



BOSSY

GRUMP

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NICOLE SNOW

BOSSY GRUMP

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

OceanofPDF.com

NICOLE SNOW

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Office Grump Preview

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ABOUT THE BOOK

You know that awkward moment when your lava-hot boss says “marry me?”

Not for love. Not for real. Not without a mammoth payoff.

Of course, this fortune comes with a ginormous snag—Ward Brandt.

Call me bananas.

I must be short of a full bushel rejecting Chicago’s finest billionaire.

Who knew he was my boss when he crashed my worst date ever?

Oh, but he found out.

He swore I wasn’t fit for Brandt Ideas, chewed me up, and spat me back out.

I vowed I’d prove him wrong—and sabotage a metric ton of his coffee.

Then tragedy strikes, upending his limitless ego.

Guess who needs an image makeover to shore up the family business.

Big fat hell no.

King Snarlypants has a peanut-sized heart and a chip on his shoulder bigger than a redwood.

Find another sucker, Ward-hole.

Even if I agreed, my shields are up.

No magnetic kisses. Zero butterflies. Nix the blushing when everyone gushes over what a “perfect couple” we’d be.

Then again...it’s just ninety days and mama needs a windfall.

What’s one little white wedding lie with a bossy grump built like a god?

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DARK KNIGHT (PAIGE)



I'm hoping my fake smile doesn't break my face when my phone vibrates against the table.

I glance down to find a text from Brina. *Pssst! How's the big date going?*

Ugh, it's not.

It's also entirely her fault I'm here with this loser. I should've known better than to take romance advice from a bestie who's now giddily married to one of the hottest and richest men in Chicago.

Why does everyone have an awesome life but me?

I shove my phone under the table and quickly type back, *Typically Tinder-rific. You should have come celebrate with me tonight.*

Stud or dud? she replies.

Holding in a sigh, I stare across the table for a second, trying my damndest to give this guy one last chance. Michael—Micah?—Mike?—*God, what's his name?*—has a firm jawline, a decent chest, and marathon runner legs, but his pros end there.

Nameless throws back another shot of whiskey and sets his glass on the counter with a deafening *clink*. He winks at me like I should be impressed that he needs to announce his presence to the whole flipping bar.

“Yo, can I get another?” he yells at the poor bartender.

I roll my eyes, wrinkling my nose as I tap at my screen, mourning this bomb of a date.

**Shrugs* He's not unattractive...if you're into self-centered pigs,* I send.

Yikes, what *is* his name, anyway? He deserves that much, doesn't he? A label for his footnote in my bad run of dating app disasters.

Whatever.

Maybe I'll just get creative and not address him by name for the rest of the night. I can enjoy pretending I'm in a *Seinfeld* episode while I try not to gag at his presence.

Slowly, I pick up the glass in front of me and sip my wine.

It's almost gone.

The bartender sets another whiskey down beside him with a sympathetic smile for me. Nameless downs that too without hesitation.

I take the last sip of wine for courage before contemplating how much suckier this night can get.

"Ready to head to the art museum yet?" I ask, plastering on another mannequin-like smile that hurts my cheeks.

"Ah, babe. Let me get one more shot first."

Babe.

It's the third time he's said it tonight, and my stomach flips over a little worse every time.

I stare at my empty glass. I could order another drink, sure, but I couldn't keep up with Nameless to save my life. And I definitely don't want him to have any reason to stay here longer.

"The bar wasn't even part of the plan, you know," I say.

"Yeah, well, you said you like spontaneous...right? Museums are just so boring." He rolls his shoulders, batting his eyes like he's ready to fall asleep. "I can't handle that shit without a little fun first."

Wow.

Congratulations, Paige. Nothing like celebrating your shiny new rock star job in the arts by going out with a dude who needs to be hammered to enjoy an art museum.

I try to smile, but I'm not sure my lips are curling in the right direction.

“Umm—” I laugh. “Why didn't you just tell me? We could have done something else.” And I could've swiped the other way, but he talked a good game.

I expected a cultured, witty professional to show up and sweep me off my feet from the texts we shared. Not this whiskey fish of a man.

What gives?

He holds up a finger, grazing it over his lips like it should be sexy or something.

He's ordering another shot the second our bartender is back in range.

She walks away, and his eyes stick to her ass. When she's no longer in our line of sight, he turns back to face me. “I never disappoint, babe.”

Babe.

Again.

Blargh.

But maybe he's already forgotten my name too? It wouldn't be the worst thing.

Pushing my glass away, I click my fingers off the high bartop and glare at him. I'm about to end this sideshow and head for the museum myself when he lays a floppy hand across mine.

“Okay, babe. Okay. I get the hint. Last one, I promise, then it's Beethoven city.”

I don't bother telling him Beethoven wasn't an artist—at least not the visual kind.

The bartender comes and hands him the shot glass.

“Can you close out the tab?” Nameless asks.

“The wine’s on a separate ticket,” I say quickly.

No point in letting him pay for my drink. There won’t be a second date.

“No biggie.” He shakes his head. “I’ve got it.”

“It’s cool.” I dig my debit card out of my purse.

He puts his hand over mine and pushes it away. “It’s a first date. I’ve got it. You’re hanging with a gentleman.”

I’m hanging with a drunk, but...saving a few bucks on a drink seems like the least I deserve for this torture.

So I drop the card back in my purse and mutter a “thanks.” This seems to be my fastest route to the art gallery, and maybe he won’t be such a dud there.

Art can work miracles.

Creative beauty brings out the best in everyone, even the folks with the cultural sensitivity of a coconut crab.

It’s the whole reason I studied art and promised it my life.

With the bill paid, he places his hand on the table and balances himself as he stands. He rocks back, but catches himself with a messy laugh.

Odd.

I pop up and follow. “Are you okay, guy?”

He waves a hand. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. Lit and loving it. Now let’s go see some finger painting.”

We walk to the art gallery with my tongue caught in my teeth. A trip I usually make in less than fifteen minutes from here takes more than half an hour.

He stumbles along with an awkward gait, falling behind me, and other times staggering on several steps ahead.

This is when I should acknowledge the big, ugly red flag flapping in the wind in front of me.

This is where I should arm myself with excuses and beat it, and about when I should pull my head out of the clouds where everything seems happy and bright and boundless.

Nothing can ruin my new career at Brandt Ideas next week, though, a prestigious and well-paid gig I fought for tooth and nail. Not even this dope.

I'm being too generous, high on my future success.

Besides, what if he has some disability he's embarrassed for anyone to know about?

"We could get an Uber. It's only like another five minutes," I suggest.

He laughs. "Why would we Uber? The weather's awesome tonight."

"You don't seem to be enjoying the walk. Are you *sure* you're okay?"

"Never better! Just one too many shots."

Awesome. But how many did he have? Three? Four? Should he be this drunk?

"Fun fact, I got the party started early." He laughs again, a little too close to my face. "It's probably not the whiskey. Gotta be the vodka I had before I left the house."

Dearest of Lords.

So, he was buzzed *before* he insisted on stopping at the bar? I don't want to be seen with this guy at my favorite place in the world. My feet are rapidly getting cold.

"We could do this another time."

He stops blundering along and blinks at me like I've just stabbed him in the chest.

"Aw, no. Don't tell me you're tired? We're gonna celebrate your big promotion."

Whoa, he almost got it right.

It was almost sweet.

I almost smile.

“Why?” I snap. Then it’s my turn to sputter a laugh. “You told me you have to be buzzed to enjoy it. You don’t have to force anything on my account...”

“You kidding? As long as you’re here, I’m having a grand time,” he whispers with a goofy smile.

There’s a protest lodged in my throat again, but at this point we’re coming up to the long temple-like steps of the museum. He locks his hand around mine and starts up the stairs, dragging me along.

Okay. I guess we *are* celebrating.

It’s a busy evening. There’s a line flowing almost to the door.

“We’ll go through the members’ line. It’s a lot faster,” I say.

“Whoa, babe. You have a membership to the art museum?” He snickers.

I don’t answer. I take a step toward the “members’ only” line and since his hand is still locked around mine, he comes along.

There’s a tall man in a dark business suit in front of us. From behind, his body is all straight lines and edges. Sculpted muscle tamed by designer fabric. Broad shoulders civilized by wool, but so defined under it they tell the world he’s capable of very uncivil things.

Judging by the crisp way he wears his suit like a second skin, he has class and good looks.

His hair is dark brown like a crafted mocha—not the weak powder stuff, the kind of bitter chocolate ultra-nice cafés melt in coffee.

Something strong and slightly brutal you’d want to drink on a crisp evening like this when your nerves are buzzing and you’re dying to enjoy the finer things in life.

Damn. I should’ve just celebrated alone and tried to awkwardly bump into the handsome stranger.

But I made my choices, and strange men aren't riding to the rescue on wings of glory.

We wander through some blown glass sculptures and I put a few badly needed strides between myself and King Idiot.

Which I quickly regret when Nameless stumbles backward and almost tips over a huge glass vase that must be seven feet tall on its podium. My hands fly up to my mouth as a gasp slips out.

Oh my God!

Thank everything it's bolted down.

Yep, I'm going to be banned from my favorite place ever, and it's all this jackass' fault.

My heart pounds. I move between him and the sculpture, centering my weight. He stumbles into me instead of precious glass when he goes all tipsy a second time.

I throw my arms out and manage not to fall, struggling to support his bulk.

I don't know how. It's a small miracle—and not the kind I was hoping for tonight.

His obnoxious laugh booms, echoing through the room.

Awesome.

People turn to look at us, including a certain gorgeous stranger with eyes itching to dismember the source of the disruption.

And who can blame him when my dolt of a date must be ruining his night?

We've ended up in the same exhibit as him a few times, but this is the first good look I've had at his face, and...

You guessed it. Even *more* intimidatingly beautiful than his backside.

His eyes are green-blue glass inquisitors made to deliver whiplash, glowing like stars under his walnut-colored hair.

They glint in the light like knives with a fierceness that could rival a tiger scenting blood.

But his expression is what gets me. It's hilariously stern, the meanest scowl in the history of scowl-dom.

He's surly, intense, and thoroughly pissed off.

Well, hello to you, too, Grumpyface.

Oof. Why is that so funny? I cover my mouth, swallowing a red-faced giggle.

A lot of things are funny tonight that shouldn't be, and I'm not sure why.

But I guess it's either laugh it up or sink into a crater of shame.

Nameless doesn't notice the guy who'd like to impale him staring him down and continues on with boyish barking laughter.

"Can you believe it? I almost knocked that damn thing over." He laughs again, doubling over.

At least he's a happy drunk.

"Good thing you caught me, babe. Go team!" His voice is so loud it bounces off the walls.

I'm desperate to pull away.

His Grump-faced Highness graces us with another blistering glance, shaking his head like we just committed a violent felony, and turns away. But a handful of other people who wandered in are still staring.

Yeah, crap. It's past time to get away from this moose.

"I'm not ba—my name is Paige," I clip, steeling my voice. I figure it's the politest way to get him to quit calling me babe. "Maybe we should go. It's getting late."

"Huh?" He pulls out his phone, his brow dipping in confusion. "It's barely after eight."

Right, but stupid drunk guys and fragile glass artwork don't mix.

Hell, I'm wishing I drank more so I could put up with this. Maybe I'd find my inner bitch faster and drop him on his head.

"Well, let's find another exhibit. Some thousand-pound sculptures or something," I mutter.

Anything, really.

I just need to get away from the glass before we're banned for life.

He nods and grabs my hand again. We walk out of the glass room and take the spiral staircase one floor down.

"This is a cool floor," I say. "My absolute favorite is the corner with the model buildings made by Beatrice Brandt."

"You have a favorite floor? You come here *that* often? Shit."

Why, oh why, did I agree to this dumb date? Where's the sensitive professional guy I thought I was texting? Is this some weird Jekyll and Hyde thing for him?

Whatever it is, I've overdosed on so much dumb I can't help asking.

"It's hard to believe you're the same guy who texted me for days about Frank Lloyd Wright and Louise Bourgeois." Might as well be honest. And bitter.

"Frank Burger-who? Not me!" he blurts out.

What the hell? It's all I talk about.

We wouldn't be here if he couldn't talk art.

Art interprets life and helps us explain the world. I don't waste time with people who don't get that, or people who can't express the slightest interest in the marvels of the human mind.

"Umm—what? Yes, you did."

If I sound bewildered, I am.

He shakes his head, a horrible smile pulling across his lips. "Nahhh, that was my buddy, Reed. Dude had a better date tonight with a hot accountant and I'm down on hookups, so—here we are."

Oh, no. The *imminent spider* feeling zips across the back of my neck so fast it's almost my turn to get tipsy.

“So he...pawed me off on you? Gross!” My voice is too loud and too high-pitched, echoing off the high ceiling.

I can't help it.

Confirming my worst suspicions also confirms my total stupidity for giving Nameless way too many chances. He's not even the guy I set up a date with!

“Babe, calm down,” he says.

His clammy hands fall on my shoulders. Only for a second, thank God, or I'd have punched him for sure.

He pulls the heavy wooden door open, waving his hand with a dramatic flourish, and we enter the architecture exhibit. I so don't want to be here with Dumb Date Guy Who Doesn't Even Like Art. But my brain locks up, burned out past the point of how to end this gracefully.

The sight in front of me also steals my attention like it always does.

Soaring three-dimensional models of buildings flank every wall covered with photos of local buildings designed by famous architects. Some of the creators are natives. Chicagoland has everything, just enough awe to beat out its drawbacks.

I think I'm smiling my first real smile since we got here.

Then Dumb Date Guy clears his throat like he has a bone caught there and dulls the magic.

I'm about to suggest we leave again, but since he wasn't open to it the last time, I pull my phone out. If he isn't cooperating, I'll text Brina for an emergency SOS while he's not paying attention.

He grins. “I see why you like this room.”

I finish punching Brina's number in and glance up from my phone. Is my dread showing?

“You do?” I ask quietly.

“Yeah, sure, c’mere.” He tugs on my hand that’s suddenly in his grasp.

I stumble forward on my toes and barely catch myself before I fall. My phone slides out of my hand, facedown.

Fuckity. Can this day get any worse?

Before I can bend down to grab it, he’s scooped it up with another one of his all-too-punchable laughs.

“Chill. I’ll hold this for you, so you don’t have to worry about dropping it again.”

I reach for it with my free hand. “It’s okay. I’ll just shove it back in my purse.”

“Relax, babe. I’ve got it. I told you, didn’t I?” He pulls me forward again with a harsher yank.

I definitely don’t like the odd shift in tone.

Before I realize what’s happening, we’re heading straight to the corner of the room with black-and-white shots of the Sears slash Willis Tower, an architectural feat in its day.

“You like the Willis Tower?” I ask, hating the spring in his step.

“Huh? I mean, I guess. It’s like, *the* tower. What’s not to like?”

“It’s not going anywhere,” I say. “Slow down. It’ll still be there for us in a few seconds.”

“What will?”

“The photo.”

Holy crap. I’ve never been so ready to slap another human being.

“You’re nuts, babe,” he says with that insufferable smile.

What is happening?

Literally the only thing in this corner is the massive black-and-white photo of the once Sears Tower and a photo booth that lets you take a picture against it. But no one ever does that

since you could just go take a picture outside the real tower for free. The dude is acting like a tourist.

Except he doesn't stop dragging me along until we're on the other side of the photo booth.

The room is dimly lit. There's a photo booth on one side of me, a wall behind us, and another wall on the other side. Only my back is visible to anyone else in the room—the empty room—and that's when my pulse picks up with fear.

He's cornered me. He has my phone. Heat climbs up my cheeks.

“Nothing back here. We should rejoin the exhibit,” I say, halfway in denial about my dumb predicament turning scary.

He's a friendly drunk. He's probably just being stupid, I tell myself. Surely, he wouldn't be crazy enough to try—

Nameless lets go of my hand.

Sweet relief.

I'm about to back away and lead us to the center of the room so I can get my phone back and fly out of here. But his arms close around my waist before I can make a move.

He pulls me closer, and his lips drop toward mine, falling below my ear instead. Sloppy whiskey lips.

Jesus, no!

I keep my lips tightly closed and back away from him, mustering up a scream. “What are you doing? Are you insane? We're in *public*.”

Again, that sickening laugh.

“Babe, you're so uptight. Trust me.” His lips go for mine.

Aaand I lose it.

I'm boneless, jerking and wiggling, trying to break out of his hold, but he's freaking strong. I stomp on his toes and lurch back, but he must have released the pressure of his arms because this time I spring backward.

My ankle turns almost all the way around. “Oww!”

Then I conk my head on a sculpture.

It hurts too bad to move, and my ankle starts throbbing. I linger there for a minute on my knees, head leaned against a marble statue, because I'm in too much pain to move.

I inch my head back and rub it, forcing my eyes open to see what I hit.

Only, all I see is rock covered in smooth black cloth.

Not good.

I must have hit my head harder than I thought. I'm seeing things.

If there was a human statue in this room, I'd remember it. Even weirder, the sculpture slides back at the same time its powerful hands hook under my arms and bring me to my feet.

"Can you stand?" a deep voice asks.

A man.

The words swirl in my head for a moment. I blink a few times and realize this is my chance to get away from Nameless the Psycho and get my phone back.

I hope he plays along. "Oh! Oh, Max. Thank God you're here. I haven't seen you since that day with *Angela*."

"Angela?" he asks.

Crud. He's not young and hip enough to know the common code for *help, get me out of here*. I turn my head to face my rescuer for the first time.

My stomach drops.

King Grumpyface with the princely brown hair and scourging eyes is holding me.

He still has his arm swung over one of mine, steadying me. He *is* young enough to know it, I think, maybe in his early thirties. I hope.

I try again, this time with wide eyes and raised, wagging brows. "Max, my man! I haven't seen you since the day we

went to the rooftop bar with—” I pause to emphasize the next word. “Angela! Angela, remember?”

He studies my face for a moment like he’s trying to decide if I’m crazy.

Sigh. Can anything go right?

Nameless finally steps out of the dark corner, his eyes scanning and then landing on me with an ugly grudge. “Dude. You wanna get your hands off my girl? Thanks for helping her up, I mean, but I’ll take it from here.”

Grumpyface nods slowly. “Angela. It’s her birthday, isn’t it? I’m glad I found you here; I was looking all over. We’re going to be late for her party.”

Nameless takes another step toward me—us.

I hold in a gasp.

His eyes trace from me to the unexpected dark knight who showed up right on time. His gaze cools. “Not nice, lady. First I’m hearing about this party. Tell him to *split*.”

Dark Knight gently pushes me behind him and steps forward, putting his wall of a body between us.

“Back up, *dude*,” the stranger spits, something feral in his voice. “We’ve all been friends for years. It’s my cousin’s birthday. Angela forgot about the big day, and we need to get going.”

“Gah, do you have to move in on other guys’ dates because you can’t get your own?” Nameless snorts, taking another step.

“No. I move in because you’re drunk as hell and leering like a snake. I can smell your whiskey stink from here. Leave, or I’ll escort you out.”

Holy crap.

My heart climbs into my throat, stunned and afraid that Grumpyface is willing to come to blows to protect me.

“What the fuck ever. You don’t scare me, dude, but you’re not worth the shit,” Nameless snaps, scuffing his shoe on the

floor. “Who the hell spends a Friday night at a stuffy-ass museum, anyway?”

“People who don’t need a pint of hard liquor to get through the night,” Dark Knight growls back, his fist clenched into a club at his side.

Wow.

Wow.

Still cursing under his breath, the idiot starts dashing for the door.

“Wait!” I call out, safely tucked behind my knight.

Creepo looks over his shoulder. “What do you want?”

“My phone. You can give it to my friend.” I keep my voice as nonconfrontational as possible.

“You took her phone, too?” The bullet-like accusation in Grumpman’s tone is clear.

And honestly, I feel crazy lucky that gruffness is on *my* side.

Nameless glares at me as he turns to hand over my phone. “She dropped it. I just picked it up.”

Right. And wouldn’t give it back.

My tall, dark, and handsome friend stands in front of me like a sentinel until Nameless is out the door at last.

With the threat gone, Dark Knight turns to face me, his eyes teal storm clouds in the dim orange light. “So are you really okay?”

I manage a split-second smile, dropping my phone into my purse so I don’t have to meet his eyes.

“It hurts to stand on my ankle, but I’ll survive. Thank you, thank you *so much* for your help. You have no idea what it means to—”

“You’ve been drinking, too, haven’t you?” he cuts in, cocking his head, assessing me with that razor-sharp gaze. “C’mon, let’s get you home.”

“Please. I just had one glass of wine because that loser insisted on going to a bar before we got here—”

He rolls his eyes and huffs out a breath. “Sure.”

Okay. Woof. So maybe he’s a dud knight in expensive shining armor if he’s calling me a liar.

I shrug. “Look, I don’t care if you believe me. I’m here to celebrate my new dream job at Brandt Ideas and I’m not leaving until I’ve had a little fun. This is my favorite place in the world, and I’ll be damned if I let a twisted ankle or creepy date keep me from celebrating.”

Crankyface stiffens, his royal jaw turning up, regarding me with wide eyes like I’ve spontaneously turned into Bigfoot in front of him.

“What did you say?” he asks slowly, his voice pure smolder.

“Umm—I said this is my favorite place in the world and... let’s celebrate?” I venture, unsure why he’s so freaked out.

“No. Your new job, where is it?”

“Brandt Ideas. The most incredible architecture firm in the city,” I say with a smile. Does this mean he appreciates art like I do?

He shakes his head, answering my question, and it’s not a happy head shake.

I don’t get it. Does he have some beef with them?

How could an art admirer—one who ended up in the architecture exhibit, no less—have anything against Beatrice Nightingale Brandt?

“Have you seen their work? You must know how talented she is,” I say, stepping closer, trying not to go all giddy.

“Who?”

I smile up at him. Surly or not, the way he towers over me is kinda hot.

“You wouldn’t have reacted like that if you knew how talented Beatrice Nightingale Brandt is. Have a look.”

I take his hand. After the way he picked me up off the floor, the motion feels natural. Smooth and soothing, unlike the clammy hand locked around mine earlier.

Then I step forward and almost stumble before I pick my foot up and shake it out with a wince.

“This isn’t necessary. I’m...quite familiar with Mrs. Brandt’s work,” he tells me. “It’s probably best we get you home.”

“Oh, I’m fine.” I take another step. Dang.

I’ll admit it, my ankle hurts, but I’m not going to let anything ruin tonight. I limp along to the 3-D model he has to see to get how big of a deal this is.

I realize I’m being a little weird and imposing after what just went down. But God, is it a crime to try to get *someone* to appreciate a sliver of my life?

Soon, we’re standing in front of a scale model, a towering glass office building. I take it in slowly and point to the iconic Arboretum Office she made her home base.

“See how the lights are chandeliers? Every fixture, inside and out, is high-end handcrafted glass. I think the most beautiful part is probably the white flowering ivy hanging from the ceiling. It’s an office and a greenhouse. That’s what makes her work so special. It’s art people use in their daily lives, a place that’s functional and organic and just...so beautiful.” Trying not to squeal, I point to the roof. “It’s solar-powered and grows oxygen-rich plants. Beatrice is so brilliant. It’s environmentally sustainable on top of high-end, classy, and unique. And she gets to work there every day.”

When I turn my head, he looks a smidge less freaked out. Maybe my little spiel is working.

“I see.” He gives me a slow, almost knowing smile.

“I didn’t know grumpy gods smiled.”

“Grumpy gods?”

Frick. Did I say that out loud?

“You’re passionate, I’ll give you that.” He chuckles and quirks a thick eyebrow. “Let’s get out of here.”

He’s said it a couple times now.

I thought he was just being a buzzkill at first, but I’m not so sure anymore. Having a drink with this guy or some takeout might be a great way to salvage the night.

“You’re right. We should grab a bite and head to my place.”

“No food, and you don’t need another drink. But we should get out of here.”

“Oh, straight to my place then?” I wink. “Even better, you devil.”



I LEAN into the back of the leather seat.

I haven’t been in a Tesla since Brina’s fancy wedding. It’s a smooth ride. Of course, I might be enjoying it so much because, rather than let me hobble along, he picked me up, carried me to the car, and plunked me down on the heated leather seat.

“You know, I think maybe that glass of wine somehow made the twisted ankle worse,” I say, stretching my foot and wincing.

He smirks. “You can drop the act. I’ll never believe you only had one glass of wine. Damn glad I showed up when I did, or else that worm you were with might’ve—”

“Do you call everyone you meet a liar?” I cut in with a laugh.

Apparently, everything is still funny when I’m this keyed up and the mood is set to awkward.

“Only when I’m questioning the truth from girls I don’t trust with an Uber,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Whatever. This is a nice ride,” I say, realizing how cushy the seat feels.

He grins.

“Watch this.” He takes his hand off the wheel and we stay in a straight line.

“It’s self-driving?”

He places his hands on the wheel again. “Close enough. Give it a few more years before you can take a nap at the wheel.”

“Ohhh, sounds like a dream.” I close my eyes, my brain flicking to a terrible vision of me napping in his arms.

When I open them again, I’m actually clutched in his embrace. We’re standing outside my front door and he’s carried me up a full flight of stairs.

I hold my arms out to my sides, my head reeling.

What is wrong with me?

There’s no way it’s the wine. I think I’m just overwhelmed, slightly beat up, and trying to process how the night went from hell to heaven faster than the 2.4 seconds it takes his car to go from zero to sixty.

“See how balanced I am? Not drunk!” I insist, pushing playfully at his shoulders.

“Calm down, woman.” He turns my key in the door and pushes it open. “Where’s your room?”

Uh-oh.

Straight and to the point. I think I like this guy.

Ever since Brina moved out and got married, I don’t even have a roommate to work around anymore. *Win.*

“Down the hall, first door on the right,” I tell him.

And then my excitement catches up with me and I let out a loud hiccup.

Blushing, I cover my mouth. “Just air. Not drunk. I swear.”

“Right,” he snorts. “You don’t have to impress me. I’m not in charge of policing chicks who like to party too hard.”

We cross the threshold to my room and he lays me down gently on my bed. It’s like I’m floating on a cloud as another hiccup lurches out of me before I can clap a hand over my mouth.

“Yikes. I’m not normally like this,” I whisper, hiding my face.

“Be right back.”

By the time I register he’s gone, he’s standing beside my bed again. Why isn’t he kissing me yet? Is he one of those “take it slow” guys? Is it the hiccups?

Or is it the fact that we’re total flipping strangers?

Ice prickles my face, and I jerk up.

“Drink this.” He hands me the water bottle he’s just held to my cheek.

“Water? I’m not that thirsty.”

“Do it,” he barks.

“Jeez. Fine, Bossypants.” I open the water bottle, a brand I recognize from my fridge, and take a swig.

His knuckles brush against my free hand. I draw in a breath at the sensation. My palm opens and he places something in it. “Take these.”

I glance down at my hand to see two Tylenol, then flash him a befuddled look.

“You’re going to have the hangover headache from hell in the morning to go with that twisted ankle. The pills will help with both.”

“Ugh, I told you, I only had one glass of—”

“Whine? You’re very good at it. Less talking, more drinking,” he growls. His eyes are like hot teal-blue heat rays.

Sighing, I gulp down the pills.

He taps on my nightstand, drawing my attention to it.

I glance over. There's a sandwich cut into two neat triangles there. Wow, he's thought of everything.

"Eat."

"Why?" But all questions aside, I'm actually hungry.

My stomach gurgles at the sight. The original plan was the art museum and then dinner or happy hour snacks somewhere nice, but Nameless kept us at the bar way too long.

"Because your questions are annoying as hell. And you just might feel better having something solid in your gut," he grinds out.

Well...good answer.

He pulls out his phone and starts tapping at the screen.

Giving in to Mr. Congeniality, I pick up a triangle and devour half of it in one bite. Salami, cheese, lettuce, and mayo. Simple, but tasty.

I'll have to brush my teeth now, but I can't deny it hits the spot. I swallow the other half of the triangle and recline back into my cloud.

He's frantically typing something on his phone now.

"Done. Can we be less boring now?" I ask.

But my stomach sinks as the reality hits me.

Yikes. I must look like a total mess to this stranger who thinks I'm a lush in distress.

Make that a lush who stupidly brought him home with a twisted ankle, offering to practically *throw* herself at him.

What am I doing? I owe him an explanation.

Heck, I owe myself one.

"Listen, mister, I'm sorry if this is so...weird. It's been a crazy evening. I don't mean to string you along or make you think I do this with every guy I—"

"Hang on. I need to finish a very important email. Why don't you rest your eyes a minute?"

I am a little tired, especially with the mood souring. I just wish I knew why one glass of wine and a miserable dud make me feel like I've been flattened by a bus.

"...maybe a power nap would be good. Can you take a rain check on meeting up again?" Does he hear me? My voice feels faint.

Opening my eyes again, I tug on his left hand, remembering I know nothing about this man except that he apparently rocks the dark knight aura like it was custom made for him.

His eyes lock on mine. I trace his ring finger.

"No ring. Nice," I whisper.

Who says all the good ones are married?

He glares at me with something worse than annoyance, but when he speaks, his voice is eerily level. "Rest up, and I'll let myself out as soon as I get through this email."

Is it the ring comment? What a weird thing to get mad about.

Eyes like loaded pistols are the last thing I see before he leaves...or I fall asleep.

I'm not sure which happens first.

When I open my eyes again, it's early morning, and I'm left wondering if my hero with the stormy gaze ever existed.

And if he did, would I ever have the guts to see him again sober?

A HOLLY HEADACHE (WARD)



This is *not* how my night was supposed to go.

I hit the museum to lose my edge and part of my mind, a ritual cleansing I do several times each month. I'd planned to get high on brilliant art and forget about the stress at the office and the void back home.

Peace and quiet is a treasure, and apparently, I'm not worthy.

Because stumbling into the obnoxiously drunk girl and shepherding her home before she could become a wolf's dinner was a screaming slap to the face. Miss One Glass even looked cute demolishing my evening and trampling on every last nerve—at first—but when she flippantly mentioned her new job?

When she announced she'd soon be a daily thorn in my ass?

Fuck. I didn't lose my shit so much as catapulted it into lunar orbit.

I'll just finish this email before I leave, make sure she's peacefully asleep, and never lay eyes on her again.

She dozes now in slow, rhythmic breaths, smacking her full pink lips, every now and then releasing this tiny hiccup of a snore.

It might be cute if she wasn't a loud, messy, butterscotch-blond kill shot to my sanity. But she'll be fine soon, and so will I without having her up in my business.

Hell. I went to the museum for a distraction, and maybe some inspiration.

If I had to chaperone her away from booze and a pond scum little boy, what would having her in the office be like?

We're not finding out.

Don't get me wrong. I heroed her like any decent man would. I couldn't leave her marooned with a potentially dangerous fuckboy, or have her stumbling in front of a moving bus.

Unfortunately, it's still possible to be a Brandt and have a conscience.

But if you think I'm above nipping this problem right in its adorable little blond, green-eyed bud, and damn all the consequences?

I never pretended to be a saint.

Gritting my teeth, I shake my head, remembering how she insisted it was just one glass.

Yeah, sweetheart, if glass means bottle.

My thumb cramps from pounding at my phone. I move my hand away and shake it out. My left ring finger catches my eye.

Did she have to point out there's no ring?

Do I walk around with an invisible dark halo that tells the world, *ladies, run. This asshole is anti-marriage material.*

Maria breaking off the engagement was supposed to be the worst part. I didn't think I'd have total strangers rubbing salt in the wound, or—

No. I choke the thought off there.

This isn't the time or place to fall down that rabbit hole again.

After all, that's how I end up at museums on Friday nights alone, playing unwilling knight to drunk chicks being pawed

at by losers I wish I could smash in the face. At least then I'd get a modicum of satisfaction for my trouble.

Miss One Glass whimpers a little and rolls over. With a sigh, I stand up and throw the loose sheet at the end of the bed over her, securing it snugly over her shoulders.

What the hell was Grandma thinking, anyway? I shake my head and read through my email to check for errors before hitting send.

To: Beatrice Nightingale Brandt

Cc: Nicholas Brandt

From: Ward Brandt

Subject: Houston, we have a problem.

GRANDMA AND NICK,

I BUMPED into the new executive assistant at the art museum tonight. Quite literally.

She was drunker than a grunt, had some handsy goon hanging all over her, and didn't hesitate to loudly advertise the fact that she works for us.

She went tumbling through the architecture room. Again, literally. Her hard head came close to busting my knee—that's how we met.

I did the right thing. I ran off her harasser, made sure she got home, and tried to pretend I wasn't mortified when she hit on me.

Frankly, I'm actually glad we met this way.

We can't have her starting next week. It's a direct threat to our image, and I'm fortunate we found out before she ever stepped foot in the downtown office.

I suggest moving forward with a backup candidate. This girl might be able to hold it together for a forty-five-minute interview, but she'd never be able to keep it together for the rigors of a sixteen-hour workday. And with the Winthroppe contract coming up, we need all hands on deck without any grade-school distractions.

Sorry to be the bearer of bad news.

THANKS,

Ward Brandt

Senior Partner, Brandt Ideas Inc.

I GLARE down at Sleeping Beauty again. She's out like a light, snoring with a dull purr.

I'll stay a few more minutes just to make sure she's truly okay, and didn't mix that wine with a bad medication or something.

I check my investment portfolio between eyeing her.

Yeah, she'd be cute if she wasn't a lush with the sense of a rodeo bull.

She'll be fine.

She's got the pep to talk herself into another job that's a better fit.

The worst thing that'll happen is the hangover she'll no doubt have in the morning.

Sometimes we all need a bitter schooling from life. The sooner the better, because she's too beautiful and brilliant to be acting this way.

Damn shame. She'd probably make a good assistant, too, if she was just a little more mature.

She's friendly, warm, energetic as hell, and outgoing.

I remember how she gushed over Grandma's designs at the Art Institute. The woman has sharp taste, an eye for beauty that serves a purpose.

And if she got through an interview with Grandma, she has to be smart.

She just doesn't have her shit together yet.

And I'm damned lucky I was there when her true colors showed. If we'd met any other way, total strangers, I might've asked for her number.

Either way, we don't need a chatterbox who can't lay off the sauce working for us, especially as a C-level executive assistant. She'll be too involved with our business dealings that have zero room for error.

Besides, the last thing my family needs—the very goddamned last—is *more* scandal. My parents filled the gossip mills for years, and so did my dolt of a brother.

We're not getting our feet muddy again.

I flick through an email about new hires and find her, pinching my jaw shut. A part of me flinches and doesn't want to follow through.

Tough shit.

Paige "One Glass" Holly is just going to have to plant her sweet butt at another job elsewhere. Ideally, far, far away from my family.

Ready to end this torture, I march to the fridge and grab another water bottle, and the Tylenol from the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. She'll need them in the morning. There's a packet of multivitamins beside the Tylenol, so I leave it on her nightstand for good measure before I let myself out.

It's the least I can do as the jackass who's firing her.



CYMBALS CRASH together so loud it rips my head off.

What the hell is that? Oh, the most annoying alarm in existence. Snarling, I grab my phone and dismiss the hellish screeching that's apparently been going off for three minutes.

My head rings and my throat feels like cotton.

Okay, so I may have had a few drinks after I went home last night, but at least I wasn't traipsing around downtown Chicago like some kind of drunken idiot. I pick my phone up again at that thought.

One new email from Nick.

To: Ward Brandt

Cc: Beatrice Nightingale Brandt

From: Nick Brandt

Subject: RE: Houston, we have a problem.

WARD,

YOU NEED TO CHILL.

You're exaggerating like always and it isn't even her first day. Lay off the extra espresso shots and get some fresh air.

Leave the poor girl alone.

Nicholas Brandt

Senior Partner, Brandt Ideas Inc.

FOR GOOD MEASURE—OR to annoy the hell out of me—he's embedded a link to Taylor Swift's "You Need To Calm Down."

I'll never comprehend why the universe gave me a little brother to piss me off.

Nick thinks *everything's* a joke by instinct. He's a few beams short of a sound structure, that's for sure.

I think it comes from being the spoiled baby, first by our parents before they lost their minds, and then by our grandparents.

Grandma hasn't responded yet with the final word.

Even though it's Saturday, I need to make sure she's at least seen the email. Far better we cut ties before the new EA ever shows up in person to get a nastygram from HR.

I jump out of bed, and it's like being beat in the head with a sledgehammer.

Fuck. I didn't chase the bourbon with enough water last night. I also forgot the joys of encroaching middle age that start to creep up in your thirties.

I glug down a bottle of water and a pinch of pain pills, then get ready for work.

There's hardly anyone in the office today. Thank God when I'm not in the mood for people.

Let's be real, I never am, but with this bourbon and Miss One Glass induced headache?

Double hell no.

I pass a couple folks from marketing, but they're so busy working on a showcase of our recent projects that they don't even look up.

Nick slumps over his desk as usual, his office door half cracked. The right thing to do is remind him it's hilariously inappropriate for a partner to show up to work in a Hawaiian shirt and sleep at his desk in full view of our staff, but Nick is the last person I want to talk to before my head stops pounding.

Too bad we don't have an assistant here today. I'd send her for a coffee run.

Before I've got my laptop up and running in my office, Grandma appears at my door like a quicksilver whirlwind.

She's only a few inches shorter than me, and today she's wearing platinum heels, regal as ever. She has this lonely deep line in her forehead that she always jokes came from dealing with "her boys." Her black business suit is custom tailored with a silvery shirt underneath.

She looks just like she did when I was a kid, except the helmet of hair around her face is now mostly quicksilver. She's gotten thinner and more breakable with age. Still, the grit in her eyes and sharp cheekbones warn the world to tread lightly.

This is a woman who bleeds for her art.

"How are you this lovely morning?" she asks.

"Not as chipper as you."

She laughs. "Oh, Ward, must you be a cactus every weekend? Wrong side of the bed again?"

"Headache," I grumble.

"Do you need something?"

I shake my head. "Already popped a few pain pills. They just haven't kicked in yet."

She nods. "Well, when you get settled, come straight to my office."

Huh? That weird look on her face says she's holding something back.

I'm a senior partner in the company and blood, so I won't be fired. And I'm far too old to be grounded, so...why do I get the feeling *I'm* in trouble?

Shit, I'm not dealing with this without more caffeine.

While my computer wakes up, I plod downstairs and fetch a double espresso, then head straight to Grandma's office to get this over with.

I tap on her door.

She peers through the long window beside it and waves me in.

She's perched at her desk like an empress waiting for her court. The soaring glass windows and lively vines behind her cast a backdrop that steals my breath even after years of working in this building and being inside her corporate throne room a thousand times.

The Chicago skyline peeks in with a hint of orange early summer sun that makes Grandma glow like a creature that isn't fully mortal.

Sometimes, I wonder.

"You wanted to talk to me?" I take the leather chair across from her desk.

"Yes." She smiles and nods. "I got your email."

"Oh, good. I didn't get a response so I was afraid you hadn't seen it yet," I say with a nod. "Do you want me to send the note to HR? We can easily kill this before she ever gets started here. It's only Saturday. We can probably still find someone to start training on Monday. I know the search wasn't easy, but what about the temp agency? There might be someone in their pool who'd make a decent permanent hire if we just..."

I trail off as her eyes narrow into bullets.

That deep wrinkle in her forehead creases, and she tilts her head back and forth for a second. "Absolutely not. That's hardly warranted."

Come again? The coffee cup dents in my hands.

I don't understand.

"Grandma, she was at the museum—on the architecture floor, no less—drunk as hell, roaring loud, and had some guy hanging all over her," I venture. "If I hadn't been there to help, there's no telling what trouble she would've found herself in."

She leans away from her computer, folds her hands together, and rests her chin on her fingers, looking at me like I'm this lost puppy.

“She caught your attention, I see. I understand why. Miss Holly is smart, youthful, and vibrant. And from what you’ve said, she sounds infinitely more fun than that Maria ever did.”

I wince at that name, stifling my gag reflex.

“She had *everyone’s* attention, Grandma. I wasn’t the only one concerned. People were staring, especially at the hell-date blundering around with her.”

“Are you sure you aren’t exaggerating?” she asks with a yawn.

I glare. “Your *other* grandson asked me the same thing.”

“Well, you have been known to exaggerate. It’s in your nature, dearie.”

“Not this time,” I grind out, anger-sipping the coffee. “When did this ‘Ward exaggerates’ crap happen?”

She looks at me blankly. “I don’t know.”

Her eyes say there’s some inside joke I just missed.

Look, I’m used to people talking behind my back—it’s only natural when there are times I’ll work them half to death—but damn if this is a running joke. Hard truths need no exaggeration.

“The whole room was staring,” I try again.

“When someone’s making a scene, that tends to happen. And with this dreadful man after her, she had good reason to lash out, didn’t she?”

I bite my tongue, giving a curt nod.

There’s no fucking argument there.

“But how did you find out she works here?” Grandma asks.

“She told me.” I roll my eyes and look over her shoulder, trying to plead my case. “I never got her name, but there’s only one EA we hired. She said she was out celebrating her start here next week. Told the whole *room*, too, with how loud she was being. I was relieved to be the one who rescued her

from the asshat—” I realize I’m talking to my grandmother. “Jerk, sorry.”

Grandma nods.

“I’m glad I saved her from the weirdo she was with before he could do any damage,” I continue. “And I don’t regret bringing her home before half of Chicago found out she works for us, no thanks to her mouth.”

“Well.” A slow smile crawls over Grandma’s face. “You two certainly talked long enough for you to find out plenty about her.”

“She mentioned loving your Arboretum Office, too.”

Grandma grins, drops her hands to the desk, and sits up straighter.

“Ah, I knew she had good taste when I hired her. Now, Ward, what she does on her own time is none of my concern as long as she’s good here. It’s none of yours either,” she says in a motherly tone that’s like arguing against a wall.

“But—”

Grandma clears her throat before I get out a word.

“Truly, if the worst thing she’s ever done is force you to extract that giant stick from your rear, she’s okay in my book. You need to relax more, and get your priorities straight when you rescue a pretty girl from a walking pile of trash.”

Damn it all.

I stare at her, folding my arms. “That giant stick has done a lot for this place, Grandma. Nick does enough relaxing for ten of us.”

“Well, he could afford to relax a little less, couldn’t he?” Grandma laughs.

He could, but that’s not the point.

I can’t help the sigh rattling out of me.

“You’re not taking this seriously. We can’t afford scandals. Roland Osprey and his tabloid goons at *The Chicago Tea* are

always pecking at Nick's stupid flings, and what happened with the parentals years ago...say no more. We don't *need* a new employee who creates her own trouble, especially right now with Ross Winthrope."

Another blank look.

"You know Paige Holly is *a* Holly, right? As in Milah Holly. I looked it up."

Her eyes bore into me like a medusa, only she's the unmoving stone, immune to my logic. I slurp my coffee again and shrug.

"Okay, so I went snooping, but I didn't have to go far. Her last name came from the credentials email."

"You're *a* Brandt," Grandma says coldly. "Remember? What's your real problem with Miss Holly?"

"...do you know who Milah Holly is? She's Paige's famous pop star cousin and made national news a few years ago for—"

"Yes, dear, pop stars do that."

"Let me finish," I snarl. "She made the news for almost dying of several drug overdoses. Then there was this attempted poisoning and a whole gaggle of armed thugs after her sister, the author, over Milah's drugs. You still think *this* Holly isn't going to create scandal when it's in her blood? Should we set up a contract with Enguard Security just to keep everyone in one piece?"

Grandma clucks her tongue. "Oh, Ward, if her cousins are famous, that's all the more reason to retain her. She understands how serious bad PR can be."

And just like that, my headache becomes a migraine.

"Are you even listening to me?" I whisper.

"Ward..." Her face softens, that single harsh line carved in her head smoothing. "Your concerns are noted. I understand what you're saying perfectly, but I'm going to overrule you and give her a chance. She's bright, passionate, and exceptionally creative. She'll prove herself in this firm, or she

won't. If she doesn't, we'll address it based on her merits in the office."

"And the chaos she brings before you fire her?"

"Son, everyone has a bad night now and then. I'll let you in on a little secret," she says, lowering her voice to a whisper. "I had a couple wild nights in my twenties too. They involved too much drinking and a very handsome man who became my husband."

Not the mental image I need. I curse under my breath.

She leans forward. "You don't want to know how I met your grandpa."

From that tone, I definitely don't.

"Enough. Point taken."

"Besides, it'd be poor taste to rescind the offer based on something that has nothing to do with her work ethic or ability. If she's messy, I'll clean it up. That's what I always do around here, isn't it?" Her face shines with whimsy.

"No. You design buildings millions of people can't help but love. The lights wouldn't stay on without you."

She shrugs. "I guess. But I'm a cleaner, too."

"Yeah, about that. How's the Winthrope deal going? Still trying to promise him the moon?" I ask, happy to change the subject.

"Wonderfully. We've scheduled our final pitch. Ross Winthrope is a careful man, if a little old-fashioned. He has an eye for reliability and exquisite work. Even top firms from around the country can't beat our track record when it comes to the look and functionality of a world-class hotel that's also one of a kind." A dreamy smile spreads across her face as she claps her hands.

Gah. I'm sure it's exhilarating for her.

She and Gramps built this company from the ground up before I was even born, and she's always been the lightning in our storm and the shelter, too.

“And even knowing how much Winthrope values perfection, you’re willing to take a chance on a flake?” I ask. I can’t help one last try.

She flattens her hands on her desk. “If she’s a flake, then she’s the best damned flake I ever interviewed. She’s here for a reason. I can feel it, Ward. That’s how I’ve done it all these years, you know. Trusted instinct, and it’s gotten us rather far. Why stop now?”

I meet her eyes with no answer, slowly nod, and stand.

She’s hell-bent on bringing this girl in and I’ve got work to do.

For everyone’s sake, I’ll just have to hope she’s right about One Glass Holly. Grandma often makes decisions on the fly, and it’s never steered us wrong.

I go to the door. When I put my hand on the knob, she calls out.

“Wait.”

“Yes?”

“You’ve got to lighten up, Ward. Just the tiniest bit, or you’ll give yourself a heart attack,” she tells me.

“You should probably talk to your other grandson about that,” I growl. “He needs the lecture more than I do.”

“Oh, what now?” she asks.

“Nick was asleep at his desk when I came in. Dressed like he just got off the plane from Maui.”

Her chair creaks and she falls backward with a wild laugh. “You know Nick doesn’t have a serious bone in his body, and you’re one hundred percent bear. If I could ever get either one of you boys to find some balance, we’d be set. And Ward?”

“Yes, Grandma?”

“I’ll only say this once—you noticed an awful lot about that young woman.” She pauses, giving me just enough time to cringe. “Obviously, it’s against office policy and good ethics

to pursue Miss Holly as a love interest, but I *like* you noticing lovely young women again. It's good for your soul."

Wonderful, because I don't.

I turn to look at her, stone-faced as a bulldog. "She tumbled across the Art Institute and would've cracked her head open if I wasn't there to catch her and chase off Prince Charming. Ignoring her wasn't an option then, but you'd better believe I will the instant she sets foot in this office."

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A FAMILIAR HANDSOME FACE (PAIGE)



My first day is the best kind of day—exhausting but awesome.

My ankle is still wrapped up, but I make it through the day without hobbling. Mostly.

I'm not sure what I expected from a new gig paying this much. Orientation consists of *Here's your desk, your computer, and your ID. Now get to work.*

I dive in with little instruction and aim to impress.

Between Beatrice and her grandsons, my new bosses, there are thousands of emails to sort and organize. I start up a cloud-based storage system for each person and route their messages and attachments accordingly. But it doesn't take long to realize they still won't be able to find anything this way, so inside each individual folder, I set up subfolders upon subfolders.

I tag. I crunch. I prioritize like a boss.

After that, I get busy reorganizing a pretty Byzantine physical filing system.

Judging by the disorganized state it's in, I'd say it's been a while since they've had a decent assistant.

Good news: I think I'm over my gorgeous curmudgeon of a stranger who rescued me Friday night and left without leaving his number.

So maybe I'm a little sad he ghosted me with no chance for a second date—a real one—but who could blame him?

Friday was definitely not a life highlight. A man like Crankyface probably has a hundred better things to do than risk another evening white-knighting me around.

Honestly, I spent way too much time thinking about it this weekend, but with a job like this, I won't have time for that. Thank God.

At five thirty sharp, Beatrice Brandt stops by my desk with her lips pursed. She's tall, imposing, and scares me with the faint hint I've done something wrong.

"Why are you still here, young lady? I haven't assigned any special projects yet, and my grandsons aren't around to keep you running either." She tilts her head. "Don't tell me Ward's blowing up your Inbox already with a thousand demands?"

"No, ma'am, Mrs. Brandt! I'm just trying to get the email system sorted and all your filing caught up. Never liked leaving a job half done," I say with an enthusiastic wink.

She waves a hand. "Filing. Pish posh. Shackling yourself to this desk over our filing system isn't any cause to work past five in the evening. Get out of here. You'll have reasons to be here half the night soon enough."

She's warm and brilliant and I adore her already.

Can she tell how starstruck I am? Are my eyeballs still in my head?

"Will do," I say with a salute that makes her smile.

"Come on. Get your desk cleaned up and I'll walk out with you."

Wow. I close the new travel binders I've set up for the senior team and stick them in the largest of the three drawers under my desk. I'll finish them off and pass them out tomorrow. I stack my notepads and Post-it notes and grab my purse.

"I hear you're impressed with my Arboretum Office," she says.

No clue how she knows that, but it's not exactly a secret. I think I only gushed about it to eight new coworkers this morning.

I nod. "It's breathtaking, almost like working in a rainforest hideout. Is it true there's even a waterfall?"

"You'll find out in due time," she answers with a wink.

"I love the way you were able to combine such high-end finishes with an amazing indoor green concept. A lot of times, green projects come out looking kind of clumsy or way too rustic. The Arboretum Office is upscale, modern, and lavish. Oh, and not to mention the solar power and oxygen cells!"

She grins. "I appreciate your eye for my art. The idea came to me designing another building for a client who wanted a Portland theme. The man was a restless financier who missed his home out west, and he wanted an upscale look with plenty of greenery to make it feel right. Since it worked out so well, I've tried to make all of our projects eco-friendly when possible. No one ever complains."

We step into the elevator together.

"They shouldn't. You do a stellar job," I gush. "And I'm glad you pioneered a lot of corporate green designs. If it's not made by God, then—"

"—it must be a Brandt," she finishes. "That slogan was Ward's idea. I thought he was out of his mind when he first pitched it, but now...it has a nice ring to it. How did you get to work today?"

I smile until my cheeks hurt.

"Oh, the El. It's pretty far from my place, but I wasn't sure about the parking situation here," I tell her.

Translation: I didn't want to *pay* for parking.

Sure, I'm comfortable, and I've been freelancing while I looked for the perfect job on top of my old job over the past year. I've done okay, but I'd be a lot poorer if I jumped at luxuries like paid parking in downtown Chicago.

The elevator dings open. She steps out and I follow behind her.

“Take the company car home,” she says matter-of-factly.

“Company car?”

She leads me out the luxe glass double doors with a nod.

Then she grabs my arm and points at a sleek black town car. “Those wheels belong to Brandt Ideas and they’re forever at your service. You should try it since you’ll be making plenty of rides with the C-level team. It’s only unavailable when my grandsons or I need it.”

“Really?” I’m not sure how kosher it is for an assistant to use the company driver—Sabrina always did, but then again Brina married her freaking boss—but it would beat walking several blocks on my busted ankle, then being crammed into an L-line car for twenty minutes and walking another dozen blocks once it stops. “Well, okay.”

She walks over to the flawless Lincoln with me. “Go ahead and climb in.”

I get in the back seat. Beatrice opens the front passenger side door. “This is our new EA, Paige. Take care of her please.”

The driver turns and smiles. She’s a brunette who looks almost younger than me, pretty, and definitely not what I expected to find behind the wheel.

“Nice to meet you!” she says.

Beatrice waves to us, steps away from the curb, and the car takes off.

“I’m Reese,” the driver says with a cheery look in the mirror.

“Paige,” I say. “Paige Holly.”

“Fresh meat, awesome. How was your first day?” she asks.

“It was good. I really love working with Mrs. Brandt. She’s an exceptional woman and I live, breathe, and eat art.”

“Lucky you. You’re also lucky the boys weren’t there to make life interesting since they were at a conference all day.” She laughs. “I’ll ask you how much you like the Warden in a week.”

“Warden?” I repeat, sinking into my seat.

“He’s earned the name after expecting everybody to pull long hours and has no chill for mistakes. Oh, then there’s his brother, Nick the Prick. He’s kinda...special,” Reese huffs with a labored tone that says she’s dealt with him plenty.

“Do I need to worry?” I venture.

“Nah, don’t lose any sleep over it. The Warden keeps to himself if you’re hunkered down at work, and Nick, the worst that might happen is he’ll mistake you for a dude for months before he finally bothers to pay attention.”

“Come again?”

“Never mind, it’s...a long story,” she says with a strangled laugh. “Like I said, *special*.”

I blink, wondering what kind of men the Brandt boys are.

“Nick is really harmless, though. Just ignore his dumb jokes and punch him if he flirts. He doesn’t really mean it. He’s just set in his ways. The Warden, on the other hand, can be a real bosshole if you get on his bad side.”

“Uh-oh,” I mutter.

“You’ll be fine! He *is* a senior partner, just like his brother, but remember this. Beatrice makes it clear to everybody that she’s still queen bee. So, if Ward ever gives you hell, don’t be afraid to get Granny on his butt.”

I giggle. “Does she know you call her Granny?”

Reese laughs. “I’ve done it to her face a few times. She’s a sweetheart. Trust me, everybody loves Granny Bea, and the boys aren’t that terrible if you give them a chance.”

For my sake, I hope she’s right.



Now, I'm too curious.

I pull a pizza from the oven, pour a glass of iced mint tea, and sit down to do some serious Google-fu on my new employers. After what Reese told me about the Warden and Nick the Prick, I want to have an idea of who I'm working for, and what landmines might be up ahead.

I hate being caught off guard.

Biting off a messy chunk of pizza, I search Nick Brandt's name first.

There's kind of...a lot. Mostly what looks like tabloid pieces either drooling over him or scorning him for bad behavior on exotic beaches, especially from the local muck pool, *The Chicago Tea*.

A photo pops up with a guy who looks thirtyish. He's hot, but more pretty-rich-boy hot. Not really my type.

He's wearing a wetsuit and a lei on some stunning Hawaiian beach. His longish dark hair is soaked and matted to his face. He beams a million-dollar smile, holding a surfboard above his head.

Reese is right.

This guy looks harmless, but going down the side of my screen there's a long list of Instagram influencers, glam models, and actresses he's dumped. The guy is a player to the core, but I'm not looking for an office fling. I'll be fine.

I take another bite of the pizza and somehow get the spiciest piece of sausage on the damn pie and a smattering of crushed red pepper at the same time. I wash it down with a heaping swig of tea and Google "Ward Brandt."

A handsome face slowly appears on my screen.

A *familiar* handsome face.

Oh, crap on a cracker!

It's a good thing I don't have to twist my head to do a double take, or I think I'd need a neck brace.

Strong jawline.

Cut chin.

Mocha-brown hair—cacao-dark even—and liquid eyes that shift from teal-green to dusky blue, depending on the light.

Feral dusting of a beard designed to knock out the knees of every woman ever, haloing a smirk that looks like he knows your darkest secrets.

Holy hell, no. *No*.

The worst part is, I haven't even swallowed yet. I start choking on my last bite, panic, and blow pizza and tea across my laptop.

Gross!

I have to focus on breathing to stay upright and not keel over.

When the shock wears off and I can move, I grab the cell off my desk and call Brina. Of course, she's off with her perfect husband, living her blissful life, so she doesn't answer.

God, Brina. Pick up.

Pick. Up.

I need you.

Call me ASAP. 911! I text, hitting send.

When my phone doesn't ping back instantaneously, I call her again.

She picks up finally, thank God.

“Paige? Are you okay? I was just about to call you.”

“No—yes—I...I don't know. I effed up. Bad.”

“Shhh,” she whispers. “Can you calm down and tell me what happened?”

“It’s the new job. Um, I think I’m about to get fired. I don’t know. I don’t know what to do. I’m a massive idiot.”

“Brandt Ideas, you mean? How? You just started. There has to be a fix unless you like...set the place on fire...” She pauses.

Somehow, I feel like it couldn’t be crappier than coming face-to-face with a grumpalicious bossman who saw me at my absolute flaming worst.

“...Paige? You didn’t actually set the place on fire, did you?” she squeaks.

“No! Nothing like that. I just...” I trail off, struggling to find the words.

“Okay, look, I don’t think they’d fire you for a mistake you made on the first day if it happened on a spreadsheet or something. Even Mag wasn’t that big a tyrant when I started at HeronComm.”

“I heard that!” Her hot tyrant of a hubby calls in the background.

Where to begin?

“Do you remember Dark Knight?” I ask slowly.

“The guy you told me about last weekend? The dude who rescued you from the Tinder vampire and played doctor sexy but never left a number?”

I smile at how good her memory is.

“That’s the one.”

“What about him?”

“Turns out, I’m his flipping executive assistant!” I cover my face with my free hand, feeling heat pulsing in my cheeks, and trying not to cry.

Deep breath.

When I can talk again, I say, “Working with Beatrice Brandt is a dream but...I don’t know how I can face this guy. And I don’t want to be his assistant. I mean, not unless it’s like

one of those eighties romance novels where ‘secretary’ really means ‘take me against the wall.’ And even then, I’d rather just skip to the fun parts and block off everything else.”

Brina’s laughter fills the phone.

“Not even trying to deny it, huh? You’re already smitten.”

“I brought him home, Brina. I let him put me to bed right after I narrowly dodged a drunken mess. Kinda hard denying he’s attractive at this point. I think I told him to his face. After acting like a total damsel-in-distress idiot in front of him. And I think I was messed up that night, who knows, maybe Count Dick-ula slipped something in my drink.”

“Not your fault. Ever,” she throws back.

“Sabrina, whether I was in my right mind or not, I *hit* on my boss.” I wince and then shudder at how bad my night could’ve ended if said boss hadn’t come to my rescue. “God. How do I ever deal with that? Especially daily...”

“I know. Working for Mag was hard. I had this weird kind of pull with him right away. You noticed, but he didn’t. It was tough working for him, because I didn’t think he felt the same vibe, and when I found out he did...then it got even harder because it had to be a secret. But I couldn’t ditch a good job, and neither can you.” She pauses. “Can you, I mean? I know your situation is a little bit different than mine.”

“In the sense that I can survive on less, yes. But you know I pay my own way and I’ve never wanted anything to do with my parents’ cash. Also, it’s Beatrice freaking Brandt...I may never get a job this good again, much less a chance to work for not-so-starving artists.”

We both pause, and I can hear the wheels in her head turning.

“Then you just have to be professional about it. You have two choices: go to work and pretend like you have no idea who he is or approach him. Admit that you had a terrible night, apologize, and ask to start over. Blank slate.”

“What would you do? Wait. You’re Brina. You’d do number two,” I say, cringing, and knowing it’s the sanest

option. Also, the harshest.

She giggles.

“I don’t know if I can do it. You really expect me to, don’t you?” I ask, flicking my hair over my shoulder anxiously.

“Paige. You pied my billionaire husband right in the face when he was being a dick. You’re a badass, you make pretty things, and you’ve got this.”

I laugh. “I didn’t think I’d ever see Mag again.”

“Yes, you did. You knew he’d come back groveling to win me over,” she says with another jittery laugh.

“I did *not* grovel,” Mag snaps in the background.

“Tell him I’ll pie him again if he keeps lying,” I joke. “I just...I wish I could pie my way out of this mess, too.”

“Not sure that tactic would work here,” she agrees glumly.

She’s right though.

I need to face this with big-girl pants of steel. “Okay. So there’s this big design conference that’s keeping him busy and out of the office, but tomorrow’s the last day. I’ll catch him after he’s back and just try to clear the air.”

“Let me know how it goes. Hey, I have to go. Mag looks pissed and I’m not gonna lie...he’s sexy when he’s peeved. Talk to you tomorrow.”

Before I can say bye, she’s already gone.

I sigh.

All of my friends have moved on with their lives since college. Husbands, careers, travel, kids.

Me, I’m still here in this rented space with no adult attachments. Maybe I should buy a dog?

At least then I’d have someone to come home to and wouldn’t feel alone when I lick my wounds.

For now, I hope to everything almighty that I’m able to confront this office beast without taking too many arrows straight to the chest.



I SIT at my desk trying to finish up replies to low priority emails when Beatrice comes out of her office and stops by my desk. “I have a charity event this afternoon, so I’ll be out the rest of the day. You can keep working on what you’ve been doing, and if Ward needs any help, assist him.”

I smile at her. “Sure, no problem.”

She looks at her watch. “Make sure you get lunch. Don’t let my grandson work you to death.”

I watch her float off in a hunter-green dress that looks like it was tailored for royalty. Everyone she passes by gives her authentic smiles, honest respect, and she stops to exchange a few words.

Dang. When I’m a grandma, I hope I’m a fraction as cool as her. Then again, to be a grandma, first I have to be a mom and to do that—yeah, well, never mind.

My eyes crawl to the door I’ve been dreading to look at since noon.

The Warden is in.

I didn’t see him come by, but he arrived sometime when I stepped away for the printer.

His dark silhouette ripples behind the frosted glass of his office door, a giant of a man. Maybe he’ll be a gentle giant?

I hope.

Slowly, I spin my chair around and stare at the stack of files I’ve purposely waited to deliver until we could talk.

Welp. There’s no good way to do this, so why wait?

I swallow the bulging lump in my throat, take a deep breath, grab the files, and force-walk to his door. I stand in front of it and hesitate, trying to talk myself out of bolting for my desk and sliding the files under his door like a chicken when he’s out.

But just like Brina said, I have to face the music.

So I tap lightly at the frosted glass with my nerves in knots.

“It’s open.” His voice is gruff, no nonsense, and charred.

My heart hits my belly and bounces back up like it’s on a trampoline.

Cringing, I walk through the door, closing it behind me cautiously, and approach his desk.

Sweet bejeezus. He’s...

Somehow, he’s *hotter* than I remember in his tailored suit, pressed to his body like a second skin. The man is a moving sculpture, so flawless it hurts. *Bernini, eat your heart out.*

I’m paralyzed and gawking.

Look, it was one thing knowing Mr. Dark Knight was my boss, but coming face-to-face with him in the torrid flesh is so not something I’m ready for.

Sad memories of Friday night whip through my mind like my life flashing before my eyes.

His powerful hand in mine.

Being pressed against his marble-hard body as he carried me to the car, up the stairs, and tumbled me into bed.

The way he took care of me like a bygone gentleman.

Oh, I was stupid, thinking he actually liked me in my washed-out state.

Ten thousand ughs.

Paige, you’ve got to do this. Now or never, a voice nags in the back of my head.

“Just put them wherever,” he growls without even looking up.

Oh. My. God.

“Right.” I lay the files down at the clear edge of his well-organized mahogany desk, but I make no effort to move.

My words are stuck, so I clear my throat like an insanely awkward species of bird.

He finally spares me a flaying glance. It freezes over into a proper stare a second later.

Not like the way I can't rip my eyes off him. More like he's pissed that I dare even breathe the same air in his presence.

"What do you want?" He stands, drawing up to his full imposing height.

Eep. I rock from my heels to my toes, forgetting the mechanics of stilettos.

Frick.

I almost hit the floor, grabbing at the side of his desk to catch myself. I haven't said anything yet and I've already managed to blow it.

"Are you okay, Miss Holly? Watch your step. We're not looking for a liability suit around here," he clips.

"Yes!" I hiss.

I know. I have an amazing track record of forgetting how my feet work around him.

He rolls his eyes. "Have you had 'just one glass of wine' today?"

Blood pumps under my cheeks, and we haven't even gotten to the part that should be uncomfortable yet. I jerk my head toward the wall, away from those punishing teal eyes.

"Of course not. I just sometimes forget I have to shift my energy in heels. My roommate used to wear my shoes more than I did, but then she moved out and—" I clamp my jaw shut.

Yep, I ramble when I'm nervous.

His face tightens in this sneering smirk as he walks around his desk, assessing me. He glances at my feet, cocks his head, and seems to accept my answer.

I hate that I have to convince this guy I'm not a drunk at work. I wasn't even drunk on Friday night, unless it was really strong wine.

I don't know. What if Nameless really did slip something in my drink?

"Kindly get to the point. I don't have all day," he says.

"I think you know why I'm here, Mr. Brandt." I focus on the pointed toes of my heels. "About the other night—"

"You mean the night I witnessed your public intoxication?"

I swing my head back and release a breath.

He's not going to make this easy.

"I—um—I had no idea who you were, or that we'd ever see each other again. I didn't know we'd be working together or that I'd morbidly embarrass myself in front of a partner at this firm." I force myself to meet his eyes. I have to or the next part won't matter. "I assure you, I don't usually react that way to a drink. I'm painfully sorry. It will never, ever happen again. I deeply appreciate the opportunity to work here, and I'm going to do the best I can for everyo—"

"So you want validation," he spits.

Holy hell. I'm rapidly finding out why the Warden name fits. He talks to me like I'm wearing orange.

I bite my lip. "I was just hoping—if you're willing—maybe we could just—"

"What? Forget it ever happened?" He cocks his head, spearing me with those sea-storm eyes.

"Yes! That!" I smile until my face feels numb.

He crosses his arms, biceps barely contained by his sleeves. "No chance in hell that's going to happen. In fact, I told my grandmother to fire you before I ever left your apartment Friday night since you were so stinking drunk."

He—what?

It's a fight to stay standing because of course he isn't done.

“For whatever reason, Grandma wouldn't do it. You have her to thank for that. Not me. She sees something in you. I'm sure it's because she's not wearing her bifocals, but you don't serve under me exclusively, and Miss Holly, you should be very, very thankful for that. If you did, I'd make sure you didn't last a day.”

Nice. Well, asshat, don't hold back. Tell me how you really feel.

I blink my eyes too fast. It's either that or cry. I want to tell him he's a colossal prick.

If I could take it back, I'd have never left with him last Friday, and not because we have to work together.

Because he's horrible.

I can't reconcile the Warden with the image of the chivalrous grump I met at the museum.

First impressions can be wrong. Irony of ironies, I know.

That kind of works both ways here.

“I'm only going to say this one more time. I had one glass of wine. *One.*” I hold my finger up, desperately wishing it wasn't shaking.

It's not a snappy or punchy declaration. It's tearful and pathetic and totally unlike me.

I'm the girl who dishes crap out and doesn't take it. Except—oh, right—I have to gag on humble pie if I want to keep this job.

I'm so deflated the words are barely audible.

Maybe I should've just gone with Brina's first option and pretended like it never happened. I could've tried to deny it. A mistaken identity lie seems better than this shitshow.

“You can quit lying to yourself because you're not fooling me, Miss Holly,” he says coldly. “Believe me, if you're ever such a lush on the clock, I assure you I *will* find out. And when I do, I'll skip Grandma and go straight to HR. You'll be

promptly removed without an appeal—or even a sobriety test. We don't dispense those here.”

“Ha, ha,” I sputter bitterly.

His eyes widen at the open disrespect.

It's too much. I need this job but I can't stay quiet any longer.

Now, I think I'm cool with the route I took.

This Warden—this *Wardhole*—isn't turning me into a coward.

“Whether you believe I'm a drunk or not doesn't change what happened that night.” I smile at him and keep my voice even. “I'm fine with arguing the truth. But then again, I don't call my boss ‘Grandma.’”

The last word hangs in the air like thunder.

Either he doesn't get it or he doesn't care.

Clearly, I'm not accomplishing much here, so I think I'll escape to the lunch Beatrice insisted I take and clear my head before I have a nervous breakdown.

“Watch your mouth, Holly. I'm a partner!” he snaps, his pride and his ego showing its bruise.

I throw my head back and laugh. “God, you're funny.”

“Excuse me?” His eyes bulge, and I can practically sense his blood pressure building like a mudslide.

“Oh, nothing.” I shrug. “One, it took you long enough for my comment to sink in. And two, you're a partner in a family firm. My sister works for my dad. I don't. I freelanced for two years before landing this job and I earned it honestly.” I grin at him. “On my own.”

His mouth drops.

Now who's speechless?

I put two fingers to my head and move them away in a smart-ass salute before I pivot for the door. I leave it hanging open on my way out as I sail away.

He can shut it himself.

He's a big boy, and a very thin-skinned boss.

I came here to apologize, not declare war.

If this Warden wants to play games, I'll give him the jailbreak of his life.

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SLOSHED (WARD)

For a nanosecond, I almost regret being so harsh with her.
Almost.

Then that damn woman and her barbed wire tongue went and accused me of benefiting from family nepotism. We'd have both been better off if she'd simply crashed her hand across my face.

I'm a highly sought-after architect with years of experience as a CEO and two degrees from top-notch schools. I've added billions to this company. I fought overseas. I've made Grandma's vision bigger and brighter than the sun. I'm worth more than most men can dream.

And I absolutely do not need this shit in any way, shape, or form.

Hell, I could've started my own firm if I weren't here for Grandma. Not many people run a multibillion-dollar company at thirty-two.

Yes, it's my family's company I'm running, and after what we've suffered, no one would have blamed us for closing up shop and retiring to some remote island.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been so blunt with her, but after Grandma's last EA hit on me and then skipped out of the place without notice, I learned my lesson.

It's best to drag these issues out back and shoot them between the eyes.

Plus, it's bad enough I had to pretend to be someone else to rescue her from the grabby loser at the museum. I intervened on her behalf, drove her home, and set her up to deal with the imminent hangover.

My reward?

She repaid me by pointing out my lack of a ring—as if I drip pure defeated bachelor—and then had the fucking gall to imply I'm only where I am thanks to Grandma.

Yeah, I get it.

Girls go for fun guys like Nick who are better at concealing their baggage, but someone has to be the level-headed brain behind decisions hundreds of livelihoods depend on. Not to mention the family legacy.

I didn't need a nasty reminder of Maria, however innocent.

I damn sure didn't need her verbal lashing in my office, even if it was retaliation for the way I dressed her down.

Most of all, I don't need a pissing contest with a human porcupine working under me.

There's no room for mistakes right now. Everything about our company and this pitch has to be perfect.

Ross Winthrope doesn't play around.

He's always been impressed by Grandma's class, wisdom, and impeccable designs, yeah, but that's not the whole game.

I can't be distracted by references to my backstabbing ex or a sloshed-out wine-guzzling blond who looks like she just stepped off a magazine cover.

That's what makes this torture.

Not just her shit, but how brutally attractive she looks while flinging it.

If I was as reckless as Nick and as foul as my father, I might have bent her over my desk, hiked up her dress, and shown her exactly who's in control.

After I'm done with my inner zen of grumbling, I don't see Pai—Miss Holly—the rest of the day.

Thank fuck.

With the peace and quiet, I've almost got the details of the formal bid for Winthrop nailed down. I'm working on tweaking it when my office phone rings.

"Ward Brandt," I answer.

"I know you're still at the office," Grandma says.

I roll my eyes.

"Yeah, how?"

"Security camera. Go home, Ward. It's past eight o'clock. You can work your life away tomorrow."

"I'm finishing the bid."

"The bid will be there tomorrow." She pauses before saying softly, "I worry about you, Ward."

What? I worry about *her*.

She's in her seventies and running around with a workload and social life meant for a woman half her age.

I'm thirty-two, fit, and healthy.

There's no reason for her to worry about me. Even if Grandma seems more unbreakable than anyone on the planet, she drives herself too hard.

"You know I appreciate your concern, Grandma, but I'm not twelve years old anymore. I can keep a sleep schedule, thank you," I tell her.

"Someday you'll have kids of your own, I hope. You'll understand then," she says quietly.

Nah. I'm married to Brandt Ideas and that's the way it's staying. The company is more loyal than any woman I've been with.

"Maybe so," I say, keeping her hopes up. "But that's not today."

“Go home,” she orders again. “Don’t make me come down there myself.”

Dammit, the worst part is, she *would*.

“Let me wrap up and I’ll find my way home,” I say with a heavy sigh, pushing the phone back into its cradle.

Lucky for both of us I was about to head out anyhow. Better to let her think she won.

Old people, right?

Downstairs, I climb into the sprawling backseat of the souped-up Lincoln and lay my briefcase on the floor. I stopped bothering with the pomp of having drivers load it up for me years ago.

“Welcome back, Officer Warden!” Reese quips with her usual smart-assery, then smiles at me.

“I’m in a firing mood today,” I warn.

“Aw, learn to take a joke, bossman. They’re finding more benefits with laughter every day, you know.” She flashes me an awkward smile.

“I don’t joke.”

Or laugh, for that matter, I think to myself.

“You ain’t lyin’, tiger.”

No, but I do grin at her bullshit. Sometimes I halfway get how Nick was oblivious to her for well over a month when she started.

She’s fresh-faced, intelligent, and in her early twenties with a nice figure, but Reese could be one of the guys. On the plus side, any man on our staff looking for an easy date knows not to fuck with her, or Nick and I will be there to back her up.

“Have you met Paige yet? I think we’ll like her.” Her cheerful eyes smile at me in the mirror and only deflate after I go a minute without answering. “What? Was it something I said?”

I roll my eyes. How does this insufferable ass-sistant have everyone wrapped around her finger already?

“Count me out of your fawning. She’s a drunken fool, and as soon as Beatrice lets me, I’m firing her.”

“Eww. I’m telling your grandma you called her Beatrice.”

I don’t say anything, just snort.

“Seriously though, what happened? She rubbed you that wrong? She thought it went well today.”

I could go into it, but the less Reese knows, the better.

“I simply don’t think she’s an appropriate fit for the company. She has ample opportunity to prove me wrong,” I say.

“Why?”

I sigh. “She got drunk at the Art Institute and made a scene.”

Reese laughs and flashes a thumbs up. “Good for her! Somebody had to riot. That wine they sell at the café is some high-dollar crap. Ain’t worth it if you can’t get buzzed off fifty bucks.”

Okay. I take it back. Reese can’t be one of the guys unless we’re talking frat boys...or Nick, I guess.

“Who gave you a Mountain Dew IV drip today?” I ask.

“Oh, I get to babysit my niece tonight, so I’ve been slamming it back all evening. How’d you know, boss?”

I shake my head. “I can just tell.”

She nods. “Well, be nice to Paige. Pretty please? She’s a cool lady, and if she goes to art galleries on her time off, that seems like a good fit to me.”

“No, Reese. A woman stumbling through a museum with some dickwad hanging on her and loudly declaring her affiliation with my company isn’t a good fit. Granted, the rotten date wasn’t her fault, but as for the rest...” I trail off, wondering why I bother.

She won't get it.

So far, no one does, and I hate it.

Makes a man wonder if there's something to his permanent stick-up-the-ass reputation after all, but now isn't the time for reflection.

Reese's face in the rearview mirror narrows, sucking her cheeks in.

"Bad fit. Right. Whatever." She takes one hand off the wheel and stabs a finger back at me. "This is out of line, but here goes. Have you ever thought of being less of a judgmental prick? You forget I've seen you throw the shots back and nobody gets drunker than your brother."

"Just drive," I bite off.

It'd be easier to be less judgmental if I could get Paige's weaponized grin out of my head. She *enjoyed* implying I serve purely at Grandma's pleasure.

I should have told her it was only because her own grandmother knows her too well to hire her.

Shit. Why didn't I think of it in time?

Oh well.

She's about to regret the potshots she took in so many ways. If I can't fire her, then I can make my new enemy's life very, very interesting.

I pull out my phone to tap out an email.

To: Paige Holly

From: Ward Brandt

Subject: Marching Orders

MISS HOLLY,

I HOPE this email finds you sober so you're up to the task at hand.

As you know, the big pitch with Ross Winthrop is coming up, and it's critical. I'll be sending you all the information for the bid presentation in another email. I'll need you to organize it and start putting together a slideshow that will hold his attention.

When you're done with that, you can catalog the other Winthrop properties for comparison. Be sure to leave no detail out. I'll send you a catalog created for another client you can use as an example.

Also, please grab our coffee when you come in tomorrow. Grandmother and I drink black coffee or double shots of espresso, and Nick likes his mochas.

THANKS,

Ward Brandt

Senior Partner, Brandt Ideas Inc.

REESE PULLS UP to the curb in front of my building as my phone dings.

“Thanks,” I say to her and climb out of the car.

I tap on the screen to open the email and read it as I walk.

MR. BRANDT,

I WOULD BE happy to oblige but I'm kinda sloshed. I decided to unwind after a long day with—go ahead and guess—one devastating glass of wine.

However, that shouldn't be a problem, seeing as you don't own my personal time.

But I adore your grandmother, and I've never met Nick, so I'll make sure their coffee is steaming hot and on their desks tomorrow morning.

CIAO,

Paige Holly

Executive Assistant, Brandt Ideas Inc.

I KNEW pain-in-the-ass is her state of being.

My teeth clamp together. Why the hell did Grandma insist on keeping this girl around?

My fingers go to war.

MISS HOLLY,

YOU'RE NOT HOURLY. You're salaried. That means you're responsible for having all projects completed by their deadlines, no matter whose clock you're punching to complete them.

I'll enjoy our meeting with HR tomorrow with my double shot espresso.

Ward Brandt

Senior Partner, Brandt Ideas Inc.

I HAVEN'T EVEN MADE it into my penthouse when her next email comes in, my phone pingin' like a restless hornet in my ear.

MR. BRANDT,

IT'S A VERY good thing you have an EA to check your correspondence. You forgot to close your letter out with a proper goodbye. Oopsy doopsy.

When's my deadline?

I look forward to our meeting with HR tomorrow too. Turns out, calling an employee names is considered harassment. I'm sure you didn't know that, considering certain "allowances" are probably made for you.

No worries. Most employees aren't fired without three strikes, but you probably didn't know that, either. I've attached the applicable section of Illinois employment law for your bedtime reading. It's absolutely riveting.

Night-night, Mr. Brandt. Always happy to be of service.

NOT YOURS,

Paige Holly

Executive Assistant, Brandt Ideas Inc.

I OPEN HER ATTACHMENTS, half expecting to find a malicious virus or a crudely drawn dick in MS Paint, but she's literally attached a snippet from the state's labor code.

She researches well and fast and it infuriates me.

Still, that could be an asset. She's also lying about being sloshed, or else she's a very functional drunk.

"Woman, you're as annoying as hell, and you have a fucking lot of nerve," I bark at the screen. Still, I have to answer the question.

MADAME,

YOUR DEADLINE IS eight a.m. tomorrow. Sharp.

My EA will properly close this email and check for any mistakes like retaining you for this position.

MR. BRANDT.

I SCOFF. Let's see how long it takes to respond to that.

The silence on the other end is deafening and enjoyable.

Even if I'm glad I've schooled her smart mouth for one night, something tells me it won't last.



WHEN I WAKE up in the morning, the first thing I do is check my email.

I'm expecting Miss One Glass to send back some whiny message about how unfair it was for me to bury her under an avalanche of projects.

There's nothing like that, but a slideshow of the final bid in its current form attached to a blank email with the subject line *Done*.

Damn her.

It's incredible how she maintains her scathing sass with a single word.

At the office, Nick stands in front of Miss Holly's desk, sipping his sugar rush mocha and leering over her. Probably trying to look down her blouse.

Careful, you idiot. This girl knows Illinois employment law by heart. She'll have your balls stapled to your jacket.

Muttering silently, I stop on the way to my office and my eyes meet hers. "I take it my coffee's waiting on my desk?"

She looks up and glares a second too long, those green eyes glittering like a jungle cat's.

“Nope.”

“No?” I spit back.

“Shocking espresso shortage. The Bean Bar only had enough left for a mocha and one double shot, and Mrs. Beatrice Nightingale Brandt takes seniority. If I'd waited for them to resupply, I'd have missed your oh-so-important deadline. Mrs. Brandt told me to let you know you could see her if you had a problem with it, though.” She flashes me a murderously triumphant “gotcha” grin.

“The Bean Bar does *not* run out of espresso,” I snarl through clenched teeth. The coffee shop has its shit together better than anything else in this city—the whole reason we love it and treat ourselves to Chicago's finest dressed-up caffeine overload a few times every week.

“Sorry. We're one cuppa joe short, but I figured the project was more important, so...” Holly just smiles and shrugs like a schoolgirl who's gotten away with cherry-bombing a high school toilet.

The motion sends my eyes lashing down her face to the low cut of her blouse.

For a tortured second, I'm no better than my idiot brother, my eyes glued to a pair of ample tits I'd like to boss around with my tongue, my teeth, my—

Damn her to the moon.

With nothing else to say, I turn around and nearly slam into Nick.

“Whoa, where's the fire?” He greets me with his usual lopsided grin.

“Nowhere, apparently.” I level a glare at him. “Shouldn't you be in your office *working*?”

He holds a hand up. “Bro, if you're jonesing that bad for coffee, I can run down to the bar downstairs and get you an espresso. My treat.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

I need to move it before my humiliation is complete, so I push past him, go to my office, and slam the door shut. Then I remember, I’ve only seen one completed project this morning.

Where’s the other?

I open the frosted glass door and stick my head out. “Where’s the Winthrop comp catalog?”

Miss Holly looks up, twirling her blond hair like spun gold. “I’m working on it now! I can send you what I have. The final should be ready before lunch.” She points to her computer.

My eyes narrow and I fold my arms.

“It was due at eight a.m.”

Nick watches us for a minute and huffs loudly. “Yo, Ward, give her a break. It’s still her first week.”

“No excuse to miss deadlines. She has the credentials and work ethic, when she applies them,” I say.

“Aw, c’mon, the last girl took at least a solid week to make those catalogs,” Nick fires back. “There’s so much crap in them—”

Miss Holly jumps in. “Most of it I’ve been able to copy and paste, which is why I’m done with the North American hotels for comparison. Since Mr. Winthrop is coming by for a check-in this week, I thought the slideshow was more important. I’ll be done with the catalog today, like I said.”

Nick’s eyes trace from Paige—Miss Holly—to me.

Get her the hell out of your head, I demand inwardly. Yes, she’s beautiful, but she’s a wine-sloshing trouble maker with a whip for a tongue. Stop feeding her.

“She made a slideshow for you, too?” Nick asks, looking over at her, seriously impressed. He lets out a low whistle. “Damn, girl. Beauty and brains. I like you already.”

“Not me. For the Winthrop bid,” I correct sharply.

“Ah. Sure.” He nods but his eyes are glued to one particularly annoying fallen angel.

“Leave her alone so she can finish up,” I bark right before I slam the door and stomp back to my desk.

It’s the only way to end this, leaving them to their own devices.

And as much as I may crap on him, Nick isn’t a total idiot. He knows not to fraternize with any pretty ladies in this office unless he wants Grandma coming down on him like a ton of bricks with me right behind her.

Miss Holly sends the Winthrop property catalog at eleven a.m., before her new noon deadline, and Winthrop comes in at two for his “check-in,” as he calls it.

For a man who’s loaded beyond belief and routinely shows up on the world’s Top 100 list of billionaires, Ross Winthrop is in a class of his own.

If someone uploaded Willy Wonka’s brain to a Victorian hotel mogul, you’d get something pretty close to the stuffy, demanding, and utterly eccentric man who’s come all the way here from London.

I try not to stare too hard at the royal purple suit he’s decked out in today, complete with an antique gold pocket watch sporting a chain that looks like it could leash a polar bear.

He loves Grandma’s designs, and that’s all that matters.

Fortunately for us, her rare aesthetic seems like one he wants to add to his portfolio of stunning properties around the world. If we can just close this out, he’ll pay more zeroes than any of us have ever seen.

I let Grandma do the talking.

They’ve been at it for over an hour when he looks at her and says, “Your concepts are always transcendent, Mrs. Brandt. Your office is clean, sleek, soulful, and modern, and you’re every bit as gracious and responsible as Godfrey was. God rest his soul.” He bows his head. “I’m glad to see you’re

still running the place. If there's one thing I loathe about newer firms, it's the immature, money-grubbing bachelors who steer them. They're always too high on dreams, low on discipline, and lack the dreams big enough to ground them."

I stiffen in my seat like a stone.

His peripheral vision captures my brother and me.

Message received.

It's disguised as a backhanded compliment, but what he really means is, "*I like your firm since you're here to babysit your Peter Pan grandsons.*"

In fairness, Nick might need a babysitter.

I damn sure don't.

Once Winthrope's in the elevator with the doors firmly closed, I let out a low, exasperated growl. It was an exercise in restraint holding it in this long.

Grandma and Nick both give me odd looks, but I've got nothing to add.

Making this dream come true for Brandt Ideas won't be easy.

Then again, putting up with Ross Winthrope suddenly feels simple compared to the blond bombshell with a destroyer mouth I desperately need to stop aching to ruin.



THE NEXT MORNING, Miss Holly conveniently forgets my coffee. Again.

Of course she remembers Grandma's and Nick's drinks.

And the day after that, she waltzes into my office with stilettos clip-clopping against marble, announcing her arrival like a black cat catching its claws on a shag carpet.

I glance up from my work. "There should be laws against you wearing heels. Buy new shoes before you endanger

yourself and half the office.”

Her full-pout, flirty pink lips open and she looks at the floor.

I die.

All because I’m torn with regret for not kissing her when I had the chance, and relief that I didn’t.

She sighs. “I thought they were cute. You don’t like them?”

Oh, I like.

Her black pencil skirt hugs the curve of her ass and the hem bobs up and down, just above her knee, revealing perfectly shaped calves any man would kill for. I try not to think about those legs, wrapped around me in nothing but heels, spurring me to render her speechless.

She’s more than cute, and it’s doing a horrific number on my last nerve.

“No one’s ogling your feet in this office. They’re too busy. Also, you’re dangerous in heels,” I growl, refusing to meet her eyes.

“Does that mean you accept I only had one glass of wine that night if you’re blaming the shoes for my balance?” She purses her lips.

Fuck, I could bite them.

“Not a chance. Why are you in my office, anyway?”

“Oh—nothing.” She holds her arm out, offering me the tall white Bean Bar cup clasped in her hand.

The name on the cup says “Warden.”

Lovely. She’s been talking to Reese.

I snatch the cup from her hand. When I plunk it down on my desk, under the name, I see Paige’s handwriting scrawled across a pink Post-it.

A sweet morning pick-me-up. Truce?

“Enjoy, bossman,” she whispers, turning to exit the room.

She swings her hips with every step.

Goddamn, is she doing it just to taunt me?

Does she know I feel like an armed grenade every second I look at her?

There's nothing to truce over anyway, but it's never a bad time for a double shot. Lifting the cup to my lips, I take a loud gulp—then promptly spray dark muck across the room.

Fuck! If this was any sweeter, it'd be liquid black cotton candy.

This is her peace offering? Trying to *poison* me?

If she wants a battle, let's roll.

I jump on my laptop, forwarding her every meaningless assignment that's ever touched my Inbox over the last six months, busywork I couldn't muster a single shit about. All due *tonight*.

Half an hour later, she taps on my door.

“What?”

She opens it and steps inside, clearing her throat with this nonchalant smile that draws too much attention to lips worthy of a hundred hate-kisses.

“I got your emails, Mr. Brandt.”

“Yeah? Then you have plenty of work to do.”

“Looks that way.” She smiles ever so slowly. “How was your coffee?”

I don't give her the pleasure of a tantrum.

I just point to the trash can beside my desk.

“Yay, I'm glad you liked it so much! Vanilla honey-cream syrup is the sweetest they have, but if you mix it with guava, you can create a sugar coma. Same order tomorrow?”

I'm surprised my hollowed-out eyes don't set her on fire.

“Get out,” I order.

Her smile grows wider and she waves before she shuts the door.



THE NEXT DAY my whole office smells like coffee.

A new tall cup sits on my desk with *Wardhole* written across it. I stare at it for a minute, wondering if I want to drink it after yesterday.

What if she's stepped it up? What if she's set up the lid to blow off and splatter me with pure syrup the instant I take a drink?

At least then I could fire her ass.

But it smells so good, I brush my fears aside.

I pick it up, sniff cautiously, and take a smallest swallow, not wanting to stain my office again.

Black. Plain black coffee with the scent of Kona heaven.

I clutch it like mana and head to the conference room, where we're prepping the final Winthrope bid today.

With my laptop connected to the projector, I sit in a high-back chair, waiting for everyone else.

Nick comes through the door holding his mocha with a scowl aimed at me.

"Hey, what the hell did you do to Paige?"

"Miss Holly, you mean—we have professional moral to maintain around here—and what are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? Didn't you notice? She recoils whenever you enter a room like she's just seen Lucifer." He pulls at his tie.

She *has* been moving to the other side of the room, lately, I guess.

I've noticed it too.

Comes with the territory when we're like two violently repelling magnets.

"And it's like she's memorized your schedule or something," Nick continues, raking a hand through his hair. "She knows exactly when you won't be in your office and waits to deliver anything until then. She doesn't do that with anyone else, so I figure you've said something. One of your asshole things that makes you so lovable."

I shrug. "I told her to lay off the bottle while she's at work. Nothing more."

For a second, my brother stares at me in disbelief, as if he hasn't done far worse in his party animal life.

"You're such a jackass, Ward," he mutters.

Jackass or not, I look away from my computer now to catch his eyes. "We need to get something clear. She's our executive assistant. She's not here to be anyone's hookup, or to make a spectacle of pissing me off. I'm after a competent EA, and well within my rights to ask her to shape up."

Nick laughs too long before he straightens up.

Covering his face with his hand, he leans in and groans, "Oh, man. You pay *a lot* of attention to her, don't you? No one said anything about hooking up before you did. Look, you need to relax with this dumb hotel and go on a real date. It's been—what? Two years since your—since Maria, I mean—and you're still reeling and taking it out on people like Paige. Not fair. Just live your life, brother. If you have subconscious urges for the EA—"

"What? You're the one hanging over her desk every time I —"

"So you're jealous?" He winks. "Thought so."

"Dammit, I have zero *urges*, and this 'dumb hotel' is a lifelong dream for our grandparents. Grandpa didn't even get to live to see it while Winthrop was dropping hints for years, but always walking away at the last second. Buck up and get serious." I pause to see anger flash across his face. "Everything we have, we owe to them. This is our last chance

to leave a legacy for Grandpa Godfrey. And the press loves to serve up Brandt family drama. Assholes like Roland Osprey are always out there lurking for scraps.”

“Don’t remind me,” he slurs, falling back in his seat.

“Exactly. We’ve got to be a hundred percent scandal proof right now. Winthrope’s old school, strange, and British. Scandal will scare him off. We’re not fucking this up.”

“Yeah, no, he’s a crazy boomer with a pylon up his ass a mile long. He’s obsessed with talent, quality, and precision. My personal life has nothing to do with the quality of my work. I can bring home a different model every night and still make sure our designs are executed flawlessly, if I want.”

“You’re so full of yourself,” I say with a snort.

“Whatever. At least I’m not stomping around the office like a jackboot.”

“He’s just old-fashioned and protecting his brand. Can you blame him? If I had an image like his to protect, I’d be skeptical of working with us after what our parents did too. It took us *years* to repair the damage, Nicholas.”

“You’re too worried. We’ll sell him so hard his top hat flies off. If he doesn’t take the contract, it’s his loss. Tell me, who has better designs than Brandt? Name one person who designs better than Grandma.”

“God,” I quip. “After that, no one.”

He chuckles, but his smile is real. He wasn’t a fan of the slogan I came up with at first, but now it’s grown on everyone.

More importantly, it’s accurate.

If it’s not made by God, then it must be a Brandt.

Grandma’s designs are always a stroke of creative genius.

Hell, maybe I am too worried, and dealing with it by lashing out at Paige.

On the other hand, with deals as lucrative as this, Murphy’s Law is king. Everything can go wrong.

My gut tells me not to get too comfortable.

Minutes go by in silence while the senior staff file in. I sift through the slides, rereading the notes to help me remember what I need to highlight with each point when the time comes to touch base with Winthrope's team again.

Nick watches me and finally says, "You know what your problem is?"

"I didn't even know I have a problem."

"You've got a bigger stick up your ass than Ross Winthrope, just like Grandma says. You don't mind people like Winthrope trying to protect their image because he's going to be *you* in forty years. Minus the circus outfits, I mean."

"Ross Winthrope is a few notches below Elon Musk. I'm trying to decide if I want to be insulted by your crap." I pretend to think. "You know what? No, I won't be. Last time I checked, he has more money than you, me, and Grandma combined."

Nick bristles while I go back to work, wishing I could shut down Paige Holly just as swiftly.

Only, the fact that she's still in my head—rent free—annoys me to no end.

I'm not losing my mind.

I'll win the deal, the money, the dream, and the prestige without getting sloshed on Miss Holly.

OceanofPDF.com

SUNBURN (PAIGE)

Don't freak out.

Not even when he piles on insane amounts of work with impossible deadlines.

Just smile, research how much time similar projects take, and vow to get it done. If Mr. Grumpyface Brandt wants to play hardball, I'm ready to swing.

But I've also decided I'm not losing sleep over meeting the master of the universe's demands.

After all, he's one of three bosses, and Beatrice Brandt and Nick are very happy with my work.

Deep down, the Wardhole is too.

He just can't admit it.

"Can I borrow a marker?" I ask the barista, waiting on the latest order at The Bean Bar.

She glances at the silver counter beside her, finds an extra marker, and hands it to me. She's written The Warden on this black drip, per my request.

It's always The Warden or Wardhole depending on the day of the week. Today, I'm adding a more personal touch.

I quickly sketch a set of handcuffs under the name and smile at my cartoonish work.

Oh, he'll enjoy his coffee today.

I can't help giggling as I pick up the drink carrier and traipse out of the café.

Two hours later, I'm sitting at my desk, working through the deluge of assignments from yesterday. I've completed half of them by working past midnight and coming in early this morning, and I'll be done before he expects it.

Ward comes out of his office rubbing his eyes, yawning like a bear.

He strolls up to my desk at a snail's pace.

"Sorry."

"For the yawn? No worries. I feel like doing the same thing every time we talk," I say.

Those gas flames for eyes beam hot death.

"I don't know what the deal is, but my coffee isn't doing it lately. Would you go to the bar downstairs and get me a triple espresso and a Red Bull?"

I smile, trying to hold back a snicker. "Of course, Mr. Brandt."

His eyes follow me to the elevator.

I bite the inside of my cheeks.

"Wait. What the fuck did you do to my coffee?" he hurls at my back.

Oops. Maybe I didn't keep a straight enough face. Kinda hard when you've been messing with the boss' precious brew for this long without him noticing.

"Excuse me?" I turn, innocently twirling a lock of my hair.

"You did something. Christ, you've been doing it for over a week, haven't you?" He bows up, casting a figure that's all muscle, all jaw, and all ragey.

I tuck a strand of blond hair behind my ear. "Mr. Brandt, if you're getting too old to keep up with your schedule, you don't need to blame me for it, or The Bean Bar."

“You tampered with my brew,” he grinds out, his eyes shifting around suspiciously.

“Whatever.” I shake my head. “You’re nuts.”

The elevator doors open. I step inside, punch the button to shut them, and immediately burst into a manic fit of laughter.

Oh my God.

His face.

His stupid, arrogant, chiseled, upset *face*.

In no time, I’ve ordered his triple espresso the same way I did his black drip this morning. *Decaf*.

Too bad he asked for a Red Bull, too.

No way to fake that one.

Since he’s decided to torture me with impossible workloads, inhuman deadlines, and yes—I’ll admit it—those deliriously good looks that keep showing up in my dreams, I’m fighting fire with fire.

I’m going to do everything to this jackass Brina should have done to Heron before they had to go and ruin their fun by falling in love—okay, except maybe the pie to the face.

He deserves a nice thick banana-caramel cream pie, but I might actually get fired over that one. And I want to keep this job, even if it means putting up with a tyrannical lunk stuffed into the world’s sexiest suit.

At lunch, he passes my desk, heading for the elevator. I look up from my work. “How was your coffee this afternoon? Any improvement?”

He glares at me. “Awesome.”

I spot the Red Bull in his hand. Has he figured out the rest of his drinks were decaf?

“Y’know, if you need two coffees *and* an energy drink by lunchtime, maybe you should get to bed sooner. Don’t stiff the Sandman or you’ll pay!” I call.

He stops, his huge shoulders rippling with a sigh.

“Don’t you have work to do? Or do I need to assign you more?”

I flash him a smile and turn my eyes back to my screen.

He sent me half a dozen “special assignments” on top of my normal load yesterday. But they’ll all be done before I leave today because I rock and roll.

Take that, Wardhole. I’m too good at this and you suck at getting under my skin.

Around four, I submit the last of his projects and open an email from Beatrice that makes me gasp.

She...she wants feedback on her latest designs. I mean, sure, it’s sent to the entire creative team, but she CC’d little old me.

Beatrice Nightingale Freaking Brandt wants *my input*.

This woman is so amazing I’m not sure there’s anything I could tell her. You can’t improve on genius, and even if I’m educated in art, I’m not a licensed architect or designer.

But part of feedback means weighing the feeling, the mood, the soul of her creations. We’re also going to work through the process, how she makes revisions, and I’ll be there at the same table with her entire team.

That’s worth more than any salary or any appalling bosshole.

My computer pings again with something less exciting in my Inbox.

To: Paige Holly

From: Ward Brandt

Subject: Your Capable Hands

MISS HOLLY,

I HAVE a new use for your hands away from the keyboard. See to it that the scale models in my office are dusted and shined before 5:30. I'm expecting a meeting with a VIP client tomorrow. Try not to break a nail.

THANKS,

Ward Brandt

Senior Partner, Brandt Ideas Inc.

WHAT THE EFF? See to it? Break a nail?

Ugh-city.

Still, Beatrice doesn't need immediate feedback before tomorrow and five thirty p.m. comes first. I suck in enough air to puff my cheeks and blow it out slowly. I don't even know where to find cleaning supplies since I didn't realize I was part of the janitorial staff now.

Freelancing might not have been so bad.

Not knowing what else to do, I go to the bathroom, unroll a sheet of paper towels the length of my arm, and wet them.

Ward's office door is flanked by two tables of imposing models cast in what looks like pure silver. I start at the left table, dusting his stupid models.

Yes, they're beautiful buildings.

No, the phallic symbolism isn't lost on me, especially when I wind up stroking up and down a tall skyscraper the company worked on refurbishing years ago.

"Make sure you get the ones in my case, too. Nice and slow so you don't miss a spot," he says, emerging from his private bathroom.

Oh, God.

I whip around, letting out a squeak as I catch my balance. The bastard smiles, one hand fixing his tie, a hot glint in his eye.

How long has he been watching me?

My only response is a dagger-eyed glare.

He leans against the doorframe with one dark-brown wave hanging in his eye. I'll admit, the purple tie and silver suit looks good on him today.

"It's a pleasure working with you sometimes. You've been a decent hire after all," he says slowly.

It's an odd, sincere burst of praise I'm not expecting.

I try to come up with some quip, some joke to throw back, but I'm actually speechless.

Again, he hits me with that Hercules smile that could hold up the world—and I'm a little afraid it's captured my heart.

Oh, I'd like to slap him, or do—*other things*.

Rough things I've wanted to do since the night I met him in the art museum and he started calling me a drunk like the cruel dolt he is. But I need this job, so...

All I can do is shine his freaking toys and nod, hoping I'm just imagining his eyes undressing me as I work, and I conjure up every unsexy thought in the universe.

Furnace outages in winter. Rotten fruit baskets. Saggy old billionaires in boudoir photos.

Only, somehow Ross Winthrope's skin tightens in my head. His face morphs into a bearded halo, an immaculate chin, and thick hair screaming for my fingers, all perched on a titan's body belonging to Ward Brandt.

Argh.

At least I don't have to smile about it.

I save Ward's glass case against the wall for last, hoping he'll go get his stupid coffee, or have a meeting or something, so he's not there while I am.

No such luck.

He's sitting at his desk with his coat off now. His sleeves are rolled up and my eyes can't help but wander.

His arms. They're big, taut with muscles, corded in a way that says he didn't get those guns in the gym. His head tilts down as he reviews a file. He can't see me taking in the view.

His suspenders line that hard slab of a chest like fine licorice-black ribbons.

I bite my lip to keep from giggling.

Nerd. Who wears suspenders in the 2020s?

Unfortunately, *that* nerd. The one who happens to make suspenders ridiculously sexy.

A tattoo ripples under his rolled sleeve, but I can't make out what it is, only dark ink. He stretches his arm, reaching for another file, and the sleeve comes up.

It's an eagle crossed with barbed wire.

Whoa. Hardcore.

Ward has a military background, apparently. That might partly explain why he's such a raging hardass.

Guess it's par for the course when you're sporting the whole lady-killer package.

Stoic attitude. Rock-hard body. Bitter black coffee attitude.

He lifts his head and meets my gaze with those summer eyes from Hades' pool. He lifts an eyebrow, as if to say, *well? What are you waiting for?*

Send help.

Blood rushes to my cheeks. I spin around to face the display case and start dusting like my life depends on it. Honestly, it might.

The Warden chuckles behind me. It's a dark, deep rumble like bass in my ears, vibrating through me.

"Are you well, Miss Holly?" he asks.

"Never better," I force out.

"Then why are you so red?"

I wave my hand in front of my face and say the first thing that comes to mind.

“Sunburn.”

“Oh, you must have gone out at lunch. I didn’t notice it was that hot earlier.”

Technically, the burning heat is confined to this room.

The more annoying he gets, the more the fire in my face subsides. When I’m confident I’m not morphing into a lobster anymore, I face him.

“So, do you spend a lot of time looking at me?”

“No—I—you’re hard to miss,” he snaps off. “Your office is in the lobby. You’re my assistant. How the hell could I miss you?”

“Oh, okay,” I say with a hint of sarcasm.

“I’m serious. You’re—” He pauses, a scowl on his face, struggling to find the words.

It’s cute when he’s forced to be tactful.

I smile. Sometimes keeping a straight face with this guy is the hardest part of the job.

“Mr. Brandt, I understand. I just need to get back to work, okay?”

He glares at me, his eyes napalm pools. “Give them a second dusting. Please.”

Holy crap. He said the magic word. First time I’ve ever seen it in his vocabulary.

“I’d be happy to, if you can tell me where to find a refill head for the duster. Since I’m not on the janitorial staff, I don’t have access to cleaning supplies,” I say sweetly.

“Just get out of here,” he growls.

“But how will your models be dusted then?”

He stands and waves his arm at the door, his face so tight, so conflicted.

“Miss Holly, *go*.”

Lordy, he’s sizzle when he’s mad.

I close the door behind me and make it to my desk before I laugh. Not only did I best him—again—I got out of dusting more models.

Score.

Nick’s the first to leave that evening. He doesn’t even wait until four. The guy’s a one-eighty to his brother, a total rake, but he doesn’t have a serious bone in his body.

He’s fun. I like him.

Beatrice, whom I love the most, goes next. She says she’s been a little tired lately and thinks she should rest. So I’m left alone with the third of the equation I despise.

At eight o’clock, that third comes out of his office to torment me.

“Why are you still here?”

“Hello to you, too. I’m looking for errors in your grandmother’s latest design.” I glare at him. “I might have finished earlier, but someone decided they needed their models dusted today.”

“Just go home already. Grandma’s designs have no flaws,” he says.

I shake my head. “This is the kind of experience I took this job for. I’m not losing out on design work because I shined your toys so well it got you mad.”

“You—” He pauses, biting back whatever curse was on the tip of his tongue. “Suit yourself, Miss Holly, but you’re wasting your time. I told you, Grandma doesn’t make errors.”

Slowly, I look up and meet his stormy eyes. “That’s funny because...I’ve already found three.”

“*What?*” He stalks around my desk and looks at the screen.

I click back to the first slide of the interior.

“Look here, the Presidential Suite.” I point to a door entering a room and then to the closet. “Granted, I’m no architect, but this seems out of place.”

“Rooms need doors, and people usually like closets. What’s your point?” he demands.

“From what I can tell, one of these doors has to swing in a different direction. Otherwise, they’re going to hit each other,” I tell him.

For a long, deadly second he’s quiet.

“You could just not have both doors open at the same time,” he says weakly.

“Huh. Do all of your upscale clients work on that assumption?” I bat my eyes.

He sighs, a hint of redness behind that beard as he reaches up and scratches his face. “Fuck. You’re right. What gives? Grandma never makes mistakes. And if that’s truly what this is, it would’ve been caught well before the final draft, you know.”

“Everyone makes mistakes. No one produces perfect art on the first try. You’re welcome for saving her some time.”

He crosses his arms. “It’s not the first draft. She wouldn’t have asked for feedback unless she’d already looked at it a thousand times. She’s a lifelong perfectionist.”

I shrug. “Hey, bossman, I’m just helping.”

“Well, thanks,” he grinds out reluctantly. Then he goes to the elevator and calls over his shoulder. “Don’t stay here all night.”

I’m done by midnight.

The next day, Beatrice compliments my work, and she’s so grateful for the error report. She tells me I’m doing an outstanding job and if I keep it up...I just might be her protégé.

Holy crap. I’m beyond honored, walking on sunshine, but I hate that she’s as uncomfortable as Ward about some of the

mistakes I caught.

They're just little things.

What's the big deal?

And yet, it's like she's deflated, looking like a woman who feels a superpower slipping away.

I can't put my finger on it, but there's definitely something odd with her.



IT'S after lunch on a sunny Friday.

I've officially survived a month now at Brandt Ideas, and I'm actually giddy at the accomplishment.

"Can you repeat that?" I ask.

The marketing director, Andrew, is presenting a plan to attract new clients. The Brandt brothers are out pitching Winthrope, and Beatrice is at another charity event this morning. Everyone will need detailed notes, and this guy talks faster than I can type.

He points to the top line of his presentation pad again, tapping it like a human hummingbird. "Did you catch all that? If you need me to, I'm happy to start over."

"Good news, people!" a gruff voice booms over us before Andrew the Marketing Guy can machine gun through his talk a second time.

Ward.

His voice has always been whiskey smooth, but out of the blue like this—when he isn't supposed to be here—it rakes goosebumps down my arms.

Andrew the hummingbird wouldn't let anyone else get a word in edgewise. He doesn't try that with Ward.

The Warden walks up to the center of the table like the proud lion he is. He makes a show of leaving everyone in

suspense for just a few more seconds before he clasps his hands in front of him and makes his announcement.

“Ross Winthrop has tentatively accepted our offer to create the finest hotel on the Chicago skyline. The cherished dream of my grandparents lives, and it’s all thanks to each and every one of you.”

Marketing Guy Andrew and I are the first to start clapping over the wave that follows.

Sure, Ward Brandt pisses me off like nobody can, but this is a success I’m happy to share. And it was so important to Beatrice. She told me once that the grand hotel would fulfill her husband’s dying wish, and it’s too perfect having her grandsons close it.

“Since I’m here, I’ll stick around for the meeting,” Ward says.

Andrew nods. “Of course, Ward. There’s an empty seat beside Paige.”

What? Oh, no. There has to be another one.

I scan the table.

Nope.

The only empty seat in the whole conference room is next to lucky me.

He sits down beside me. I’m wafted with a wave of espresso and mint. He *would* have to smell like a mint mocha.

No lie, the man smells good enough to drink and he’s close enough to touch. My fingers tingle.

Hello, torture. But I quash the agony as fast as I can.

Remember, he thinks I’m a drunken idiot because he met me on a bad night. A little girl to be rescued—even if I needed a little hero action that night. I just don’t need his lectures and scorn.

He leans closer. My traitor lungs inhale my boss and adore it.

My fingernails skim up my thighs under the table. A decadent heat that shouldn't exist crackles through me.

Okay, never mind, I haven't quashed anything.

"Where's Grandma?" he whispers, looking around.

"Charity conference," I say quickly. "She left this morning. Something in affordable housing co-sponsored by Heron and Heron," I say, smiling at Brina and Mag's company being involved.

"She's usually here." He shakes his head, a disappointed look on his face. "Well, since Grandma and Nick are out, make sure you take good notes. She'll want to know every word that was said."

I give him the deadpan cheese-grin that always pisses him off so much.

"Best notes ever. Got it." I turn my computer so he sees the open document on my screen. "However, Mrs. Brandt prefers summaries, so I'll make sure to condense everything before sending it on to her."

Andrew goes back to his whiplash presentation, so Ward doesn't even have the chance to respond. Ha.

An hour later, Marketing Guy has another meeting to get to, so the meeting ends. I'm glad it's almost lunchtime.

"Go ahead and send me a copy of the notes now, Miss Holly," Ward says.

"Sure."

Naturally, I couldn't resist having a little fun. Every time his name was mentioned I used Wardhole.

Yes, I'll clean it up before I send the notes to Beatrice and Nick, but Ward needs his copy now. Unedited.

Here you go, Wardhole. Happy reading.

I type in his email and click send.

He opens the document before I stand. He has to quality inspect everything I touch, you know. It would be entirely too

much for him to just assume I'm smart enough to take one damn hour of notes.

He scans the first page. "These are very detailed."

I don't know what to say to that, so I don't respond.

"Wardhole?" he grunts.

I shrug. "Well, if the shoe fits..."

"*You*. And here I thought it was the barista all this time." His eyes skewer me, sending another balmy flush down my body.

"Are you serious?" I ask.

He glares at me. "No."

"Oh, good." I laugh. "I was gonna say if you believed that, then—never mind."

I close my laptop, tuck it under my arm, and slide off my chair.

He stands. "You know I'm your boss, right?"

"Actually, I don't report to you 'exclusively,' last I checked. And your grandma doesn't care that I ruffle your feathers. She thinks it's funny," I say.

"Grandma talks to you about me?" His face becomes stone, and he closes the space between us, reminding me just how big and imposing that body can be.

My boss eclipses me.

He's like a giant with a little boy's expression when he gets mad. I bite my lip, but I can't hide the grin.

We talked about him *once*, technically.

Beatrice told me to shrug off his shenanigans and match them with my own. Good advice. But I'm not about to tell him his name casually comes up sometimes.

"I'm afraid I could never betray her confidence, Mr. Brandt," I say pointedly.

He follows me to the elevator I summon, ready to hit the café on the main floor.

“Why are you discussing me with my grandmother?” he demands.

I punch the elevator button. “Ask her. Like I said, I’m not discussing my personal conversations with Mrs. Brandt. It’s unprofessional.”

The elevator opens and he follows me in.

Being stuck in a confined space with a walking Adonis who smells like mint mocha would be hard enough, except now I have to focus on not laughing my butt off. All because this uptight suit is actually worried about what I did or didn’t say to his grandmother.

“Since when are you professional? When we met, you were stumbling through a museum with some scumbag cornering you,” he growls.

My smile wilts.

Dude. I’m so tired of hearing about that night. I stare him dead in the eye.

“If you ever mention that incident again, I’ll—” I stop mid-sentence.

I’ll what? He’s the boss. I can’t threaten him with HR. He’s like a foot taller than me and a whole lot broader. I’m not sure I could kick his ass with a whole case of pies.

“You’ll what, Miss Holly?” he whispers, boxing me in with another step forward, his body and scent and those dark-lagoon eyes stealing the air from my lungs.

“I’ll...I’ll tell your grandma!” I burst out.

He quirks a brow and scoffs. “She already knows what happened. *I* told her, remember? When I tried to talk her out of hiring you?”

“I’ll tell her you won’t quit harassing me about it then. It’s not my fault the guy was a creep. I had no idea who you were. I just needed help from a decent man who wouldn’t keep guilt

tripping me. I thought I found him that night, but...I was wrong.”

The elevator door opens, thank God.

Ward hits the CLOSE button.

“I did help you. I ran him off in full retreat, if memory serves.”

“Yep. Then you tried to get me fired from the best job I’ve ever had and decided to remind me of it every time I see you. I had one rough night. I’m sorry it messed with you so much,” I say, hands on my hips, entirely ready to shred this man. “I could be like Nick and tell you that what happens in my personal life is none of your damn business, but...you’re trying to protect your family’s brand. I get that what I do in my personal life could affect that, and I take it seriously.”

His eyebrows pull down like storm clouds. “Miss Holly, you—”

“Let me finish. I had one bad night before I started this job. One, Wardhole.” I hold up a finger. “So unless you’ve never had a bad night, please just—fuck off. Leave me alone about it.”

His eyes snap open, and so do mine.

Part of me can’t believe I just said that, but I’m not exactly sorry.

Sucking in a breath for support, I mash the OPEN button. I’m sick of sharing a cell with this anti-gentleman.

As soon as the doors open, I dart out.

“Pai—” he starts to say. I slow a step before he yells. “Miss Holly, wait!”

Right.

Because I’m such a peon he can’t even use my first name.

I spin around to face him.

Of freaking course, my heel tilts, and I go tilting mid-turn.

Lovely. As if I'm not in deep enough trouble, suddenly I'm sprawled on my back against a marble floor in the executive lobby of Brandt Ideas.

Ward steps toward me, offering a hand. I shrink back, salvaging my tattered pride.

No way in hell is he helping me again so I can hear about it for the rest of my life.

Hand up, palm out, I push him away with the most force I can muster.

“Don't. Seriously.”

“But—”

I scrape myself off the floor and stand. “Unless you have more models for me to dust, or a hundred more unreasonable requests before morning, I have real work to do.”



LATER, after lunch, I walk to my desk in silence.

Ward looks up from talking to Andrew and stomps into his office without speaking to me, the door slamming shut behind him like a vault.

I go back to reviewing some files a messenger left Beatrice for the next hour. She needs to see them, so I put them with a stack of stuff to deliver before I leave the office today.

Come to think of it, I haven't heard from her since she left this morning. Weird.

She must not know the big news about the Winthrope deal. Otherwise, she would've said something or sent me an email, if not a company-wide memo.

I pick up her stack for delivery. If she doesn't know, I can tell her about the tentative acceptance from Winthrope and enjoy the smile on her face.

I peek in her frosted glass door. There's a shadow behind her desk. Someone's in there, but the shape, the posture, seems

strangely off somehow.

I tap on the door.

She doesn't answer.

"Beatrice?" I call, my heart climbing into my throat.

Then I hear it.

Thud!

And a smaller *thud* on the heels of the first.

I shove the door open, ready to burst inside. I get two steps in before I'm gasping and covering my mouth.

Beatrice Brandt has collapsed on the floor behind her desk, her chair tipped on its side.

Everything I ever learned about CPR gallops through my brain as I rush inside.

Shit! Please be okay. Please be okay.

Mrs. Brandt, wake up!

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SLIPPERS (WARD)

Paige's words from earlier sting like a scourge.

She hates me so much she wouldn't even let me help her up.

Nick's annoying question floats back at me. *What the hell did you do to Paige?*

Now, I wonder what my clumsy ass did do, and I hate it.

Since I have time between afternoon calls, I open her notes to see what happened before I joined the meeting. The notes are impeccable as usual.

She loves to antagonize me, no question, but there's no disparaging her work quality.

She calls me Wardhole throughout the document. Did she clean it up before she sent it to anyone else?

It's another fucking eye roll, but I prefer the whole senior staff not knowing me as Wardhole. That juvenile Warden nickname they fling around behind my back is bad enough.

Holly's right, though.

I did my share of stupid crap in my youth, especially before I enlisted in the Army. A decade older and so much wiser, and I *still* do stupid shit.

I almost married Maria Duchessny, for one, only the most self-absorbed witch on the planet.

Apparently, I also can't shut my yap when it involves repeatedly savaging a gorgeous, smart, and talented young woman. Even if I can't stand Miss Holly, perhaps I've been too harsh.

With the worst of securing the Winthrop contract over, maybe I should back off.

Lighten up.

Can I handle being less of a Wardhole? Her nickname almost makes me smirk for once.

I hate that I haven't seen her since she bit my head off in the lobby.

We need to clear the air.

I open my door to call her into my office, but her desk is empty.

Not just hers, I realize a second later. There's some kind of commotion.

People dart around the lobby like confused bees. Eerily quiet. When someone speaks, it's in hushed tones.

Something's very wrong in this office.

My eyes assess the situation, trying to suss it out.

After watching two people run in and out of Grandma's office, my heart begins to pound. I sprint across the lobby and burst through her door, eyes flicking over the scene and—

My fucking pulse stops dead.

Grandma lies on the floor, a contorted, pale mess that looks more like a crash dummy than the living, breathing, vibrant woman who gave me my world.

Paige kneels beside her, doing frantic chest compressions.

I can't breathe. I can't think. I'm going to lose it.

I want to move, but I don't know how, my brain rabbiting into the darkness.

She raised us. She raised me. Is she—no, she *has* to be okay.

We can't lose her.

Think, dammit, a voice barks in my mind.

My hand knots into a fist. Sweat beads on my brow. Something squeezes my chest so tight any air is crushed out of me.

I'm not sure how much longer I can stay vertical. I take a few clumsy steps forward and rest my hand on her desk for balance.

Then Nick appears in a stricken rush at my side.

"Ward? What happened?" His voice is thin, terrified.

It's also the kick in the ass I need to hear my little brother scared.

I take a deep breath, hold up one finger, and become myself again. The oldest. The protector. My voice is low and shaky, but it works. "Paige?"

I don't get tripped up on formalities. This isn't the time.

"I just..." Her whole body moves with the next compression. "I found her like this."

Nick starts past me. I throw up my arm to keep him back.

"No. Paige has it. Let her try."

"But—"

"Nick," I growl.

The one-word admonition has always been enough.

His face goes slack. "You think she'd leave us with someone we barely knew?"

I know what he means, but at the same time Miss Holly is working her fingers to the bone, and I want to defend her.

"If you can't stay calm, you can't be here. They need space. Keep it together for Grandma. We have to," I grind out.

Nick nods woodenly, moves to a wall, and slumps against it, ruffling his shirt.

Paige takes a deep breath and presses down on Grandma's chest again. Right now, I wish I had a shred of first aid skill, but I wasn't a medic.

I turn to the door, my legs pure concrete, eyes searching for some way to help.

"What can I do?" I force out. My voice is low, ragged.

"Already called 9-1-1." A few seconds later, Paige lets out a long sigh. "She's okay. I think. She has a pulse."

She collapses against Grandma's desk with her knees up, head resting on them, taking deep breaths.

"How do you know?" I ask.

"She's breathing." Paige catches her breath and stands.

"She is?" Nick straightens up.

Paige picks up Grandma's arm and checks her pulse. She smiles. "Yep. Feels stable enough and she has a steady pulse." She grimaces. "But it might be a little slow."

Fuck.

We're not out of the woods yet and I can't fathom where this forest ends.

I nod to Paige. "Thank you. We'll take it from here."

Nick starts moving toward Grandma again and I roll up my sleeves. I haven't the foggiest idea what the hell to do.

"Ward—Mr. Brandt—I think you should stay put," Paige says harshly.

Nick's forehead creases and he looks at me—the big brother—like he expects me to tell her to go to hell.

God, Nick. Don't do this to me. I can't even think straight right now.

He takes another step.

I'm going to have to give him an errand. I rack my brain to come up with one.

Paige puts her hands out, palms up. “I—I don’t think she should be overwhelmed right now, and we can’t move her until the EMTs get here.”

He stops in his tracks and shoves a hand through his hair. “But—”

“Nick, can you do me a favor?” I sigh.

“What’s up?”

“Go downstairs and wait for the paramedics. That way, you can show them where she is, and they won’t waste any time,” I say sternly.

“Yeah, shit. Good thinking.” Nick nods and leaves the room, pumping his legs in a run.

Paige keeps watching Grandma, making sure she’s breathing and occasionally checking her pulse.

Her blond hair spills down over her shoulders. The sun filtering in through the vine-covered windows turns it into a scene from a movie where I’d swear an angel just descended.

“Thank you for—for everything,” I say, brushing a hand across hers.

I can’t help it.

I’m scared shitless we might lose Grandma. Somehow that’s almost as scary as thinking my foul fucking behavior could’ve cost me Paige Holly.

What the hell would be happening if she wasn’t here right now?

Paige nods but doesn’t say much. She just stands over Grandma, loyal till the end, intent on giving everything she can.

Two paramedics burst through my grandmother’s office door a second later. The woman unfolds a gurney while her partner checks Grandma’s pulse the same way Paige did multiple times.

“Present but slow,” he calls.

“We’re ready for her,” the woman answers.

The other paramedic lays her on the gurney, and they start rolling to the elevator with her. Paige and I follow behind at a rapid clip.

“Where’s Nick?” she asks.

“Nick? The guy panicking in the lobby?” The lady paramedic walking backward behind Grandma shakes her head. “Some people don’t handle this well.”

“One person can ride in the ambulance. Everyone else takes a separate car,” the male paramedic says.

“Ward, you should probably ride in the ambulance. Nick, he’s—well—Nick.” Paige’s voice is quiet.

Damn if I don’t smile for the briefest second.

That’s the best way to sum up my little brother I’ve ever heard.

“Come with us?” I ask.

Fuck, I hate the way I sound. That wasn’t supposed to be a question.

“What? Why? Really?” she asks, blinking those lush green eyes.

“Yes, really. I need someone who can think straight. It’s not me today, and you’ve met Nick.”

“He’s upset today, too.”

“I know, so we need you,” I whisper.

What the hell am I saying? I don’t need anyone.

Miss Holly nods.

At this point, we’re getting off the elevator on the first floor behind the paramedics.

Nick stands in the middle of the hall, looking distraught. “They were here and then they weren’t.”

“It’s okay. We’re going to the hospital right now,” Paige says.

I veer my head toward her. “She’ll drive you. I’m going in the ambulance.”

“Why?” he asks.

“Unless you’re comfortable and clearheaded enough to okay medical interventions, I need to be in the ambulance.” I hate the bite in my own voice, but this man can be such a knucklehead.

He nods, recovering his wits. He grabs Paige’s hand and pulls her outside. Reese is parked right behind the ambulance. I watch them jump into the back of the car.

Nick, calm the fuck down, I think.

But there’s no time to fumble. Not when Grandma needs us like never before.

The second she’s in the ambulance, I climb in, steeling myself.

For everyone’s sake, I need to step the fuck up.



THE THREE OF US sit in a hospital waiting room for hours.

Miss Holly excuses herself, and when she comes back, she’s holding a mocha in one hand and a black drip in the other.

I snort with surprise when I take the cup.

“Just Ward today? No decaf? No rat in a heat-resistant suit waiting to jump out?” I joke.

“Not today.” She just gives me this gut-punching smile.

“Paige, thank you,” Nick says as he takes his mocha and slurps before saying, “We’re not at work and this is an emergency. You didn’t have to fetch the coffee.”

“I thought I’d be nice to my bosses,” she says sweetly.

My eyes flick to those plush pink lips. I know it’s the last place I should ever be fixated on her mouth, but fuck if my

mind isn't dragged in a hundred senseless directions.

"You're nice every day," Nick says firmly.

I flash him a dirty look. Why would he say that shit?

If he plans on making her his flavor of the week, smitten with her caring touch, he has another thing coming. She works with us and it's totally inappropriate.

Also, I met her first, so he's got no damn claim to—

Like I said. *Inappropriate.*

End of story.

She smiles at Nick but doesn't say anything more. I get the sense she's trying to fight back some sarcastic barb meant for me.

She smooths her skirt out as she sits down beside Nick, tucking one creamy leg behind the other.

There's something regal about the way she moves.

She covers her mouth to let out a yawn and pulls out her hair tie. Threaded gold cascades down her back and shoulders, framing her like a halo sent from a better place.

It's every bit a sucker punch to my chest and my badly behaved dick.

Yes, I know what a piece of crap I am, thank you very much.

I called this girl a drunk, a reckless idiot, and then she went and saved my grandmother's life.

Sighing, I put the cup she gave me to my lips and suck in bitter black nirvana, wishing it could wash away my guilt.

You need to make this right, jackass.

A woman in blue scrubs comes up to us. "Brandt party?"

Nick and I stand at the same time.

"That's us," I say.

"Is she okay?" Nick sputters, coughing into his hand.

“She’s in recovery right now. She’ll be getting moved soon. I’m afraid she won’t be going home tonight. Room three forty-five will be hers, if you find it more comfortable, you can wait there.”

Nick nods and looks at me. “We should be there when she arrives. I don’t want her waking in a hospital room alone.”

“She’s probably going to be a little out of it. Not sure it’ll matter.”

Nick’s eyes narrow, never leaving my face. “We’ll wait there.”

“Okay, come on.” I slap a hand on his shoulder.

We find room three forty-five all the way down the hall on the left. I open the door, and Nick follows me in.

It’s an ordinary hospital room. The bed looks silver and sterile. Tubes tumble out of the wall like tentacles. A stand to hang IVs on sits beside the bed.

Nick pulls up the one chair in the corner of the room. I stand in front of the door, surveying my brother.

Grandma has to survive. *Has to.*

If she doesn’t, it’s not just me I’m worried about. I’ll be responsible for keeping Nick’s shit together, too.

“She’s so tough. I never thought I’d see her like this.” His voice is low, quiet, pained. Not like my normally boisterous brother who pretends he’s never met a care in the world.

“She’s seventy-two. We’ve been lucky so far.” My chest aches saying it, but it’s reality.

Someone taps on the door.

“She must be here.” I open the door.

A tall doctor with wire-framed glasses stands on the other side. “Mr. Brandt? I’m Doctor Than.”

I nod.

Nick stands.

“Ward Brandt has POA,” the doctor says.

Shit. First I'm hearing about it, but it makes sense.

"P-O-A?" Nick asks.

"Power of Attorney. It's when—"

"I *know* what Power of Attorney means. I'm not that clueless," Nick snaps, his face tightening.

I don't say anything.

"Is she all right?" I ask the doctor.

"Why would she make you her POA?" Nick asks jealously.

I sigh.

Does he even have to ask?

"Who knows. Can I talk to the doctor first, and then we can discuss it like civilized men?"

"Yes, *we* will talk to the doctor. Then you and I can talk about why Grandma would make only you her POA."

"Sorry." I look at the doctor with a rough smile.

He laughs. "No problem, I have three daughters..."

Ouch. Nick and I don't really fight.

He just hates being the youngest with the most baggage. Truth be told, sometimes I wish I didn't have all the responsibility crushed on my shoulders.

"Is she okay, doctor?" I ask again.

Than nods. "Yes. Mrs. Brandt had a minor surgery tonight. From what I can tell, she's had a genetic heart defect—probably since birth. She's been quite fortunate she's never had an issue before. But she's going to be staying in the hospital until we have her well on the way to recovery. She'll be here tonight for observation, and likely at least a few more."

"Will you be her attending physician?" I ask.

He nods. "I make rounds in the morning and evening, so if you have questions you'll need to be here then. You can

always leave a message through a nurse or email me, and I'll get back to you."

I nod firmly, my head feeling too light, the outer world reeling.

This is fucked.

How did we go from the high of winning over Winthroppe earlier today to wondering if Grandma will even pull through to hear the news?

Dr. Than's eyes trace from my tense face to Nick's. "You two can relax. She's in great shape for a seventy-two-year-old woman. I wish my overall health was as good."

"She walks two miles a day," Nick says proudly, puffing up his chest.

"Well, she'll need to slow down she's home," Dr. Than says.

I hesitate, clearing my throat.

"How long do you think she'll be in here?" I ask.

Than shakes his head. "I can't say before we've assessed her. However, I can tell you that even once she gets home, she's going to need plenty of relaxation with no stress. Some activities will be okay and could even boost her cardiovascular system, but nothing strenuous like running."

"She's going to be off work for a while," Nick says slowly, the realization dawning on him.

"Indeed, she will," the doctor says. "A substantial leave of absence would do her well. She's still in recovery, but they should be bringing her in soon. It's a pleasure meeting you both."

He walks away, and I shut the door again.

"Fuck," Nick says, doubling over and grabbing his head. "This is the *worst* time for this."

"You mean there would be a good time for Grandma to have 'minor'"—I put finger quotes around the word minor,

because the heart seems fairly fucking vital—“heart problems?” I finish.

A slow, sad smile crawls across Nick’s face. “Ah, Wardhole, it hasn’t hit you yet, huh?”

“What?”

“What’s the big news today?” he asks, his face looking pale.

“Grandma had a heart attack,” I say. “What do you mean?”

He shakes his head. “See? It’s worse when you actually say it. I mean, the doctor didn’t say heart attack, but—”

“No, dumbass, people always have heart surgery for fun, right?” I snap.

He glares at me.

“I know you don’t want it to be true, but it is what it is,” I say with a sigh.

“Whatever. It still hasn’t hit you.”

What’s he on about?

“Can we stop being vague? What hasn’t hit me?”

“What happened right *before* Grandma had her minor heart surgery?” He air quotes the last few words.

“The tentative acceptance of the—” I stop as it hits me between the eyes. “The Winthrop deal.”

“Bingo.” Nick snaps his fingers like a gunshot going off. “And the doctor just said Grandma can’t be stressed.”

Shit, he’s right.

“It’s not the end of the world,” I say glumly, shaking my head. “We’re just going to have to figure it out. We’re grown men, brother. We can handle filling Grandma’s slippers for a few weeks, months, whatever it takes.”

He quirks an eyebrow. “Yeah? How? Ross Winthrop made it crystal clear he trusts Grandma. Us, not so much.”

“Don’t worry,” I say, grabbing him by the shoulders. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You’ll keep doing what you do best—ensure the design process is flawless, and make sure it fits Grandma’s vision. That’s more critical than ever now. Vision won us the job.”

Nick nods like a bobblehead. “What about the mile-wide rod up that guy’s ass?”

“I’ll handle client relations. If you ever have to talk to him, I’ll be there.”

“Do you really think we can do this?”

Good question.

Our last few projects were rave successes worth hundreds of millions. But carving a hotel from the sky for one of the world’s richest men is next level.

“We’ve been doing it our whole lives,” I say, steeling my voice.

“We’ve been helping Grandma do it forever, you mean. Without her...”

“No.” I shake my head. “We’ve always been a team, Nick. She’s one of the best designers on earth. You implement those designs, and I deal with the clients, contracts, and money. The Winthrope concepts are all but done. And we’ve got Paige, the first competent assistant ever. We’ll pull her in if we need to. We’ve got this.”

“I hope you’re right, Ward. Because if something goes funky with the Winthrope property, Grandma could have her heart wrecked a second time,” he says darkly.

“Nothing’s going wrong. I promise.”

The doorknob clicks as it turns, and I sweep out of the way.

Four people push Grandma in on a rolling bed, moving her into the room. Nick and I get out of the way and stay silent. She’s sleeping and needs her rest.

Once they've moved her, three of them leave and a nurse stays to take her vitals. She writes the stats on a dry erase board bolted to the wall and punches them into a tablet.

Her gaze falls on us. "It's okay to talk, you guys. She's sleeping, but she's out good. She's on a post-surgery drip."

I read the stats on the board, but they're gibberish to me. I don't speak medicine. I veer my head toward the wall and point.

"Those numbers. Are they good or bad?"

The nurse studies the wall, then meets my eyes. "They're about what you'd expect for a woman in her seventies who just got out of surgery successfully. In other words, nothing to worry about."

"Thanks," I say.

"No problem. If she needs anything, just push the call button." She walks out of the room.

Nick watches Grandma sleep for a minute, her small chest rising and falling.

"Where's Paige?"

"Huh?"

"She was with us. Now she's just...gone," Nick says, a bewildered look on his face.

Oh, hell. I forgot all about her after the coffee run.

I look at my smart watch. We've been in this room for half an hour, and she hasn't texted. Is she still here?

"Hang on," I tell him. "I'll go find her."

"I can do it if you need to stay with Grandma since you're the POA."

"Yeah, in case there were any hard feelings, I didn't know about it until the doctor told us. She probably just had to name someone and—"

"You're the oldest," he finishes for me. "I shouldn't have freaked about it earlier."

I nod. "I'll find Paige. I need to talk to her."

He grins. "Yeah, whatever, dude. Bet you feel bad for trying to talk Grandma into axing her before she started now. And you should."

I say nothing, just dart him a glare.

Few things suck more than admitting your little brother might have a point, so I'm not giving him the pleasure.

I exit the room. If she hasn't caught a ride with Reese, she's probably in the waiting room, but I don't need to search far.

When I open the door, Miss Holly stands beside it, arms crossed neatly across her ample chest and wobbling.

I look down at her feet.

Of course, she's wearing six-inch heels today.

"You could never be a model without dying."

She wrinkles her nose and lets out an annoyed huff. "Smooth, Wardhole. Do you say that to all the girls?"

I grin. "You're gorgeous, and I'd never tell you otherwise. You just can't walk in heels. I'll give you a hundred dollars to take those off right now."

"You're joking, right?" Her arms fall to her sides. "Uhh—they're three-hundred-dollar shoes, for one, and I'm not walking around here barefoot. That's gross. I could catch hepatitis or something."

"Fine. Four hundred bucks. Also, I'm fairly certain you don't get hepatitis from walking around a hospital floor barefoot. Do you have any clue how much they sanitize these places?"

"Do you, Doctor Grump?" She turns up her nose and then shakes her head. "It's still gross."

Wrong. The only grossness is all the filthy things I want to do to that mouth.

“Look, I’ll buy you slippers from the gift shop and pay you five hundred dollars for your stupid shoes. Deal?”

She cocks her head, fixing me with a stare that questions my sanity.

“You’re joking? Why do you want my shoes so bad?”

“I don’t. I’m worried you’re going to break your neck, and I’ve had enough damn ER visits for one day,” I grind out.

“Psssh. I wonder when you’ll get your fill in sniping at me over ridiculous things?”

I came outside to apologize, so I’m trying not to bite her head off, but seriously. The girl’s exasperating.

“I don’t know, but I still think you should apologize to the floor in my lobby.”

She sighs and turns her head. “Fine, but buy me the slippers first, jerk. And I guess since you have time to harass me, Beatrice is okay?”

I’m bristling an iota less. She’s such a sweet girl, her eyes shimmering like an emerald forest with worry.

I shouldn’t be such a Wardhole all the time.

“She’ll be cooped up here for a few days, but she’s fine, thanks to you. I came looking for you because I wanted to thank you again.”

She gives me a long, wondering look and then shrugs. “Well, no need. It’s what any normal human being would’ve done. I had to help her.”

“And I’ve been a little bit of a hardass on you,” I say.

“A little?” Her eyes flash.

“A lot, are you happy?” I shake off my annoyance and offer my hand. “Truce? For real this time?”

Miss Holly stares for a moment before clasping my fingers. She feels so small, so fragile, so much like something I came too close to breaking like the staggering fucking moose I am.

“Truce,” she echoes, a faint smile on her lips.

She’s still hanging on my hand. I must be out of my mind from today’s events, because I pull her closer, then move so she’s backed against the wall, and do the most idiot thing possible.

I press my lips to hers in a kiss that’s unholy.

It’s greedy. Electric. Unrepentant.

I kiss her with a maelstrom of hunger that ends in a rushing growl, pawing at her hips, sucking in her gasp. All while a panicked voice buried in my head screams, *what the ever-loving fuck are you doing?*

She should slap me blind, if she doesn’t just progress straight to stabbing me first. But incredibly, she opens her mouth. I lick her lip with animalistic need, slide in, and caress until she moans against my tongue.

Goddamn.

Miss Holly.

Paige.

She cups my arm with her hand, sinking her nails into my flesh. Her fingers tremble.

The seething bulge in my pants grazes her thigh when I shift, and I swear, if we weren’t in public, I would hump her like a feral dog.

Another kiss.

Another molten groan.

Another whispering moan like a smoking campfire from her lips.

That’s when I move away with a furious jerk, fighting off disaster.

Holy fuck.

What kind of jagoff am I? I just made out with my assistant in front of my grandmother’s hospital room. Right after I spent the day on a roller coaster from the height of my

career before plunging down to fear, loathing, despair, and bad decisions.

Yes, I'm going straight to hell, and I deserve it.

"W-Ward?" she gasps. "Mr. Brandt?"

I get even dumber. I lean in, placing a kiss against her hair. "Go into the room, please, and park your butt on the chair until I'm back with your slippers. Do not walk around."

She flashes me a red-faced smile. "That's kinda tyrannical, you know. You're as bad as Magnus Heron."

"Nah, I'm not a showy marketer midwit like him." I shake my head. "I told you, one ER visit a day is my limit. Can I ask you something?"

Her throat pulses as she swallows, green eyes so glittery and full of light.

"Sure," she answers softly.

"How did you know what to do back at the office?"

"I was a lifeguard at YMCA summer camps in high school. I've kept my CPR certification up, because you never know when you'll need it. But I've never used it before today in a real emergency."

"God, you're amazing," I whisper, my throat so raw. I need to get the hell out of here. "Go sit."

She beams and retreats into the hospital room.

My head comes unscrewed, trying to sort out what this day even is.

Damn it all.

I kissed her.

I tasted my very off-limits assistant, and I fucking liked it.

No clue how to deal with this tomorrow, but I know how it ends.

Certain cataclysm.

MAD MEN (PAIGE)

I pinch my nose to swallow another sip of triple espresso loaded with sugar.

Six days ago, I wasn't a huge coffee drinker, aside from those sticky sweet cinnamon lattes I'd always get with Brina.

Six days ago, I didn't hate my job.

Six freaking days ago, I didn't know Ward Brandt could obliterate a woman in sixty seconds flat with an apocalyptic kiss.

No, we haven't discussed it since.

Hell no, I haven't forgotten.

Could you forget a perfect sunset sliding down your throat? Thawing parts you didn't even know were frozen?

Calling his kiss divine would be an insult. Those lips were pure precision wrapped in a halo of hot tease, velvet sledgehammers dead set on breaking me apart.

And I'm a little afraid to admit they succeeded.

I don't think I've lived an hour since that kiss without remembering it. His heat, his hunger, his playful softness shifting into wild abandon. Ward kissed like a man laying claim to a woman he wants.

Needs.

He kissed like he flipping needs me.

What do I even do with that? Besides feeling my toes curl up until they hurt every time he walks by, I mean?

Besides feeling butterflies tickling my belly with insistent little wings, total confusion, and no answers. Butterfly wings aren't as easy to read as tea leaves, apparently, and neither is my blackhole of a boss.

Right now, I'm just trying to forget the whole incident because I'm here on a mission.

I tap on the outside of a tall glass office that has Trista written neatly across the screen in glittery purple letters.

She doesn't answer, but I see her sitting at the computer, a lovely round woman with pink highlights in her jet-black hair.

"Pssst. Trista!" I hiss, pawing at her cube like a cat wanting attention.

I don't have time for this. I slide the screen back.

Ick. I'm acting like Ward. Hopefully his bossholery didn't rub off in that kiss?

She doesn't look up, and I realize she's wearing headphones.

I knock louder and wave. "Hey, Trista!"

The woman throws her hands back and gasps in surprise. I can't help but giggle as she steps out and invites me in.

"Oh, shit, sorry, Paige. What's up?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I just need to know where we're at on the Winthrope designs."

She rolls her chair away from her desk and spins it to her screen, then faces me again. "The entire team is working on creating a model for final approval now. I'm sourcing materials to put together a quote." She's quiet for a minute, her face tense.

I can tell there's more.

"But?" I venture.

She lets out a tired sigh. “Well, Paige, my team has never been asked to pull a rabbit out of their hats so fast. The Winthrop project is a world-class luxury property requiring a lot of detail. Far bigger than anything this firm has tackled. All of that detail has to be present in the model. Don’t tell me this is a rush contract? I was under the impression we’re still working off of a tentative acceptance.”

Her eyes are pleading.

“That’s right. Tentative,” I assure her.

She’s not wrong about the intricacies involved, and the many worries. I jot down her concerns to discuss with Ward later on my tablet.

I’m not even shocked by the gaping yawn she releases in my face.

“Sorry,” she mutters.

Don’t be, lady.

For the past six days, I’ve slept a max of four hours a night, so I know the feeling. This poor woman looks more frayed than me.

“Are you okay, Trista?”

“I’m...surviving. Same as the rest of the crew. It’s just, because this project is so upscale, there’s a lot being imported. Sourcing for this contract as fast as the Warden wants me to means I’m up all night ‘e-meeting’ international vendors.”

I snicker. “You call him that too?”

She grins. “We all do, but as long as Beatrice was around, we rarely had to work with him breathing down our throats. Is she okay? When’s she coming back anyway?”

I pause, unsure what to say.

Ward has me checking in with every team daily to make sure they’re all on track. He’s determined there’ll be zero hitches with this contract on his watch.

Trista’s reaction is the same I’ve already heard from at least a dozen people. Every employee and project manager

I've talked to tells me they're not used to being micromanaged by Captain Wardhole. They're also having an angst fit over Beatrice's return.

Being the messenger for chief micromanager feels like being the grim reaper.

No one wants to see me coming to peck at their progress.

But I put on my best diplomatic smile. "Beatrice Brandt is on the mend, don't worry. I'm sure she'll be back soon. This place is like her second home!"

Trista gives me a skeptical look and starts to open her mouth, but my tablet pings with a scheduling reminder. Time to move.

I hate cutting things short, but I still have three other teams to check with.

My next meeting is with Andrew the Marketing Guy. For a guy who always jabbers a mile a minute, he's shockingly slow to get to the point today.

It's two o'clock before I'm back at my desk, feeling like I've just come from a marathon.

I plan to hit the café downstairs and grab lunch when I look up.

Susan the HR director hovers over my desk with an impatient look. As soon as she sees me she hits me with a question. "Paige? Can you get a meeting with the Brandt boys?"

I giggle. "Why does everyone call them that? It makes them sound like a couple of neighborhood brats up to no good."

Then again, doesn't the description fit?

Susan shrugs. "It's how their grandparents always referred to them."

I pull up Ward's calendar, and it's full of back-to-back meetings for the rest of the week. Maybe Nick can help her. I

check his schedule. Not as booked as Ward, but he doesn't have time to add meetings either.

“Oof. They're pretty full all week, Susan. I'm sorry, is it urgent?”

She purses her lips. “If you want to keep this place running, it might be. I have three employees ready to quit including Trista Chisholm, the project manager.”

My heart drops.

“Oh, no. I just talked to her. I had no idea it was *that* bad.”

Susan's face falls. “She says she doesn't see the point in working her team around the clock when we don't even have final acceptance yet, and she can't do anymore midnight meetings for the next week. I pointed out how badly we need her right now, and how much Beatrice is counting on her. She says that's the only reason she's stuck it out this past week, and she didn't think Beatrice would approve of such harsh expectations.”

I tap my fingers off my keyboard, searching for words.

“Tell you what, I'll quit visiting the project team for updates and just gloss over it when Ward asks. That puts it on my head, so the first time she thinks she might hit a snag, she needs to reach out to me. I'll risk the hit to keep up morale.”

“I'll talk to her. I'm not sure it will be enough,” Susan says glumly.

“I'll alternate days with her for the midnight meetings, if she can send me instructions on what she needs.” Might as well. It's not like I remember what sleep is.

Also, maybe a teensy part of me would rather not have time to dream about a certain workaholic monster of a boss.

“That's generous of you,” Susan says.

Actually, the reason I'm killing myself over it is because Ward and Nick are too worried about their Grandma to have to fret about key staff deserting them too.

That's all.

It has nothing to do with the way Ward kissed me senseless in the hospital, or how I haven't been able to get him out of my head since.

I curl my toes in the fuzzy slippers he bought at the hospital that day. They're supposed to stay in my desk drawer, but I've been banned from wearing heels in the office. He says I'm a liability.

Cute. As if the tidal wave of crap he brings down isn't a bigger one.

"See if Trista's happy with that," I say, nodding at Susan.

This is what I'm here for. Keeping the wheels in this big Brandt machine turning at its finest hour.

I just hope I don't wind up getting flattened.



NINE HOURS LATER, I'm walking up the stairs to my apartment, sticky with the humid summer night, when my phone vibrates with a text.

Wardhole: How are the teams? I need an update.

Umm—maybe once I'm inside my air-conditioned apartment. But another message comes from boss Crankyface before I can get the door open.

I need the Winthrop files pulled as soon as you're in tomorrow, then check with all of our other clients. That might be voluminous. If you need help, pull someone off whatever team you want to assist.

Really? It's close to midnight.

I've got one foot—*one*—inside my door, and you're texting me, barking orders? After you kissed me so hard my legs turned to jelly and then acted like it never happened?

Why the hell did I let that slide anyhow? That's so not like me.

Neither is wanting to scream when my phone pings again.

BTW, don't forget my coffee.

I punt my bag down, collapse on the couch, and prepare to answer without tearing his head off.

OMG, chill. Honestly, you're stressing us all out. Please save what you need at work for tomorrow. I just got home. Also, I've never forgotten your coffee.

When I didn't mean to, I add.

He responds a second later. ***But you have forgotten my coffee, Miss Holly.***

I purse my lips. So we've regressed to Miss Holly after being on reckless kissing terms?

Nice.

You deserved it, I fire back.

And I won't survive this week without coffee, he growls at me over text.

I can even hear his ragey griping in my head and laugh.

So why is that my problem? I ask.

Wardhole: You're my assistant.

My fingers pound away.

Oh, silly me. A decision I regret more with each passing day. I don't have to stick around.

His next message is almost out of character for a perma-grouch.

Don't even joke about that. You're keeping the lights on. I won't get through this week without you either. Winthroppe is a huge deal. Don't disappoint Grandma.

Here comes that pesky part where I feel empathy for this beast of a man when I shouldn't.

I couldn't, I fire back. ***That's why I'm still here, you know. But don't take advantage of my respect for Beatrice.***

I hold my breath until another message notification chimes.

Never. And I'll never be able to thank you enough for what you did. Grandma wouldn't be here without you. Thank you, Paige.

Crud-rama.

When he's nice, it's ever so slightly harder to forget the beastly way he pinned me to the wall and kissed me like our plane started falling out of the sky. And I really don't want to remember it since he acts like it never happened.

I also don't want to dwell on what happened later, when he came back to me, removed my heels, and swapped them out for the big fuzzy shoes right in front of his brother.

I thought my heart might never beat normally again, playing this messed up Cinderella.

Then the next day he was back to being Wardhole incarnate without explanation.

Yeah.

I don't have time for this drama, this confusion, this *shit* my enigma of a boss inflicts on me.

So I mute my phone to Do Not Disturb and go to bed.

The next day, it's tempting as hell to play with his coffee. Make it sweet, or decaf, or flavored with jackfruit. But I'm a good girl and order his stupid artisan black drip.

He's in his office when I drop off his coffee, looking magnificent as ever in his white button-down and fiery teal-blue eyes chiseled off a lump of pure turquoise.

"You're here early," I say.

"Someone needs to be and we both know it won't be Nick," he grumbles.

I place the coffee on his desk, ready to scam.

But before I can turn, he says, "Sit down."

Oh, boy. What now? I take the chair across from his desk.

"You look exhausted," he says, seemingly oblivious to him being the reason.

He's left me no choice. I flash the *I'm-gonna-kick-your-balls-off* grin he hates so much.

"I am. I left at eleven and before I could get in my door, someone was texting me about work today."

He doesn't apologize, just levels a dead-eyed stare. "Go get me a tie. The closest color you can find to my eyes."

"Come again?" I blink.

"My other one got splattered in a business meeting last week and it's at the cleaners. I need a new tie," he says, as if that explains everything.

Like I haven't seen him wearing a dozen different ties before? Like there's no backup? What?

You know what? I'm not sure I even want to know. If this new neurotic obsession gets me the hell away from him, cool.

My shoes click the floor when I stand.

"You're wearing those things again?" He pauses and snorts. "Don't you own a sensible pair of flats?"

"I thought the mandate that I stay heelless only applied when I'm physically *in* the office. I just got here from fetching someone's coffee and haven't swapped them out yet. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

He doesn't.

Of course, he doesn't.

"Paige, I don't care if you wear house shoes, slippers, or fucking clogs. I just care that they're shoes you can walk in comfortably. Buy yourself a fresh pair on the company card while you're out and try not to break your neck before you get to the check-out line."

"How are my shoes your business?"

He rolls his eyes.

"Humor me."

I don't have to humor anything, you overbearing Warden, I think bitterly.

“Why is it my job to buy your ties? That’s a little more personal than coffee runs,” I snap.

“You’re my assistant and this is a business need.”

“I get the feeling this is a *you* need, actually,” I say, twirling my hair.

I think he tries to ignite me on the spot with this hot, annoyingly sexy, and totally not amused stare down.

“Teal silk tie. Got it. I’ll see you later,” I squeak, hating how good he is at winding me up. “I’m so glad your playboy brother doesn’t demand this kind of trivial crap.”

Whatever. At least I won’t be around to listen to how much everyone hates him and how quickly this place crashed since Beatrice got sick.

“You think Nick’s a playboy?”

I bite my lip to keep from laughing, but can’t hide the grin. Why do you care, Ward?

I shrug.

“He’s not unattractive, and he’s definitely easier to deal with. Plus, I hear he’s quite the ladies’ man.”

“You’re attracted to my brother,” he thunders, then louder, “Stay away from him, Paige. He’s bad news and he knows better than to fraternize with employees.”

“Since I’m his assistant, it’s going to be hard. I have to spend a lot of time with my bosses, you know,” I tell him, biting back a smile.

He doesn’t say anything, but his face is firm as he knifes me with his eyes.

I start for the door again.

“Remember!” he calls after me. “It has to be the same color as my eyes.”

Sure it does when you’re an egomaniac.

“Teal-blue like the sea.” It comes out a little too fast. Oops.

Don't look at him, don't look at him, I tell myself. Inevitably, I do.

He's grinning like a wolf. "You've noticed my eyes."

Ugh, yeah, they're hard to miss when they're the bane of my existence and the center of my nonexistent sex life.

"No," I fire back.

But Wardhole's Cheshire-cat grin widens.

"It's okay. Truth be told, sometimes I've noticed your—" He cuts himself off, shaking his head. "Get out of here, Paige."

"Everyone calls your brother frivolous, but he's never asked for a silk tie the same color as his eyes," I say, crossing my arms.

Ward sighs. "I lost my lucky tie, if you must know. Now go."

My eyebrows go up.

How superstitious. I kind of like it because it almost makes him human.

I go to the door, put my hand on it, and turn to face him again. "What do you notice about me? You never finished that sentence, bossman."

His eyes soften, and without saying a word, he winks at me.

Holy Toledo, this man drives me crazy.

One minute he's all Wardhole, quills and all, and the next he's Casa-freaking-nova.

I go downstairs and get in the town car.

"You're leaving early today," Reese says with a smile.

"I have to find the Warden a tie that matches his exact eye color."

She laughs. "He's got you wrapped around his finger, huh?"

My forehead creases. “Question. Is he making me do stuff another assistant wouldn’t do?”

“Umm—the last few EAs didn’t last long.” She’s quiet for a minute before looking back in the mirror. “So, Paige, you work in the office with the big shots. Be honest, is Granny Bea coming back? Because a lot of people are saying she’s not, and if this is how it’s going to be working for the Brandt Boys... I’m not sure I can handle it.”

Not you too!

I clear my throat.

“She’s coming back, Reese. We’re just not sure when. Don’t even dream about quitting. We can’t afford anyone leaving right now. I know it’s annoying, but it’s going to get better.”

Everything except the endless love-hate jousting with my boss, but I keep that part to myself.



FINDING a tie to match his paradise blue-green eyes is no small feat, and I return to the office behind on actual work.

So maybe I keep wondering why this stupid “lucky tie” thing is suddenly so important.

I drop the Barney’s—the fifth and thank God final high-end store I went to—tie on my desk and check my schedule. I need to meet with Andrew in marketing like now. I grab a pad and pen and go to his office.

This is how my day goes. Meeting after meeting followed by calls and then another meeting. Every person I talk to asks about Beatrice, and more than one tells me they don’t expect she’ll return. A few openly warn me they won’t stick around if Beatrice doesn’t come back.

I work through lunch. It’s after five when I walk into Ward’s office holding the tie box. His chair is turned toward the window, and he’s drinking from a small glass.

Coffee again?

It takes a minute, but the pungent smell, the crystal glass, and the amber-gold color confirms it's not his usual brew. When I realize what it is, I stop dead in my tracks, my lungs seizing.

"You...you freakin' Ward-hole!" I spit.

He startles for a second, then looks at me.

"Really? At work? What is this? Some kind of demented *Mad Men* throwback to the fifties?"

He doesn't say anything. He just leans over, opens his bottom drawer, pours a second glass, and places it in front of the chair on the other side of his desk.

I sit, but don't move for the drink, wondering if this is some weird new test.

"You gave me so much hell over being drunk," I hiss, thoroughly annoyed. "You tried to get me *fired* over one glass of wine, off the job, before my first day, and now you're drinking at work?"

I run my hands down my face, feeling my skin stretch, trying so hard to process this latest crapfest.

He scoffs. "That wasn't a single glass of wine."

I wish my glare could choke him.

"Truth be told, I'm having a bad day," he says slowly, twirling his glass, staring at the amber liquid.

His words hit me hard.

Just like that I go from pissed to scared. Ward cares about the reputation of Brandt Ideas. If he's drinking at work, he has to have a reason.

He looks like he hasn't slept in a month.

"Are you okay?" I ask slowly.

"I'm fine. I'm going to send you a memo in about an hour. I need you to revise it and send it on to the whole company."

A lump forms in my chest.

“Oh, God. Is Beatrice—I mean, is your grandma—”

“She’s alive and well,” he says quietly, then smiles at me. “Thanks to you once again. However, this will be the biggest memo to go out at this company since my grandfather died.” He turns away from me and sighs. “I’m not ready for this.”

“What’s wrong, Ward?”

“Everything. Still, the only thing to do is move forward, hopefully with a functional buzz to take the edge off. That’s partly why I needed the tie.” He points to my glass. “Bottom’s up.”

I put the drink to my lips and try to gulp it down, but it’s wretched.

It tastes like a scorpion just crawled into my mouth, stinging and intense. I roll my nose up and swallow.

I think it does damage going down. How did Brina and I ever do tequila shots?

I’m not sure if it’s this stuff or I’ve just lost the edge from my college days.

Ward watches me intently.

“Have another,” he says, refilling my glass.

Not his usual command. It’s more—curious, I think?

Humoring him, I repeat the dreadful process, putting the hellfire to my mouth and pulling in as much poison as I can, feeling my insides shrivel on the way down.

“Jesus.” He hangs his head and then straightens up like a bolt. “It really was one glass of wine. You were telling me the truth.”

My lips twist.

“I told you! But why do you suddenly believe me?”

“Because you clearly can’t drink for shit.”

He leans forward, snatches the scotch away, and puts it in the bottom drawer. “You’re dismissed.”

What the actual frick?

I hate this job. Mostly because nothing makes sense.

I'm only still here because I feel sorry for this jackass in front of me and can't stand disappointing Beatrice Nightingale Brandt. He's got another thing coming if he thinks he can treat me like some kind of toy for his head games, though.

"Well, what was that about?" I demand. "I deserve an explanation."

"Just go. I have work to do."

The tie box is still in my lap. I stand up and throw it at him, careful to let it tumble across the edge of his desk.

"You, sir, are a snarlysauros and a ginormous Wardhole." I really want to punctuate this sentence with my two-week notice. "You're lucky I care about your grandmother, or you'd be down an assistant, effective immediately."

His eyebrows dart up in surprise.

Why am I taking Trista's midnight calls for this jackass again?

How is this even the same man from a week ago? A month ago?

When I look at him, it's hard to find the hero who came dashing to my rescue, much less the demon kisser who wrecked my better instincts.

He stands, eyeing me slowly. "Paige."

"No, just listen. The closest thing I could find to the color of your devil eyes is in the box. The business day's over. I'm so tired and worn out I feel a cold coming on, I'm hungry, I haven't had my hands in clay for over a month, I have a fresh pair of heels waiting at home, and...and I'm leaving."

I push a broken rasp back into my mouth.

"The memo—" he starts, but I cut him off mid-growl.

"I'll revise it and send it from home. You're welcome."

Dick.

He may be under a mudslide of stress, but it's hard to find pity. All I want to do is throw him, if I was like ten times stronger and had a prayer of moving his slab of a body.

I take a deep breath on my way to the door.

Empathy, Paige. Empathy. Even madmen with sorcery blue eyes deserve it.

Right.

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OFFICE MORGUE (WARD)

I check my Inbox for the hundredth time this hour, hoping to stamp out any fires in response to Paige's email.

There are a few emails to answer, all right, which keeps me occupied since I can't sleep.

Not with two nuclear bombs exploding on my head.

Grandma up and leaving the company, plus the realization that I tried to get Paige fired because she had a single glass of wine and can't walk in heels, are too fucking much.

Who am I kidding?

Even seeing her since the day I kissed her into the wall at the hospital—*and she kissed me back*—has been a boulder on my back. I've kept my distance, constantly reminding myself that getting mixed up with her would be a fast track to scandal.

Only, that isn't true, is it?

After playing hero, then ghosting her because I was too stupid to believe her one glass excuse, then kissing her and pretending like it didn't happen...

I don't know why this woman hasn't quit and sued me.

I'm especially confused why she hasn't plucked my eyeballs out of my head, or at least lashed me across the face with her palm.

She's a better person than I'll ever be, thank hell.

Because if she quits now, we'll be screwed seven ways from Sunday.

Because of all the times Grandma could've decided to retire, she chose now.

Now.

When everything she and Grandpa worked their whole lives for is on the line.

If this deal doesn't go through, it's going to be ratcheted into my conscience forever. An ink stain on my soul.

No one expects Nick to be the problem solver. That's my job.

He gets to be the funny man, the less broody one, the guy who comes rushing in to help save the day at the last second.

I oversleep by an hour the next morning. I don't want to go in and deal with the storm of questions I'm sure to be barraged with today.

I purposely had Paige revise and send the email yesterday to buy myself time, but it can't be put off any longer. Today, I'm facing destiny and all its dragon teeth.

By the time I make it downstairs to the Lincoln, Reese has been waiting roughly an hour. "I'm sorry, Reese. Slow morning."

"I get paid either way."

We're almost to the office when I notice she hasn't said anything else.

"You're quiet today. None of your usual crap?"

She forces a smile. "Good morning to you, too."

"Is something wrong?" I ask.

"I'm just tired." She fakes a yawn.

"You read the email?"

She doesn't answer.

"Relax, Reese. Nothing's going to change."

She nods dully and pulls up to the doorman.

The office is quieter than a tomb.

Paige is glued to her seat, fingers flying across her keyboard, pretty green eyes focused on the screen. I stop at her desk and lean in. “Order breakfast for the office. Everyone. Hurry.”

“What do you want me to order?”

“Whatever you think people like. Spare no expense,” I tell her.

She nods again and moves her mouse. Her icy silence is harder to take, but I can’t dwell on that shit just now.

An hour and a half later, I come out to check on breakfast. She’s ordered a nice spread of pastries and bagels with all the fixings from Sweeter Grind, a popular Chicago café. Their creations are too sweet for me, but apparently the flavors of Heart’s Edge, Montana, are a pleaser with the staff.

It looks a little less like we’re overseeing a funeral parlor, at least.

Paige clutches a Sweeter Grind cup at her desk.

“Thank you for ordering breakfast,” I say.

She nods.

Goddammit, woman. Talk to me.

It’s not my fault, and I don’t like this any better than anyone else. I think I hate it more than everyone else in this office.

It puts a hell of a lot more pressure on me than them.

“What are you drinking?” I ask, clearing my throat.

“Just something my friend used to order for me before she got married and abandoned me to the single life.” She takes a long slurp, brutalizing me with those lips I can still taste.

I force back a chuckle, and something more feral at the thought of her being single.

“What is it?” I ask, pinning my eyes to her cup.

She offers it to me. “You can try it, but I don’t think you’ll like it.”

“What is it?” I ask again.

“Cinnamon latte, my best friend’s favorite drink.” She stops, and I can hear memories cascading in her laughter. “Anytime I had a bad day, Brina used to bring home two. Oh, and a whole box of Heart’s Edge truffles.”

“Are you having a bad day?”

What do I care? We’re all having a bad day under this constant stress pressure cooker.

This girl is not my business.

I’d do well to remember it and hit the Everest pile of crap I have to figure out now.

Paige meets my eyes, glances across the empty hallway, frowns, and her eyes fall to mine again.

“I’ve had worse days since I started here,” she says.

Another pointed jab at me that’s about as subtle as hot coffee to the face.

Damn her. Rather than get into another fencing match, I turn my back and stomp away.

It’s lunch before I hear from her again.

She doesn’t knock, just sails through my office door and folds into the chair in front of my desk. When she sits, the black-and-silver dress she wears dips a little, exposing more cleavage than my eyes need.

I can feel my sanity slipping, and I swallow what feels like a piece of raw cactus lodged in my throat.

“I took this job to work with her, Ward,” she starts.

Fuck.

I stiffen in my seat.

“You’re not quitting on me, are you?”

She shakes her head. “I won’t do that. I’m not going to let her down. But is she okay? Why isn’t she coming back?”

I push my laptop away and tent my fingers, wondering where the hell to begin. I don’t even fully understand it myself.

“Grandma constantly joked about retiring a few years ago. Nobody took her seriously. This place has been her life, her muse, her home. She called us over for tea yesterday afternoon and—”

Paige laughs.

It’s the first time I’ve seen her smile today.

“Beatrice Nightingale Brandt takes afternoon tea? That’s so cool. And I’m glad it means she must be doing okay.”

I smile.

“It’s not just for fun. She uses teatime for big decisions or family meetings. It’s been that way since I grew up. Anyway, when Nick and I showed up, she didn’t mince words. She told us she was done.” I pause, shaking my head in disbelief. “We didn’t believe her at first, but the blow to her health meant the time for jokes was over. She’s decided it’s time to pass the torch, this time for real. She wants us to take over, full time. She’ll help as needed from a distance since this is her dream project, and my grandfather’s legacy, but she needs her rest. No stress whatsoever, or else her ticker...”

I can’t finish. The thought of Grandma keeling over is still too visceral.

“It’s okay. You could’ve given me a heads up while you were in here downing scotch instead of waiting for me to read it in some email I had to revise,” she says with more softness than I deserve.

The summer sunlight spills in through the clouds and comes through my sprawling windows just then.

The angel’s back, and for a second, I feel downright stupid.

I’m the world’s biggest heel for mauling this saint with a sailor’s mouth.

“You knew before anyone else in the company, besides Nick,” I say slowly. “I didn’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to talk about it now, but it has to be dealt with.”

“You should have talked her out of it.” She leans forward, damning me as her pert tits pull together.

I’m not sure I’ll leave this office alive.

I manage a wry laugh. “Believe me, we tried. Even the tentative deal wouldn’t change her mind. Nick and I are ready to handle it, she insisted, and if it’s meant to be, it’ll happen. She’s always been a believer in fate, and still is, despite her new...limitations.”

“Limitations?” The word comes out of Paige’s pink lips as a whisper. “She’s not doing so hot then?”

I haven’t let myself think about what this heart problem really means for Grandma’s future.

“She’ll be fine,” I say firmly, smoothing my face. “She has the very best doctors behind her. She just needs plenty of rest.”

Paige nods and leans forward like she’s about to stand.

“Is that all you wanted to talk about?” I ask.

Somehow, having this kindhearted sprite of a woman in my office feels like a calm in the storm, and I’m not ready to let her go.

I just want a break from the darkness, the pain, the worry.

Just for a little while longer.

“I wish that was it, but...” She shakes her head, gold locks falling everywhere. “It’s like a funeral out there, Ward. We need to do something to boost morale besides order breakfast.”

“I’m not the type for big pep talks. Grandma promised a farewell speech. I hoped the food would perk people up.”

She crosses her arms. “It was a nice gesture. I’m just going to have to donate a lot of leftovers to the homeless shelter.”

She looks crushed. Defeated.

God. Why is this woman who's only been with the company roughly a month so shattered by this?

I need to get my ass in high gear. I'm not letting my grandparents' legacy fail, and I'm not letting Paige go under with the ship.

"Fine. We'll call the staff together and let them know we have to see this deal through for my grandparents. They'll rise to the occasion. Don't worry."

"I'm worrying," she says, folding her arms tighter around her shoulders like a sudden chill in the air. "You think it will work?"

Slowly, I nod. "It will. Just having the Winthrope contract on lock and publicly announced will skyrocket our reputation. It'll drive the company's value up so hard there won't be time for sulking."

She bites her lips together, drawing my eyes like magnets.

"You think I'm on the wrong track?" I rumble, stirred by the nervous jitter in her jade eyes.

"Working people to death might not be the best happy pill. Before the big announcement, everyone was complaining. Susan from HR said she had a dozen people on the verge of turning in their notices."

"Shit." I suck in a breath. "That might have been helpful to know earlier, Miss Holly."

"Can we stick to Paige?" she snaps, locking eyes with mine.

Can we be that informal, without blowing ourselves up?

I give a curt nod.

"Sorry, I was just trying to help. I handled it because I didn't want you or Nick to have more on your plates."

"Paige, I need you to be straight with me. Always. You've got your finger on the pulse of this company in a way I don't. You know, Wardhole and all." I pause, relishing how she smiles. "But thank you for the thoughts. Working people into

their graves might not build morale, but having an inspiring vision that gets results will. It helps people understand what they're working for, beyond money and busywork, and success is a great motivator.”

That lethal smile, brighter than the sunshine, grows into a grin that spreads across her face. Her eyes soften like she might just see me as more than the donkey who never wanted her to have a chance.

More than the dolt full of demons who pressed her up against a hospital wall on an appalling day and kissed her until she moaned.

If my train wreck of a life hadn't grounded me along with my fear for Grandma and bad memories of the woman I wanted to call my wife...who the fuck knows what would've happened.

I'm the luckiest human scum on Earth.

She should have quit then, leaving me no chance of getting through this with her.

“See? I knew you could do it. You're better with pretty words than you give yourself credit for.”

For a second, my breath stalls, and I'm lost in her sparkling forests for eyes.

I'm about to shrug it off when Nick blows through my office door.

“Bro, it's like a morgue out—” His eyes land on Paige and he stops. His gaze traces from her to me. “You two have been getting along much better since the hospital.”

He casts his eyes down her body.

Idiot.

Jealousy coursing, I want to punch him, but then I realize he's staring at her feet. She's wearing the same gaudy slippers I put over her feet the first time at the hospital after removing those damn heels myself. He looks at me again, but it's a silent accusation.

“What?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing.”

“Did you need something?”

“I was going to say it’s a bad vibe out there. We have to do something.”

“That’s the plan.” Paige stands, flicking at her hair, her eyes pure mischief again. “Ward said he’ll take care of it and he won’t let us down.”

“He did?” Nick looks at me.

There’s something in her tone. Even if it puts me on the spot—annoying as ever—it’s so cute I want to laugh again. The statement is almost a defense to Nick’s silent accusation.

“Captain Obvious, I’m aware morale’s suffering. Some of our people started with Grandma when she opened this company.” I look at Paige. “Miss Holly—*Paige*—was just leaving.”

She blushes when I correct her name, and moves toward the door fast, no doubt hoping I don’t notice.

But fuck, I do.

“We’ve been here forever, too,” Nick says absentmindedly. “Some of them still see us as kids, and we’re just not as graceful as Grandma.”

Seriously, dealing with a petulant younger brother should not be part of being a CEO.

Paige stops at the door. “Those are some serious Louis Vuittons to fill,” she says.

“We’ve got to call Winthrop first. He needs reassurance,” Nick tells me, the first sensible thing he’s said all day. “On second thought, Paige might as well be here for it, no?”

Damn, he’s right. I’ve been putting off the call, telling myself I needed to wait until Nick could do it with me.

The truth is, I just don’t want to do it at all.

With Nick here, though, I can’t procrastinate any longer.

I look at my brother. “Nonsense. I’ll send her a summary email when it’s over. I’m sure she has work to do.”

Nick grimaces. “Dude. We have to call a weirdo who’s holding our future in his stiff little hands—”

Paige’s laugh cuts in.

“—to tell him the woman he really wanted to work with isn’t coming back, but he should still choose our company,” Nick finishes. “Yeah. I think it would be good to have someone take notes, and Paige worked with Grandma on the designs. She’s our right hand—and maybe the left one too.”

Paige flutters her lashes like he’s just bowed at her feet.

Damnation.

In the last five minutes, my playboy brother has made her laugh, and now he’s telling her what to do with her time. She’s technically his assistant, sure, but I don’t like it.

My gaze falls on her.

“If it won’t impact your workload to be here and take notes rather than reading a summary later, you’re welcome to stay. If you have things you need to do, that’s fine too.”

She shrugs. “I’ll stay. I’m not anxious to get back to the morgue.” She returns to where she sat before Nick came in and leans over my desk for a pad and pen.

Fuck me.

The way her neckline bobs into her cleavage isn’t going to be helpful at all. It’s a colossal distraction that roils my blood.

For a scalding second, I’d like to find another wall to push her against rather than make this call.

Too bad duty calls.

I suck it up, pick up the phone, and start dialing.

“Ross Winthrop here,” a very English voice answers a second later.

“Hi, Mr. Winthrop, this is Ward Brandt. We’re on speaker with Nick Brandt and Paige Holly.”

“Of course. I was going to call you boys today. I just haven’t had the time yet. I’m so dreadfully sorry to hear of Mrs. Brandt’s abrupt retirement and her recent health problems. I hope she’s doing well.”

“Thanks for your wishes. She’s recovering well and soon she’ll have all the time she always wanted to travel,” I say.

“Thank God. Losing Beatrice Nightingale Brandt is truly the end of an era. Godfrey’s passing was bad enough. The way she picked up and kept going after her husband died was amazing. No one wants to see her out to pasture. She’s a wonderful lady. I looked forward to working with her. I truly wish I hadn’t dragged my feet so long without having a Brandt designed property, and now I fear it might be too late.”

My gut bottoms out.

“Mr. Winthrope, there’s no need to lament her retirement or worry you’ve missed out on anything. We still have the same outstanding opportunity to build Chicago’s finest hotel.” I pause, dreading the silence on the other end. “That’s what we wanted to talk to you about today, sir. She’s formally handed over operations to my brother and me. We wanted to assure you that you can still expect Brandt quality, Brandt perfection, and Brandt ideas. We’ll meet our previously discussed timeline. Everything will work just as it would if Beatrice—” It’s weird calling my grandma by her first name, but this guy already thinks we’re kids. I can’t refer to her as Grandma. “—hadn’t retired. I assure you, Mr. Winthrope, Nick and I are already down to brass tacks with the design phase, supply quotes, and schematics—”

“Hold on, son. Before you get too far in, you have to know your grandmother’s departure from Brandt Ideas was rather unexpected. We’re on a *tentative* contract, I’ll remind you. I think it’s best if we allow a certain grace period for everyone to reassess before going any further. Don’t you?”

No, I fucking don’t.

I hit the mute button on the phone and stare across my desk. Nick wipes sweat from his forehead. Paige’s mouth twists in horror.

Again, I'm surprised she feels our pain.

This isn't her dream to derail, but her sympathy stabs me in the chest.

If I don't nail this, I'm not just letting down my family. I'm letting down Paige Holly.

For the first time since Iraq, I hope there's a hero in me somewhere, and I've got to find him fast.

"Of course, Mr. Winthrope. I want you to be completely comfortable moving forward," I say, unmuting. "If you need a few days to think it over, no worries. You won't find anything better than Brandt Ideas in this industry. No matter what happens, I'll prove to you the finest Winthrope hotel ever built was always meant to be a Brandt design. I'll check back in two weeks, and if you have any questions in the meantime, feel free to give me a call."

"You talk with confidence, I'll give you that," he says. "It's the experience factor I have to wrestle with, but I'll do my due diligence. Have a nice day, Ward."

"You too."

Dial tone.

I turn the speaker off.

"Fuck," Nick says.

A perfect summary.

"What do we do now?" he asks.

"I need a Coke," Paige says.

"There's one in the mini fridge," I tell her.

She grabs one and pops the top. "Should I pour you guys some scotch?"

"No. This isn't the time for drinking," I say.

Nick raises an eyebrow. "She knows about the scotch in your bottom drawer now?"

"I don't make it a habit," I say with a shrug. "Yesterday was brutal, and it's not like you had to be the one to write the

memo to the whole company.”

He nods. “Any chance you want to be the one to tell Grandma the deal’s toast?”

Damn, maybe it is time to start day drinking.

“There isn’t anything to tell, Nick. We have a tentative acceptance. No signature before all hell broke loose. He asked for a grace period, and he’ll get it.”

Nick sits up taller, finger-raking his hair. “He didn’t sound sold. You really think he’ll actually commit in a few weeks?”

“Right now? No, but it buys us time to figure something out.”

“I really don’t get his concerns. We’re the same people doing the same work we were when he agreed to it. Grandma’s drafts are done, just minor adjustments left. What does he want?”

“He wants us to be seventy, straitlaced, and English,” I say. “Or at least a world-renowned artist like Grandma.”

“On second thought...” Nick gives me a wolfish grin. “Ward, you *are* straitlaced. You act ninety. You should just start faking an English accent and coming into the office looking like a candy cane.”

He’s only exaggerating a little. Last year at this charity gala, Winthrope showed up in red-and-white pinstripes.

“Thanks, ass. You threw in every punch except for my broken—” I cut myself off.

“Maria? That was two years ago, man...and the tabloids forgot.” Nick leans against the wall. “Osprey and his muckrakers barely touched you. Nothing like me and Carmen Seraphina. He dragged me over the coals for a month.”

“Enough,” I bite off.

I shudder at every mention of that hideous man. Roland Osprey is a media assassin, the mortal enemy of everyone rich and famous, especially here at home in Chicago. *The Chicago*

Tea is a fucking flamethrower of a publication, leaving scorched earth in its wake.

“We’re still paying for our parents’ sins,” I say, the words so numb. “And our own.”

I wish it weren’t true, but I’m old enough to know better.

The Brandt curse will never end, not since that incident on the yacht with the trash we called parents and Dylan damned Parnell.

“It was so long ago—” Nick starts.

I shrug.

“Things come back to haunt you, even if you don’t deserve it.”

“How can it keep coming back? I wasn’t even involved with it, and neither were you,” Nick says with disgust.

I want to laugh in sympathy, but this situation is so intense I just can’t.

“Believe me, brother, I understand.”

Paige sits pale and quiet, watching our exchange. For her sake, I hope she has no idea what we’re talking about. She hugs herself.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Yeah.” She looks at me, twisting her lips. “Can I ask a question?”

“Sure.”

“Morale is already so low—” she begins.

“And this won’t make it better,” Nick adds.

“Do you think people will quit?” Paige stares at me sadly.

Hell, I hope not. The panic on her face is obvious.

She’s afraid she won’t be able to handle it if more positions go vacant, if we lose the Winthrop contract, and wind up rudderless, running on Grandma’s glory fumes.

Frankly, I don't even know if *I* can handle it, and I technically own half the company now.

There has to be something we can do. We have to stop the bleeding.

“We'll get through this, or die trying. There's no other choice, and no point in dwelling on what might happen,” I growl.

They look at me, scared but reassured.

I fake stoic calmness well.

If the company fails, maybe I can try for an acting career.

Nick sits on the floor, ignoring the other empty chair.

“Nicholas Brandt, stand up right now,” I say.

“Huh? What's your problem?”

“We're already on the brink of losing a very important contract for this company and for our family, because people like Winthrop still see us as the ‘Brandt Boys.’” I put finger quotes around that stupid name. “You look like a frat boy sitting on the carpet. Start acting your age. If we want to run this company like Grandma, we need to stop panicking and shape up.”

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EX TROUBLES (PAIGE)

My heart dropped when Winthrope said he needed to reassess.

Everyone really wanted this deal. Ward can't handle more setbacks right now, even if he's the only one who seems to be keeping it together.

I doubt Nick can either, judging by the way I catch him brooding in front of his soaring windowpanes overlooking Chicago in its summer majesty. He always lightens up as soon as he notices my presence, but I'm able to see a different kind of family resemblance between him and Ward when he slips into grump-mode.

Both brothers are closed books in their own ways.

Human vaults with something very dark and painful tucked away inside.

Why?

The hardest thing is imagining how the Winthrope deal falling through could affect poor Beatrice. The day before she collapsed in her office, she told me she could finally taste what she and Godfrey set out to do when they were young.

They wanted to build a castle, a palace, right along Lake Michigan. It was a silly pie-in-the-sky dream of two young artists madly in love then—except for the fact that Ross Winthrope's outrageous luxury hotel can actually make their fever dream a stunning reality.

Without the contract, she'll be crushed.

I worry. With a bad heart, can she handle it?

“...start acting thirty, nimrod.” Ward’s booming voice draws my focus back to the room.

Nick stops his pacing, running a hand over his face. “Whatever. There must be something we can do.”

“I said we’ll figure it out.” Ward’s voice is iron, and strangely soothing.

My eyes connect with Nick’s in a hopeful glance, desperately wanting to believe him.

Nick moves to the cabinet Ward keeps his mini fridge in and reaches inside. “Where’s the damn water? My throat feels like cotton.”

“I’ll get it!” I bolt out of the room before either of them can stop me.

Thank God. You’d need a chainsaw to cut the tension in there. Grabbing the water gives me an excuse to breathe.

The air in the hall feels ten times cooler, but the atmosphere is just as morbid.

The building isn’t empty, but you’d never know it from the void that permeates Brandt Ideas these days.

I stop by my desk to change into the more professional house shoes he insisted I buy with his stupid lucky tie. They shuffle against the marble floor. I should have just worn flats, but wearing Ward’s slippers in the office makes him acknowledge what passed between us, even if he’ll never admit it.

I go to the supply room and grab an armful of water bottles.

On the way back to his office, Andrew watches me from the glass wall his marketing team’s office suite sits behind. A girl from accounting peers at me through the gap in a horizontal blind made bigger by her finger.

God.

We won’t be able to hide the crisis forever.

Everyone can feel something dreadfully wrong, and they act like I'll be the bearer of news, good or bad.

If we lose this contract, there'll be resignations. No one wants to go down with a sinking ship.

And when people don't come to work, I get their workload if it's anything I can do. I'm not sure I can handle more without ending up in the psych ward.

I may have panic-called Brina to vent the day I found out Ward was my Dark Knight from the museum, but this place wasn't HeronComm bad with her badass boss-turned-husband ruling over his people with an iron fist.

Not until *today*.

My hands are too full of Fiji bottles to open the door, so I kick it. Nick opens the door for me and grabs a bottle from my mound, rips the cap off, and starts chugging it like a man dying of thirst.

I restock the rest in the cabinet fridge.

Wardhole taps his pen like a gavel on his desk. My eyes snap to those hands, so strong and strangely calloused for a man who grinds away behind an office desk all day. They're more like a carpenter's fingers, weathered and imposing, far too good at making me imagine what they'd feel like brushing my skin.

"It's got to be the personal factor giving Winthrop cold feet," he grumbles, mostly to himself. "What the hell can we do about it?"

I admire how calmly he asks the question. He hasn't lost his temper the way he often does—or maybe he only loses his temper with me.

Ha-ha. That bitter laugh in my head must translate to my face.

"Why are you smirking now, Paige? What's so funny?" he asks.

I shake my head.

“Nothing.”

“It’s never nothing with you,” he says, dark whirls in his eyes ripping the truth out of me, stripping me bare.

Am I flushed? Send help.

I try to hide it with a laugh. “You’re just so calm with this Mayday situation. I was just thinking...maybe you only explode on me.”

“Not just you,” Nick adds with a wince. “You should see how he gets when he’s out of cereal. Ward eats peanut butter puffs like they’re going out of business.”

“Children, can we focus?” Ward asks, darting his eyes away with a hilarious tic of shame that says it’s true.

I snicker, trying to imagine him stuffing ‘candy for breakfast’ into that mortar of a mouth. So maybe he does have a human side.

Nick snaps his fingers loudly, banishing the thought.

“I’ve got it. We need a reputation wash. The same kind of service I hired to spruce up my internet footprint the last time Osprey was on my ass,” Nick says with a smile, holding out his open hands like he’s just solved string theory.

“Huh?” Ward looks at him. “That was online only. And it didn’t fool Osprey and his machine for very long when your ex was still gallivanting around, talking about your sordid... history.”

“That’s not the point,” Nick snaps, huffing out a breath.

“What’s a reputation wash?” I ask.

Nick turns to me. “It’s like cleaning your personal history. Teams go into Google results, social media, wherever, and try to rank up the positive results over the bad.”

No one says anything. Ward and I exchange a lost glance.

“Trouble is, Winthrope isn’t dicking around on Instagram or Twitter. Plus, *The Chicago Tea* has a top spot in Google news. Nobody’s going to bury Osprey’s crap with the media

empire he's built. We don't need a reputation wash. We need a time machine, Einstein," Ward tells his brother.

Nick's shoulders sag. His eyes flick back and forth, a shade greener than Ward's, searching for alternatives and failing.

"Look, he doesn't want to do business with us because he thinks we're spoiled frat boys. We need to look old, artsy weird, and boring."

"No shit, Sherlock. We need to look like our grandparents, but we both know the ship has sailed on that, no thanks to... never mind." That last word is a whisper as Ward's eyes meet mine before shifting to Nick again. "Short of defying relativity and re-doing our lives, what you're asking for is impossible." He pauses. "And frankly, there is no reputation rinse. Not for real. You saw how fast it was over and done for you."

"Nah, but that was me. Your reputation isn't trashed beyond repair, Ward."

"What?" Ward asks.

I plaster myself to the wall and watch.

"You don't have a hundred miles of nasty blog posts and tweets like I do. You haven't dated enough famous girls and had the infamous breakups. You didn't have Carmen Seraphina crawling over barbed wire, always coming back—"

"Thank God for small favors," Ward rumbles.

Nick throws him a withering look. "The point is, *your* reputation can be smoothed out. Just enough to show Winthrop we can do the job without him breaking a monocle or something."

Ward scoffs. "Yeah, right. You heard him on the phone. He knows who we are. Hell, if Grandma wasn't in the mix, he never would've given this firm the time of day. He's not the type to pass out second chances. We have to prove ourselves on skill, talent, and service. Although, if he won't give us a foot in the door, I don't know how we—"

I burst out laughing.

“How is that funny?” Ward looks at me, his eyebrow quirked.

“I mean, it’s not. It’s just—you talking about people not giving second chances.”

“Okay?” His forehead creases.

I shrug. “Ignore me. I’m just an obnoxious drunk.”

Nick lets out a belly laugh and meets my eyes.

“I like you. Never stop giving him everything he deserves, Paige.” He looks at Ward. “Bro, you’re boxing yourself in. You *can* save this company. You just need a reset and an open mind.”

“Don’t you think I’d do it in a heartbeat if I thought it would work? Human beings aren’t fucking blueprints, Nicholas. You don’t just redo a bad design and go about your merry way.”

Our eyes meet, and I hate how I’m totally blushing again.

He may be a asshole, but right now, his words are strangely profound.

“Ah, Ward, you’re such a drama king,” Nick spits. “If you’d just man up and get over her, you wouldn’t even need a reset. You don’t stomp around Chicago with your dick hanging out like I do.”

He’s trying to be funny, but there’s something kind of sad behind his self-deprecation too.

Oh, Nick. You poor, poor soul.

Ward stands. “Wrong. The breakup was public. She made me look like a damn—”

But Nick cuts him off. “It was two years ago.”

What? What was *pretty public*? I want to know.

I have no idea what they’re talking about, but two years is ancient history for anything short of murder. Did Ward get his heart busted up by some girl?

I step forward. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but—”

“See? She doesn’t even know and she works for you.” Nick rips open another water bottle and starts chugging, his eyes narrowed at his brother.

“Uh, actually I was just going to say my best friend Brina’s husband, Magnus Heron, was a total buttwipe. The dude paid some chick to fake an engagement once so he could stage a big press conference. He always did outlandish things, marketing himself, but when he had to take over his company and look after his kid brother, he turned it around fast. There’s no way either of you can match that guy in the jerk department.” I shrug. “I mean, I’ve never had to hit either of you in the face with a pie.”

“Shit. Heron’s wife is your best friend?” Nick asks, sputtering on his water.

Ward chuckles like a crackling fire.

“I’m more interested in the ‘she pied Heron’ part.” He looks at me. “You really hit him in the face with a pie?”

Maybe I shouldn’t have admitted it.

“Um, yeah. He kinda deserved it. Long story. I didn’t realize you guys knew him.” I don’t know why. Billionaires in Chicagoland are practically neighbors, unless one of them pisses the others off. “The point is, the press used to treat him like an arrogant ogre...and he was. But now? It’s all fluff pieces since the wedding and the stuff that went down with HeronComm. If he turned into Mr. Rogers in a year, you guys can too.”

“He’s married to a small-town girl who doodles cat and dog cartoons for charity shelters,” Nick says.

I scowl at him. “Brina’s from the burbs. She owns her own company, thank you very much, and those pet cartoons attract tens of thousands in donations to help animals find new homes. She makes serious money with her graphic art and only works part time.”

Nick shrugs. “I didn’t mean anything by it, Paige. Just that Mag’s a family guy now.”

The room goes silent.

“Don’t you get it?” Nick asks.

I shake my head.

“No,” Ward clips.

“That’s it. That’s how we get your reset.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Are you saying I need to wife some graphic designer?”

“Not necessarily.”

“Good, because every girl in our graphics department isn’t my type,” Ward jokes.

What *is* your type, Wardhole? But I laugh again.

He looks at me exasperated.

“What’s wrong with making art for a living?” I ask. “Jeez, for the grandson of two famous architects, you’re such a snob.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m not a snob. I suppose nothing’s wrong with cartooning as long as I don’t have to be involved with it, but why would anyone marry someone whose hobbies are as bland as porridge?”

“Oh, Brina, I’m sorry. I never should’ve mentioned you. I didn’t mean to get hung up on cute pet cartoons. It wasn’t the point.”

“What *was* the point again?” Ward asks.

“Get married. There’s your reset. Bam!” Nick says, signing guns with his fingers. “It’s a ticket to good PR, and you’ll look like a grown-up.”

Ward and I share a grim look, then we both burst into laughter.

It’s so absurd I’m in stitches until my sides hurt.

But Nick never laughs.

And when we finally regain composure, he keeps the joke going. “Do either of you have a better idea?”

Um. I’m speechless.

“Of all the stupid shit I’ve heard you say—why don’t you get married to save the company takes the nonexistent wedding cake,” Ward snarls, his dark brows pulling down like a thunderhead.

Nick grins. “I’m irredeemable, remember? Look, you probably don’t have to get married. Not really. Just fake an engagement until after the contract’s signed. A low-key broken engagement a few months later isn’t a good reason to cancel. He won’t back out once it’s underway, and managing a Winthrop construction shores up our reputation forever. We’ve just got to make the finish line.”

Crickets.

I *wish* there were bugs chirping to break the agonizing silence.

Then Ward clears his throat, turning to face the city through the shimmering glass. “I hate to point out the obvious, but...I haven’t had time for dating in two years. Who, pray tell, should I fake marry?” He sighs. “I can’t believe I’m even asking.”

“A cat cartoonist,” I say.

Ward scoffs.

“Bad timing, I guess. I thought it was funny.” I shrug, feeling a soreness in my shoulders. It’s got to be the stress.

Nick stays quiet, his eyes slowly tracing from his brother to me. Then back again.

Wardhole, Paige.

Paige.

Wardhole.

Smile.

Sinister freaking smile.

Oh, no. He can't possibly be thinking—

“Paige,” Nick says, starting toward me.

I whip my neck around. “Nick?”

He stares at me heavily until I get his point. His incredibly boneheaded, desperate, and no-way-this-is-happening suggestion.

Hell no.

But before I can say it, Ward hits the limit on his snarly boss-o-meter. “Ridiculous! We’re struggling to salvage the biggest deal in Brandt history and all you’ve got are games, Nicholas? Christ. Maybe Winthrope’s right. Give me something real to work with, you two,” he spits, pure venom in his tone.

Ouch.

I shudder, suddenly offended, even if it’s hilariously absurd.

On top of everything else he’s done, all the games he’s played with me, the very notion of pretending to be engaged to me is a death sentence?

I look him dead in the eye.

“Newsflash: ‘You two’ didn’t come up with that asinine idea. Your brother did. No worries, Ward. I would throw myself off a high-rise into Lake Michigan before I’d *ever* pretend to be desperate enough to marry a man like you.”

“Feisty. See? She’s cute when she’s mad, she’s brilliant, and she’s got backbone,” Nick says, nodding firmly. “Good wife material.”

Ward groans, dragging a hand across his face. He doesn’t even acknowledge what I’ve said, just glares at his brother.

“Hey, chucklefuck. In case you didn’t notice, I’m not in the mood for jokes today. I’m ten seconds from breaking your jaw.”

“Wonder why,” Nick mutters.

They stare each other down, having some brawl with their eyes I'm not privy to.

"Tell you what. When you prove this is a bad idea, I'll give you a better one." Nick tosses his half-empty water bottle in the air and catches it with a dramatic flourish.

"You've lost your goddamned mind," Ward snaps, pacing back to his desk and reaching for the phone.

"Who are you calling?" Nick asks.

"Grandma. I need someone to back me up on having you committed." With another bearish sigh, he slams the phone back into its cradle.

"Screw you, dude," Nick flings back. "She's obviously comfortable telling you what she thinks, and you two bicker like you're already married and sick of it. Everyone would believe it. Just sayin'."

Big yikes.

I can't decide whether to be offended at the ugly truth or mortified at his logic...

...especially when *said* logic makes enough sense to raise the hair on my neck.

Silence engulfs the room again.

With a switch of my hips, I walk out, escaping before Ward has a chance to dismiss me.

After this meeting disaster, I'll be damned if I give either Brandt brother the opportunity.



I POUR a glass of wine and flop down on the couch.

What even are the last few weeks of my life?

What will I ever be to my boss in his constantly evolving, ever hateful, and totally annoying image?

Before Beatrice collapsed in her office, I was still a drunken idiot he deigned to rescue.

At the hospital, I was an angel whose potentially broken neck he was worried sick over, and a woman who was good enough to kiss like he wanted to carry me off on horseback.

The next day, business as usual.

The mortal enemies kind.

And of all the outlandish, half-cocked suggestions for Nick to come up with, I still can't believe it was me faking an engagement to the Warden. But Ward's shoot-first reaction was too much.

I take a long sip of wine, a sweet porter that feels like my only escape from the hell called this job, this life.

I just want to sleep.

At least I shocked the crap out of the boss before I left his office. He hasn't called, texted, or emailed since. Must be too much to ask for.

I text Brina. *Hey, fun news. Brandt Ideas is about to lose a massive deal because Beatrice Nightingale Brandt retired. Apparently, reputation matters, and her grandsons are in deep doo-doo. So deep we flirted with the office caveman faking an engagement to me.*

LOL. Whose idea was that? Brina asks.

Nick's, I send back, adding, Dudette. Ward's reaction was instant 'roid rage rejection. You just had to be there.

The walls are closing in, Brina. It's not just all the stress at work, or the fake fiancé nonstarter. It just...it reminded me of Austin.

My eyes sting with a force I didn't know that stupid idiot and his bad memories could still muster.

Brina replies, *It's not the same! Don't go down that rabbit hole, girl. Why did it make you think of Austin?*

I don't know, but I do.

I know what it's like to be used, played with, and tossed away like a cold pizza crust.

But Brina doesn't know Ward tongued me into a kiss-happy coma. I don't even have words for that story yet.

Especially the part where he came back into his grandmother's hospital room, slid my feet into those fluffy shoes, looked into my eyes like I was Cinderella, and said "No broken necks today, princess."

And I kind of swooned.

Okay, I *really* swooned.

That's why today, weeks later, I feel like a total idiot.

Fool me twice? I'm a girl who's had her heart pounded into gravel. She should've been immune to a mindless flirt and a blazing kiss from her monster boss.

Why? Why did I open myself to more pain?

Maybe it wasn't Ward's usual trash that's left me reeling.

Maybe it's my own baggage.

My phone buzzes with a new text from Brina. ***You like him. Fess up.***

Ugh.

No! Not in this lifetime. Catch me in the next, I punch back.

Paige Holly, don't lie. You've got an office crush and you're a crappy liar. If you didn't have an office crush, it wouldn't have reminded you of Austin, and it's not like you guys even met at the office, so...bet you a thousand bucks he feels the same way. She sends a winking emoji.

Brina, shut up.

I tongue the roof of my mouth, denying it to myself more than to her. My phone pings again.

The dumb fake fiancé scheme was Nick's idea, right? Not Ward's. It probably won't come up again. Just forget about it. Unless you're hoping he changes his mind, I mean, so you

can be Mrs. Brandt someday. This time her emoji has its tongue out.

No way and you know it!

Then just forget it, she sends. Never happened. Don't you dare waste another second thinking about that Austin prick either.

Too late.

Mentally, I'm already back in the biggest humiliation of my life.



Years Ago

AT A FRAT LUAU, junior year, Brina and I stand on the sidelines making fun of our drunken classmates.

A topless blond boy in swim trunks with cobalt-blue eyes walks up to us and gazes into my soul. "Your friend's straight fire. Can I get her name?"

I grin at Brina. "Brina. Want her number?"

"Shut up!" Brina swats me with both hands.

Shirtless Blond Boy tucks an errant hair behind my ear. "I was talking about you."

My heart jumps. My chest tightens. I can't speak.

"Her name's Paige. Need her number?" Brina asks with a lopsided grin.

His eyes never leave mine. "I'd rather go somewhere we can talk. Let her give me her number when she wants me to have it."

Oh my God! All the blood rushes to my head. He holds his hand out.

I clasp it.

Then he leads me to a creek a few blocks from campus.

We talk until three a.m. He walks me home like a perfect gentleman and says he hates for the night to end, promising to walk with me to class in the morning.

I never really expect him to show the next day.

I'm used to gorgeous guys coming out of nowhere to talk big and then ghosting into thin air. But I open the door to leave for class a few hours later, and there he is.

"You weren't going to wait for me, hot stuff," he accuses.

I grin. "I didn't think you would show."

"Why?"

I shrug. "Frat boys have a bad rep for a reason."

"Heh, yeah, no denying that." He nods and scratches awkwardly at his neck.

But I chose to go into denial that morning, falling for Austin Gifford.

We were inseparable from that moment on.

Flash forward a year. His parents own a cabin in Sturgeon Bay. A bunch of us decided to drive up for spring break for one last rowdy, dreamy getaway that every Midwestern college kid needs at least once.

I can't sleep our first night there, so I stand on the balcony overlooking the lake. It's a quiet night with the stars dancing across the still waters like silver beads.

Austin and his friend Tanner are downstairs drinking. They must be on their second case of beer, if not something harder, their laughter rising with the pitch of their voices.

I snicker quietly. I'm not trying to eavesdrop, but it just sorta happens by default when their drunk voices carry.

"Your girl's hot as hell, man!" Tanner says, clinking a glass bottle against another loudly.

Austin laughs. "She's fuck-hot in bed, too. You have no idea."

I grimace, but a tiny part of me flushes with delight.

“So? When are you gonna put a ring on her? You’re graduating, dude. She’ll have you replaced in a heartbeat if you dick around,” Tanner says.

I smile into the night, shaking my head.

Austin can’t possibly be replaced. A part of me hopes the ring is coming soon enough.

Only if it’s his idea, of course.

We’ve talked about our future. He told me he’d stay in town after he graduated, because he doesn’t want anything to come between us. That was the first night we made love.

“It’s not like that,” Austin says quietly.

Oh? I stiffen. What does he mean?

We’d talked about it all the time. He’d propose my senior year, and we’d get married after I graduated.

Tanner coughs, waiting with barely more patience than my own thrumming heart.

My breath stalls. My ears strain, trying not to miss a word.

Tanner chuckles. “What’s it like then, my man? Tell me.”

“Well, I’ve got a badass job lined up with a top real estate firm. I’m thinking it’s time to trade up. I’ve got my eye on the broker’s daughter. She’s hotter than Paige and we’ve been texting for a couple weeks.”

Clapping a hand over my mouth so I don’t give myself away, I choke on darkness and heartache.

I want to die.

The entire starry sky suddenly feels too small, too cramped, too suffocating.

I need to flee.

But I just had the wind knocked out of me. It takes a minute to move, and even then I can’t tear myself away from his quiet assassination.

“Shit. You’re serious, huh? You’ve already met her then?” Tanner asks.

“Sure. She’s our age, but she graduated early. She’s in law school, and she told me she doesn’t date college boys. She said I could talk to her when I had a real job, but you know how it goes.”

Silence.

Tears start cascading down my cheeks.

“Surprise them. Tell them they’re really something special. Fuck them senseless. Move on to the next,” Austin says with a vicious laugh. “Women are so predictable, man.”

“I guess,” Tanner agrees awkwardly. “Straight to the point. But you’re sure about this?”

“Fuck yeah. Her old man owns the brokerage and he’s hiring. Win-win. I’ll have the deal sealed in more ways than one. Give me a couple months.”

Enough.

Somehow, I stagger back into my room and cry until I can’t. I think I fall asleep around five a.m.

I was a fucking placeholder until something—someone—better came along.

A few hours later, Austin nibbles on my neck.

My eyes snap open and hot fury jolts up my spine. My legs move on instinct, crashing a knee straight into his balls as I roll over.

“What the fuck!” he roars, falling out of bed. Still tangled in the sheet, he flashes me an angry look. “Paige?”

“Go call the broker’s daughter,” I snap, locking the door the instant he’s gone.

I pack my crap, rent a car, and drive back to school, swearing I’ll never make my heart a target for cruel little boys again.

It was the last time we ever spoke.

The last night I stupidly let myself believe in love.



Present

HE USED AND ABUSED ME.

Placeholder Paige, the girl who was never good enough to marry.

I drown the rest of my tears in another glass of port. Yes, I'm allowing myself a second glass tonight, thank you.

Brina's right. This *is* different.

Because boss-zilla and I have no relationship at all outside the office. The infamous museum rescue doesn't count.

Also, I don't have feelings for him.

I don't.

He's just a hot, complicated man who hits some switch in my head when he barks orders all day and throws me a rare bone or two of kindness.

His cold indifference makes his true feelings crystal clear.

Mark my words, I'm never, ever faking anything with him even if he changes his mind.

I'm not anyone's pretty little plaything, I send to Brina absentmindedly. *Def not Ward Brandt's.*

Brina replies, *Umm. I thought Ward shot the idea down?*

He did, I text back, grinding my teeth.

Sooo why are we talking about it? You're rabbit holing, aren't you?

Staring at her text, a deflated sigh seeps out of me. I don't respond, just grab the wine bottle.

I'm risking a real hangover tonight for good reason.

I just wish three little glasses could compete with what Ward flipping Brandt does to me.

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PERFECT ILLUSIONS (WARD)



I sip from the double shot espresso on my desk.

Dark, bitter, and scalding hot, just the way I like it. I didn't expect to find coffee on my desk this morning after the way my asshole mouth ran her off.

It makes me regret turning my fire on the wrong person even more.

The person I should've massacred walks through the door.

"Do you ever work?" I bite off.

Nick shuts the door behind him and levels a stare. "Find a fake fiancée."

"This crap again? Excuse me if I fail to see how *another* broken engagement helps me seem less like a walking dipshit."

"Ward, Maria didn't break up with you for reasons that had anything to do with you, and you know it. It was a family matter."

Even if he's right, this conversation is officially stupid.

"Her reasoning had everything to do with me. Our parents are a fucking death wish. She's practically royalty. How could you blame her for ditching out after the Parnell incident and Dad's tirade?" The words come out strangled.

Nick's face hardens. "We had nothing to do with that. We were kids for God's sake."

“Whatever. I know, you know, and Grandma knows. But it’s the kind of thing that follows you for life. I can’t blame her for not wanting to tarnish her whole family for my sake, even if it busted me up at the time.”

My pulse slows, an anger and despair I pretend I’m oversteaming my blood.

“If she loved you, she would have stuck it out,” Nick says firmly. I hate it like hell when he tries to be nice. “But I’ve never understood why her broken promise makes you a womanizing bachelor anyhow.”

“Her parents weren’t monsters. That’s the difference between being a Duchessny versus a Brandt.” I shrug. “Besides, I didn’t handle the break up well. I almost assaulted that kid from the tabloid when he got in my face yipping questions. That’s probably where the ‘womanizing’ comes from. Osprey’s revenge for shitting on one of his people.”

“He’s a hundred-foot dick. And I don’t mean that as a compliment,” Nick laughs.

“Doesn’t matter. You need to drop the fake fiancée plan and come back to earth. Paige hasn’t been this pissed at me in weeks.” I pinch my jaw, wondering if my progress toward having a normal EA was an illusion or not before my brother’s idiocy intervened.

“I think she was more upset about your reaction to enlisting her. But it doesn’t have to be Paige. I just said Paige, because she’s beautiful, crazy smart, and you guys clearly have a—”

“She’s our assistant!” I roar. “End of story.”

“Nah, you left out some details. We can trust her, she’s available, and it’s believable with you. Roland Birdshit and his teacup boys would probably eat it right up. People have seen you together before.”

“Yeah, at work. Once the fake engagement ends, I’d look even worse. A man who seduces his assistant, then leaves her before the wedding?” I snort, slashing my hand through the air. “Ridiculous.”

Nick leans over to peer through my frosted glass door, drumming his fingers against his thigh.

He glances back at me. “Obviously, it’s your choice, bro. She’s just too perfect to pass up, the kind of chick you *should* be dating. If you ever dated, I mean.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. Ass.”

“It’s not anything against you. It’s just—”

“Don’t you have work to do, Nicholas? Don’t you ever?” If I have to hear him describe Paige in all her wonderful perfection one more time, I might just pick him up and chuck him out of my office.

“Ward, no one’s going to have work for long if we don’t figure this out. If Paige repulses you so much, find a sugar baby or something. There’s a price for everything, and always somebody willing to pay it.”

Damn him, I never said Paige was repulsive.

Quite the opposite, and it’s a mammoth goddamned problem.

“A woman that hard up for money won’t play well. And what do you mean no one will have work without this deal?” I growl. “We did big dollars in projects without a Winthrope centerpiece last year. No reason we can’t do it again this year.”

“I hope,” he says quietly, his eyes darkening. “When word gets out that Grandma retired in the middle of a project and it made Ross Winthrope choose another firm over us...what do you think happens next? That’s not losing out on a little success. That’s a hit.”

Fuck. I don’t have a counterargument.

“Most people probably won’t even connect the dots,” I say weakly.

“Maybe. But if I were looking to build a multimillion-dollar property, I’d make it my business to know the ins and outs of every firm, right?”

Dammit, Nick, why are you making sense today?

Success breeds success. Momentum is king. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true.

I slump in my chair, pulling angrily at my tie.

“Exactly,” Nick nods, reading my misery.

“We’ll figure it out. There has to be another way. Besides, Paige wasn’t even interested. And I’m not sure we could ever keep some random chick quiet long enough to seal the deal.” I shake my head, dumbfounded that I’m even entertaining this insanity. “Plus, if word ever got out that I hired a fake fiancée to con some old man into dealing with us, that’s a kiss of death.”

“That’s what nondisclosure agreements are for,” Nick says. “Jane Nelson works in accounting. She’s bubbly and gets along with everyone. I’m sure she’d be willing.”

“Who?”

“Sandra Nelson’s granddaughter.”

“Again, who?” I stare.

“The old blond lady who used to give us oatmeal cookies when we started here with Grandma. Gah, you’re lucky I’m the people person around here.” He stabs his thumb at his chest proudly.

The original accountant. Right. But I don’t follow.

“Why would I fake an engagement to her granddaughter?”

“She’ll keep her mouth shut for Grandma, if nothing else. She’s got family roots at the firm.”

I can’t picture this girl. I don’t even know who she is. I’d rather drink decaf for a solid month.

“Nick, this is more batshit than faking it with Paige.”

It’s also infinitely less exciting, but of course I don’t say it.

He grins. “Yeah? I wonder why, brother.”

“Forget it.” I roll my eyes. “Let me figure this out. We’re not getting anywhere by lying about marrying some poor girl.”

Nick shrugs. “Pay her well. She won’t be poor then.”

Before I can rip into him, there's a soft tap at my door.

Nick stalks over and opens it.

Speak of the gorgeous devil.

Paige comes strolling in, deliberately avoiding my eyes. She's still fuming about yesterday.

Without missing a beat, she sails to my desk, but she leans too far forward.

"You're wearing stilettos again." It slips out of me before I can stop it.

I don't need to look.

"I read the entire dress code front to back, three times," she says, folding her arms. "There's nothing against heels in there."

"Whoever wrote it expected people who couldn't walk in stilettos not to wear them." I meet her eyes with a blaze.

"Well, I'm code compliant." She drops a slab of files on my desk, flips one open, and puts her finger above a line. "You'll want to sign this one. It's due by noon, Mr. Brandt."

My fist tightens.

I shouldn't hate that we're back to *Mr. Brandt* so much.

"What are you so mad about now?" She sighs, her brows knit together as she rests a hand on her hip.

"No idea what you mean, Miss Holly," I growl back.

"Shit. I already believe you're married," Nick mutters, waving his hand in the air and chuckling as he closes the door behind him on his way out.

Paige keeps looking at me with those bright-green, all-too-expectant eyes.

"What? The shit Nick said yesterday was all on him," I grind out.

"Yes, you made that very clear. Oh—wait, I think you actually blamed me for it."

“I didn’t mean—it was just—an inappropriate suggestion,” I try, hating how easily she knots up my tongue.

“Can’t disagree with you there, Warden. As soon as you scribble your signature, I’ll get this sent out.”

I pick up a pen and slash my name across the contract. “We had a truce.”

“We still do. I didn’t even forget your coffee this morning.”

She’s right.

She’s doing her job. She didn’t poison me with a blob of sugar. She’s acting like a pro.

So why am I so enraged about it?

Bah.

“Change your shoes,” I order.

“Yeah, no. It’s inappropriate to wear slippers in the office. When I’m on the clock, I’d rather be completely professional, including my attire.” She shrugs. “I mean, unless I’ve had a glass of wine before the art museum. Then I’m—*what’s the word?*—oh, yeah...fireable.”

“Paige.” I stand, ready to grab her if I need to, and talk some goddamned sense into her.

Even if I’m well aware I’m fooling myself, and the only person in this room who deserves a dressing down is *me*.

Too slow.

Before I can round my desk, much less say a single word, she grabs the signed file and storms out.



GRANDMA ADJUSTS her hospital bed so she’s sitting up, a striking silhouette even when she’s down for the count.

“I thought you’d forgotten me,” she jokes.

I smile. “Grandma, you know that’s not possible.”

Someone knocks on the door.

“Food services!”

Before I can move to open it, the door opens and a cart rolls in.

“Lunch is served,” a lady behind the cart says before rushing out the door again.

“Hm. Lunch,” Grandma says, as if she has some doubt what they’re serving is edible. “Now, if one of you were visiting me in the middle of the workday, I’d expect Nick. What’s wrong?”

My eyes meet hers slowly.

“What makes you think something’s wrong?” I ask, remembering how impossible it is to hide anything from this silver whip of a woman.

“It isn’t obvious?” She cackles. “You’re not working, Ward. How’s the weather in Hades, anyway? I’m a bit worried it’s below freezing.”

“You want me to push your food over, Grandma?” I ignore her quip.

“I want you to scrape it into the trash and bring me a milkshake.”

I do a double take. Her smile says she’s serious.

“Grandma, no. You’re on a special heart healthy diet.”

She puffs out annoyance and looks away from me.

“I’d do it for you, son. No hesitation.”

“You’re all we have left,” I try, keeping my voice calm. “You’re doing the dash diet until your doc says otherwise.”

“Nick’s right, you know. You’re a walking, talking, fun-sucking rule book. He’d bring me a milkshake.” Her eyes grow wide. “Where’s my phone? I need to summon my other grandson.”

“Grandma, I’m texting him right now. Not about your damn milkshake,” I growl.

“Buzzkill. Why don’t you at least tell me why you’re really here?”

“I just came to visit.”

“I know that. But what’s wrong?”

Damn her sixth sense. Folding my hands, I put my phone down and try to be delicate. It’s not easy when you’re all iron and no velvet to spare.

“I’m not sure the Winthroppe deal’s going to hold up. He asked for time to reassess after we announced your retirement,” I say slowly, delivering the bad news as lightly as I can.

She’s quiet for a minute, then purses her lips and nods. Typical Grandma.

“Well, reassessing doesn’t mean backing out—unless you’ve given him a reason to? Have you boys told him to stop dressing like a rodeo clown?”

“No, ma’am,” I say with a chuckle.

“But?”

“He thinks we’re too scandalous. Not up to snuff.”

Her thin lips pull into a smile. “Well, Nick does make the papers quite often, and you know how Mr. Osprey loves a salacious story. But no one ever gave you kids a fair shake after that dreadful affair on the yacht...”

I cringe when she mentions it. I don’t dare go there, especially not now with her heart.

“Grandma...”

“Let me finish. It’s not fair. Just do the best you can, Ward,” she says, reaching for my hand. “If we don’t snag this deal, the world won’t end. I promise.”

I’m not so confident.

“Nick’s worried that if this contract slips away, we’ll lose a lot more,” I mutter.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I’ll...honestly? I’m still working it out.”

“And that’s why you’re here.” She smiles, her eyes so kind and bright.

“No. I’m not here to worry you over this. You need to rest,” I say sharply. “Nick says my reputation is salvageable, but his—”

“What reputation? You were in the Army for four years, you worked with us while you were in college, and other than some drunken parties, you’ve never done anything wrong. Unless there’s something I don’t know about?”

Her eyes bore into me. I hesitate.

“The whole Maria thing—”

“Oh, Maria-popea. She’s a snob and a bitch. You’re better off without her.”

I can’t help but smile at her bravado, even if I don’t believe it.

“Everyone thinks I cheated on her after I yelled at that prick from *The Chicago Tea*. I never bothered to correct them. Osprey called me personally for a comment and I told him where to go.”

She snorts with amusement. “Back in my day, we had a word for that. You want to know what it was?”

“What, Granny?”

“A gentleman. That’s what we called a man who took the fall and never corrected anyone on the details. Particularly a certain anyone who makes his living peddling hogwash and schoolyard rumors.”

“Well, when those rumors are about the rich and famous, a lot of people drink his swill. I just didn’t want to help him brew more.” I sigh, blinking a second too long.

“You’re a good man, Ward. Never let anyone make you doubt it.”

I’m not. If she knew what I did to Paige...

Another repressed sigh.

“Want to hear something funny? Nick thinks I should hire Paige to be my fake fiancée so Winthrop will believe I’m all grown-up and responsible. Like two degrees and a solid decade grinding away at the top of the industry doesn’t prove it,” I tell her.

“Oh, I love it! That boy comes up with brilliant ideas when he buckles down and puts his mind to it.”

What?

My jaw almost dents the floor.

I stare at her. What exactly are they giving her for the pain?

“Come again? Grandma, what do you—”

“Do it!” she cuts in. “Fake marry Paige. Live it up and give the world a show that’ll blow their hair back.”

I cock my head, studying her.

“Why?”

“Why not?” She flicks a hand in midair. “The way everyone judges you boys for what your parents did isn’t fair. Desperate times call for desperate measures, desperate justice. Fake an engagement to Paige, but make it look real, I say. If people don’t think you’re smitten, it will never work.”

Smitten, huh?

“There’s a problem. Actually, there’s a hundred problems, but here’s the big one—Paige isn’t interested,” I say.

“Oh, Ward.” She reaches over and pats my hand again. “I’ve never met a woman disinterested in one of my grandsons.”

I smile because she’s being polite.

Maria was interested, at first, and it wasn’t enough to keep her around.

“You don’t believe me, do you? Such a shame. You’re knight material. Handsome, wealthy, brilliant, and civil.”

Now she's just blowing smoke up my ass. Mostly because she doesn't know I pushed our assistant against the wall right outside this room not so long ago and kissed her like a savage high on lust.

"What more could she want?" Grandma asks.

"It's fake, remember? She's not an actress."

"I do, dear. It's just my ticker that's broken, not my memory. So, tell me, you'd really walk away from a billion-dollar contract and your grandfather's legacy over having to be seen with an intelligent, beautiful woman for a few months?"

Boom.

She would go for the guilt trip, wouldn't she?

"How long do you think it would have to go on?" I ask, knowing I'll regret this question.

"I don't know. A few months? Everything about it has to be real, even the breakup." She shakes her head. "Then again, as hard as you took Maria...I'm not sure I want you enduring another broken engagement, fake or otherwise."

"I could be the one to break it off," I say.

She twists her lips sourly. "No one will believe that, Ward. But if you're opposed to fake marrying my assistant, why doesn't Nick? I've never known him to turn down spending time with a gorgeous lady. Perhaps Paige could teach him a thing or two about how to behave."

My blood sizzles.

The mere suggestion that Nick—*fucking Nick*—pose as Paige's fiancé bothers me more than the original dumb idea.

"I think we agree Nick's reputation is...a work in progress," I say, trying like hell to be tactful. "Still, I'm not throwing Paige to the wolves over a sham."

Grandma flicks a hand at the air again.

"Since I'm not getting my milkshake today, will you be a dear and push my cart over here?"

I go to the cart and roll it to her bed. The wheels squeak against the hard floor.

“Take that stupid cover thing off for me, please.”

I smile. It’s the reverse of when we were kids, a memory of my tonsil removal recovery flashing back. I get her set up so she can eat in peace.

She picks up her plastic fork and scoots food around the plate.

I can’t blame her for not wanting to wolf down that stuff.

“Well, it’s your choice if Paige wants to help Nick’s reputation, I suppose,” she says with a disinterested tone.

Lady, you’ve been on too much morphine.

“My choice?” I echo, wondering what she’s getting at.

“Oh? Didn’t you say you couldn’t make it work? If Paige changes her mind and wants to help, I think she should have the chance. She’s fully capable of making her own decisions. She’s a headstrong young woman.”

I shake my head until it might fall off. “Grandma, Paige doesn’t want to fake it, and Nick agrees no one would ever believe he’s getting married.”

“You said she doesn’t want to fake an engagement to you. For Nick, well, that might be a different story. She might just get along with him easier.”

My stomach knots.

“She’s not getting engaged to Nick,” I snarl.

“Why’s that?” Grandma asks pointedly, her eyelids fluttering.

Checkmate.

I don’t answer.

I’m too busy hating the fact that she’s convinced me to consider this appalling fuckery—an illusion of love with Paige damn Holly.



PAIGE IS at her desk when I come in. I throw down a giant Macy's bag with a *whump*.

"Excuse you?" Her eyes dart up at me, annoyed.

She shouldn't get to be so deliriously sexy.

"Pick a pair. Reese assures me they're fashionable."

"Huh? You bought me more shoes? What's wrong with you?"

"Not bought. We're going to trade."

She props her feet up on her desk. "And what makes you think I'll turn in all my heels for flats? The growly schtick and unenforceable rules aren't really doing it, boss."

"Adding ten thousand dollars a year to your salary." I pause, watching her mouth fall open. "Fully worth it to reduce the liability."

She glares at me. "God, why don't you harass anyone else about their footwear?"

"Everyone else can *walk* in their chosen shoes without risking permanent injury."

Nick runs out of his office and skids toward the elevator, barely catching his balance. He points both hands at me like they're guns.

Paige stares at me blankly.

"Okay, make that *almost* everyone," I mutter. "Once you've changed into safer shoes, can you come to my office? I need to talk to you."

"Is Beatrice okay?" Concern fills those big green eyes.

I blink at her. "How'd you know where I went?"

"She called and said that if you forgot to talk to me before you left today, I should call her back and she'd fill me in. Apparently, it's of the utmost importance. I laughed a little at

first because I thought we weren't bothering her with work, but then...I wondered if it was serious."

My jaw clenches.

So now Grandma's meddling directly. Fuck.

I can't help wondering if there's something going on here that I'm missing.

If she and Nick are both willing to ride this crazy horse to the station, without giving me a chance to back out, maybe it's as ludicrous as it seems.

"I'll fill you in. Just hurry up," I say, nodding at Paige and then heading to my office.

I barely have time to decide if I need to invent something else to talk to her about when she glides in wearing pastel-pink flats. A smirk pulls at my lips.

"Close the door, please?"

She gives me a skeptical frown but obeys.

"I must be in trouble. Awesome."

"Nah, this is actually a salary renegotiation...of sorts." I wave to the chair in front of my desk.

She bites her bottom lip and sits down.

"Let me guess. You want to cut my pay because you think we're going to lose the Winthrope deal?" She asks bitterly. "If you want me to stick around earning less for my misery, then I get to work with the design team once a week in lieu of compensation. Beatrice was teaching me a lot, but she won't be here so—"

"Will you just listen?" I say, leaning back in my chair and crossing my arms.

She closes her lips with a glance like a sheathed sword.

I never realized she's such a team player. I also didn't know Grandma was teaching her design intricacies when she doesn't have the education.

“There’s a bigger reason than shoes why I’d like to enhance your pay. I want to give you a significant raise for a very special assignment.”

“Raise?” she whispers. “Wait. How horrible is this ‘special assignment?’”

She’s so cute. Was I like this at twenty-four?

“Yes. We’d up your salary to the tune of three hundred thousand dollars per year.”

“Holy—” Her jaw drops. “Wow. And the assignment?”

She’s holding her breath, every nerve stretched on tenterhooks.

Yeah, fuck, she’s not the only one. It’s now or never.

“Play my fiancée for ninety days. The breakup would be on your terms. After that, I’ll move you over to the design team, or relocate you somewhere else. Anywhere you’d want, really, where you won’t be answering directly to me.”

Deafening silence.

My jaw could break from the tension. Cutting in when someone needs to make a decision like this comes across pushy. It doesn’t close deals.

She’s considering it, at least. That’s a good sign when hard noes come quick.

Her face turns red but her voice is even, quiet, strained when she speaks. “Ward?”

“Yes?” I tent my fingers, leaning forward.

“I might just be a drunk idiot who didn’t belong at your museum, but I don’t make stupid a habit. I don’t fake relationships. Not for three hundred thousand dollars a year and not for three million,” she says, lancing me right in the chest before she continues. “But I have to ask...why? A month ago, you were worried I’d single-handedly trash the company’s image. Why the hell would you ever want to fake marry me?”

My head might pop right off.

I'm so awful she can't even fake a relationship for three hundred grand?

Damn.

I expected resistance and put on my best sales face, but this? This isn't just no.

It's a ball crushing *hell no* that hacks up my pride in little pieces and buries them in the desert. Still, I clear my throat.

"Paige, truth be told, I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions that night. I damn sure shouldn't have made it my mission to get you a pink slip. I was out of line," I force out, sincerely and painfully.

She smiles, her eyes flitting up to mine. "It's fine. I'm the one who keeps bringing it up, you know, and I shouldn't. It worked out how it was meant to...and I'm happy to keep it that way, boss, without any fakery." She cocks her head. "But if you really want to know...you were in front of us in line that night. There's a guy I'd like to meet, I thought, even before you came charging to my rescue. It certainly wasn't my best moment, and you thought I was worth ghosting—"

"Paige—" I growl.

It isn't fucking like that, I want to scream, but she isn't finished.

"Then there was the hospital. I get it, you were keyed up. Scared for your grandmother. You didn't mean to kiss me that day, and I just sorta fell into it. You didn't intend to make such a cute scene with the shoes when you—"

"Paige," I snarl sharply.

I expected a hard sell.

I didn't think she'd eviscerate me with the saddest rejection ever.

She shakes her head before opening her eyes, dark-green seas churning. "Nope. I'm not worth it, and you're not worth faking it for. So, if you and Nick really think a scheme like this will help close the deal, I'll hunt down a talent agency and set

up some interviews. I'm your assistant, Mr. Brandt. Not your toy."

Gutted.

I sigh, hellfire burning out of my nostrils.

"You don't understand. I need someone I can trust with this. If it's moving forward, you're the only realistic—"

"Use an airtight NDA," she says sharply. "Did you need anything else?"

Only a heart transplant after she speared her damnable heel right through it.

"You're dismissed," I huff out.

She gives me that shitty grin she only uses when she's being sarcastic—or putting up a wall I want to beat down with my bare hands.

"How kind of you," she quips, before sashaying away with an anticlimactic switch of her hips.

Poison.

This woman is a lioness, and I still want to stick my idiot head in her mouth.

No, and I don't mean the phony marriage proposal, either.

Fuck. Being shot down for a *fake* engagement is almost worse than being shot down for a real one. I hit her line on my office phone ten minutes later.

"You rang?"

"I need a black drip. Now."

The least she can do is deliver a caffeinated potion to take the edge off my misery.

Something dark and bitter, just like my life.

FOR REALSIES (PAIGE)



Ward Brandt may be many things—bosshole, control freak, espresso-blooded, lightning-eyed beast-man—but the one thing he isn’t is a man who accepts defeat.

The texts and emails arrive almost nonstop.

He keeps refining his offer. It’s up to five hundred thousand now.

Part of me thinks I should take it.

I mean, I could do a lot with half a million dollars at the end of ninety days—including finding a job that isn’t a fancy nuthouse.

But I want nothing to do with another fake relationship. Especially not one with a man I originally dubbed the Dark Knight right before he proceeded to power slam my heart to smithereens like a shaken snow globe.

I’m also getting sick and tired of the messages.

Digging my nails into my thigh, I pick up the phone and call him.

“You’ve come to your senses. I knew you would,” Ward says with an easy tone that almost sounds like he’s joking.

Dear Lord.

“Not even a hello? I actually called to tell you to grow some balls.” I channel my inner Brina.

“What?”

“Stop harassing me over text. My thumbs are sore. If you won’t give up, at least pick up the damn phone.”

“Noted. So five hundred thousand for ninety days. Deal?”

“No deal. I told you. I’m not faking a relationship.”

Silence.

He mutters something under his breath. But it doesn’t sound like a slur, or even necessarily angry, more like something weirdly...sad?

“Am I so horrible you can’t even fake a relationship with me for three months to save my family’s company and a lot of people’s job security?” he asks, his voice like cement.

Oof.

“No, it’s not that. Obviously, you’re—never mind.” Crap. We’re not going to go down that road. Because it ends with me admitting he’s just about *everything*, a fallen angel with the devil’s good looks and a cocky attitude to match. “Tell me, though, do you always lay the guilt trip on so thick?”

“It’s not what? Not the fact that you curse the ground I walk on? So, what is it, Paige?”

It’s that I’ve always secretly wanted my very own dark knight, and I’m kind of tired of fake relationships.

Fake just seems so smarmy. So disingenuous. So *wrong*.

“I deserve someone who doesn’t begrudge me a bad day.”

“I’m sorry—”

“And I’m not into fake love. That’s better saved for middle school, don’t you think?”

“Six hundred thousand,” he says. It’s not even a question. “Do we have a deal?”

I think my soul might be leaving my body.

I flump back against my seat with a sigh.

“Ward, I’m going to level with you. If you repeat this, I’ll deny saying it, so tread lightly. Here goes...you’re hot and rich. There are a million women in this city who would’ve

jumped at the three-hundred-thousand-dollar offer to not-marry you. Actually, they'd probably do it for free, if you just asked nicely enough. You definitely don't need me and I think you're a little obsessed."

"Tell me something I don't know," he mutters too easily. Cocky jerk. "The difference is, I...I trust you, dammit."

What? For a second, I hesitate, stunned.

"I'm glad," I say, shaking my head. "But you know that's not a prerequisite for a fake relationship. I'm not even a great actress. Get an NDA, hire a girl who did theater, and happy trails to you and your fake fiancée. I'll still be here to fetch your stupid espresso."

"It's believable," he says, his voice like distant thunder.

"What?"

"You and me. I'm not about to start telling Nick he's right, but with us, he might be. Our relationship's believable. People have seen us together before. We love art. We have a certain dynamic that's easy and rare when we're not at each other's throats. We make sense, Paige Holly, and don't you dare deny it."

Holy hell.

I'm folding up into the fetal position, my head spinning. All because I can't deny his sudden impassioned plea.

Damn you, Ward.

I know what it looks like on paper.

Perfection.

In reality, he's still my grump of a boss who I wasn't good enough for until I happened to be at the right place at the right time to save Beatrice.

I'm not about to agree, so instead I say, "I'm sure you'd make sense with a lot of women in this city. I'm hardly the only chick who's capable, educated, and into gorgeous architecture. A thousand girls would bend to fit whatever mold

you want, no questions asked. You don't want my smart mouth or my baggage."

"That's the problem, Paige. I fucking do," he rumbles, something like a tiger's low purr in his gruff tone. "Intelligent women in a city this size aren't a rare commodity. Smart women with your brains, your looks, and your lady-stones to stand up to me...that's another matter. I've been in this business for a long time. Everyone has a price. Name yours."

Oh my God.

I feel like I can't keep my feet on the ground.

Not with this crazy, sexy, downright desperate bull of a man determined to drag me away, whether I like it or not.

"Name it," he demands again.

"W-what?"

"What do you want, Paige? Like really *truly* want? It's yours. Tell me and I'll write it into the contract."

I try not to ask myself that, but he's posed the question so perfectly I can't avoid it. I sigh.

"What my friends have," I whisper.

"Care to elaborate?"

"A business they love, an adoring husband, a family." All wishes this genie in a tie can't grant. "Just happiness at winning life, I guess."

"Well, I don't know if I can deliver all that. Not legally, anyway. But I can help with one of those. What kind of business would you want?"

Is this really happening?

I wouldn't even know where to begin with a business, a life rich in art, and a family. I look at Sabrina and my cousin, Liv, like they won the lotto. Brina got herself a billionaire, while Liv hits the charts all the time with her books and wound up hitched to a fire single dad, Riker Woods, who's constantly playing superhero at Enguard, a world-class security firm.

I've never really thought about making a serious grab for my dreams. Not after Austin.

The row of handcrafted miniatures on the faux mantle above the television catch my attention, all pet projects I sculpted by hand. The tongue-in-cheek anthropomorphic cat I made last year in the pose of *The Thinker* really hits home.

I know what I want to do. What I love. What I need.

"You really want to know? I'd like an art studio, but I'm not sure that's a viable business," I say, crossing my fingers.

"What kind of art?" he asks.

"I sculpt. Mostly a lot of figurines and busts because I'm limited to what I can do at the kitchen table. But back in college, I crafted a life-sized statue and it sold for a pretty penny at a gallery. With a studio and the right equipment, I could make bigger projects rather than just conforming to what's available. But I wouldn't know the first thing about turning an art studio profitable."

"That's the trouble with art schools," Ward grumbles. "Tuition should pay for a course in how to make a living with an art degree."

I laugh, harder than I should, considering the gravity. "I think that was included in the whole 'most artists need a day job' lecture that never happened."

"Most people who want a day job don't pay a hundred thousand dollars for a degree."

"True, but it was a fun four years."

"A hundred grand worth of fun?"

I laugh harder. "This is where I sound like a spoiled brat, like you and your brother—"

"So I'm a brat now?" he challenges.

"Come on, Ward. There has to be a reason I won't fake date you for six hundred k."

He laughs. "How are you a brat?"

“My parents paid my tuition, so I didn’t really think about the cost. I spent whole days cooped up in the studio working on my projects. Brina had to remind me to come back to our dorm and eat. I was the only person in my class to sell something for more than ten bucks before graduation. I thought I had it made. I was going to be the one art major out of ten thousand who actually finds fame and fortune. Maybe not Beatrice Brandt success, but at least I’d make a name for myself and scrape by doing what I love.”

He falls silent as I blush.

I’m rambling. Why would he even care?

But then his question comes like a shot.

“How have I worked with you all this time and not known that?”

I don’t know if he wants the truth, but he’s about to get it. “I think you decided who I was, and this doesn’t fit your narrative.”

“I was a jackass. I’m sincerely sorry.”

“Nah, you were a Wardhole.”

He snorts. “Right. Thanks for the reminder. Now how much would it cost to open a sculpture studio?”

Yikes. He’s serious.

I try to come up with an estimate on the fly. First I’d need a kiln and a space with good natural lighting, and that’s just the start. Real estate around here isn’t cheap.

“Hm, probably around six or seven hundred thousand to own, including tools and space. And that might be the low end.”

My lips twist.

How many sculptures would I have to sell to make that profitable? The thought scares me.

“It’s yours. Partner up for ninety days, and I’ll give you a cool million and help you write your business plan so we can get your dream off the ground.”

My stomach drops.

“What? Y-your serious? Why?”

“Because, Paige. I need to turn into less of a pumpkin, and that’s your price to be my Cinderella. Deal?”

This can’t be real life.

No one pays a million smackers for ninety days of lying, even if it’s the fake betrothed kind. But this conversation borders on flirty and surreal, and I can’t resist having some fun.

“A million dollars, plus you get your own coffee and teal-blue ties. Those jobs are below a fiancée, even a fake one.”

He snorts loudly.

I smile.

“You drive a hard damn bargain. Fine, then, one point five million dollars and no more coffee runs. But you’ll pry tie-duty from my cold dead hands. I won’t be caught dead without my lucky tie, and I rather like your touch making them luckier.”

Dead.

My face heats so much I need a temperature check. I can’t breathe.

One. Point. Five. Million.

Dollars?

Yes.

Shut the front door. In ninety days, I’ll be a millionaire.

I swallow back the giddiness threatening to send me jumping to the rafters and tighten my grip on my phone. I suck in a tortured breath and release it slowly.

“The color you’re looking for is called cerulean-emerald. If you asked for the right thing, getting the tie wouldn’t be such a big kerfuffle.”

“My girl knows what to ask for,” he throws back.

His girl?

Ward flipping Brandt just called me *his* girl?

Because I'm his assistant, or because he wants me to be his counterfeit bride?

Gah. Too bad it's not real. Being his. Because I know I'll regret it soon, but right now, it sounds nice. *Really* nice.

Can I even do this, though? Be in another fake relationship after Austin?

It's been years, and I'm still not really over him. My frustrated single status is a testament to that.

A pained laugh slips out.

"What's so funny?" Ward asks.

"Sorry. I was just remembering something. Didn't mean to laugh." I'm such a dork, but it's out there now.

"What?" His voice hits my ear, hot and demanding, before his voice gentles. "What were you remembering?"

"Nothing. Honest. I just...I need to think this over," I say.

Not that there's much to mull.

A debt-free studio would put my life on the fast track to eureka. I'd be living out my dreams, and I'd be wealthy beyond my wildest imagination.

Even if the art didn't work out, I'd be *set* to figure out a badass backup plan.

"What if I just want the million and a half and to be retired from tie duty? No studio?"

"What you spend your money on is none of my business."

"Are you serious, Ward? This isn't some sick joke, right?" I still have my doubts.

"Hang on, Grandma's calling."

He clicks off the call.

Fine. I need calm to digest this, without him and all his grouchy hotness breathing down my neck, tempting me from

the other end of the phone.

Besides, Beatrice should come first.

It's her company, she's his grandmother, and she's still in recovery.

Ten minutes later, I've made my decision.

I might hate myself in the morning, but I also can't help it.

He drives a hard bargain, but a fair one.

I'll just steel myself and make sure I don't fall any deeper. Resisting Ward Brandt shouldn't be so hard. There's plenty to hate.

It's only ninety days. It's only fakery. It's only one little yes to get paid.

But he never calls back.

Ugh. Why negotiate so hard if he wasn't that serious?

Oh, yeah, I forgot.

Wardhole.



I MAKE a spinach-artichoke dip with focaccia bread and flop down in front of *The Great British Baking Show* when my phone dings.

Sorry, she wanted to talk and her medication makes her loopy, then Trista called to check-in on logistics. Can you meet Nick and I at my home base outside the city tonight?

Before I can respond with a snarky, *Nick and me, it's Nick and ME, a brilliant businessman should at least use proper grammar*, the phone pings again.

We can work out the details, Paige. I promise you I'm trying to be fair.

Forget about his grammar. My mouth drops.

Holy crap. I didn't even give him an official answer, and yet he's already taken it as a screaming yes.

Like he just knew. Full steam ahead. No stopping now.

I frown. Maybe I should back out of this madness?

Actually, every rational thread of me says I *should* back out of this cray.

Before I know what's happening, I grab the phone and panic-dial.

"Hey, Paige." Brina picks up on the first ring.

"Oh, thank God. You have time for me today, right? I need you to talk me out of something stupid."

"Where's the fun in that?" I can hear her sunny, teasing smile over the phone, and then a sigh. "Let's hear how stupid this thing you're planning is."

"I can't give any details because I'm sworn to secrecy, but...I'm sorta in the process of possibly faking an engagement."

"Oooh, mysterious! Why?"

"Again. I can't say. I just...help me, Brina," I whimper, pulling a hand over my face.

Brina laughs like a hyena with its tail caught. "So, wait, girl. I'm supposed to talk you out of getting fake married, but I can't ask any questions? Not fair."

"Um, basically." I realize how stupid this sounds.

"What kind of relationship are we talking? Is there a certain raging bossasaurus involved?"

"Um..." I cough into my hand while I say the next word. "*Yeah.*"

For a heavy second, she's quiet.

"Riddle me this, if you think it's stupid, why do it?"

"Money. A lot of it," I answer quickly.

She laughs. “Yeah, don’t do it then. You’re not broke enough to need the money and you’ve got plenty of pride to bruise.”

“No, Brina, like *a lot* of money. The kind that makes you want to stuff your ego in a little box and bungie it shut.”

“Oh. So, you’re afraid of the windfall making you stupid? Why?”

“Because...” I trail off.

Because it’s as pathetic as it sounds. I don’t want Wardhole thinking he owns me, and that’s just scratching the surface.

Let’s be real for a second. The first time I saw him, I wanted his number. When he brought me home that night, if I wasn’t so loopy and my ankle wasn’t twisted, I would’ve jumped him.

If I have to get fake engaged to him, it might suck when it’s over.

“It’s just so much like Austin. Being a placeholder for some guy to use, without really loving me,” I say, closing my eyes. “Of course, I’d be agreeing to it this time. There’d be no cruel surprises. But I just...yeah. Advice?”

She pauses long enough to weigh my greed against my beat-up heart. What are best friends for?

“You really want my two cents, Paige? I say, go for it.”

I open my eyes and blink.

That was...not what I expected.

“For real? I’m kind of surprised you’d support it.”

“It’s a win-win. If it doesn’t work out, well, then you’ll have a nice fat cushion to find a new job. And you know I’m not here to push you into anything you’re not ready for, but this might be a good way to *forget* all about that little prick. It was years ago, Paige. You can’t keep beating yourself up, and the dating app duds aren’t doing you many favors.”

True.

She falls silent, and I roll the idea over, wondering if she's right.

“Well...”

“Try to have some fun with it, okay? I know you can pull a rich guy's tail just as well as I do. I don't care what the agreement says, you're not letting him walk all over you, right?”

“Never!” I throw back.

She giggles. “That's the spirit. Look, I don't think you'll regret it, and if you do you, well, blame me.”

“Crap, you're right. I gotta go. I need to give him a ‘challenge accepted.’”

“Good luck, lady,” she tells me. “Get paid. I want to see you hawking your art out of your own studio like a badass in a year,” she says.

“We'll see,” I throw back, eating my own smile. “Later!”

Sabrina's a mind reader. She knows exactly what I want and she also reminds me that this could actually work.

A few months in thrall to Ward Brandt could open doors that seemed chained shut for the next decade.

One point five million dollars means I'm free from Warden's BS and anyone else's.

I can slay on my own terms.

I can call my own shots.

I can even find a normal man to ring me one fine day—if normal dudes still exist.

God.

I'm also not in peril. I'm confident I won't get bulldozed by the boss, so I channel that grit into the fun flirty facade I've been keeping up all night when I grab my phone and text back.

When and where, mister?

His reply comes instantaneously. *My property in Highland Park. Should I send Reese, or do you want to drive? Fair warning, it's not the easiest place to find for good reason.*

I roll my eyes.

Of course the office beast has his very own modern Gothic castle tucked behind a wall of manicured trees, a medieval gate, and hugging prime Lake Michigan shore. The cliché forms in my mind so vividly it hurts.

When you're his kinda rich and hilariously anti-social, you get to brood in style.

For a second, I wonder if he wants to lock me up in luxury and toss away the key.

I'd accuse him of playing the part of a jerkwad fiancé too well, but he's a protector at heart. That night we met, he made sure I had food, water, and pain pills before he left.

I was a complete stranger at the time.

He's not out to hurt people. Not deliberately.

"Stupid chivalrous Wardhole," I mutter with a small laugh, then punch at my phone.

Yeah, send Reese. I'll be there ASAP.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, my chest is a stone as I slide into the Lincoln's back seat.

"Lucky lady! He never invites anyone to his Highland Park place," Reese says as she greets me. "Any hint why you're having clandestine meetings with our fearless leader at his Batcave?"

"Umm—" That's a good question, and one I'm not sure I can answer.

Wardhole, you should have given her a reason instead of leaving me to lie.

“Big project! It’s the Winthrop deal, you know, and Wardhole that he is, he wants a late-night strategy jam.” Can she hear me clearly through clenched teeth?

Reese laughs. “What? The Highland Park place is supposed to be like, his personal retreat. He never mixes business there. The penthouse downtown is where he crashes during the week and entertains folks from the office.”

Her eyes flash me a skeptical look in the mirror.

“Oh, I don’t know then. Won’t it be fun finding out?” I say.

Dear Lord. I’m going to have to get better at lying to pull this fake engagement off.

“Right-o. If it’s classified, you could’ve just said so,” Reese says with a wink.

I throw back an awkward smile, inwardly licking my wounds.

Yeah, make that I’m going to have to get *a lot* better at fibbing, and fast.

Highland Park is farther away than I realize, even though it’s supposed to be roughly half an hour from the downtown center. Ward’s house is actually on the outskirts, the last property in a huge, otherworldly row of mega-mansions peaking through the trees and wrought-iron fences.

The road is dark and winding, and I’ve never been here before. It could only be more appropriate with lightning lashing through the sky.

“Thanks for picking me up, Reese. It would have been hard to see out here.”

“Do you wear contacts?” Reese asks.

“No, but my night vision isn’t perfect. Especially when I just want to...stare.”

She throws back her head and laughs. “Yeah, the homes are gorgeous. It’ll take you a little time to get used to them.”

While I’m remembering to breathe, she pulls through a soaring gate and crawls up a long twisty driveway a good

distance from any other houses. The dark outlines of what look like cornstalks dot the skyline on one side.

“Ward has a farm?” I ask in disbelief.

“It’s not any farm I’ve ever seen, but it is rustic.” The mile-long driveway finally ends, and she pulls up to a three-story white stone house, every bit the modern castle I expected.

“Dang. Gotta hand it to him, it’s beautiful,” I say.

“Just wait until you’re inside,” she says with longing.

Holy Hannah. Inside with my “fiancé.”

The reality of what I’ve tentatively agreed to whacks me so hard I’m dizzy.

I have to focus on opening the door and planting one awkward foot on the ground.

“If you need a ride back, call me,” Reese says.

“Will do! Thanks.” I step completely out of the car.

I’m standing in a white circle drive with a freaking koi pond in the middle. The pond has a three-tiered fountain blooming over a pylon of black stacked rocks that look like they were dropped here from Hawaii. My parents are well-off, but this makes them look like beggars.

I swallow the anxious lump in my throat and turn to the large ornately carved double doors.

Okay. Deep breath. Go time.

Squaring my shoulders, I start up the magnificent slate staircase. If I’m going to fake being engaged to a billionaire for the next few months, I have to get used to this luxury.

I ring the doorbell and a man in a black suit answers. He bows slightly, so I wonder if I should curtsy.

Instead, I just wave. “Hi, I’m—”

“You’re expected, Miss Holly. The gentlemen are in the front foyer waiting for you. Allow me to show you the way.” He opens the door fully and waves his hand, welcoming me in.

Jeeves leads me to a large dim room that looks like a cross between a library and a living room. The back wall is lined with shelves of thick books from floor to ceiling. A worktable with four green-cushioned chairs stands in front of the shelved books, and a large black sectional stretches across the room closer to us.

“Hmm.” The butler pauses, scanning the room. “They *were* in here a minute ago. I’ll notify Mr. Brandt of your arrival. Do make yourself comfortable. Can I get you a coffee or a sherry?”

“Sherry?” I actually have no idea what that is. “No. No, thanks.”

Hoping I don’t sound annoyed, I realize I should get the awkward introductions over with. This guy’s someone I’ll probably be dealing with for the next three months.

“I’m Paige Holly,” I say.

“I’m aware,” he reminds me.

“And you are?”

“Oh, of course. I’m Grayson, the valet.”

“Why does a single guy need a butler?” I catch myself. “You don’t have to answer that. Sorry, I was just thinking out loud.”

“I’m really more of a property manager. Mr. Brandt is only here a couple days each week. I alternate between the three properties he owns, ensuring they’re ready for him per his preferences.”

I blink. What have I gotten myself into?

“Oh. I see,” I say with a nod.

I actually don’t see anything.

“I’ll go find Mr. Brandt and let him know you’ve arrived.”

“Umm—are there lights?” My voice comes out weak and pathetic.

“Certainly. Delphi, turn the lights on,” he calls, and the room brightens.

I feel like a fool for not guessing he wouldn't have this place rigged to the nines with every piece of smart home technology.

Grayson exits and leaves me in this pristine abyss of a room by myself. A Picasso replica hangs over the fireplace. At least, I *think* it's a replica.

In a billionaire's house, you can't be sure.

I move closer to the wall to investigate, but get sidetracked by pictures of a young Ward.

The “Brandt boys” as kids are adorable. Ward stands out immediately even though he's roughly the same size as Nick until their teen years. Interspersed between pictures of the boys together are photos of them with their grandparents, scenes of Ward with a younger, stylish Beatrice and an older man hanging over him, plus intermittent works from Picasso's blue period which happens to be my fave.

But why are there no pictures of his parents?

Weird.

I slowly scan the walls a second time, looking for the Brandt brothers, or at least Ward with a couple younger than his grandparents.

Nothing. Evidently, my fake fiancé doesn't have a single picture with his folks.

He's a Wardhole and a workaholic, but he cares intensely for his grandma and little brother. He's a family man at his core, so the absence is striking.

What's going on with the Brandts?

There might be things about Ward I just don't know. But I know him well enough to be sure he's not the type to just write family off without good reason.

The painting over the fireplace is so detailed, it could easily be authentic. With Ward taking his sweet time, my

curiosity gets the best of me.

I climb up on the rock ledge in front of the empty fire, hoping to get closer to the signature.

I've seen enough Picassos in school to take a fair guess if the signature is original. Even standing on the ledge, it's still too far above my head to inspect. I stretch up on my toes, putting my arms out at the side to hold my balance.

I know what to do.

Crossing the table, I pull a chair over to the fireplace. Then I try to get all four legs settled on the stone ledge, but when it's obvious that's not working, I settle for two. The other legs are almost-but-not-quite on the very edge of the platform.

Risky, yes, but I'm dying to know.

I scramble up on the chair, inching closer, straining my eyes.

In the corner of the painting, it's there. Thick black letters, but a good replica might also reproduce the signature exactly.

Picasso was one of the few artists lucky enough to make his signature worth something during his lifetime. I lean forward for a closer look.

The chair wobbles.

Eek! I throw my arms out, trying to rebalance, but—

The chair teeters back and forth once. Back and forth twice.

Then I'm falling, weightless for a split second before my back crashes against an unforgiving wood floor. "Ow!"

Where's my dark knight when I need him?

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NINETY DAMN DAYS (WARD)



T *hump!*
“Ow!”

The walls of the house are pretty solid, but I could hear a human body falling from a town away.

“Paige is here,” I say glumly.

Nick looks up, his eyes darting around.

The door to my study creaks open. “Mr. Brandt?”

I nod. “I’ll be right there, Grayson. Go check on her, please, and see if she needs an ice pack.”

“Yes, sir.” Grayson closes the door.

“Ice pack?” Nick echoes.

“That sound was her falling.”

He stares at me.

“How did you miss the thud followed by the scream?” I grumble, slapping his shoulder. “Pay attention!”

“I just assumed it was a pipe or something.” He shrugs. “But why would Paige go falling over the second she shows up?”

“Because no matter how many pairs of sensible shoes I force on her, she still insists on wearing something horrible she can’t walk in,” I growl.

Not to mention something that's pure torture to look at. Those demon heels summon every bad thought I shouldn't be having about my soon-to-be fake fiancée.

Nick laughs. "I'm starting to get why you finally agreed to this."

"Don't start." I glare at him.

He tries wiping the grin off his face, and not very well.

"We've got the terms down pat. As soon as she signs, we're golden," he muses.

"We hope."

I should make sure Paige hasn't broken a bone, or worse. I push my chair back and stand.

"We can't fuck this up, Ward," Nick warns. "We've got to get this into the news cycle the right way if we want anyone buying it."

"We won't. I'm a Brandt and an independent billionaire. That alone should draw plenty of eyes. But if it doesn't, I've got the balls to make a scene if I need to."

Nick nods. "We're counting on you."

Don't I know it? Fuck.

"Hey, if you treat her real well, maybe you'll land a wife to keep. Bonus, right?"

I glower at him.

"Right. Well, I'm heading back to the city if you're sure about this contract," he says.

"If you're planning your latest debauchery, try to keep a low profile. We can't have anything overshadowing this, Nicholas."

He gives me this silent, shit-eating grin.

"For once, I'm not in the spotlight. Your turn, bro."

An exasperated groan slips out of me. "Just don't do anything stupid. Don't make our reputation worse while I hire a would-be bride to rinse us."

“Scout’s honor.” He holds up crossed fingers.

“You were never a Boy Scout and neither was I.” I walk out the door.

I need to make sure Paige isn’t hurt.

In the foyer, she has both hands on a heavy wooden chair that’s toppled on its side, missing a leg, trying to right it.

Grayson stands behind her. “Allow me, Miss Holly.”

“It’s fine. I’m the klutz who broke it. I’ll clean up my own mess.”

“Do I even want to know?” I ask.

She visibly bristles at my voice.

Apparently, I’m the Wardhole she keeps insisting I am.

Paige lets go of the chair and meets my eyes. “Before you lay into me, no, I don’t have a good excuse. I wanted to see Picasso.”

“Try me.” I hold in a chuckle.

Her mouth twists and she bites that ripe strawberry of a bottom lip.

“Umm—I just wanted to see the signature. I had to know if it was real.”

“So you risked breaking your neck to inspect my artwork? Glorious. You could’ve just asked, Paige.” I try not to laugh but it slips out anyhow. “It’s real, by the way. The piece was authenticated by the Smithsonian.”

Grayson lifts the chair and returns it to the table.

Paige’s head darts toward him. “Oh, I’m sorry. I would have done that.”

“Not necessary. I’ll get the chair repaired promptly, sir.” He passes me on his way out of the room.

“Thanks, Grayson. Now, let’s sit.” I wave her to the table and an undamaged seat.

We sit side by side there.

I place the contract I've had in a binder under my arm between us.

"The terms are crystal clear, no legal mud to wade through. Twenty percent up front, plus monthly installments. Nick and I threw together a list of events we should attend together, so the scheduling's taken care of too."

She looks up, and I catch a flicker of fear, uncertainty dancing in those lush green eyes.

I steel my voice, trying to be reassuring.

"Don't worry. We've taken the guess work out of it, as much as possible. We're going to be spending a lot of time together, Paige. You'll need to move into my penthouse temporarily. It's closer to the office than your apartment and makes the most sense."

Her hand balls into a fist.

"Jesus. Moving in with you is part of the deal? I guess I should've realized..."

She stops and a small, strangled sound flits out of her.

She's as flustered by this situation as I am.

And she should be.

I'm not sure either of us understand what we've gotten ourselves into.

"You'll have your own quarters," I say. "Comfortably removed from my presence when we're not working together."

"Oh, joy." She laughs. "Quarters! Sounds like something out of one of those billionaire romance books Brina's mom writes. At least I'm consenting to a hostage situation."

I spear her with my gaze.

"You'll have a whole set of rooms at your disposal, at least four times as big as your apartment. You'll never have to see me if you don't want to. All of my properties have plenty of guest spaces," I say, assuring her my horrible presence won't be clouding her constantly. "Everything in the contract was

reviewed by a team of lawyers. It's fair, thought out, and perfectly legal."

"How many properties do you have?" she asks quietly.

"A few. But that's hardly relevant." I slide the contract closer and hand her the pen from my pocket.

"I wasn't expecting that, but I guess it's no big deal," she says slowly. "I mean, we technically shared a room already when you took care of me that night."

"For barely an hour," I say, clearing my throat.

I try not to think what might've happened if she'd been less hurt and I'd been less of a hulking prick.

She takes the pen and touches it to the paper but doesn't sign.

"So, hold up. What do we tell people when they ask about us? Everyone at the office, I mean?"

Her beautiful face grabs me, innocent eyes lit by the soft glow of the gas fireplace.

"I'll handle it. I'll tell them I wasn't planning on it, but when I met you...you captured my heart. I had no choice."

She raises a skeptical eyebrow and her cheeks glow red.

"Like it's that easy? They'd just believe it?"

"Office romances happen all the time. I'll tell them...that I knew you were mine the first day you walked into the office. I'll say you're brilliant, graced with Cinderella good looks, and we both have so much in common with our interest in art. Besides, how could I possibly resist falling for the woman who saved Grandma's life?" I never break eye contact.

Shit. This is coming out heavier than I intended, but it's convincing.

I think.

Her eyes widen like jade discs as I'm talking, bright and lively and dangerously mesmerizing—and then her gaze drops to my lips.

My dick stirs in my trousers, and I hate the ragged breath I take.

Knock it the hell off, Ward. You're not relationship material and this situation is already awkward enough, a voice warns me.

She blinks and shakes her head for a moment. "But my parents? What am I supposed to tell them? We've had so much drama in our family, what with Milah and Liv and their misadventures. If Mom thinks we're really engaged, she'll be heartbroken when it's over. She's been after me to get married since the day I graduated college."

I smile. "That old-fashioned, huh?"

"Nah. She just loves reminding me she won't live forever and she wants to know there's someone to keep me company. But in a country with a fifty percent divorce rate, that's delusional. Nothing keeps the guy from dropping me for his secretary seven years later. Mom just needs to chill on the wedding fever."

My blood heats and I look at her too intently.

"No man with a brain would drop you for anyone, Paige Holly. Never."

She looks away.

Fuck.

I can tell she's fighting the blush braising her cheeks, and losing.

"Whatever. The point is, I can't tell my mom we're engaged and with all of your planned appearances...she's going to find out sooner or later. And then she's gonna be pissed I not only didn't tell her, but *moved in* with you and left her to hear about it from the Chicago press."

Her lips twist sourly.

Dammit, she's getting cold feet.

I have to gag her voice of reason, and fast.

“There’s an addendum, a solution to this very issue. You can tell the truth to anyone willing to sign an NDA and not talk about it for an entire year. That should take care of your parents, plus any nosy friends.”

“And the media? They’re going to be hounding me nonstop. You’re always so composed, but...I’m not used to the attention. I don’t hide my emotions well.”

“Just keep your distance from shit-hounds like *The Chicago Tea*.” I clench my jaw. “Look, I’ll try to keep you out of the limelight, unless you’re with me. Even then, I’ll toss them the red meat they want. But if I didn’t have faith you could handle it, you wouldn’t be here, Paige.”

She smiles, small and fragile and luscious.

“If you can think of something nice to say about me that’s also true, say that,” I continue. “Maybe don’t tell them I’m a Wardhole. Refuse to answer questions about how we met. I’ll take care of that part. Here.” I slide the contract toward her again. “Sign this and you’ll have your deposit tonight.”

Shoulders square, I sit up so straight my spine aches.

I should probably give her one last chance to change her mind. If she’s in over her head and can’t handle the situation, that would be the opposite of helpful.

I cast her a heavy look, folding my hands, drilling my eyes into her.

“I’ll be brutally honest. This *will* be difficult. Reporters will want to draw contrasts between this—our relationship—and my parents’ joke of a marriage. Being a Brandt comes with a certain history, and not all of it pleasant. There are scandals in my past that may—no, that *will* come up. Frankly, this might be ninety days of hell for you.”

Her eyes widen. She shifts uncomfortably in her seat, a blond lock spilling over her ear.

“Scandals? Like?”

“The less you know about it, the better,” I bite off. “And the more honest you’ll be when answering their questions. Let

me do the talking if—when—they become relevant.”

She gnaws on her lip again, a gesture that’s very nearly my undoing.

“Ninety days,” she says softly.

“Ninety damn days. That’s the duration, with negotiable extensions. It’ll probably take at least that long to close the Winthrope deal. But there’s an addendum to push this beyond the ninety-day period. Of course, in that event, you’ll receive additional compensation.”

She nods, flicking at her hair, destroying me one second at a time.

For a monstrous second, I regret not adding an option in the contract to consummate our fakery with one very real night alone if we both consent.

Also, I regret like hell not kissing her since the hospital every time my eyes land on her pink lips.

“Still, I have to wonder...what scandal could anyone find in a Warden’s past? You seem so vanilla.”

“Not important. Nothing as interesting as Nick’s antics, I assure you.”

“You’re the opposite of Prince Scandal, Ward. You make narcoleptics tired.” She gives me that smart-ass grin I want to tame with my teeth.

“And you tell pathetic dad jokes,” I fling back. “The biggest blotch on my family is my parents. I’m not getting into that whole incident. I don’t have the time or patience. Google it. That should give you a good idea what you’re getting into.”

She frowns, slowly picks up the pen, and starts signing.

Thank God.

I put my hand over the top of the paper, brushing her hand.

“Hold it. Do you want to wait until you’ve had a history lesson so you’re not blindsided for the next ninety days?” I pinch my mouth shut.

Why am I trying to talk her out of this deal everyone's counting on?

"You could just tell me what happened so we can get this over with," she says.

"A man should only take so much punishment. I'm not rehashing it." My voice is harsher than I intend. I clear my throat.

"Jeez. Growly much? Do you ever choke on that tone?"

"I am a Wardhole." I shrug, flashing her a bitter grin.

"Who's telling dad jokes now?" Those humored green eyes might roll right out of her pretty little head. "You said it this time, not me. Glad you're finally admitting it, though."

"Last chance, Paige Holly. Do you want to do your due diligence before signing away your life?"

For a second, our eyes fuse. My fingers grip hers automatically, squeezing, something forbidden igniting the air between us.

Then, slowly, she shakes her head and scrawls her name across the signature line.

"It's only ninety damn days, remember? And whatever happened, it's your folks, not you, right? Besides, I've gotten kinda used to thinking about having one and a half million clams. I want my studio, or at least a quiet little place to think on a low-key beach. But you know, you'll have to tell me sooner or later."

She sets the pen down with a deafening *clack*.

"Story time isn't part of the contract. The filthiest corners of the internet will tell you everything you need to know about my demons, and we'll never speak of them again." I pick it up and remove the checkbook from my pocket.

"What are we going to tell our coworkers?"

"I'll take care of that." I write out her check and stab my signature into it.

Her cheeks go scarlet.

“I hope you have a good story. What if they say I slept with the boss to get a promotion? What if they start gossiping just like...” She doesn’t finish, just bites her delectable lip, catching my burning eyes.

“Like you all gossip about my sorry ass already, you mean? Yeah. Those types of rumors will not only be squashed, but likely met with terminations. I won’t tolerate any less than noble speculation about your professionalism.”

Again, that gravel-churning growl tears out of me. Fuck if I care.

No one’s disrespecting my temporary wife-to-be.

I hand her the check.

“Thanks,” she says before looking at it. Her mouth drops and her hands tremble. “Holy cheese and rice. Three hundred thousand smackers. I...I’ve never held this much money in my life. That’s more than my dad makes in several years. Thank you.”

Don’t thank me yet.

At least this gushing over money keeps her from asking more pointed questions about how complicated this could be. I’m exhausted thinking about it.

I hate that if the truth ever comes out, it could tarnish her life, too.

“Thank *you*. It’s money well deserved, I’m sure.”

I wish I could still get that excited over a few hundred thousand dollars. I hate money at this point. It just fuels power plays and reckless greed.

Grandma spent her entire life designing beautiful buildings because it’s what she loves. The compensation was always secondary, and she was rewarded quite well for sharing her passion with the world.

Nick and I run the company because we grew up in the office. It’s second nature to us. We don’t know anything else.

We work hard for happy customers.

That should be enough, but in a world where millions of dollars exchange hands like postage stamps, it barely scratches the surface. You need the pedigree and designer shoes to go with it.

Paige still stares at the check, mouth partially open.

I hold in a sigh.

She's so unbearably cute. It's going to be excruciating remembering this is all just an illusion.

A ploy to secure a dream hotel that puts a big, beautiful exclamation mark on my grandparents' careers.

"Paige?"

She meets my gaze.

Now for the awkward part.

"One more thing to sweeten the deal. I talked to a dealer downtown yesterday, and I picked up this." I pluck the ring box from my pocket and flick it open for her to see.

"Ohhh, I get a real-life ring too?"

It's a teardrop and barely a carat. I take it out of the box and slide it on her finger.

"You *need* a ring. This has to look real."

She holds her hand up and examines it. "How'd you know my size?"

"Lucky guess."

"I'm surprised it isn't a big flashy rock. I thought that was your style."

"And this is *your* style. Beautifully modern. Sophisticated, but modest. It seemed similar to some of your favorite work at the museum. If you hate it, there's certainly time for us to exchange—"

She shakes her head. Her eyes are soft and that firestarter smile stretches from cheek to cheek.

"No. It's perfect, Ward. I love it."

“You do?” My voice is barely audible.

Goddamn. Why do I care so much what she feels about a fake engagement ring?

“Yes, it’s beautiful and sleek and just the right kinda glittery. You did a good job.”

She looks up with a smile that blows my heart to kingdom come. I reach up, fidgeting with my collar, wishing this damn shirt had a release valve for steam.

“Enjoy it while you can. If this works out, if we’re that lucky, we’ll never have to see each other again,” I say.

“How romantic!” she sputters, laughing. Then she studies the rock on her finger like it came down from the stars and spontaneously joined her hand.

I lift a brow. “Well, would you rather we share a bed like you suggested the night we met?”

A dark rosy color fills her cheeks.

I would rather share a bed, of course, or at least settle for her lips again.

Her face gets redder, but she grins.

“Does it matter what I prefer?”

I can’t help but grin. Damn her. She’s got me, alright.

“You’re so red, you’re almost purple. Cute.” Fuck. I didn’t mean to say that.

Way to not make things more awkward.

She rolls up the contract.

I’m about to protest. She can’t back out of this. It’s too late now. But she doesn’t crumple it up and tear it to shreds the way I expect.

Instead, she taps me on the nose with it. “Bad bossman. Very flipping *bad*.”

I grab at the contract.

“Enough. I’m not a dog, Paige.”

She pulls it farther back, just out of my grasp. “Depends on who you ask.”

I reach for the rolled-up paper again, this time managing to grasp it between my fingers.

She doesn’t pull away.

“Careful. You don’t get the check back if you rip it,” she teases, those green eyes set to rain forest sunshine.

“The contract gets invalidated if it’s torn,” I snap, glowering. “Let go.”

She shakes her head. “No exchanges and no refunds.”

“I’ll cancel the check,” I warn her.

“And I’ll take you to court.”

“You and what lawyer dealing in damaged legalese?”

“I don’t know. This girl Brina and I used to hang out with in college is about to graduate law school. I’m sure she can come up with something,” she says with a pout.

I shake my arms like I’m trembling.

“How awful. I’m so petrified of an almost-attorney.”

Paige stares at me with a firm face.

“It’s JD to be, dude.”

God, I’m breathing fire, my veins churning blood so hot it burns.

I want to shut her up.

I want to do bad things to her cursed mouth.

I want to show her exactly what kind of Wardhole I am.

I could grab her and kiss her right here. Right now.

Hell, I won’t be able to resist if I don’t get my ass up now. So, I stand and take a few steps, forcing some space between us. “We should head out soon.”

She nods but makes no effort to get up.

“I’ll text Reese. She’ll be here soon,” I say.

“You’ll drop me off?”

No. We’ve talked about this.

She doesn’t want to move in with me. I can’t blame her and I hate that she has to.

She twists the ring I placed on her finger between her thumb and forefinger of her right hand. “Reese said she’d take me home.”

“Right. We’ll make a pit stop at your place to collect your belongings,” I say.

She does a double take, whipping her head around so fast that blond hair gleams in the light.

One more fatal blow to my sanity.

“Oh. I know we talked about having a room at your place, but I didn’t realize it meant, um, tonight.” She’s quiet for several seconds. “I thought I’d have an evening to get used to the idea.”

“It’s only a ninety-day contract. Better we dive right in and get accustomed to living together. I’m sorry. I know it’s a lot to ask. Again, you’ll barely see me. There’s ample living space.” My voice shouldn’t sound so ragged, so conflicted that we’ll have the promised space between us.

One part of my anatomy is anything but happy about it.

She picks up the check with one hand and taps it on her fingertips. “You’re paying me very well, so...I guess I can’t complain. I’ll pack my stuff.”

“It’s a lot to ask, no matter what the hell I’m paying. Truth be told, my family deeply appreciates this, Paige, and so do I.”

There.

With that out of my mouth, I’m done playing Nice Guy for the night.

She returns a buttery smile. “I just want your grandma to get her dream hotel. It’s not fair the way Winthrope judges you and Nick so harshly either. You guys work as hard as anyone

else at Brandt Ideas. Harder, I suppose.” She stands. “That’s why you’re the Warden, keeping everybody else in line.”

I grin. She said “you.”

She mentioned Nick, too, but the compliment was directed at me.

I like that, and I shouldn’t.

But I do.

I wish I could say the same about the Warden crap. Who knew I’d actually miss the juvenile doodles on my morning coffee?

Paige stands and pushes the chair under the table.

“Ward—” Her voice is soft and she doesn’t finish the sentence.

“What?”

“Do you not have a car here?”

I shake my head. “No, Reese drove us here earlier. My ride’s back in Chicago, and even if I might seem like the kind of jagoff who’d collect fifty cars, I’m a practical man.”

She nods. “Oh.”

“What’s wrong?” I cock my head, leveling a glare.

She stares at the floor. “Do you think Reese could just take us to your car?”

From everything Reese has said, they like each other. They’re friends. What’s going on?

“Of course,” I say, waiting for more.

She doesn’t say anything, though, and keeps her eyes on her feet.

“Want to tell me why?”

She looks up and sways a little. “It’s just—weird. I’m trying to get used to this and it’s happening so fast.”

“You don’t want Reese around while we’re moving your stuff in,” I say, answering my own question.

She nods again.

“You know she’ll pick us both up in the morning, right?”

“That somehow seems better. No late-night walk of shame with you.” Paige blasts me with her smile again.

I laugh.

Her face gets red, flushed, taunting me with visions of what she’d look like under me.

“You never struck me as a prude,” I grind out, fighting back a smile.

“Oh, I’m definitely no prude.”

“I should know. You practically tried to seduce me the first night I saved your ass,” I say before I can stop the words.

“God. We’re never going to get past that, are we?” She scowls.

“Why would we? I love how red your face gets every time I mention it. When people ask for our story, I might just tell the truth about how we met.” Except maybe in the story I’ll do what I wish I had—kissed her like a summer storm and joined her in bed.

“Don’t you dare!” She gasps, her brows pulling together.

“The truth is usually easier to remember than a lie. I was at the art gallery, and a drunk girl—”

“Hey, remember when you said you knew it was only one glass of wine? Because I can’t drink like a sailor?”

“Fine—a girl who can’t handle her alcohol almost knocked me down trying to escape an overgrown worm, so I took her home and tucked her in with her twisted ankle...not knowing I’d see her in the office the next week. Sounds like a fairy tale.”

She crosses her arms.

“When you help a woman, you’re not supposed to mention it again. Try being a gentleman,” she warns.

I shrug.

“When that woman happens to be wearing my ring, the rules are different,” I whisper, something scorching my throat.

Her arms fall limp to her sides, but she marches up to me and kicks me in the shin. I barely feel it.

I look down, about to ask what the hell, but I don't get the words out.

“I'm wearing your ring, so the rules are different, all right. How do you like them now?”

About as well as I like wondering what bear trap I've stepped in by getting fake-engaged to this very real wildcat.

Swiftly, I lean down and kiss her on the cheek, then straighten up immediately.

Wide emerald eyes stare up at me, her lips hanging open in a murderously kissable O it hurts not to claim.

“You're wearing my ring, so I can do that, too,” I say matter-of-factly. “I'm clearly enjoying the new rules as well as you.”

“It's going to be a long ninety days,” she whines.

“Dear girl, you have no idea,” I say.

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DON'T FORCE IT (PAIGE)



Standing in his kitchen, drawing handcuffs on a disposable coffee cup, I watch Ward round the corner. “Paige? Are you ready? It’s time to get going.”

“I’m in here!” I call.

He walks toward me in dark pants and a crisp white shirt with his blazer hanging over his arm. His stance, his shadow, that halo of a beard begging me to imagine what it’d feel like on my skin...

God.

For a flash, I wish this was real.

I hold out the coffee cup, trying not to smile.

He takes it from me. “I thought you negotiated coffee duty away?”

“Yeah, well, old habits die hard.” I pick up my purse and sling it over my shoulder.

“I should’ve known.” He grins when he sees my doodle. “Where’s yours?”

“You don’t have cream, but I don’t think I could keep anything down today.”

“Are you sick?”

“No. It’s just—the whole fake engagement thing. It’s going to be a long day.” My stomach lurches, and I swallow. The last thing I want to do is vomit nerves on my new fiancé.

“Long doesn’t have to mean bad,” he says with a nod.

I jerk my head around and stare at him.

“Um, do you hear yourself?”

“Spare me your ‘that’s what she said,’” he groans with a hint of a smile. “There’ll be no shortage of awkwardness for me too, but we’ll get through it. We’re in this together and there’s no going back.”

“You’re right.” I sigh.

I try not to notice he’s talking to me almost like we’re friends.

“I wish you’d eat something, though. It’s easy to miss meals in the commotion. You might pass out if you don’t,” he says.

“If I think I’m heading for a hanger-fit, I’ll eat.” But I’m a fake fiancée now, not just his assistant. “And you won’t say anything about when I’ve had my fill and want to leave, right?”

“Deal. Now let’s get moving.”

The town car waits at the curb. Ward opens the door and holds it, allowing me to climb in the car first before he slides in beside me.

“And you wanted to fire her!” Reese says.

My eyes trace from the hyperactive woman in the front seat to Ward beside me.

“Reese,” Ward clips.

From his tone, I know we’re talking about the incident at the museum again. I guess tales of my humiliation weren’t limited to Nick and his grandmother. Reese knows too.

Awesomesauce.

“Congratulations, you guys! Nick told me about your *engagement*,” she says.

Wait, what did Nick tell her? Does she know the truth? Why would she emphasize the word *engagement*? Oh, crud.

I catch Ward's eyes, hoping for a hint at what to do.

He surprises me by stretching his arm out, pulling me closer. I'm tucked under his shoulder, inhaling mint and grump.

I bite my lip and stare at my custom Sketchers—Ward still insists heels are a liability, so he picked them out—trying not to blush.

Yes, he's brutally attractive and I admire the way he's stepped up since Beatrice's heart attack. I don't want this situation getting any more awkward than it already is.

"Nick has a big mouth," he says.

"Con-grat-ulations," Reese chirps again, slowing each syllable.

"Thank you," Ward says grudgingly.

I'm about to say "thanks" too when Reese asks, "Why are you so quiet? It's because he's here, isn't it? Oh, Paige, you never struck me as timid. Kinda adorable."

"Timid?" Ward scoffs. "Hardly."

The wheels in my head are turning like they're stuck.

If the short ride to the office is this bad, how do I get through the day?

"Look on the bright side." Reese grins and her laughter fills the car. "Maybe you'll soften up now that you're getting laid, boss."

Holy hell.

Heat pumps under my face. If Ward thought I was so red I turned purple yesterday, I must be a full ugly eggplant by now.

His grip around my waist firms. "Reese, don't talk like that in front of my fiancée."

"I was just—"

"I know. You're one of the guys. But Paige isn't, and she has to work with us, okay?"

Reese stares back in the mirror and nods.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry.”

My stomach sinks. He handled it well, but Reese didn’t expect his reaction.

“It’s okay,” he growls. Those beach-kissed eyes connect with mine. “I told you I wouldn’t allow any idiotic comments. Promise kept. That’s the least I can do for you.”

My eyes drop from his eyes to his lips.

I wish I could kiss him.

For the briefest, scariest second, I contemplate what he’d do if I did.

What would happen if I played his fiancée, right down to the physical level? Would it be just like that night we met, where he told me to get lost? Or would he give me the force of a thousand suns like he did at the hospital?

“When’s the wedding?” Reese asks.

“Not sure yet,” I say. “We haven’t quite picked out a date.”

“Go easy on her, Reese. We just got engaged last night,” Ward says.

“Oh! Can I see the ring?” she asks.

Forcing a smile, I stretch my arm out and lean forward.

Ward’s arm stays hooked around my waist, and he pulls me back to the seat. “This would be safer after she’s parked.”

Reese lets out a whistle worthy of a lifeguard when she sees my rock.

“Marvelous! You outdid yourself, bossman.”

He did. Just not the way you think, lady, I think to myself.

“This is such a surprise. I see you both every day. I’m kinda pissed neither of you said anything,” Reese says. “Is it too much to give a girl a few details? Like, how did it happen this fast? Was it romantic? Did you cry, Paige?”

“Save it for another time,” Ward answers.

Then he pushes a button on the door and a privacy screen goes up between us and Reese.

“I forget the damn thing exists sometimes. Should’ve done it sooner,” he tells me.

I giggle and look up at him. “Was that really necessary? You had to know we’d be having these conversations today.”

“Yeah, but we’re having them on our terms. I’m not fielding an entire press conference with the driver.”

I nod because I get it.

This is barely an appetizer of the whirlwind to come. If I don’t pace myself, I’ll be dead from embarrassment ten times over before I ever get to enjoy my new riches.



TEN MINUTES LATER, we step out of the elevator together.

Nick is walking toward his office on the other side of the lobby.

He looks over his shoulder at us, grins, spins around, and closes the space between us. His mellow green eyes have a shine to them today that really stands out from Ward’s teal-blue.

“Have a good night, bro?” He punches Ward on the arm.

For a second, I pause, tuning them out.

I don’t have an enclosed office. I have a desk in an open space in the lobby.

Yeah, I’m not ready to have every random person on payroll stopping by and dying to know about our not-engagement until I have my bearings.

I grab my laptop from my desk.

“Hey, Ward, I’m working in your office today.”

He nods at me. “I’ll be there as soon as I kick Nick’s ass. Go ahead and send the email. We’ll have the all-staff meeting

in twenty minutes. It won't take me longer than that to pulverize my brother."

Nick stays silent, an amused smirk pulling at his face.

I disappear into his office with a grin and a memo to set up.

Someone knocks at the office door a few minutes later.

I open it to find a woman I recognize, but can't quite name from the quality assurance team.

"I think he's in a meeting with Nick," I say.

"Congratulations!" She grabs me and hugs me so tight it knocks my breath away.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"I had to stop by and give Ward my best. He needs you, lovely lady. I'll catch up with him later."

The elevator dings. A graphic designer with cat-eye glasses—Chelsea, I think—steps off of it before I can close the door and hide again.

"Paiiige!" she squeals, barreling toward me like a human cannonball.

I wave at her from the doorway. The quality assurance woman hasn't left yet, and her lips turn up when she sees the designer.

So much for hiding.

She comes up to us. "Okay! Dish. You *have* to tell us how it happened."

"I was wondering the same thing," Miss Quality Assurance says. "It's totally out of left field. None of us knew any fairy tales were happening around here. Was it the stress since Beatrice's breakdown?"

"Oh, um, not at all. I've been crushing on Ward since we met." Or at least crushing on his body since the weird night at the museum. "I wasn't feeling well and he kind of took me under his wing, brought me water and Tylenol. And then when

I was leaving, he chased some weird guy off who was trying to follow me. Total sweetheart.” It’s close enough to the truth, even if it comes out in a mess.

“But how’d the proposal go?” Chelsea the designer asks, stars in her eyes. “Was he sweet? Did he get down on one knee? Were there balloons?”

Quality assurance lady nods, rapt. “I can’t even imagine. I would die.”

And I think I did. Twice.

Once, when he slid that gorgeous ring I still can’t believe I’m wearing on, and looked at me like this wasn’t just for show.

And again, just now, when I realize I’m so freaking out of my element.

Relief floods me when Ward steps out of Nick’s office and walks toward us, opening the door with a surprised quirk of his lips. He’s at my side in seconds.

“Congratulations, Mr. Brandt!” QA woman calls as he rips me from her death grip.

Ward nods at her but doesn’t answer until he has us all safely contained behind his closed door. He looks at her.

“Thank you, Janice. Most of the company doesn’t know about this yet, so I’m going to have to ask you ladies not to say anything until after the meeting in five minutes.”

“Huh? It’s already on Twitter,” Chelsea says, adjusting her cat-eye spectacles.

I gasp. “Twitter?”

Ward shakes his head, visibly gritting his teeth.

“My dumbass brother knew we had an announcement today, but he chatted up this blogger at a club last night and gave her some sob story about how bad he needs a date to get through his brother’s wedding. He didn’t know she works for Osprey and the *Tea*. We’re going to clear the air. The

meeting's in five minutes, so it wouldn't be a bad idea to head over."

"Of course! Can't wait to hear the deets," Chelsea chirps, backing away.

"No problem, Mr. Brandt." The QA woman follows the other woman out the door.

I move to the open door and close it, shoving my back against it like there's a hoard of zombies waiting to break through.

"But...there isn't going to be a wedding," I croak.

Ward shakes his head. "I know. It's just his new pickup line, and he thought having some organic press wasn't a bad idea. Shame he didn't check the woman's media credentials."

I cock my head, still leaning against the door.

So far, this has been a nightmare and a half.

I can feel my resolve withering. A chill sweeps up my back, imagining everything I might have to do to *earn* this money.

"I'm not sure I'll survive today," I whimper.

"Suck it up. We'll get through this and never have to see each other again," he says as we walk to the conference room.

"Oh, that's *so* reassuring. I'm keeping the ring," I say.

"Of course. It was a gift. Relax," he says, bathing me in that easy, deep laugh that says maybe this insanity won't be my end.

"When you contort your face into something that could be mistaken for a smile, you're not so bad, you know," I say.

Ward shakes his head like he's lost all hope in me.

In the conference room, Nick sits near the center of the table with two empty chairs beside him.

Ward stands behind the seat closest to Nick, and I take the one beside him. I open my laptop to start recording notes.

“I know we’ve had monumental changes around here recently when my grandmother retired. We’ve tried to make the transitions as seamless as possible, but Beatrice Brandt isn’t replaceable, so I know it hasn’t been smooth sailing. We’re here today because I have another change to announce. However, I don’t think it will affect your work in any way. I just want to be transparent per company rules. Miss Holly and I are—” He looks down at me. “Stand up, darling.”

Darling? Coming out of his mouth, it sounds like a foreign word.

I stand, knees shaking, plastering on a porcelain smile.

“We’re getting married,” he finishes.

It sounds rehearsed even to me, like a jury foreman reading a verdict, but Reese bought it this morning. Maybe Nick’s bait for the press was a smart move after all?

It has to be more authentic than Ward’s cringe announcement, anyway.

But everyone breaks into applause. More than a few whoops fly out.

Susan the HR honcho stands. “I need the wedding date so I can get an appropriately timed wedding shower planned.”

“Leave it to HR,” Ward mutters under his breath.

“Shut up before someone hears you.” I try not to move my lips when I speak.

“Thank you, Susan, but let’s leave it to friends. No big shows on the company’s dime,” Ward barks back.

I gaze out at the sea of people we’re lying to and try to force a smile that looks halfway natural.

Nope. Not happening.

They’re supporting us, grateful for some good news, and we’re lying to their faces.

Ugh.

I visualize the three-hundred-thousand-dollar check I'll deposit before the end of the day. That helps flog my lips to curve up a little.

"How'd you guys keep it a secret this whole time?" Andrew the marketer says.

I look at Ward, fluttering my lashes with a loopy grin.

"Yeah, Ward, how *did* we keep this a secret? It wasn't easy hiding how madly in love we are, right?"

Those eyes are a turquoise dagger, flaying me open.

"Great question. I'm glad you asked, because I wanted to talk about that too. You all know me well enough to understand my personal life doesn't affect my work." He shrugs. "Hell, I rarely have a personal life. Working with a beautiful woman hasn't changed that. Miss Holly and I fell in love over memos and planning sessions. Simple as that. She's still the executive assistant. I'm the CEO. That hasn't changed one bit, and we'd ask that you respect our privacy when we're off the clock."

The room quiets.

Everyone looks on expectantly while I pray for a hole to open up under me.

"That's it. You guys can go," Ward says.

People start filing out.

Chelsea from earlier shuffles up to me. "Sooo, how long have you been a couple? Since the first day when he chased the weird guy off?"

"Uh, kinda," I lie. "It wasn't official or anything but... yeah, sure. He's such a charmer. How could I resist?"

Ward's gaze attacks me again.

I can't decide whether I want to laugh my head off or be vaporized.

She pats my arm. "That's so adorable. I'll catch you later. Let's do lunch sometime, Paige!"

“Of course,” I say.

Eventually, it’s just the three of us, my tomato of a head next to two sullen Brandt boys’ long faces.

“Holy shit, you guys.” Nick stands, adjusting his tie. “Holy shit, no. If this is going to work, you two have to do a hell of a lot better than that.”

“Come again?” Ward snaps, his brows slamming down.

“Act like you’re in love,” Nick strangles out. “You two look like you’re ready to tear each other’s throats out. You’re always arguing. Flirt a little. Be cute.”

“We don’t flirt,” I say, wincing. “We just—”

Ward cuts in with, “Great advice. Because my deranged little brother knows everything about being madly in love.”

Nick stares at Ward, his eyes half lidded.

“Call it what you want. It doesn’t look anything like whatever the hell that was. And ‘don’t ask about our personal lives?’ You’re paying her so people *will* ask.”

“I’m paying to close the Winthrop deal,” Ward says sharply.

“Which we won’t do if no one believes this is real,” Nick says.

I bite my lip. “He’s right.”

They both look at me.

“Who?” They say together.

I laugh. “The way you guys argue makes me wish I spent more time with my sister. Nick’s right.”

“Bam!” Nick says, gunning up his fingers.

Not amused, Ward’s raised brow screams.

“Do I even want to know?” he asks.

“We argue a lot, Ward, but I’m usually more comfortable with you than I was lying to a room full of people. We have to work on that.” I sigh and my shoulders slump.

Ward's face is tight before he says, "There's room for improvement, I'll admit."

"So, will you two let go of your egos and act like you're in love?" Nick asks.

"I'll try," I say.

Love is hard to fake. Then there's the fear that faking it might lead to *not* faking it, and this sham has a ninety-day deadline.

"We'll make the best of it," Ward promises.

"You guys better figure it out fast. We can't afford to lose this deal," Nick reminds us, wagging a finger.

He isn't wrong.

To make this look real, we have to convince ourselves first, I realize.

Can we feed our hearts the biggest lie ever without inflicting permanent damage?



REESE DROPS US at the curb, and I follow Ward into his building, a sleek luxury condo stabbing at the sky like a middle finger.

"This is my working residence. I stay here during the week because it's so close to the office. If you don't like it, we could stay somewhere else over the weekend."

It's instant shock and awe even though it's not the first time I've been here.

The floor is marble. Glass elevators circle a fishpond with a cascading waterfall. Gold trim gleams from every corner.

"I don't belong here, but I'm not sure I'd belong at any place you own, Ward."

"Why do you say that?" His eyes soften.

Is that a hint of concern in his voice?

I give back a lazy shrug. “My dad does well for a living. My family’s upper middle class, and my mom only ever worked part time.” I look around the building. “But I’m way more middle class than this...this castle.”

I let out an awkward giggle. But I’m not laughing the second his firm hand grips my shoulder, his fingers sinking into my skin.

“Get used to it, beautiful. You’ll be richer when this is over. If you stick with your art, the payment you’re getting from me won’t be your last million. Get comfortable with the finer things, Paige.”

It’s a sweet thought but so far off.

After this sham, I’ll sink my payout into a studio, work out a business plan, and scrape by more firmly middle class than my parents.

Maybe, there’ll be enough left for a down payment on a basic condo somewhere in Chicagoland. But he doesn’t need my worries, so I just smile.

It’s going to be hard living in a personal luxe hotel for three months. I can’t be the only one who notices I’m like a fish out of water.

Ward pushes the button and we step onto an elevator with an old lady in a fur coat that I really hope is vintage. She’s holding a gold leash tied to a dog whose designer collar costs more than my whole outfit. She glances at us, but her eyes linger.

Yeah, lady, I know. I’m an intruder in Elysium.

On the top floor, I step out of the elevator in front of Ward, then wait for him to pass so I can follow him into the penthouse.

The hardwood and silk of his couch catch my attention immediately when we step through the door. I was too tired to notice last night, stumbling into my room and settling into the posh bedroom.

“Oh, you have a settee.”

He grins. “Grandma insisted. It’s an authentic piece from the Victorian era.”

“Wow. You would be a fan of the Victorian stuff. Everyone had whole trees up their butts then, too,” I say with a teasing flick of my tongue. “Or was it a walking stick? They loved those.” The techno-magic Tesla from our ride home that first night pops into my head. “So, wait. You have a thing for Victorian furniture but electric cars?”

“What can I say? My style’s eclectic.”

I roll my eyes. “If that’s what you want to call it.”

“If you’re hungry, I don’t cook—”

“Why am I not surprised?”

He chuckles. A deep, dark, and to my burning ears, seductive sound.

“What should I order us for dinner?”

“Italian,” I say. “And I’ll order dinner. *Darling,*” I add.

I say it the same way you’d call someone an asshole.

Soon, I order up our food from this cute little Italian bistro I used to love, Mattarello’s Italiano, but haven’t been to much since Brina got married. It sucks losing your wing-lady.

When I finish, I hide in the guest suite that’s bigger than most million-dollar condos until dinner arrives.

The bed space in this room rivals Texas and costs more than everything in my parents’ place. But if I pretend like I’m on vacation in a luxury suite, an escape from real life—and that’s what this is, isn’t it?—I’m able to feel a microsecond of comfort.

Lounging on this bed feels like floating on the sea. I’m about to email Brina the NDA, so I can fill her in on the details, when my phone dings.

It’s an email from Beatrice Brandt. I haven’t heard from her since the hospital.

HELLO PAIGE,

I'M sure you're settling in. I wanted to send my best wishes along with my personal gratitude for taking up the adventure of an engagement with my grandson.

I know my boys are Neanderthals, and Ward can be a bear. Know this—he's a good man under his gunmetal. He has a guarded heart for reasons that are his to tell.

If any woman can melt that glacier and find the gold underneath, it's you, dear. Take care of him for me.

MY DEEPEST THANKS,

Beatrice N. Brandt

SHE...SHE knows it's fake...

Right?

I'm floored.

I swallow the lump in my throat. I'm going to talk to the Wardhole like a human being.

Shocking, I know.

We have to live together for three months without tearing each other's faces off (or kissing ourselves into a terrible mistake), so we might as well be friends.

Break past the secrets and be civil.

That might make living in this opulence less awkward too, and accomplish Nick's goal of making people believe we're deeply in love.

I square my shoulders and stand, straightening up in the mirror. Reaching down inside myself, I find my inner badass and put on her mask.

Damn it, I'll do this.

For Beatrice.

For Brandt Ideas.

For freaking Ward.

And above all else, for *me*.

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LIFE IS A SHIPWRECK (WARD)



I peel off my suit and hang it for Grayson's next dry-cleaning run, change into sweats, get the fireplace started, grab a bottle of wine, and collapse on the couch.

Paige isn't comfortable here. Her body tensed up the moment we arrived, and she did that last night too.

Hell, I'm not at ease with Paige around either.

My blood thrums with every glance, every quip, every hot second our eyes connect too long.

It's a cruel, self-inflicted joke that I'm fake-engaged to a woman I can never haul into my bed and ravish. And perhaps it's a crueler one that my unruly dick intends to remind me of that fact every aching second we're sharing the same room.

This sprawling penthouse suddenly feels claustrophobic.

It's going to be a long three months.

Yeah, forget the glass. I put the bottle to my lips and regret not choosing something stronger.

Paige prances in barefoot a second later, wearing a sleek black dress that hangs halfway down her thighs.

Fuck.

Is the skin hidden by her black silk as creamy as what's visible?

Do I even have to ask? She's an angel with a devil's tongue and a medusa's gaze.

She watches me drink from the bottle and laughs when I wrinkle my nose.

“That bad, huh?”

“Should’ve gone straight for scotch,” I mutter.

She holds her hand out and I pass her the bottle.

“It’s white,” I warn. “Would you prefer a red?”

“Actually, I would. How did you know that?”

My eyes meet hers and I try to ignore the static, the way those jade gems bomb my soul.

“You just strike me as a red wine kind of girl.”

She nods, a tussle of gold falling over her shoulder I try not to think about in my fist. “I don’t like to taste the alcohol much, but I enjoy the buzz.”

“Be right back,” I say.

I pad over to the kitchen and snatch the sweetest red wine off its rack, then pour it into a goblet. When I return to the living room, Paige sits on the couch, still holding the wine bottle.

I scoff. Ten bucks says she hasn’t taken a single swig.

Holding out the goblet, I offer her a smile.

“Trade me.”

She looks from the bottle to the glass. “Hmm, why would I trade you a whole bottle for a glass?”

“One glass is all you’ve ever needed, isn’t it?” I quirk a brow.

Her lips twist in astonishment, then bloom into a giggle. “Man, you’re *never* going to let me live down that night.”

She lets me take the bottle from her hand and accepts the glass, taking a loud slurp from the goblet.

“Paige?”

“Hold on.” She takes another lengthy sip and pulls the glass away. “I may need to be drunk to get through this.”

Putting up with your crap, I mean.”

And I thought she meant this whole surreal situation.

I gulp several pulls straight from the bottle again.

“Your grandma thinks you’re nice. Why won’t you let anyone else see it?” she asks.

It’s my turn to laugh, a bitter edge in my voice. “She’s Grandma. She has to think that. Has she been talking to you?”

She nods with a syrupy smile. “Maybe I shouldn’t be so hard on you, Wardhole.”

“We’re supposed to act like we’re in love, remember? Dropping Wardhole feels like a good place to start,” I growl, loving how her face heats when my eyes sink into her.

“It’s a term of endearment,” she says softly.

Is it?

She doesn’t call Nicholas anything like that.

“Did Grandma tell you not to be so hard on me?” I ask.

“Eh, something like that.” She brings a finger to her pensive lips, pretending she’s deep in thought. “I’m giving her advice the consideration it deserves.”

Shit. I’ve got to talk to Grandma tomorrow. This is awkward enough without her butting into my fake relationship.

“How’s the guest suite treating you?”

“Unfamiliar, cold, lonely...but very luxurious. Hard to complain.” She smiles as she lifts the goblet to her lips again.

“I’m sorry. Once you’re used to it, it won’t be unfamiliar. As for the temperature, I can put a space heater in, or you can change the thermostat anytime to warm it up—”

“Oh, Ward, I didn’t mean cold as in frigid—I meant uninviting.”

“Bull. It’s a beautiful living space,” I say, careful not to feel wounded.

“It’s lovely, it’s just...” She purses her lips. “It’s too much. It’s unlived in. Feels like a hotel room, even a very nice one. I don’t know. It needs some warmer hues.”

“You can change it up however you want. I’ll pay for any renovation.”

“Nah, that’s too extreme for a few months.”

“It’s my place, but for the next ninety days, it’s also yours. I’ll decide what’s necessary to make you feel at home.”

She shakes her head, splashing my vision with blond-gold. “Yeah, but you’re already paying me to be here and fronting money for all my necessities. You shouldn’t have to redecorate on top of it. What’s three little months?”

We share a look that says exactly the kind of crushing weight it is.

I take another gulp from the wine bottle, breaking the awkward silence. “I think when you agree to live with a woman, a man expects to redecorate.”

Her laughter fills my ears.

“Warmer hues, am I right? I can tell you like the idea,” I say, pressing her.

She rolls one shoulder in a half shrug. “I mean...maybe just a little something to make it cozier.”

“Done. I’ll have Grayson take care of it tomorrow. See? We can resolve our issues like human beings.” I clink my wine bottle against her goblet, celebrating a rare agreement.

Of course, she loses her shit in a belly laugh.

Of course, I’m worried about my ears getting all too used to that warm serenade of good humor.

“Were you serious about opening a studio?” I ask, holding her dancing eyes.

She nods firmly. “Probably. I haven’t made a final decision but...yeah, it sounds nice. I love sculpting more than life. I’d like to be able to create without limitations again. Art can be a

hard sell, and it takes time to nail the market, but I could always teach classes to make it profitable.”

“What limitations?”

“Huh?”

“You said you want to create without limitations again.”

“Oh—at Northwestern, the studio was always accessible as long as you had a code, and I had all the equipment and space I needed. I have a table kiln now, but it’s not full-sized. I also have pretty limited workspace. Still, I can’t complain. My apartment isn’t bad by Chicago shoebox standards. I just can’t bring everything to life there. It gets dark pretty quickly too. The lighting just isn’t the best.”

“You’re serious about your art,” I say, mulling over the obvious.

She nods and smiles. “Art makes pain beautiful and life make sense.”

Hell of an observation.

Still, I wonder. “If you’re so passionate about your work, why did you come to the firm for an EA role?”

A slow smear of a smile shows her pearly teeth.

“What’s not to like at Brandt Ideas? The pay rocks, and architecture *is* art, on a grand scale. You can’t be Beatrice’s grandson and not know it. She’s only said it a million times in interviews.”

“Touché,” I whisper, smiling in turn when I remember it was practically Grandma’s motto at every big speech for younger crowds.

“You guys make functional art for people. They can enjoy it daily, whether they’re inside the buildings or just gazing from the outside in. I love it, even if it’s not something I could do for a living.”

“Why? You’re creative and smart.”

Not to mention too gorgeous for life, I think to myself, clenching my mouth shut so it doesn’t slip out.

“Art and architecture are two different fields.” She grins. “Plus, I like the way it feels to have my hands buried in the clay, smoothing and pinching and bringing something new to life.”

Sweet hell, the dirty thoughts that image brings.

How did I ever think this girl was just a drunken partier?

“I tried pottery once—”

She rolls her eyes. “Sculpting goes way beyond pottery.”

“I know, but I wasn’t very good at pottery either. I just did it to get this girl to like me. But I shelled out fifty bucks at this ‘make your own coffee cup’ place, and there was no second date after my mug turned into a watering can,” I say, taking a long pull off my bottle.

Paige laughs, a lash of hair falling down her face.

“Desperate measures! I’m not sure why you’d even have to fake liking pottery to get a date, Ward.”

“Seems like faking romance is what I do.”

Her eyebrows go up. “Honestly, that story sounds more like your brother than you.”

“You don’t think Nick has a monopoly on stupid, do you? I was twenty-three and just back from Iraq. Can you blame me?”

“No. I’m just surprised you weren’t uptight back in the day.”

I cock my head. “Uptight? I was more serious than Nick even then, certainly, but that was before—”

Maria. Her name sticks in my mind like a barb.

It was before Maria, before I felt the family curse, before I realized I’d have to be straitlaced to the letter of the law to prove that I’m more than another bad seed.

“That was before some shit got serious,” I correct sharply. “After that last deployment, I was completely off my game. Turns out, covering your boys from enemy snipers while

they're playing real-life Minesweeper makes you a little jumpy long after you're back home."

She lets out a low whistle.

"Whoa, that's rough. I'm sure you didn't love Iraq, but did you like the Army?" she asks, her green eyes enchanted in a new way when she looks at me.

"No one loves MRE breakfasts and being packed in like sardines with a dozen other men, much less an active warzone," I say. When I came back from Iraq, I didn't feel like I had much purpose. There, it was life and death and in your face. Long stretches of extreme boredom poached by ambushes from hell. Everything seemed dull after that. Truth be told, I loved the discipline, the sense of purpose, and the friends I made along the way."

"*You* have friends?" She stares, then blushes. "Sorry. Bad joke."

"I'm a busy man, Paige, and I know when to keep my colleagues at arm's length. Believe it or not, I *do* have a social life. And if you're the best fake fiancée ever, you just might see it."

We trade tense smiles.

Smart mouth aside, I'm actually a bit touched. I can't remember the last time someone asked about me in this detail.

Maybe we're not so different over wine. Tonight, I'm not her boss or even the prick who's paying her to pretend we're getting married.

I'm just a man with loose lips lost in her emerald eyes.

Bang. Bang. Bang!

Just like that, our moment ends.

"Food's here." Paige pops up and moves behind the couch, then stops. "Umm—this place is so huge—"

I chuckle, setting the wine bottle on the table.

"No worries, darling. I'll get it."

She doesn't hammer me over the d-word this time. It also falls out with an ease that would scare me, if I let myself ponder it for more than two seconds.

Fuck.

Paige bites her bottom lip, a ripe cherry, and for a second I wish it was *my* lip she'd chew on.

"You could just show me. If I'm going to be here for three months, I need to find my own way around, don't I, darling fiancé?"

Her eyes gleam, face framed in blond softness my hands *ache* to pull.

I stand, shifting so she doesn't see my raging hard-on.

"Right this way."



THE NEXT MORNING, I'm opening the Lincoln for Paige as a blinding light explodes in my eyes.

I blink several times, clearing my vision. Footsteps pound the pavement, surrounding us at the curb. Reporters, meaner than a pack of javelinas.

"Wow, word travels fast," Paige says.

"Hurry and get in," I order.

She climbs in the car and slides to the middle, making room for me.

"Do you think we'll be ambushed a lot?" she asks once we're moving away from the swarm.

"I hope to hell not. The next moron who shoves a camera in my face gets it rammed up their ass."

"Ward, you can't do that!" She gasps through her smile.

"Why not?"

"Don't think you'd enjoy the prison time, for one. Also, if we don't smile and think happy thoughts, this isn't going to

work. It'll all be for nothing if Ross Winthrop thinks we're anything less than soulmates and grown-ups," she whispers. "So smile. Be so in *love* with me you put the ragies aside. Pretty please?"

She bats her eyelashes.

My cock jolts in my pants like a badly behaved animal on a leash.

"My cheeks still hurt from yesterday. I'm worried my face is going to stick, sooner or later," I tell her.

People kept stopping by my office all day to congratulate me. Of course, I had to smile each time.

I may have arthritis in my jaw.

Paige laughs, moving her cleavage against the low neckline of her snug green dress.

"That color brings out your eyes," I say slowly, hoping I finish the sentence with the right word.

Because it's not her eyes I'm glued to.

"Good one," she whispers. "But my eyes are up here. You should probably touch me, too. Hand on my knee or something. Don't go overboard or I'll break you."

My face feels like a cooked ham.

I contemplate my next move. Ideally, one that keeps up this charade without mincing my sanity into dog food. I'm still deep in thought when another annoying voice cuts in.

"How's my favorite couple today?" Reese asks.

"Delightful!" Paige says. "How are you?"

"Hyped up on Mountain Dew," Reese says.

"That's more information than you're supposed to give your boss," I tell her.

"I wish I was partying all fancy-like. I had to babysit my niece last night and she wouldn't drift off until midnight. That's almost as fun, but grape Kool-Aid just isn't the same as wine, y'know?"

I do know, and I also know it's far too early for this inanity.

I raise the privacy screen between us, hook an arm around Paige, and pull her closer.

We're touching, skin grazing in so many places. My body ignites. She stares up at me with a raised brow and full lips I can already feel on mine.

Damn.

"How's this?" I whisper. "Convincing yet?"

I can't let her know every seething inch of me already believes she's mine.

She doesn't answer, but I feel her body pressing closer, this plush heat my flesh craves like a tan beneath a tropical sun.

Who the fuck am I kidding? We don't have to fake it so seriously right now when it's just us.

Reese will believe anything I tell her.

Still, why miss the chance to practice?

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" I whisper to her again.

"No, *darling.*" She smiles and drops her head on my shoulder.

This time, the d-word actually sounds nice rolling off her tongue, and it shouldn't.

Careful, dumbass. This ends in eighty-nine days. Don't forget it's all a show.

We pull up to The Art Institute of Chicago a few minutes later. I get out first and offer a hand to Paige, who takes it.

We're walking up the stairs when she says, "This is where we met."

I nod, opening the door for her at the top of the stairs. Why does her voice sound so heavy?

"What are we doing here again?" she asks as we enter the museum.

“Because we’re donors, they include short biographies on Nick and me too, not just Grandma. I have to update my bio to include my fiancée and I thought I’d do it in person. Better chance to give any eager cameras an eyeful on our terms.”

“Oh. Do you think we can walk through the gardens before we leave?” she asks sweetly.

My lips quirk up in a smile I badly want to repress.

“We’ll have to see how much time we have before our next appointment.”

She nods.

We walk to the members-only desk.

“I need to speak to the curator,” I say.

“Of course, Mr. Brandt. I’m going to open the door beside my booth. You can go right through it, and the curator will meet you back there,” the girl behind the counter says.

Paige and I walk behind the door to a set of offices complete with a front desk.

“I didn’t know this room was even here,” Paige says.

“Follow me,” I tell her, sliding my fingers through hers to pull her along.

I’m about to lead her to the front desk to ask for the curator when the door to the back office opens.

“Mr. Brandt, it’s a pleasure. Come on back,” Curator Staci says.

“Thank you, Staci.”

My hand falls to the small of Paige’s back and I lead her into the office. Touching her is getting far too easy.

Staci lingers in the doorway.

“This must be your fiancée.” She holds out her hand. “So nice to meet you!”

“Thank you.” Paige gives it a firm shake.

“Have I seen you here before?” Staci asks, a puzzled look on her face.

“Oh, I come here a lot,” Paige says. “I’ve been a regular ever since college.”

“I thought so.” Staci gives her a once-over and looks at me. “I know you wanted to update your bio, and we’ll take care of that. But this is wonderful timing because I actually received a box of new donations for the Beatrice Nightingale Brandt exhibit today, and I need to know how you want to handle it?” She walks around her desk and motions for us to sit.

The hunter-green satin hugging Paige’s body shows more leg when she sits. God, I’d like to rip it right off her.

Fuck. Concentrate.

Staci sets a cardboard box on her desk and drops into her chair. “You can go through it if you want, but I trust you’re familiar with the material.”

She pushes the box closer.

What material? Who sent this? What even is it?

I take the box and start rummaging through it, unsure what I’ll find. First, I pull out old sketchbooks and start flipping through them. They’re from when Grandma was young. The paper feels brittle, faded, but still plenty readable like it’s been tucked away for years.

They’re very old. Her designs aren’t as elaborate or refined as the work she’s known for, but her talent is evident even in her early work.

There must be six sketchbooks full of drawings here, and under the last one, a stack of...letters?

My brows pull together as my eyes skim the words.

Holy shit.

A lot of them are love letters from my grandpa. I remember her frantically looking for these at least a year after he died.

Dread fills my gut like seething tar.

“Where did this come from?” I ask, a rawness in my tone.

“Oh, the donor was anonymous. A collector of her work, I believe,” Staci says, twisting her head. “I hope there isn’t a problem?”

Oh, but there is.

A big damn problem.

I hold up several letters, shaking them. “These are very personal. I’m not sure she’ll want to donate them for public view. I’ll need to talk to her.”

“Absolutely, can she come in sometime?”

“She’s still in the hospital.”

“Oh, yes, the heart trouble. God, I heard about that, I’m so sorry. I suppose you could take them and just bring them back if she’d like to make them part of her collection?” Staci offers, far too calmly.

The room is spinning.

There’s lava in my veins.

I’m so on edge it hurts when a fluttery hand traces my bicep.

I catch myself a split second before I fling Paige across the room, and instantly feel like an asshole. I need to get a grip.

“Ward? Are you okay?” she asks.

I don’t answer.

Paige watches as I continue pilfering through the box, my fury rising every second.

“I’m fine. I just need to know what’s in here,” I growl through my teeth, pulling out a few more letters and training my eyes on them like rifles.

Some of them are addressed to my mother, and some to my dad. They’re all from Grandma.

10/2/1996

Victor,

YOU'VE HAD plenty of time to think about this, and the whole world wants answers—including me. That young man's family deserves answers most of all, and I'm sad that you've decided to remain silent, holed up in Florida.

You weren't raised this way.

Your sons will be young men in no time. They deserve a better example.

Frankly, I'm glad the boys have spent most of their time here while you and that social butterfly you married traipsed around without a care in the world. At this point, I'm not sure they were safe with you. If they'd been on that boat...we can only imagine the horror.

There's no nice way to say this.

Get it together, or you're dead to me.

SINCERELY,

Mom

THIS SHIT HAS to be from my old man. No one else would have it. Leave it to him to air dirty laundry.

The only question is why? What the hell does he want from us now?

I toss the letter in the pile of stuff. I'll make sure it disappears down a deep, dark hole.

"I hate to disappoint, Staci, but I wasn't aware of this material. Most of it's confidential family stuff that doesn't belong in a public exhibit or even an archive," I say, leveling my tone.

My poker face can't be as good as I think.

Paige stares at me in a way that says she knows I'm pissed and not doing a very good job of hiding it.

She can stay out of it. She's not paid to care, and this fuckery isn't her problem.

Her green eyes connect with mine for a sad second, and my gut sinks. I gave her fair warning certain monsters might surface when she signed on to our sham, but this is too soon.

"There was one more thing," Staci says quietly.

"What?" I run my hand through the box, looking for anything I missed.

"This," she says.

I look up, and there it is.

I'm staring at the incident that demolished my family and left Nick and me to be scrutinized by every person we've met since. A replica of it, technically.

My jaw tightens.

I don't want that goddamned thing on display anywhere—I have a screaming urge to set it on fire—and I know Grandma doesn't, either.

Yeah, no question now. My old man wants blood and these little souvenirs he's dredged up are a threat. His usual theatrics that will only get louder if we don't do what he wants.

Fuck, I don't even want to know what he's after.

"What is it?" Paige asks softly.

I can barely speak. "A replica of my grandparents' boat. It disappeared in Lake Michigan a long time ago."

"One of the design books has a sketch of it," Staci says, oblivious to the hornets in my throat. "I'm so sorry your grandparents lost their ship. Did Mrs. Brandt design this beauty herself?"

Yep. I nod curtly. Unfortunately, she did.

And she adored it until the day it sank beneath the waves with Dylan Parnell aboard.

It's a scar on our family now, a nightmare my sick grandmother doesn't need to relive.

A monster I can't afford to come barreling out of the closet until after this damn hotel deal is closed. I grab the model yacht and drop it on top of the box.

"Thank you, Staci, but I'll be taking this, too."

"Surely, a replica isn't personal?" Staci says, disappointment lining her face.

My eyes are spinning knives. Her mouth falls open in a silent apology, and she slinks back in her chair.

"Whatever you need to do, Mr. Brandt. Forgive me for prying."

I feel Paige's gaze stabbing at my back. It takes every ounce of strength to keep it together, but I do, for her sake.

"No offense taken. Please understand, it's a model of her favorite boat that she hasn't seen in years. She's an elderly woman recovering from serious cardiac distress. All I'm asking is, just let her look at it, please? If you need fresh art to expand the collection, I'm sure my brother and I can come up with something better than this disorganized mess."

I have no idea what, but I'll give her whatever she wants to forget this hell-charm ever existed. I look at Paige. "We should go, darling."

"Darling," she spits back.

Damn, I'm starting to despise that word. But at least she nods and gets up.

"Wait, didn't you want to update your biography?" Staci asks.

Shit.

I forgot about that in my mad rush to fling this model yacht off a cliff.

"Yes, thank you. Just add that I'm engaged to Paige Holly, who also went to Northwestern and works at Brandt Ideas," I say sternly.

Staci smiles and takes a piece of stationery from her desk, scribbling across it. She looks at Paige. “What’s your degree in?”

“Art,” Paige says with a million-dollar smile.

“Now it makes sense!” Staci smiles. “That’s why I’ve see you here so often.”

Paige nods and turns her wrist so she can see her Apple watch as it buzzes. “Yep, that’s why. I’m afraid we have to be getting to our next meeting.”

I grab the box, stand, and we’re out the door.

“How long do you think it will take Reese to get here?” I ask.

“I texted her under the table. She should be here soon, but let’s get outside so you can tell me what’s up.”

Yeah, about that...

We walk out of the museum and into the cool Chicago breeze. Paige shivers. I take off my jacket and drape it around her shoulders.

“Thank you,” she says. “You were turning beet red in there. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lie.

She cocks her head. “Until today, I didn’t think you were capable of real emotion over anything except Beatrice. You weren’t even shaken up when Winthrope got cold feet. Ward, what happened?”

“Nothing,” I grind out again, knowing the hellfire in my eyes betrays me. “I just don’t like people thinking they have any right to donate my family’s shit, okay?”

The words tear out of me, benign half-truths as forceful as bullets.

“Whatever.” Her forehead wrinkles as she takes a step back. “How did other people get your family’s personal stuff, anyway?”

Her voice is so small.

I'm relieved I don't have to answer when the town car arrives. *Perfect timing.*

"There's Reese," I say, giving me ample opportunity to bury the hideous truth.

For now.

As I slink into the seat, feeling the glacial cold radiating off my Not Fiancée, I wonder. How long into this ninety days of hell before it all comes spilling out?

How long till she sees me lose my mind?

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BEHIND THE MASK (PAIGE)



Things are getting weird.

Ward throws open the door for me and holds it until I'm inside the car. He slides the box in beside me and gets in.

I raise the privacy screen between us and Reese, then move the box so it's on my other side. I scoot closer to him, searching his eyes, wading through the glaring pain that's taken him over.

“Ward...what's in the box that you don't want me to know about?” I whisper.

His forehead creases. He scratches loudly at his beard.

“Why would you assume that?”

“Because whatever it is, it upset you, and if you wanted me to know about it, you would have already told me.”

He turns his head to face me.

Yikes.

He's even hotter when he's mega-pissed. He looks like a warrior god, ready to go charging into battle. “You're right about one thing—I don't want you to know. Not about this. So why do you keep asking?”

I hold up my hand, ring flashing, and smile.

He tries to ignore me, turning to the window.

“Come on, bossman. We're stuck together for the next three months. Just let me lend an ear.”

He's dead silent.

I peel away from him with a sigh. "Look, I won't force it, but haven't you ever heard repressing is bad for your health?"

His eyes snap back to mine and his gaze drops from my eyes to my lips.

"This isn't your battle, Paige. You don't want to get mixed up with this. He's hurt enough people. I don't want that sicko anywhere near you."

Sicko?

Are we still talking about the box?

"Who?" I mouth, the word barely audible.

"My father." His eyes are ice balls stuck to my lips.

I shake my head. "What does your dad have to do with—"

"Stay out of it," he snaps. "All these questions tell me you didn't do your homework when you had a chance. If you'd gone hunting, you'd know about the skeletons in the family closet."

Ouch.

His harsh tone hurts, but he's right.

Between diving into this fake engagement insanity, I got distracted. I didn't have time to do a thorough search over the touchy stuff he warned me about...or any search at all.

I cross my arms and turn away from him.

He could shame a storybook Prince with his looks, but his attitude is straight Vlad the Impaler.

"Whatever. Silly me. It's not like we're in this together or anything," I say with a huff.

In one swift movement, he leans over and cups my face with his thick hand, turning my head so there's nowhere to go but deep into those teal-blue eyes.

All the air whooshes out of my lungs.

“Don’t feel scolded. My father’s a horrible man. I promise you want nothing to do with him. I’m protecting you, woman.”

God. He’s so close to me his minty man scent invades my senses. If I lean forward the tiniest bit, our mouths will meet.

Do I want that? Again?

Last time, it was divine, but then he forgot it happened.

I suck in a breath and jerk away, knocking the box onto the floor, and slide closer to the door before exhaling.

“What does your dad have to do with this box, Ward?” I can’t help probing because this makes no sense. “Is the stuff inside his?”

“Yes. No one else would have it. I told you, it’s my problem. Got it?”

“Would Beatrice really be upset if anyone saw it?” I ask, barely a whisper.

His face hardens into granite. “Why do people always assume I’m overreacting?”

“Umm—I don’t know. But you reacted like you sat on a porcupine. Would they?”

“No question. And in case you forgot, Grandma can’t be stressed out—especially not by this crap.” His chest heaves with a monster sigh. “Nick doesn’t let anything get under his skin. He’s always in the clouds, above it all.”

“You’re sure it’s from your father? Maybe it got mixed up in a box for Goodwill or someone stole it?” I try, knowing it’s absurd, but might make him feel better.

“Bullshit. Dad doesn’t donate anything unless there’s money involved, and who steals a model boat? Don’t be ridiculous.”

My face sinks.

“Maybe I wouldn’t be, if we didn’t have to dance around —”

“Paige. Just drop it.”

“Consider it dropped, Wardhole,” I say, twisting to the window.

A few beats later, he says, “Are you pissed?”

Duh.

“Why would I be angry? I’m just stuck with a seething man who can’t tell me what his problem is, because even though I’m trustworthy enough to stay in his guest room and wear an expensive fake ring, I’m not trustworthy enough to know his problems.” I shake my head and hit the button on the door to lower the screen separating Reese. “Hey, Reese. Drop me at Sweeter Grind, please?”

“Paige,” Ward growls, his voice scraping.

“You knew I was meeting Brina today.” I shrug, not daring to meet his eyes. “I would’ve canceled for an emergency, but you don’t need my help. Remember?”

“How long will you be gone?” he demands.

“If I’m lucky, long enough to meet a hot barista and jet off to Hawaii.”

Reese snickers awkwardly in the front seat. “Trouble in paradise?”

“What paradise?” I scoff.

I know, I’m terrible, but having two commas in my compensation doesn’t give this man the right to stomp all over me.

“Stay out of it,” Ward growls at Reese, punching the button to raise the window.

“Hey, don’t talk to her like that. It’s bad enough when you talk to *me* like that, and we’re engaged,” I say.

He raises the screen and side-eyes me.

“We’re supposed to be in love.”

“And you’re supposed to act like you love me, Captain Grump.”

Our eyes lock. There's static in the air. The challenge, the heat, the tension makes me petrified.

"If you don't knock it off, people will realize that we're—"

"What?" I roll my eyes. "That all normal couples fight? It'd be creepy if they didn't. As much as I'd love to have a shred of respect, maybe it's good this is happening. Butting heads always comes naturally enough for us, right? No need to fake it." The car stops, and I glance out the window.

I can feel his eyes trying to light me on fire.

"We're here. I'll see you later, darling." I fling the door open.

Before I can climb out, Ward grabs my hand like the caveman he is. But the savage pulse I'm expecting to see in his eyes softens to a campfire.

"Just stay safe," he urges.

Huh? Unsure what to make of that, I nod.

He hasn't let go of my hand. "Call if you need anything. And don't talk to any strangers."

"O-okay," I tell him.

It takes me a minute longer to pull my fingers out of his grip than it should. Mostly because a crazy part of me doesn't want to be free of his warmth, his strength, his weird concern.

But Brina's waiting, and who am I to pass up a little therapy?

I shouldn't let him rile me up with tender glances or walls of pure temper.

This is all a show.

It's not like it means anything.

I move away from him and head for the peace of the coffee shop.



“I’M surprised you kept the apartment.” Brina sips her cinnamon latte and steps onto the stairway outside my place.

“It’s only ninety days—less now—so I just took clothes and necessities. I might as well pay rent here for the next three months because I’ll need a place after it’s over. Also, I didn’t want to move my furniture.” I laugh. “But I’ve been here so long now this place feels like home. It hasn’t been the same since you left. All of my friends are moving on to phase two of their lives, and I’m still stuck in the apartment we rented after college. Lame, but familiar, y’know?”

At the top of the stairs, I unlock the door and push it open.

“Enjoy phase one. It’ll end when it’s supposed to. Now what did you tell your parents about your current relationship status?” Brina steps inside ahead of me.

I follow her in and make sure the door is shut before I answer. I don’t want anyone else hearing this. “They signed the same NDA as you, and I told them the truth.”

“Were they cool with it? My mom would have been clasping her hands and fawning—romance author that she is—but I don’t think my dad would respond the same way.” Brina moves to the couch and sits down.

I sit beside her and slurp my latte. “They didn’t like it. Mom said if I ever date again, I’m going to have to explain two ex-fiancés instead of one. And it’s kind of hard to bury this one when we’re internet famous. Although, I guess Austin and I technically broke up before we ever really got engaged.”

“That guy was such a jackass,” Brina spits. “I never liked him. I hated the way it happened, but I’m still glad you didn’t get in deeper. I don’t know if I’d be able to visit if you’d wound up together. He was that bad.”

I smile, unsure if I should celebrate my asshole fiancé far surpassing the boy I dated organically.

When it was over with Austin, everyone said they were glad he was history.

But no one actually *told* me when I was madly in love, too afraid to burst my bubble.

“No arguments about Austin. But my parents think this is somehow worse. Dad wanted me to back out of the contract and offered to take out a loan for my studio.”

“Oh, wow. But you didn’t?”

“Nah, I’d never let him front me like that and I’d already signed the contract. You know how I get with paying my own way. I’ll leave the whole ‘let my parents take care of life’ thing to my sister.”

“It’s a lot of money, Paige. I wouldn’t have turned it down, either, except for the fact that Mag would behead anyone who offered a fake engagement now.”

We both laugh because it’s true. She married an overprotective billionaire who’s learned to treat her like gold.

“He wouldn’t let you fake it in a million years,” I agree.

“But this all sounds pretty intense for pretend,” she says. “What happened that you couldn’t tell me about at Sweeter Grind?”

I set my drink down on the coffee table, drumming my brain to figure out where to begin.

“He’s a split personality. Sometimes this seems almost real, and then the next minute he’s Mr. Wardhole again. We went to the art museum today. He was being cute, at first, attentive and sweet. They had a new box of donations for his grandma’s exhibit and he just...he freaked. He wouldn’t even tell me what the problem was. Apparently, his dad donated stuff he doesn’t want outside of the family.”

Brina blinks slowly, her eyes wide.

Yeah, I know the feeling.

“His reaction doesn’t make sense. I can get not wanting people to see all of his family’s private moments, but the way he went off...it was a little scary.”

“They must have a strained relationship. Did you ask about it?”

“Of course. He basically barked crap at me and kept saying I didn’t need to be mixed up with his dad.”

“Odd. It’s almost like he’s trying to protect you.”

“From what?”

“Did you Google?”

“Ugh, not yet. It’s been a marathon since we set this up, and now I’m almost afraid to go down that hole. It might have sharp teeth.”

She shrugs. “It’s probably nothing, just a messy divorce or something. I bet he was a deadbeat or Ward’s too deep in the drama to set his own head straight. Mag broke up with me *twice* to ‘protect my reputation.’ He also thinks he’s way more of a bad boy billionaire than he actually is. For a while, he thought he was shielding me from family crap too.”

I grin. “He was so stupid.”

“And now he’s a sweetheart. I think I’m starting to love happy endings even more than Mom,” she says with a saucy smile. “Why would Ward and his dad have such a rotten relationship, though?”

I pick up a couch pillow and hug it.

“You tell me. He’s a doting grandson and still bosses his little brother around like they’re kids. It’s kind of adorable.”

Brina nods. “So, he cares about his family. If he’s not cool with his dad, there has to be a reason.”

I hadn’t thought about that.

“You’re right, I shouldn’t put it off. I should just pull those skeletons out of the closet and be glad they’re not mine.”

Brina pulls her phone out. “Don’t worry. I got this.”

I laugh, pick up my phone, and join her in pulling up Beatrice’s bio. I’ve probably read it ten times, but always glossed over the family stuff.

She has one son. Victor Brandt. That’s a good place to start.

Brina rocks her heels, giddy with excitement. “Feels like the good old days with you and I living together. I miss them sometimes. But I wouldn’t trade it for my husband.”

I’m sure she wouldn’t. I’m jealous, but I can’t think of anyone who deserves to be happy more than Sabrina Heron.

I type Victor Brandt into the search engine. A picture of a scruffy middle-aged man with Ward’s stormy eyes pops up on the screen and the results are...long.

Jesus. This guy was plastered all over the news.

“He was married to a woman named Giselle,” Brina says. “Simms is her name now, but she was a Brandt for a while.”

“I hope his parents’ divorce wasn’t the trauma. So many people have divorced parents and aren’t monsters. If that’s his excuse...”

“I don’t think so.” Brina doesn’t look up from her tablet, pursing her lips. “His parents seem—adventurous.”

“Adventurous?” I echo.

Brina gives a pained snicker.

“Scandalous. I was trying to be polite.”

“His dad filed for bankruptcy a few years ago,” I say, reading over the article.

Is that what Ward’s so worried about? I could see how a past stained with financial ruin could give pause to someone entering a massive business deal, but it’s his dad’s beef, not his. And Victor apparently separated from Brandt Ideas long before the bankruptcy occurred.

“Looks like his mom’s been engaged to two multimillionaires and a billionaire in the past five years. Whoa,” Brina hisses. “She’s currently single again and seems to be on the prowl. So says *The Chicago Tea*.”

“Oh, man, Ward hates that blog so much.” I laugh. “Rich cougar, huh?”

“Well, she’s strutting her stuff pretty hard on the ’gram. Of course, she only flirts with a certain profile of guys...” Brina

meets my eyes and bites her lip, seeing something on the screen that hurts. “I sometimes can’t blame men for being such swinging dicks when women like this exist.”

I shake my head with a sigh.

“But it’s not okay. We don’t get to assume that every man we come into contact with is a crap sandwich just because some guys are.”

“I think we do assume. We’re just not allowed to say it.”

I go through the search links. Victor has a thing for rich and famous women. “Seems Daddy Brandt likes a certain type too. He changes girlfriends every six months, but the last lady he set his sights on accused him of harassing her. She said he wouldn’t leave her alone when it was over. Looks like it was a sugar arrangement.”

“Creep,” Brina spits. “I hate men like that.”

Don’t we all.

But the second page of hits is completely different. Everything becomes all about the Brandt-Parnell incident or the Parnell-Brandt incident. The third headline down catches my eye.

“Victor and Giselle Brandt Suspected in Dylan Parnell’s Death!”

Parnell? I’ve heard that name before but I don’t know where.

“Any clue who Dylan Parnell is? Was, I mean?” I ask.

“Oh, yeah! He was dreamy. When I was growing up, he was in some big movies with all the hot guys like Ridge Barnet. My mom always had a thing for him too, but when I asked her why he wasn’t making new movies, she told me he died in the nineties. Freaked me out. He was so young!”

I look up, my belly twisting.

“Ohhh, crap. I totally forgot all this!” Brina says. “When was it again? I have to know.”

I shrug and click the link.

“About twenty years ago—” She gasps. “Oh my God. Wait. Paige, he...he died on a boat with Ward’s parents!”

Holy shit.

She’s right.

I’m reading it now with my heart scaling my throat.

“...they were accused of murdering him. Huge messy court battle, but since the yacht sank, there was no definite evidence. Wow, looks like Parnell’s family still thinks they killed their son. This makes no effing sense.”

I sit up, bewildered, fingers fumbling.

My phone hits the floor with a *thud*.

Brina sets her phone on the coffee table in front of the couch. “God. There are so many links it has to be true. But the Brandt family is independently wealthy, and they don’t seem to have a problem attracting media attention on their own. So, what reason would they have for killing an actor?”

My eyes are glued to the screen. I’m numb from the shock and at the same time the wind has been knocked out of me.

“Last thing I skimmed made it sound like drugs were involved. Maybe that was the motive?” I say.

Were they all high?

Was it just a tragic accident?

My stomach clenches, and I remember Ward reacting like an electric fence to the box.

He was in control like the lion he is, but visibly upset. His fist clenched when that boat appeared.

I knew I had to get him out of there before he went nuclear.

No wonder.

“Jesus Christ. Hold on, Brina.” I reach for my phone and text him.

Ward, are you okay???

“What is it?” Brina asks.

My phone buzzes. *Dandy. I’m surprised you care. You were in a big hurry to get away from me.*

Sigh.

That’s not it. I was pissed and confused that he wouldn’t trust me to help.

Brina’s staring at her screen again. “Victor and Giselle used to go to all the famous beaches and Europe for months at a time on ‘publicity tours’ before the boat thing. Giselle had an acting career once. Looks like they’d leave Ward and Nick with their grandparents. They sound pretty self-absorbed.”

There it is.

That twisted freaking moment when I start to hurt for Ward Brandt...and Nick, too.

“What a horrible way to grow up,” I say.

I shake my head and text him again. *I didn’t understand the situation. But I’ve done some searching around and...I do now. I’m sorry.*

His response is immediate. *Not everything you read online is true. Only, in this case, it might be.*

Ward, are you all right? I sound like a broken record, but I’m worried.

There’s so much I still don’t understand.

Why would Victor want to drag this out with Beatrice recovering from a heart attack? It’s bad for his family and awful for his mother’s health.

I can’t see how it helps him. Ward’s last message is ambivalent enough, neither confirming nor denying...

But. What. Is. Happening?

I’ll be fine if you promise to stay the hell out of it, Paige. You don’t know everything and honestly you don’t need to. This isn’t your problem.

The bearish response makes me think he's back to his usual walking middle finger state of mind, at least.

But he still doesn't trust me to help, and it sucks.

Fine, dude. Be that way.

My phone pings again. ***One more thing. Don't mention the box to Grandma or Nick. I haven't decided if I'll tell them about it or not, but if I do, it needs to come from me.***

With every stab of my fingers at the tiny letters, I feel something raw in the back of my throat.

Fair enough. But why would your dad do this? I can't see how this helps anyone.

Another immediate response. ***He wants something. He always wants something, but I'll handle it. This is what I do.***

I put my phone down and look at Brina with this dull recognition glazing me over.

"I just remembered, at the art museum, it was the boat. The curator pulled out a replica of this fancy yacht Beatrice designed. That's when he really freaked, and I get it now. It's the same ship."

"Oof. Is that why you texted him?"

I nod. "I just don't get it. What's his father after? It was forever ago and there are still so many nasty stories about it. Bring it up now, and it'll be back in the news. Beatrice is recovering from a major heart issue. It's like he wants to kill his own mother."

Brina blinks. "I mean, people say—okay, *I* say—my mom is crazy. But she's crazy in a different way."

I smile because it's impossible not to love Brina's mom.

"A fun, silly, crazy way. She'd never lob a grenade like this. This is straight-up book villain shit. Your mom would kill off anyone in a book who pulled this crap."

Brina laughs. "You know her too well. Does Ward have any guesses what put his dad up to this?"

“Victor wants something, he says, but I have no idea what that could be. His mother and sons are billionaires. It seems like if he wanted something, he could just ask.”

But he didn't. So, is the boat supposed to be blackmail?

“Don't mention this to anyone, Brina. Ward isn't even sure if he'll tell Nick and Beatrice.”

“Hey, I signed the NDA, remember?” Brina winks.

“Right.” I sink back into the couch, twirling my hair. “What kind of father does this to his kids?”

“The kind who doesn't deserve children.”

“You're always right,” I say. We share a worried look. “You know, before today, I would've killed to know what makes him such a Wardhole...”

“But now?” Brina asks impatiently.

“Now, I just want to hug him.” My voice strains as I continue. “And I want him to hug me, and take away this sinking feeling that it's about to get really, really messed up.”

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THE BIG MOMENT (WARD)



As soon as Paige was safe at Sweeter Grind, I texted a private investigator I've used before and had Reese drop me at my building.

My phone buzzes.

I don't have time for this shit, but it might be Paige again.

Nope, my PI. Damn, this guy works fast. Never mind the fact that I was wishing it was her.

He's staying at the Express Inn near the airport, the investigator says.

That doesn't sound right. My dad isn't the type to settle for a place so normal—not to mention affordable.

He cares way more about his creature comforts than Nick or I ever have.

Are you sure? I send back.

The next message is an image of my father lounging on a bed in a room with stained carpet and knicks in the wall.

Fuck. He's really staying at the Express.

So that's a clue. He's blown his wad again, and he's looking for a payout to keep him in imported cigars and breezy beach rentals in the Keys.

I put a checkbook in my pocket and head for the parking garage, taking a deep breath that burns my lungs.

Now that I know what his money-grubbing ass wants, I'm less concerned.

I park the Tesla and fire off another text. *What's the room number?*

Room 413. Top floor on the right side of the building, sir.

In seconds, I'm pounding up the stairs and beating his door down.

He answers in a yellowing undershirt and slacks. My nose wrinkles before I even smell the cheap booze wafting off him.

"Hey, Ward. Come on i—" He sounds like someone who expected to see me.

"How much?" I snap.

"What?"

"How fucking much will it take to get you out of my life for good? Gone from *all* our lives." I sound like a meat grinder, every word flung with visceral hatred.

He clucks his tongue and levels a lazy, assessing look at me.

"Ward, Ward...you always loved to make a scene. No point in doing this in public. Why don't you come in and have a seat?" He opens the door wider.

Now this asshole is shy? He was anything but the night he firebombed my engagement.

I hesitate.

Going in puts this on his turf, and I don't want that.

I've learned the hard way not to put anything past him.

Sure, there's a need for discretion, but who here will care about Brandt drama or even know who we are? He's hiding like the viper he is.

Fortunately, I know a thing or two about skinning snakes.

He'll tell me what it'll take for him to disappear for good, or else I'm going to let him know he won't be the first man I've shot.

Not that it'll ever escalate that far. He's too chickenshit. I stalk past him, swallowing a growl.

He shuts the door.

I survey the pea-green carpet with dark stains, the beige bedspread that's coming apart, and the dented walls.

"Nice digs you've got here," I mutter.

He gives me that cringe-inducing rattle of a laugh.

"It's a hard life when you've been disinherited and thrown to the curb, son."

For a microsecond, my eyes flinch shut. I can't stand it when he reminds me we're blood, cynically expecting my sympathy. *Old man, that died long ago.*

"Of course, you wouldn't know about that," he sneers in his cocksure tone. "You're not even her kid. You're her grandson."

"Grandma's still alive, you twit. There isn't anything to inherit yet. Until her recent health crisis, she was still working. You could do the same being twenty years younger," I bite off.

He holds up his hands, wiggling long, thin fingers.

"I wasn't built for hard labor, Ward."

What the fuck do I say to that? He's telling the truth for once.

"Your parents built an empire. All you had to do was man up and run it."

"And waste my entire life chasing more coin? Besides, you and your brother took over that role so well, don't you think?"

"You had so many chances. If you'd just tried, Grandma would have taught you everything she knew. Just like she did for us."

"You got my gift, didn't you? I take it that's why you're here ruining my evening?"

Straight to the point and nasty as ever.

My hand balls into a fist. “You’re a sick son of a bitch. I can’t believe you sent those letters to the Art Institute. Private letters between your loving parents. The letter about Grandma’s miscarriage...Dad, you *fucker*. I didn’t even know about that.”

I have to pause and breathe. Otherwise, I’m going to hoist him up and slam him right through the wall.

“It’s history, Ward, and Mother’s a famous artist. People eat this crap up. Don’t you think they’d gush sympathy all over her if they knew?” He actually shakes his head like he tried to do her a favor. “I know you’re used to jumping to conclusions, but—”

“Shut it. If she doesn’t talk about it, she doesn’t want all of Chicago blabbing either. Private letters to Grandpa about needing him to submit her work, so she could be paid because people wouldn’t hire a woman in those days. She didn’t want anyone reading that shit, and you know it.” I rake a hand down my face. “What’s your malfunction? Why are you so...*you*? Your own mother’s recovering from a serious heart defect, and you just had to go shit on everyone.”

“I shit just fine, boy. You want to know? Really?” he snaps. “Here’s my biggest worry—the bitch dies before she puts me back in the will. You don’t know what it’s like to grow up a Brandt and then be disowned.”

“She didn’t disown you—you did that to yourself!” I roar, lurching toward him. “I assume the letters were to embarrass Grandma. I’m just not sure how that helps you get back in her will. Why would she want to leave you money for hurting her again?”

The turd I’m ashamed to share DNA with doesn’t answer.

He never does when hard questions slug him in the face.

“Why the boat, you ass? Are you suicidal?” I’m shaking as the rancor pours out of me like pus. “You realize there’s no statute of limitations on murder—”

“I didn’t kill that prick! It was an accident. We talked business. We partied too hard. Then there was a freak storm on

the lake, and...tragedy.”

He’s rattled, but I can’t take any pleasure in it.

“They’ll haul your ass into court if they ever find evidence. It’s in your best interest and everyone else’s that the Parnell crap stays forgotten. It’s not the time for you to be dragging this shit out. We’re in the middle of closing a massive deal with Ross Winthrope. Would you really deny your parents their lifelong dream?”

For a second, he looks almost human. Then the illusion disappears in a grin with teeth too sharp.

“Fuck her and her shitty hotel! She disowned her *only child*—all over that dumbass and the stupid boat. Let the world beat off over it until the sun goes out. I don’t have anything to hide.”

“She disowned you because you killed a man. Not because her boat sank.”

“Ward, I didn’t kill that jackass. I just sank the yacht.”

“With him on it. Unconscious. Did he still have a pulse, or were you too high off your ass to check?”

He shrugs coldly. “Your mom and I had to jump off when we did. Anything else, that was his fault. He was younger and in better shape than us. We thought he could make it. God, after he talked up that stupid deal, we thought...never mind.”

How is this piece of shit my father?

I’m glad Maria changed her mind, and my relationship with Paige is fake. No one else should be subjected to this clown show of a family.

It almost makes me sick to imagine continuing this psycho’s bloodline.

“Whatever. Just name a price to get you out of our lives before you give Grandma another heart attack.”

“I don’t care. If she wants me to give two shits about her dream of designing a hotel, maybe she should consider me for once.”

I sigh. “Joke’s on you. I have the trash you sent to the museum.”

He glares at me, his eyes going watery with rage.

“So you came to gloat, then? That’s just fine. I have plenty of other options if the museum doesn’t want to play ball. I’ve never had a hard time getting press, and I’m good at kicking up dust. I know low people in high places.”

Enough!

My hand flies up and snags the bastard’s neck in a chokehold. I slam him into the wall hard enough to shake the whole room.

“Last warning. Stay the fuck away from my family. Leave us alone.”

I storm out the door while he’s still coughing, slamming it so hard it bounces open again.

I’m downstairs and back in my car before I realize I didn’t do the one thing I came here to do.

I grin. That piece of shit didn’t get the one thing he wanted.

My checkbook is still in my pocket, no bribe written.

Guess that’s what happens when you’re such a colossal fucknugget people won’t even pay you to shut your yap.



PAIGE WEARS a black and gold thin-strapped dress with a cowl neck.

My eyes are in flames.

The way it dips between her breasts drives me crazy. If this weren’t a business arrangement—if it weren’t expiring—I’d be the luckiest man in the world and I’d damn sure have her in my bed.

A hand slips around her hip and I pull her closer, holding in a lustful purr. The move feels normal after doing it the past few days.

Like Nick said, we have to act the part. Happily engaged. Blissfully gliding on everything but the agonizing ache in my balls.

“You’re beautiful. I mean that sincerely. You always are, but the way that dress fits you today...fuck. No one’s going to be able to rip their eyes off you, Paige.”

Her green eyes shine when she smiles and bites her lip. “Well, thank you.”

“She *is* beautiful and no one ever takes their eyes off of her,” Reese says.

How did I forget we have an audience?

She’s right, though. The way Nick stared her down when she started working with us, I thought she’d end up another notch on his bedpost. I would have strangled him.

“Ward, you’re cruising with a lady way out of your league. Be good to her,” Reese chimes in again.

I roll my eyes for the thousandth time. Why did Grandma hire such an annoying driver?

“And you’ll be jobless if you keep up the rolling commentary,” I growl.

“Just trying to help you out, man,” she says with a shy shrug.

Paige hasn’t broken eye contact with me yet.

Her smile deepens. “I’m not sure he’d be that easy to replace.”

Shit.

Does she mean that, or is she just playing nice?

“Sure, he is,” Reese says. “It’s Chicago. Billionaire bad boys are a dime a dozen around here.”

“But they don’t all have Poseidon eyes, right?” Paige says, twining that sunshine hair around one finger.

Now she’s calling me the god of the sea?

It’s like she’s on a mission to destroy me today.

She’s wearing some perfume that throttles me with every whiff, and she’s so close I could devour her.

My head inches forward, magnetically drawn.

She doesn’t pull away.

Does she want it too, or is she just faking? I lean a little closer and raise the screen between us. If this happens, it’s private. For our eyes and wandering mouths only.

Our lips are practically touching.

She hasn’t moved away.

If she isn’t backing out, I’m not either.

Before I can flog myself back into denial, my lips claim their target. She leans in, a flutter slipping out of her. I lick her lips for the faintest second, but pull away before it goes further than a wet peck.

“I probably should have asked,” I rumble.

“I’m wearing your ring.” Her cheeks go rosy pink.

She reminds me of our words from the night we agreed to this.

The rules are different.

They are, and right now, they’re turning me into a raging bull.

My arm around her tightens and I’m about to lay it on thick when the car jolts. I look up, annoyed.

Reese pulls up to the curb at the museum and glances back at us. “Here. Party hard, guys!”

Paige laughs. “Yeah, right. This Winthrop guy’s the only person I’ve ever met with a slower pulse than the Warden.”

“Way to ruin our moment,” I whisper to Paige. “Knock it off, you two. I’ll lose a client with your big mouths.”

Reese giggles in the front seat.

I step out of the car and hold the door for Paige.

She steps out and laces her fingers through mine. “I’m a little nervous. Your friends live in a different world than me.”

“It’s an art fundraiser. You’ll have plenty to talk about. Your depth of knowledge impressed me from the moment we met.” I chuckle. “Actually, it more than impressed me then, because I thought you were drunk. I’d never had a drunk girl talk architecture before.”

“One glass, dick. And had I known my art talk gets you all hot and bothered, I would’ve—”

“I know that now,” I say, not giving her a chance to finish that sentence. “I didn’t think anyone could be so clumsy after a single glass of wine.”

“I don’t need wine to be clumsy, Ward.”

“I know. You’re lucky I agreed to one-inch heels today,” I say.

The smile falls off her face. “Are you worried I’ll embarrass you today? I’ll try to sit out most of the night. Less of a chance I’ll plow something over.”

I hate the deflated look on her face enough to wonder who put it there. What kind of losers does this girl hang out with?

“I’m walking in with the most stunning woman in Chicago on my arm. Nothing embarrassing about that, even if I do sometimes worry you’ll break a bone in shoes taller than a centimeter.”

Her grin wrecks me.

“Who *are* you? That’s such a sweet thing for a fiancé to say. Almost like you’ve done this before.”

My throat tightens.

I don’t answer.

“And for your information, I’ve only ever broken one bone, so I don’t think you have to worry about that, darling.”

“How?” I can’t hide my curiosity.

“I slipped on water, slid across a tile department store floor, and landed on my elbow hard enough to black out for a second. Um, it was just a second.” She shifts her weight awkwardly.

A chuckle rolls out of me.

“And this is what I worry about.”

By now, we’re up the stairs, and I open the glass door for Paige. “FYI, everything’s way overpriced to support the art endowment. Not a bad thing. The more money we spend, the better it looks. Anything you want, take it. Just tell them to add it to Ward Brandt’s account.”

“You’re paying me enough that I can support the arts on my own.”

“Use my account,” I demand, wishing she’d listen.

I spot Mrs. Winthrop sipping champagne next to a Rembrandt exhibit. The better half of the Winthrop couple looks decent, mostly because she doesn’t share her husband’s eccentric style. She takes a champagne flute.

“There. We need to go talk to her.” I lead Paige over.

“Mr. Brandt, it’s so good to see you!” Mrs. Winthrop squeezes my cheek between her thumb and finger like I’m still seven years old.

So maybe I forgot her attitude makes up for her lack of flash.

She looks at Paige. “You must be the fiancée I’ve heard so much about. Ward was practically raised at these events, so he’s like everyone’s grandson.”

Maybe she thinks so, but her husband doesn’t.

“How do you like working at Brandt Ideas? Oh, it can’t be that bad, right? You’re engaged to the boss.” Mrs. Winthrop beams.

I force a laugh for her joke.

Paige won't respond well to that and I can't blame her. I try forming a response, but she beats me to the punch.

"The boss is the worst part of the job, actually. Everyone calls him the Warden because he's a drill sergeant in a three-piece suit. His concern for work is also his only unattractive quality at home. But he's a sweetheart, and he's worried about protecting his company, so who can blame him? It was my dream to work for Beatrice Nightingale Brandt before I knew Ward existed."

Hold up. She just told my potential client the worst thing about me is that I expect hard work and care too much?

My God, she's perfect.

"What made you want to work for Beatrice?" Mrs. Winthrope asks.

"When I was in the sixth grade, my parents enrolled me in this fancy academy called Murchinson. The school's in the middle of a lot of acreage with beautiful trees and flowers, and the building is glass, so you can always see it. There's a hanging garden in the rafters and a waterway inside. The building was set up to never interrupt the natural scene."

"Does Murchinson have a boarding option? I think I've been there. One of my great nieces goes to school here in the States, because my nephew married an intolerable woman."

I like Mrs. Winthrope more than her husband. She's warmer and blunt, if a little heavy at times.

Paige nods. "There's a boarding option, but my parents were local so I never took it. Anyhow, at first I thought the building was just beautiful, but then I realized with all the natural lighting and scenic beauty I *thought* better at school. I fell in love with learning. I had to know who designed it because I knew whoever it was—whatever company or person—I wanted to work for them one day."

"How lovely!" Mrs. Winthrope gushes. "You were blessed with an inquisitive mind."

“Better. I didn’t expect to find out the place was designed by a woman. That was just icing on the cake. I spent several years following her designs. Most of them are green, striking, and luxurious. That’s a rare combination. When you go the sustainable route, it’s really easy to come across as rustic or too drab. But Beatrice’s work doesn’t do that. She’s modern and sophisticated, in a class all her own.”

“Wow,” Mrs. Winthrop breathes. “I think you might be the most interesting person I’ve talked to tonight.”

“That can’t be true. There are so many people here with more experience than me.”

“A lot of old windbags if you ask me.”

Paige giggles. “I don’t know about that, but I really admire Beatrice. The arts can be cruel to women even now and she was a pioneer. I can’t imagine what she went through.” She shrugs. “I really wanted to learn from her, but she retired right after I started working there, unfortunately.”

I draw Paige closer. “You should visit her. She loves you, and I’m sure she’d still teach you anything you want to know.”

Mrs. Winthrop smiles at me. “Well, it seems Miss Holly would be terribly hard not to adore.”

I plant a kiss on the top of Paige’s head. “I agree.”

She looks up at me with blank eyes.

“I think the mister’s in the corner. They have an old bottle of aged brandy back there they’re selling by the shot.” Mrs. Winthrop takes a sip of her champagne.

I smile at her.

“I could use a shot myself.” I look at Paige. “Come with me. I’ll introduce you.”

She nods and we start toward the cash bar, but we pass Martin Walker on the way. He’s a major investor behind a lot of changes to the Chicago skyline.

“Hey, I haven’t seen you in a while,” I say.

“That’s right. Not since the big downtown renovations. How are you doing, Ward?”

“I’m good.” I motion to Paige. “This is my fiancée, Paige Holly.”

“She’s a beaut,” he says.

“She’s right here,” Paige says.

I can’t help but chuckle.

Martin holds out his hand. “My apologies, ma’am. Martin Walker, a pleasure to meet you.”

She shakes his hand.

“Are you just here for the alcohol, like me?” he asks with a snicker.

“No, I think Ward’s place on the lake needs some fresh art, and I might be able to fit in a sculpture or ten.”

His laugh makes me grin...or is it just her wit?

She can be wickedly adorable when she lets her guard down.

“He’s been a bachelor until now. Lucky for him he has you to come in and spruce the place up,” Martin says.

Paige thinks she’s from another world, but she’s better at mingling in this crowd than Maria ever was. Maybe because she loves art so much? Maria did well with politicians and investors, but art and architecture was my domain.

“Paige! Oh my God, I didn’t know you’d be here.” A short brunette hugs Paige.

Paige lets go and takes my hand again. “Brina! I feel a million times better now. Magnus! Hi. I don’t have any pies today, so relax.”

She hugs Magnus Heron as he gives her an amused, somewhat painful quirk of his lips.

Brina scans the room to make sure no one’s looking. “You get used to it after a while. Just fake it till you make it, girl.”

“What are you doing here?” I ask him, shaking his hand. I don’t know him that well, but I know his image and his advertising empire, though I’ve never seen him traveling much in art circles. “Didn’t think this was your vibe, Heron.”

Magnus shakes his head, his blue eyes sharp stars. “Trying to nail some contracts, between us gentleman. If nothing else, dropping some zeros is always good for PR.”

His girl pokes him in the side. “Bloodsucker. Be nice.”

“I’m nothing but generous,” he says with a wink and a booming laugh. “My wife has expensive tastes and I’m working hard to maintain them. And all of those tastes are charity and her damned lattes.”

I actually laugh at that one because it’s too honest.

I look at Paige, who’s only spoken to her friend, and then at Magnus. “I have to ask. Did Paige really pie you?”

“Really, Ward? Here?” Paige cocks her head to glare at me.

Magnus laughs again. “She did, and I fully deserved it.”

“He’s not lying. He had it coming, but he’s still the love of my life.”

Magnus pulls his wife closer and kisses her head. Then he looks at me.

“Just so you know...” He wags a finger between Brina and Paige. “If you break up with one of them, you’re breaking up with both, and I think yours is the meaner of the two. Watch your step, Brandt.”

I throw back a smile that’s half wince.

Sabrina Heron meets my gaze with narrowed eyes. “Not this time. You don’t want to see me get mean.”

Everybody roars, but I don’t think it’s an idle threat.

“Well, I’m off looking for John Nations. Have you seen him?”

I shake my head. “Sorry, not yet. I’m making my way to the brandy, though, so we’ll catch up with you later.”

I introduce Paige to several more people. It’s effortless every time.

The chatter flows too easily, and so does the charade as our hands stay glued and her fingers pulse in mine.

The big moment has arrived.

We actually settle into being a couple.

The only thing I regret is that restrained peck back in the car. Hell, if I’d just kissed her like I wanted—free and hungry and unhinged—perfection wouldn’t be the half of it.

“We haven’t made it to the brandy yet,” I say, suddenly worried about missing Winthrope.

“Ward Brandt?” a voice calls.

“Just a second,” I say to my grandma’s attorney. I look at Paige. Her face is tense, and she’s pale. “What is it?”

“I’m just...thirsty. I’m going to get a champagne. I’ll grab your brandy on the way back.”

I squeeze her hand.

“Thanks, sweetheart. Don’t be away too long.”

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TOTALLY ORION (PAIGE)



My mouth feels like sandpaper.

We've talked to so many people and pressed so many hands I'm freaking dehydrated. I just need a drink and an intermission from high society.

I step up to the cash bar.

The bartender's eyes linger on my cowl neckline the way Ward's had earlier. Brina was right. This is a good look for me.

"Nice dress," the bartender says with a wolfish grin. "Don't mind me."

I manage the kind of smile you save for men when you can't tell if they're being sweet or leering. "Thanks. Can I get a glass of champagne and a shot of your best brandy? Oh, and water!"

"Will do, ma'am. Have you bid on anything exalted yet?" He slides a water glass over.

"A couple postmodern nature paintings and a Napoleon bust with the mister," I say, downing my precious H2O.

"Interesting choice." He slides the brandy over. "Here's your shot, and I'll have your champagne right out."

Someone taps my shoulder insistently, but I'm not bathed in warm mint.

My eyes land on an unfamiliar man who stares with a murky smile. Definitely not Ward, so who?

I'm beginning to wonder about the attention I'm getting with this dress.

"How'd you manage to land a Brandt?"

Frick. That voice. My head spins with horrible recognition.

Austin Gifford.

Older, spray tan, and more bloated looking than I remember him.

How the hell is he here? The tickets to this event only went out to members and were a thousand dollars apiece. He's clawed his way up the social ladder pretty far if he's here.

I want to die. The worst part is, his surprise is warranted.

I haven't landed a Brandt. Not really.

I'm only good enough for coffee runs, small talk, and arm candy.

Speechless, I look up at him, not sure what to say.

The inferno on my face could bake a lasagna, but I have to find some witty reply, and fast.

Ideally, before I toss my drink in his face.

This ass has to believe I'm engaged. I can't handle the humiliation of him knowing I've been a placeholder *twice*.

Is "fuck off," an acceptable response for a black-tie occasion?

Probably not, but it's all I've got.

Especially when his lips curl with frustration and he leans in too close. "Paige? Don't you recognize me?"

But before the panic hits, I'm engulfed with sweet mint and dark shadows. Strong arms wind around my waist, sweeping me back off the seat, and pressing me against a rock-hard slab of muscle.

Thank God.

When I melt against Ward in my fudge ice cream cone of a dress, it's because I don't have the energy to deal with my

flipping ex. Not tonight.

He removes a hand from my waist, but I'm still held securely against him by his other arm. "Ward Brandt. Nice to meet *you*?"

Austin shakes his hand. "Austin Gifford. The pleasure's all mine."

Ward's got both arms around me now. Probably sensing how I'm wound tighter than a drum.

"I couldn't help overhearing that you're curious about how we met. Paige is my assistant. When a woman this luscious is in and out of my office all day, it was a date with destiny. Hell, the first time I saw her, I was ready to beat the hell out of any man who touched her." He drops a kiss on my shoulder strap but brushes my bare skin with his lips, his stubble, his *oh my God*.

I've become one big goosebump.

I laugh and bite my lip.

Ready to beat any man who touched me? Yeah, that's one way to spin it. It's also an unexpected harshness as he realizes our company isn't welcome.

Ward drops my shoulder strap down against my bare skin.

Austin stares in disbelief. "How long have you been together?"

"Not long, but when you've stumbled on the One, you man up and stake your claim," Ward says, his voice a low smolder, so possessive my knees weaken. "Right, sweetheart?"

"Thank you," I mouth, but he moves a hand to tilt my chin further.

Apparently, he wants to give me the world's best distraction from Satan, and I'm not complaining one bit.

Especially when he leans down, his lips ignite mine, and his tongue flicks against my lips with a feral need. My mouth opens, meeting the pressure of his tongue with my own.

I probably overdo it since this is pretend—*isn't it?*

But Ward could fool me a thousand times with this kiss.

His tongue mingles, chases, and mesmerizes mine in all of three seconds.

Holy hell.

I break away just long enough to turn, facing those dark typhoons for eyes, and meet his lips again. My hands clasp together behind his towering shoulders. His arms fuse around my waist, squeezing my hips with an intensity that sends my brain spinning off into forbidden, scary, and very dirty territory.

Insanity, here we come.

What started as my unlikely hero saving me again becomes raw passion.

We're full-on making out in the middle of the gallery. I'm vaguely aware it's not just Austin's eyes on us anymore.

Ward breaks away after half a minute in paradise, leaving me gasping for air. My whole body trembles, but he holds me up.

Good, because my legs aren't stable right now, and I wonder if they ever will be again.

"Oh, God." I'm such an idiot. It whimpers out before I realize I've said it.

But *oh, God* is right.

Ward chuckles. "You all right, darling?"

I bite my lip. Heat fills my face.

"I was better a few seconds ago."

"Me too." His voice sounds husky, raw—or is it my imagination?

He kisses my forehead with a lingering growl.

Nope, not my imagination at all.

And said imagination isn't full of nightmares anymore as I turn and give the man who crushed my heart a pinprick glare.

“Sorry. I’m terrible with names and faces. Did we know each other?”

That smug, self-assured smile of his melts like a vampire seeing a cross. Austin shifts uncomfortably, disgust etched on his face and something like worry.

I could start doing cartwheels if it wouldn’t totally ruin the trillionaire vibe here.

“No worries. I’ll catch up to you guys later. Good to see you again, Sketch Paige,” Austin says.

I try like hell not to wince.

That stupid, stupid nickname. He just had to get a parting shot in.

“I seriously forgot he was here,” I mutter.

Oops. I said it out loud again. That kiss really popped a few screws loose in my head.

But Ward’s deep, delicious belly laugh puts me back together in all the best ways.

“Nice to meet you, Ward. Congratulations on the nuptials,” Austin says through pinched teeth, staring at us both like we’re crazy people.

“Thanks,” I clip, giving him a look that could murder.

“Pleasure to meet you as well, Anders,” Ward says.

It’s so hard not to snicker when I know he’s deliberately butchering his name.

Austin nods with disgust and disappears into the crowd.

“Sketch Paige?” Ward asks, once he’s out of earshot.

“Don’t ask,” I hiss, fighting to hold in my bitterness.

“All I know is I’d pay more than we’ve bid on today to see the look on that clown’s face again,” Ward says with a chuckle.

Oh, so would I.

We share a triumphant smile as he notices the brandy on the bar beside my arm.

“Is this mine?”

“Yep! I thought you could use a pick-me-up after all the gabbing, and it smells a lot better than that jet fuel you keep in your office drawer,” I whisper.

He picks it up with a smirk and downs it without a second thought.

“Thanks, lady. A couple of fluff speeches and we’ll be out of here,” he says with a wink.

“It’s not so bad.” I sip my champagne and smile. “I made some bids like you asked—nothing that’d drain you dry, of course. I want to circle around one more time and see if I need to up my offers.”

“Feisty and competitive. I love it.” He drapes an arm around my waist. “Need an escort?”

I grin at him so intently my face hurts.

The pain might be worth it.

If this were a real date, it would be a fairy tale come true.

“I was hoping you’d ask,” I say shyly, flicking at a loose lock of hair.

I’m enjoying this too much. I also don’t want to run into Austin alone again either.



“THAT SPEECH WENT ON FOREVER,” I whisper to Ward later, after the second keynote address.

“Are you ready to escape?” he asks, lifting his brows.

I didn’t know eyebrows could be sexy before his.

“No, they’re announcing the auction winners in ten minutes. I want to check my bids!”

“Let’s do it, Sketch Paige.”

I freeze, then lean over to him so closely my lip brushes his ear. “If you ever call me that again, I’ll kick you square in the balls.”

“You’re dangerous.”

“Yep. Mag warned you.”

Half an hour later, Ward carries the painting and bust I won to the car with an attendant. Once they’re secure in the trunk with Reese’s help, he slides into the back seat with me.

“Did you guys get your party on?” Reese asks.

“No time when you’re bidding exorbitant sums on the beauties we picked up. Plus, I found some douchebag flirting with my fiancée and had to end that shit,” Ward says.

Not funny. I can’t blame him since I haven’t breathed a word of explanation, though.

“He wasn’t flirting, Ward.” I shake my head.

“No? His eyes never left your chest until you turned to kiss me,” he says, this jealous sharpness in his tone that sends a flare up my spine.

“He may find me attractive, but he wouldn’t flirt. I’m not his type.”

“So, not just a random dog without a bone, then? You two know each other?”

A tense silence fills the car.

I’ve said too much. I should’ve just let Ward think he was another thirsty stranger.

“If he was gawking at Paige like she’s at a meat market, I hope you showed him how the rats chew the cheddar!” Reese calls back to us.

We stare at her eyes in the mirror blankly.

“Um, how the sausages get made?” she tries to correct. “Crap, guys, help a girl out. I’ve been reading my niece too many bedtime stories.”

“He was ready to eat her up, that’s for sure. If Winthrop hadn’t been there, I might have broken his nose,” Ward says so seriously I’m not sure he’s joking.

And yes, I kinda like it.

“So, you didn’t come to blows?” Reese shakes her head. “Bossman, I’m disappointed.”

I throw my hands up.

“Can we change the subject?”

“I let him know she’s mine, and no one else’s, Reese. The kid ran off with his tail between his legs. If he ever sees me again and makes a move on her, he’ll regret it.”

I clear my throat, so ready to be done with this.

Ward meets my eyes. “Sorry, his attitude pissed me off. Now, we can change the subject.”

“I’m mortified.” I glare at him.

“Because I don’t want you manhandled by anyone else?”

I raise the privacy screen. “Ward. He wouldn’t have manhandled me, and he wasn’t flirting. It wasn’t funny.”

His eyes widen as he looks at me, drinking in the sour expression on my face.

“Didn’t mean to upset you. I’m sorry.” He takes my hand, hooking those massive fingers around mine. “I make bad jokes when I’m mad. I’ve enjoyed the evening with you, and if I’ve fucked that up in the last five minutes. I apologize.”

He’s actually being sincere.

Sighing, I snuggle in closer to him and drop my head on his shoulder, forgetting Reese isn’t someone we need to put on a big show for.

Is he cool with this? He makes no effort to pull away. *Okay. Maybe that burn-me-down kiss wasn’t a freak accident.*

His arm closes around my waist, and there’s my answer.

I beam at him.

Fifteen minutes later, we're walking into the penthouse, still holding hands.

"What are you hungry for tonight?" Ward asks, peeling off his jacket.

"I could use a big fat deep dish pizza. And a milkshake."

"What a combination." He chuckles and gives me a warm side-eye. "Don't tell me junk food's been the way to your heart all along?"

I wink. "Honestly, I've got to get out of this dress before I can care."

His eyes drop to my neckline and slowly trace back up to my face. "That's too bad. It's a hell of a look."

"It's covered in beads, you mean. This thing weighs ten pounds and I'm wearing a corset under it."

He gives me this shocked puppy look.

"You need a corset? I've seen you in those office skirts, Paige. If that's a shape that needs improving, then I'm a frigging librarian."

I'm grateful for the involuntary snort that rips out of me.

It helps hide the cherry blossom blush on my cheeks. "Darling, you have no idea how lucky you are to never have to be a woman in formalwear."

"I'll take your word for it."

"I'm going to change." I start down the hall to the elevator—yes, he has an elevator inside this place. "Don't forget—pizza and milkshake!" I call over my shoulder.

His thick, honest laugh follows me.

I'm soaring.

Ten minutes later, I strut out in pink pajamas and find Ward's changed too. He lounges on the couch in sweats and no shirt.

Dear God. His muscles have muscles, and possibly their own zip code.

No exaggerating, I've *never* seen a more exquisitely sculpted chest. Definitely not one that's rocking an eagle tattoo like a mural, a fierce bird sweeping down on some mountains detailed by a black sunrise.

Lip biting time. I want to touch him, but he's too far away. Plus, there's no way to play it off when this place is so massive the blind would avoid accidental collisions with ease.

"I ordered the grub. It'll be here soon. Hope pepperoni's okay," he says.

I nod.

As long as you don't put a shirt on, Ward Brandt, *anything* is fine and dandy.

"You're staring. Does my casual look bother you?" he asks like he's reading my mind. "I'm not used to sharing this place and old habits die hard."

Yes, sir. Very bothered in all the worst ways.

Of course, I eat my thoughts and shake my head, one speed below helicopter. I desperately avoid his gaze until I hear that iron laugh.

"Are you sure? I can throw on a shirt if it makes you uncomfortable."

For a second, I open one eye and squint at his stupid, sexy grin. Is he dense or just torturing me?

"You could be a sculpture," I say before I have a chance to shut up.

Eep.

"Yeah? And how would you sculpt me?" he asks, flexing like he's doing his best Popeye impression.

Now, our eyes connect, but not for long.

We're both thinking the same thing—my hands, on him.

His growl in my ear.

My fingers exploring his form, straight down the tight fissures of his abs, then lower and lower until I'm teasing his

throbbing—

Right. He asked me a question.

I have to take all of him in to answer. The epiphany kicks like a mule.

“You’d be Orion. Totally. A warrior hunter in a pose worthy of the gods, club held high, shield forward, eyes on the heavens and ready to kick some serious butt. And they did the butt-kicking shirtless in those days, I’m pretty sure,” I say with a goofy grin.

His forehead creases.

“A celestial hunter, huh?” He snorts. “I’ll have you know I’m opposed to the assholes who hunt endangered game. A few months ago, I made a hefty donation to a startup big cat sanctuary in this North Dakota oil town.”

“You’re missing the point, Warden. You’re a human rock, ideal for a likeness. Your upper body is contoured, lines and planes everywhere. Holding up a club like the caveman you are and getting ready to whack someone would capture that beautifully. Picture how you’d look if you had a crack at that Osprey guy you hate so much.”

“Shit, when you put it like that...” A devilish smirk spreads across his face, and he stands. “Are you saying I’m beautiful?”

Uh-oh.

“Does this help?” He takes the Orion pose in his cavernous living room, a beast against the background of the finest rock hearth I’ve ever seen. “Well? Don’t keep me waiting forever.”

Kinda hard when I’m awestruck.

“Technically? Yes. You’re almost flawless—from an artist’s standpoint, of course.” *Way to dodge the question, Paige.*

“I have scars from Iraq.”

“Perfection’s overrated. They’re straight lines and light, and the ink draws the eye right off them. All warriors have

scars, Ward. It adds depth. Again, speaking technically. Don't tell me you skipped mythology class?"

"Grandma would've had a whole herd of cattle if I did," he throws back. "So I'm beautiful with depth? That might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

I shrug. "Yeah, well, thank your genetics."

There's a loud knock at the door.

"That's the food! I'll get it, I'm starving."

Ward rushes ahead of me. "No, you won't."

"What? Why?"

"Because I can see through that pink shirt, and nobody will mind my *technical* beauty," he says, pressing forward before I can react.

I look down.

Crap.

He goes to the door and I dread finding out if my shirt really is see-through.

Oh, hell.

Maybe it's not the food, but a coroner coming to record my time of death.

My nipples are definitely visible. And Ward Brandt has been staring at them the whole time, hasn't he?

Frantic, I look around for something to save me.

A hoodie I've never seen Ward wear—he doesn't strike me as a hoodie guy—hangs from a coat hanger in the corner. I grab it, yank it on, and zip up like a turtle.

The sleeves fall past my hands, so I roll them up to my elbows.

Ward reappears a minute later holding a pizza box and a tall chocolate shake. "Looks better on you than it does me."

"Oh, I'm sure," I say sarcastically, looking at my leg where the hem hangs way too low.

“But I preferred you wearing one layer, truthfully.”

I. Am. Dead.

He sets the pizza on the coffee table and presses my shake into already frozen hands. He opens the box and we both grab a slice of Chicago’s finest, tossing them on small plates his butler must leave out for snacks.

Ward takes a huge bite. “Okay, I’m not going to make you tell me why the douchebag calls you Sketch Paige, but who was he?”

“What makes you think he’s a douchebag?”

Ward shrugs, anchoring me with his stare. “Your face was red. You tensed in my arms. Something wasn’t right. It reminded me of the night I met you.” He pauses. “Paige, I’m sorry if I took it too far with that kiss. I just wanted him to leave you alone.”

I nod. “If I have to tell you who he is, I might as well tell you Sketch Paige was what he always called me. He’s my ex-fi—” I stop mid-word. Everyone calls him my ex-fiancé, but that’s stupid. We never made it that far. He’s really just the dumbass ex-boyfriend every college girl has. “He’s my ex-boyfriend.”

I bite a chunk of pizza off my fork so I can focus on chewing instead of the heated glare looking right through me.

“You almost said the f-word,” he says quietly.

I look away, studying the pizza on my plate. “He told me he wanted to marry me—”

“A lie men often use to get—”

“Yep. Hindsight, twenty-twenty. I’m not even sure if that was it, though. The night before I broke up with him, I overheard his friend saying he needed to put a ring on my finger before he graduated. He said he needed to ‘trade up,’ and had his sights on the broker’s daughter. I wasn’t good enough.”

“I knew it,” Ward snarls. “I should’ve bashed that fuckboy’s head in when I had the chance.”

An unexpected smile bites my face.

“It was years ago. I’m long over it. It’s ok—”

“It’s not okay, Paige. That was horrible, and I’m more than half serious about collapsing his skull. Also, I lied. I had to know why he called you Sketch Paige.”

I laugh. “You should have just asked. That one’s easier—”

“No, I had to know who he was and what he meant to you.”

It’s harder to pull away from his gaze than pinch a clean bite off my pizza through the gluey cheese.

“I took a sketch class in college. At some point, I realized sculptures come out better with less of a struggle during the process if I just thought about them as a series of sketches. Say I was sculpting a warrior god...I’d sketch his head, his torso, both arms and legs. Building the pieces would be easy. Just a matter of blending.”

He nods, never taking his eyes off me.

“Well, I also realized that my best concepts were a combination of things I’d seen, and that might be harder to remember later. So I started keeping a sketchbook at all times, and Austin joked I was Sketch Paige with the sketchbook. It’s as lame as it sounds.”

“How come I’ve never seen you with a sketchbook?”

“Work takes time, and I don’t have the proper equipment anymore. The stuff I do now doesn’t require elaborate sketches when the pieces are so small.”

I pick up my shake and take a gulp, welcoming the chocolate nirvana distraction.

“Do you still care about that guy?” he asks me suddenly.

I almost spit milkshake.

“No freaking way. Of course not. He was a jerk and I know it now. But he basically told me I was just a placeholder. That still stings sometimes. Makes me wonder if...no, forget it.”

I don't have to say more.

The way he's nodding in bitter solidarity surprises me.

It's a gesture that says he knows my dilemma perfectly.



SOS! It's been a week since he kissed me, and I still can't think about anything else! I text Brina.

The emojis come in ahead of her text.

Tears of joy smiley. Pitchfork. Black cat?

I grin because she's always been hilariously superstitious.

And he hasn't tried kissing you again? she sends. ***Maybe it's your turn.***

With a small gasp, I type back, ***Ha. You're on fire tonight. That's so not happening.***

Brina: Has he said anything?

Not really. He's a tyrant boss-hole at work every day. We usually get home around nine, and once we're in the penthouse, he's a different man. I thought he might be flirting once or twice, but he's probably just being nice since we're stuck together pretending we're one big happy couple. We're spending the weekend at his place on Lake Michigan. I've got "quarters" there too.

I shouldn't be so annoyed at having my own luxury rooms rent-free from a billionaire. But when you're daydreaming nonstop about that shrieking hot billionaire's lips...

Why? Brina asks.

I don't know. I think he's having clients over tomorrow or something, I send back.

Not to be a bitch, but lady... When Brina leads with that, tough love follows. ***The way I see it, you've got a few options. 1. Play this out to the end and see what happens. 2. Just ask him if he's interested. 3. He kissed you, remember?***

How could I ever forget? But Brina isn't done.

There's no good reason you can't return the favor and see where it goes.

She's too right.

Too bad you weren't this smart a year ago when you were crushing on your boss. I roll my eyes as I hit send, wondering if marrying a Chicago god upped her relationship IQ.

That was different, Paige. Mag was just my supergrump boss and we weren't faking an engagement. If people thought I lived with him, I would have just been honest.

This is you we're talking about, I send. *You would have been blunt.*

She must be distracted with her posh life and perfect husband because she doesn't reply.

I get up and change into an asymmetrical pale-blue swimsuit.

Of all the perks that come with Ward Brandt, the indoor pool is the best part, and I plan to enjoy it.

A massive pool fills the room with shimmering blue, spinning reflected light. I'm not expecting the giant occupying one corner of the pool.

Lovely. It's not getting any easier to tear my eyes away from his totally Orion chest.

"Come on in, the water's warm." He lounges against the side of the pool, a glass with a thin layer of amber liquid on the ledge.

I slip in beside him with flashbacks of middle school swim class. You know how it feels the first time you're in your swimsuit with boys who notice?

Yeah.

This is me.

Only, I'm an adult, fake engaged to a billionaire hottie, and this is—whatever this is—it's not how I imagined life in my

mid-twenties.

Shoot me now.

Ward's gaze falls from my eyes to my lips, where it lingers for a few seconds before slipping down to the bow flowing from my neckline. He stretches both arms across the gutter, meaning he now has an arm behind me.

Red alert.

Something red in the clear water catches my attention, all right.

Bright red swim trunks with a firm, unmistakable bulge. My eyes linger there too long.

Is that—did I cause *that*?

Frick. I hope he doesn't notice I'm gawking at his rather impressive—um, assets.

“You'll be happy to know this is working,” he says.

“It is?”

“Mrs. Winthrop must have put in a good word for us. Ross invited us out on his yacht tomorrow evening. I hope you don't mind coming out on such short notice.”

“That's what you're paying me for.” I nod. “It's fine. I'm glad all this acting is paying off,” I lie.

And it's not the glad part I'm lying about. It's the acting.

When I'm alone with him in his stripped-down wonder, nothing feels like pretend anymore.

He's quiet for a minute.

“Paige, I want this to be your victory, too. Is Brandt Ideas still in your future? You're going to be a millionaire. I'm not sure why it would be.”

“I don't know,” I say slowly. “I'm still trying to get through one day at a time.”

“Have you thought about what you'll do with the money? It's none of my business, of course, but you should consider investing anything left over from the studio. If you need help

with that, I have people who get paid very well to beat the market.”

“Thanks. I haven’t figured that out either, but I do know this will be the first time where I’m fully in charge of my life.”

He smiles, his dark hair hanging over his eyes, dousing my heart in flames.

“Hard to believe. Seems like you’ve been in charge for a while.”

“My parents met at college. It was kind of expected that my sister and I would go to Northwestern, too. So, I just did. I majored in art. They wanted another MBA. There was always this pressure to keep up with the other side of our family...”

“Oh, yeah. Your pop star cousin and the author, right?”

“Yep. They hoped I’d somehow wind up with money like Milah and Liv, but without the scandals, much less the dangerous situations they were in,” I tell him. “Dad would’ve helped me set up an art business after I graduated, but I didn’t want to owe my parents anything. I signed up with freelance agencies a semester before I graduated and tried to build clients. Graphic design and websites were still art, but it’s not my thing. Brandt Ideas was closer to my interests, and I loved working with Beatrice. But I don’t get the chance to create for myself as often as I’d like.”

“You’re stubborn as hell, and that’s a compliment. Grit’s one thing money can’t buy,” he says, his eyes flashing with this mad respect that warms every bit of me. “So you’d go straight for sculpture if you get your own studio, huh?”

I nod, secretly flattered he remembers.

“Do you have anything I can see? Examples?”

“Yeah, my phone’s on the lounge chair. Hang on.”

We climb out of the pool together. He picks up the oversized towel I left on the chair and wraps it around me, melting those goosebumps with a heat so divine it hurts.

My thighs pinch together as I grab my phone, open my photo album, and hand it to him.

“Here,” I say. “Have a look.”

He winces as he slides his finger across the screen a few times, taking in my early works.

“*What?*” I start laughing at how pained he looks and slap his chest. “You’re adorable. You must have found some abominations. It’s funny watching you try to keep a straight face.”

“Were you trying to butcher Tim Burton?” he jokes.

“Practice makes perfect, Wardhole. Keep going.” I wait, watching anxiously as he flips on through the gallery.

His expression softens. “Hmm. This looks like the piece in front of one of the corporate buildings Grandma designed. She modeled it after the Trojan horse.”

I lean over to see what he’s talking about and grin. The real horse statue has perennial flowering vines falling down from inside, a homage to hidden peace instead of grim-faced warriors exploding out the belly.

“Oh, yeah, I used hers for inspiration, but I had a hard time mimicking the plants as you can see.” I shrug. “At least it’s recognizable.”

“Paige, you’re the best fake fiancée a man could ask for, but whatever you decide...you’re talented enough to be the best anything else too.”

“Am I really—I mean, the *best* fake fiancée?”

“Definitely.”

Oh, man. Whatever he’s thinking, he’s so not joking anymore.

I stare at his lips. There isn’t much space between us.

It would be so easy to taste him, to run my hands up and down his body like I wanted to so badly the first night I found him shirtless.

It sucks when Brina’s right. I should kiss him, and I should love it.

I've never been shy with men.

But Ward Brandt isn't any man, and that's what makes him so wildly intimidating, a walking question mark.

Why do I feel so anxious, so riled, so afraid every time I imagine where one more unruly kiss could lead?

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SUNSET CRUISE (WARD)



U ntil last night, I never knew I'd signed away my soul.

But when I burst back in my room that night, there was no stopping the eruption. Swimming trunks down, hand against the wall, teeth grinding with her name burned on my lips, and my fist pumping my cock with my pulse beating in my ears.

When I came, I could still feel her soft ass brushing my length, the same way she did in the pool.

Paige Holly's name charred my lips when I exploded like a grunting madman.

She knew how bad I wanted her last night.

She fucking had to.

She tried to play it off for my sake, but *damn* that hard-on was damn hard to miss. No, try impossible.

Mansions, fancy cars, and nine-figure deals...I'd give them all up to be inside her.

And I know there's nothing better in store for me tonight.

She'll wear another cowl neckline. I had the closet stocked with new formalwear in her size before we came.

I'll want to dip my finger in the loop. So will every other man in the room.

A bad move, maybe.

If I want her as much as I did last night, it could be hard to focus on Winthrope, the whole reason for this whacked out

sham that's slowly chipping my brain apart.

It was pure torture not kissing her again last night, especially when she tossed her head back and laughed at my visceral reaction to her early works.

I'll have to be on my highest guard. If she shies away from me in front of Winthrope, it could ruin everything.

Would she shy away from me, though? She leaned into the last blazing kiss.

A willing participant or one hell of an actress.

Was she just keeping up appearances? Her ex was there too, of course. Maybe the scorching way she kissed me back was more about him than me, medicine for the heart.

The phone rings, pulling me away from thoughts of my beautiful fake bombshell and the hundred ways I'd like to own her.

"Hello?"

"Do you want the good news or the bad news?" Nick asks.

"There's bad news?"

What the hell is it now?

"Erm—right, I'll start with the good news then. I just left the hospital, and Grandma's fine. The doctor told me she'll be discharged soon," Nick says gently.

I sigh. "Thank God. When you mentioned bad news, I was afraid she'd taken a turn for the worse."

"No, she's great, and really, the bad news could be worse."

How reassuring. "Can you get to the point?"

"She told me Dad came to visit."

What the burning fuck? I guess I didn't scare him as much as I thought. I'm losing my edge.

"What does he want?" I snap. "Dammit, Nick, if he threatened her while she was in the hospital—"

“Let me finish! She said he wasn’t a jackass this time. Surprise. He brought her flowers, said he loved her and he hopes to reconcile. He’s worried something horrible might happen to her, and he doesn’t want it to happen while they’re on bad terms.”

My chest feels like solid lead.

“Tell me she didn’t buy that shit? He’s scheming,” I bark into the speaker, wondering why I feel like I need to convince myself it’s true.

“I don’t know. Do you want her to die on bad terms? Do you want us to?” Nick asks quietly.

I swipe a hand over my face, hating this shit.

He’s always been the sensitive one.

“As long as they die first, I don’t care. And if they don’t go first, then I have to worry about what they’ll do to everyone I leave behind.” To Nick and Grandma. Maybe even Paige. But they won’t screw with her. There’s no reason.

“Ward, you don’t have to protect me anymore, or anyone. I can hold my own.”

“Doesn’t matter. He’s scheming, Nick, it’s all he knows. Stay the hell away from him, and keep Grandma away from him too. She doesn’t need another sting to the heart.” I sigh.

“I know,” Nick says.

“Has she given any thought to what we mentioned last time?” I ask.

“Staying at her place in Maui for a few months? She was open, and the doctor said she’ll be fine to travel after a few more days of rest.”

“Good, that will give her some space. He’s probably too broke to follow her there.” I hope he is, anyway.

Nick laughs. “Give the guy a break. He’s our dad.”

“And a murderer.”

“And that was proven when?” Nick throws back.

“It was never *disproven*, and I always refuse to talk when I’m innocent too. We need to figure out what the bastard wants before he sinks our company or detonates Grandma’s heart.” I need to make another visit to the Express Inn.

If I have to beat the hell out of him, I will. He’s not fucking with my family.

They’re both too forgiving to see him for what he is. Irredeemable.

Luckily, that’s why they have me.

Nick’s quiet for a minute. “I don’t know...maybe you’re right.”

Paige walks into the room. Her dress is a pale-blue velvet corset tied with lace. Her full breasts bubble like they were made for my damnation. From the corset, a fitted full-length gauze skirt so airy the blue could almost be white with a single drop of dye flows to the floor.

It’s not a cowl neck, but I still want to shred it.

“Do you like this? I found it in the closet and thought, why not? It screams Cinderella.” She spins around in a flutter of gauzy silk.

I can feel my dick pulsing in my temples.

“...radiant,” I manage to choke out.

Nick laughs, reminding me he’s still on the call. “What are you two up to today?”

“Big meeting on the lake with Winthrop. We should probably go,” I say weakly.

“Good luck with him, bro, and with your fiancée.”

Damn. If I weren’t laser focused on keeping my eyes off her tits, I might notice him deliberately skipping the “fake” word. I cut the call and tuck the phone in my pocket.

Paige sucks her plush bottom lip. “Are you sure I look okay? You didn’t say much.”

Am I sure?

I'm sure I'd like to pick her up, skip this stupid meeting for my bed, and rip that thing to pieces. Nothing on this planet would bring me a bigger delight than sinking down inside her, legs locked around me like a vise, schooling her on how sure I am that she's the hottest woman ever.

"It's just my brother. The dress is perfection. Let's go."

I offer her my hand, not sure she'll take it. There's no one to put a show on for right now, but she does.

Fingers entangled, I lead her to the Lincoln. Reese's jaw hangs open as she holds the door for us. And when my arm goes around her waist, Paige just smiles and drops her head on my chest.

Too bad it's all fake.

A man could get used to having a Siren like Paige Holly around.



"NOW *THAT'S* A SUNSET. Are we in Chicago or Honolulu?" I ask, allowing my gaze to drop to the lower deck.

That's a beautiful sight, too, one that puts the unusually vivid sunset to shame. Paige is decked with shimmering blue and gold as the wind tosses her hair and dress around.

Mrs. Winthrope stands beside her, pushing a pair of binoculars into her hands. Apparently, she's a massive bird watching geek. I'm grateful Paige is happy to oblige.

"Indeed, it's stunning. I'm glad you accepted my invitation to come out today," Ross Winthrope says. "I was afraid you wouldn't."

I turn to him and grin. "And miss this? Why?"

He removes a cigar from his coat pocket and offers me one. I'm surprised he can even see through the neon-red aviators perched on his nose. They complete today's weirdness perfectly, though, as he stands next to me in a red suit that looks like it was washed in blood.

My gut says take it.

It's a bad idea to turn down gifts from a potential client, even if it's obvious I'm not a smoker. I gave it up after I left Iraq years ago, and my lungs protest every time now.

"No, thanks. I quit years ago and well...you know how easy it is to dive back into certain habits."

He nods, sticks the cigar in his mouth, and lights it with a flame shooting from a silver brick in his hand. "I do. I also know I've been a judgmental beast, Ward. That's why I thought you wouldn't come."

I lift an eyebrow. "Why do you say that?"

He stares past me, straight into the sunset. I hope the fiery glow parsed through those hell lenses isn't baking his brain.

"I overreacted when Beatrice had her heart incident. I let—shall we say bad news from the past?—color the present. That was hardly fair."

I'm silent. I know exactly what bad news he's talking about when my parents gave the world nothing else.

"I realize now Brandt Ideas has always been a family business and it appears to be in good hands. I shouldn't have been so quick to fret over *all* Brandts not named Beatrice. You're nothing like your old man, considering you're engaged to such a lovely creature, and very serious about showing the world your love. I'm sure your brother isn't terrible either, despite his Epicurean proclivities."

Nick's not like Dad, but he's not like me either. No point in dwelling on my brother's embarrassments with bedding starlets and entertaining Brazilian businessmen who like to drink their weight in expensive booze.

"He's a good man, even if it's hard to believe he's my little brother sometimes. When you grow up with infamous parents, you get used to gossip."

"That's unfair." Winthrope coughs into his hand.

"So is life, or else my grandmother wouldn't have wound up with heart surgery. It's just made us work harder, Mr.

Winthrop. We may be better off than we would be if we'd had a normal family."

"That's a good way to look at it, son."

Progress. I've gone from an overprivileged frat boy in his eyes to "son."

"I'll cut to the chase," he says abruptly, turning those red discs on me. "Do you have a contract on you? I'm ready to move forward."

My heart drums against my ribs.

Damn it.

I don't, and I don't need this guy getting cold feet again. I never imagined he'd come around so fast.

"Sorry, I don't."

"No problem, just send it over and I'll get it back to you promptly," he says, blowing smoke out of his mouth.

"Thrilled to hear it, sir. You'll love this hotel when it's complete. I assure you, we'll give every detail the respect it deserves. I'd stake the entire family name on—"

Winthrop cuts me off with this high-pitched laugh. "I like you. You've already sealed the deal and you're still selling me."

I snort. *Have I, though?*

This feels too easy. Or maybe I'm just used to unexpected black magic derailing good things at the last second.

We actually did it.

Ross Winthrop trusts Brandt Ideas with a billion-dollar contract.

Grandma's dream just got the jolt of lightning it needs to live.

So why the hell does it feel like it's happening too soon? We're only a few weeks into this fake arrangement. We'll have to play the contract out to keep up appearances, of course, but

what if she's less vested once she knows the contract is signed?

Winthrope's still staring at me. I fidget with my rolled-up sleeves and give back my politest grin, then turn to the horizon with my retinas melting.

"That sunset. Man. Feels like the whole universe is celebrating this partnership," I say.

Winthrope gives me a firm nod and holds his cigar up in a salute, which I mirror with the highball glass holding my mai tai.

I should be over the frigging moon, but it isn't the money or the majesty of the hotel on my mind.

It's her.

Why do I care what Paige Holly thinks?

Why do I feel like I've lost my shirt when I just hit the jackpot?



"LOOK AT THAT SKYLINE!" Paige says, letting out a low whistle.

We're sitting on a chaise on the upper deck. She's staring at Chicago just as the summer lights come on, a sight I've seen countless times.

I'm far more intrigued with the blond Persephone in front of me, forever enchanted by soft summer evenings and kissed by a lake breeze that makes me jealous. I loop an arm around her waist, not caring how possessive it seems.

I don't even think about it anymore.

It's just normal to have her delicate body in my grasp.

She relaxes her back into me. My body stiffens at her closeness, her heat, her promise of everything I desperately need.

“You’re tense. What’s wrong, Ward?” She leans her head back and smiles.

Everything.

Mainly, this urge to peel that corset off and replace it with my mouth, and then keep inching her dress down with my teeth.

“I’m fine,” I strangle out.

Fuck. My voice is an autumn rasp.

She twines her fingers through mine, my hand resting on her waist. “If you aren’t, you can tell me.”

“I know.” The words come out low.

“So? What is it?”

She’s too good at reading me.

Her soft fingertips draw circles over my hand and then dance up my arm.

I tighten my grip around her, pulling her closer, a move that only makes things worse. Her ass cheeks press against the tip of the hard line in my slacks.

The smart thing to do—the easy thing—would be to jump up and run, but I’m so drunk on this woman I can’t move.

“It’s good news, actually,” I say. “Winthrop’s sold. We’ll have the contract signed and delivered this weekend.”

She lets go of my hand and turns sideways on the chaise so we’re face-to-face. Her eyes are wide, a forest fire with the last of the dying sun. She grins so deep small dimples show, adorable dents I never noticed before.

“Holy—that’s freaking awesome! Why aren’t you popping champagne?” She elbows me playfully.

“I am. I was just thinking.”

“Ward, you’re *brooding*. What now?”

Just like that, I realize how screwed I am.

I can’t hide shit from this girl.

“We never got a chance to celebrate,” I say coldly.

“We will, silly. The whole office is going to freak when they find out.” Her smile reaches down inside me and lights my darkest lamp.

“No, I mean, we never got a chance to celebrate our engagement.” I swallow, catching her eyes as they dip in confusion. “Paige, we never got to celebrate like this.”

I pull her into my lap, wishing my body was less aroused by her nearness.

I want this to be sweet. Special. Spontaneous.

Goddamn. What have I turned into?

I’m still wondering as I cup her chin with my hand, but it doesn’t matter.

I’m not backing down. My finger caresses her cheek, and I inch her lips toward mine.

Nice and slow. A hungry, cherished offering.

She has plenty of time to pull away, but we’re alone up here with the entire city watching, the moon rising like this terrible signal God put there to scream, *shut up and kiss her, you dolt.*

And Paige doesn’t hesitate.

She sighs and whispers my name just before our lips collide in sticky rapture.

Her eyelids flutter shut, her taste undoes me, and I’m too high on this girl to stop for anything short of a brick to the head.

My tongue slides across her lips, so eager to feel her. She opens her mouth and strokes my tongue with hers, inviting me in like prey.

Her hands cradle my face, then pull with an energy that lets me know exactly how bad she wants this.

How much we’ve both been in grim denial for so long.

I slide one arm firmly around her and cover the hand on my face with my other palm.

The circles I trace over her tongue, the back of her lip, taste like a litany of sin. Every frenzied whimper slipping out of her is a one-way trip to hell become heaven.

“Oh—Ward!” she moans into my mouth.

God. If she sounds like this just kissing her, what the hell sounds will she make when I take her? When I’m finally *in* her?

I will be soon.

Maybe not tonight, but before this is over, I’ll claim her from the inside out.

Her hands leave my face, her blond hair a mess from my roaming fingers. Her arms lock behind my neck, and she shudders in my arms with a ragged moan.

“Paige,” I snarl her name half a second before I rake my teeth against her bottom lip.

“Oh,” she breathes, too deep in it to speak.

She moves to her knees, lifting up, straddling my waist.

Holy fuck.

I’ve got to get this situation under control, or our first time’s going to happen on the upper deck of my VIP client’s boat.

It can’t be here, not like this, even if my dick damn near turns into a blue fist and shakes at me.

Breaking our kiss, I rearrange her in my lap so she’s not straddling me anymore.

Startled green eyes connect with mine. Her face goes rosy and then crimson. “Oh, shit. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

She’s sorry?

Grinning, I shake my head and press my lips to her forehead.

“Stop. You’ve got nothing to apologize for.”

“I—I thought you wanted—” She sucks in a breath, face redder than Winthrope’s cartoon suit, tripping all over her words. “I mean, I thought you liked—”

“Paige. I practically mauled you and thoroughly enjoyed it. There’s no confusion here,” I growl.

“Then why—”

“It isn’t obvious?” I cup her face and devour her lips again, but I don’t dare linger. “The Winthropes could barge in any time. It’s their boat and we’re about to dock.” I pick up a strand of her hair, threading it through my fingers. “It’s gonna happen and it’ll be every bit as fuck-hot as you imagine—just not here. Not yet. Tonight,” I growl.

Her blush deepens, and I chuckle.

“Oh, right. Because I’m not the kind of girl who’d want to—er—because I’m not hot enough to—”

Because you’re the kind of girl I’ll need more than one time with, I think instantly.

I hush her with a finger pressed to her lips.

No way am I saying that last thought out loud, but I also can’t let this beautiful woman think she’s somehow not enough.

“I’ve never left any project unfinished. I just make sure I have time to complete them thoroughly, with all the details and attention they deserve,” I whisper.

Paige relaxes into me, tightens her hold on my arm, and giggles softly.

Fuck.

“You have a cute laugh.” I close my arms around her.

The boat comes to a stop.

“I think we’ve docked. We should say our goodbyes to the Winthropes. Reese is probably here.” I stand and hold out my hand.

She nods and uses my grip to pull herself up. “Oof. My legs are jello.”

“Because we kissed?”

“Because of *how* we kissed.”

Yeah. We’re saying our goodbyes and getting the hell off this ship. We walk down the staircase hand in hand.

Winthrope leans against the rail of the deck with a fresh cigar, blowing out a contrail of smoke. It’s a miracle he’s lived this long.

His wife sits in a lounge chair, working at her cross stitch.

“Did you enjoy the view up there?” Winthrope winks at me.

“Absolutely. It’s a fine ship made for sunset cruises. Thank you for inviting us.”

“Care to come back to the hotel for a drink?” he asks.

Any other time, I’d love to. I could get the contract signed before I leave, even, but I have plans. I look at Paige and then Winthrope. “It’s getting late. I need to get her home. Early bedtime.”

Paige tenses and shoots me a wicked look.

Ross Winthrope nods firmly, the joke clearly lost on him. Supposedly, he and his wife sleep in sensory deprivation tanks several times a week...or else the Roland Ospreys of the world always pull rumors out of their asses, which is more than possible.

Mrs. Winthrope stands and hands Paige the cross stitch she’s been working on. “Here, why don’t you take this. You caught on right away. A lot of girls your age don’t. You can finish it for me. It’s a ring-billed gull, just like the kind we saw at sunset.”

“Thanks!” Paige says sincerely. “I’ll give it back to you the next time we meet.”

“No, sweetheart. Put it up in the first house you live in as a married couple. You need all the luck you can get when you’re

first starting out.” She winks at her husband and throws her arms around him.

Whatever sort of weird they are, they’re madly in love after all these years, and that’s worth a smile.

The sun disappears when we disembark a few minutes later, but the deck remains just well enough lit for me to make out the words in the stitching.

“Home Is Where The Heart Is,” I whisper to myself.

Those words are a punch to the gut.

“Thank you again,” Paige says with a wave.

Her warm smile makes it impossible to dwell on the beatdown by embroidery.

“Thanks again for inviting us,” I say over my shoulder.

“After what a pompous ass I was, it’s the least I could do. I hope we’ll do it again,” Winthrope says.

“We’d love to,” I say.

I take Paige’s hand and lead her off the boat to dry land. The car waits, but Paige stops me before we get to it. The smile she wears disappears and she sobers up.

“So if Winthrope’s ready to sign...what does that mean for us?”

I draw in a fortifying breath.

“Victory. Plus, we hate each other a little less now. No complaints if it makes finishing our job easier.” I scoop her up and carry her to the car, opening the door with one hand.

Reese turns to glance in the back seat as I’m setting Paige down. “Looks like you two had fun tonight! And it’s nice to see you smile, bossman. You should do it more often.”

I can only manage a few lines of small talk.

Then I raise the screen between us and lock it so it can’t come down again, sliding in beside the woman who’s still mine, ninety-day contracts be damned.

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THE ART OF FLOATING (PAIGE)



“**W**here were we?” Ward slides his hand between my back and the seat, drawing me closer, and closer still to delirium.

I’m barely in the car when I’m airborne.

Molten eyes like sea glass peer into me. Mint washes over me. I swear he’s bigger than the entire universe.

I sigh. “What do you mean?”

He strokes his hand through my hair, each pull of his fingers an X-rated promise.

“I just sat on a chaise with the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, and I had to leave a project unfinished. Need I go on?”

Oh, God.

I press my forehead to his cheek, loving how his stubble burns my skin.

“Not sure. You’ll have to remind me,” I whisper.

“Have it your way, Paige Holly.” He slides two fingers under my chin, the better to find my lips.

He traces them like a treasure map, this hunter putting Orion to shame, before taking my bottom lip in his mouth and sucking. *Hard.*

My arms fuse around him, mewling his name—I didn’t know I could *mewl*.

“Ward.”

He pulls away from me and takes a harsh breath.

“Woman, you have no earthly idea what I want to do to you every time you make that sound,” he says.

“Teach me,” I breathe, finding his lips again with a nip of my teeth that drives him wild.

Our faces brush. Our tongues tangle. Our souls meet.

When he pulls away again, it’s so he can kiss my chin before diving down my neck. I knot my fingers in his thick, dark hair. He moves from the base of my throat, sweeping down to where my cleavage bubbles over my corset.

Holy, holy hell.

Rough lips tease the top of my breast, then open in a searching bloom of his tongue.

He lingers there, open mouth pressed against me, painting me with heat. I feel him draw something on my skin with his tongue.

A heart?

Dear God.

“Oh, you Wardhole,” I whimper, ready to be destroyed by a man I used to hate.

He picks me up like I’m weightless.

I’m completely in his lap now, fastened to him by his arms and roaming kisses.

His mouth attacks mine with a low, threatening growl. His hand cups my ankle, then slides further up, probing under the silk gauze of my skirt. Calloused fingertips graze my calf, ending me a hundred times over.

Our kiss only ends with my rough giggle when his finger skims behind my thigh.

He grins like the sex-god I know he is, continuing to draw circles on the back of my knee.

I laugh harder, kicking my leg. “Stop.”

“You’re ticklish.”

I kick my leg again, trying to rid myself of feathery fingers that tease too well.

“Am not!” I’ve gone from a girlish giggle to a full belly laugh.

Are belly laughs sexy?

His lips touch my forehead in answer. “Any other sensitive spots I should know about, Paige?”

“Find them on your own.”

Still laughing, I try wriggling away from him.

Open invitation.

Bad, bad move.

His grip tightens as his hot breath falls in waves against my neck. His finger moves from the bend of my knee, climbing up my thigh.

“Careful. We’re still in a moving car and that sounded like a challenge. What else am I going to find out about my Not Fiancée?”

I’m boneless, melting against his chest.

His soft touch moves to my inner thigh and continues climbing with wicked intent. My legs tremble, and he’s still *only* barely touching my thigh.

Instant doom.

His fingers keep moving until he finds the crease between my leg and pelvis. He traces that line, marauding across my panties, eyes like two storming suns cast in emerald-cobalt.

“W-Ward,” I stammer, scared I’m about to spontaneously combust.

And I just might because now he’s on a mission.

His hand moves to the elastic of my panties and his finger slides over it. He traces the curve of my body until he finds my opening.

Then his fingers curl. A fierce knuckle drags back and forth, owning my pussy until napalm pools in the scathing spot where our skin touches.

I throw my arms around him and try not to scream.

Ward's finger shifts up like the smirk on his lips. He finds my pearl, rubbing in laps determined to cause my obliteration.

No freaking words.

My hold on him tightens and a howl of pleasure sticks in my throat. My nails claw at the back of his neck as my legs quiver.

“Oh—oh God! *There,*” I whisper.

The hot glint in his eye deepens as that shadow of his smile lands on my lips.

His tongue invades me the way I wish other parts would—he's so not playing now—the pressure of his finger is too freaking much.

Before I can stop, I gasp into his mouth.

I swear, if we weren't in the car, I'd rip his pants open and mount him right here.

But his kisses are slow and passionate, sweet and diabolic.

He's not frantic like me, en route to the hottest shrieking O of my life. He's a human ice dam with arms and legs and evil lips.

Shamelessly, I move a hand to his arm and press on his hand, keeping it between my legs.

His lip curls, showing teeth, when his finger dips inside me.

Our kiss goes nova, his growl and my moan joined in unholy matrimony.

So much for fake.

So much for my body, heart, and soul.

I move to my knees, trying to remember how to breathe.

His fingers delve in and out of me with an intensity that matches the hunger of my kiss. Every time my tongue gives chase, his reminds me who's in charge with these hot flicks timed oh-so-perfectly.

Seriously.

This man's touch has stopped time.

The car no longer moves. The only things that exist are our faces pressed together in a carnival of caresses, and the ground zero blaze where his hand joins my body, pushing into me with a thrust that claims.

A horn bleats, but it's somewhere else. Someone else's problem.

Ward's mouth doesn't leave mine, and if he's not bothered by the noise, then—

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

Yikes. Never mind.

It blares so loud it's like it's coming from inside the car.

I hope Reese hasn't put the divider down. I jerk away from Ward, gasping. I move too hard, too fast, and I'm about to tumble to the floor. Firm hands pull me back to the seat a second before someone beats on the passenger window. I try to peek out the tinted window, but it's so dark it's no use.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” Ward says with a sigh.

He stabs at the button to lower the window.

“We've been stopped for ten minutes! People are honking at me like crazy. I, um, I got a parking ticket, boss. I tried to honk to wake you guys up, but—”

“I'll pay the ticket, Reese. Just get back behind the wheel and have a safe trip home.” Ward swings his car door open and steps out. He helps me out and then scoops me up in his arms again.

I try to forget our make out session stopped freaking traffic.

“Careful. A girl could get used to this,” I say, dragging my finger up his jaw, loving the scrape of his beard.

He leans down and brushes my lips with his.

“Maybe you should,” he says.

He carries me past the doorman, through the glass doors, and to the elevator.

Yeah, I can’t take it anymore.

I find his mouth, trace his lips with my tongue, and when he opens, the kiss overflows with a passion deluge.

He carries me to the penthouse and shepherds us through the door, only breaking the kiss once or twice for air before he sets me down.

My hands move to his shoulders and slide under his jacket. I take it off and let it drop on the floor in a rumpled mess.

“Sorry,” I squeak, wincing at how expensive his suits must be.

“I want your tongue back, not your apologies,” he growls.

Happy to oblige.

I fumble for his buttons. It’s surprisingly hard getting a button through a slit when your eyes are closed, your mind is full, and your body is a five-alarm fire.

So I just yank. A few get through the holes. A couple ping against the floor.

Oops. His shirt swooshes against the hardwood on impact.

I pull away from him to take in Orion in all his glory. That dip between his pecs still looks like a perfect fit for my hand.

So I lay it flat, wedged between those throbbing muscles, marveling. “I’ve wanted to do that since the first time I saw you shirtless.”

“What? Touch me?”

I nod slowly.

A throaty chuckle spills out of him and he holds me tighter, planting fresh kisses on my forehead. I smile up at him and put my fingers on the lace of my corset.

“Wait,” he clips, a one-word order that halts me in place.

“Ward?”

We’re moving, I think, and the next thing I know we’re upstairs and he’s laying me down on a bed bigger than a sultan’s. I giggle because it’s either that or choke in awe.

I don’t remember moving through the penthouse.

“I’m pulling that bow and unwrapping you right now,” he insists. “Hold still, sweetheart.”

He loosens it just like he promised, kissing the spot between my breasts where it rested. He unlaces the corset like he’s unwinding the Gordian knot, one thread at a time, peeling the cloth away with his brow pulled low as a thunderhead.

Holy hell.

His tongue traces circles over the top of my cleavage before plunging lower. He takes my breast into his mouth, flicking his tongue against my nipple, marking me with his teeth.

“Oh!” Somehow, I have the poise for my arms to flail at his belt until I find it.

He goes still, letting me move it through the loops, his eyes completely animalistic.

I unbutton his pants and slide them down, raking my hands under his boxers, pushing them away.

In one brisk tug of his arm, my dress is gone.

His head falls between my breasts. His lips paint my skin in soft, quick, sweet strokes. And he trails those soft, quick, sweet kisses down to my silk panties, the last barrier between us.

Ward’s teeth nip at my waist, and the cloth moves, but barely.

Oh, God. This is it.

My legs tremble. My eyelids quiver. The waistband moves a little bit more, inch by agonizing inch, baring me to this brute of a boss I can't believe I'm getting naked with.

This sculpture of a man removes my panties with his teeth and a lingering shudder of thunder in his throat.

"I've lived like a monk and I'm clean," he says, gazing into my eyes as he stands again. "Tell me I can feel you, Paige."

I know what he's asking, and I answer with a nod that turns my cheeks into cherries. "I'm on the pill. Ward, I need you."

And his kiss tells me how flipping bad that need is as he pushes me back on the bed and climbs between my legs.

I feel like a total goddess.

I think it can't get better.

But then he slides into me.

I forget how to breathe. My pussy molds to the enormous thrust filling me, hell-bent on conquest.

He anchors himself deep enough to rest his balls against my skin, his pubic bone grazing my clit, and—

And holy Warden.

We fuse together too perfectly.

His hips pull back and crash forward again, a wave of a man, pleasure made tsunami, everything wild in the slash of his hips that says he means to carve his name in my body with pure ecstasy.

His mouth smothers mine, ripping the air from my lungs.

Soft, lavish strokes of his tongue announce his greed, and a full body caress grinds on.

I wrap my arms around him, desperate to have him closer, even when we're joined in a primal rhythm that keeps coming faster, harder, beautifully.

“Paige, fuck,” he groans, eyes flashing deep in his head, twin blue fires.

His hands grab mine, throwing them over my head and pinning me to the mattress, pressing me down so tight it’s hard to tell where I end and he begins. The sinful slash of his tongue and pelvis don’t miss a beat, and *shit, I’m close*.

My legs hook around his hips, shaking, an O the size of a California earthquake pounding through me.

I cinch my legs around him and surrender to the ride.

And I can’t withstand much more, knowing I’m about to come on every seething inch of him, every hammer of his thrusts and match-strike of my clit.

Every freaking glory that makes Ward Brandt the only constellation I’ll ever want in my sky.

He breaks our kiss with a ragged groan, a rough tension in his wall of a body, and a glance that carves me up.

The tempo of his hips rises from slow and gentle to ruthless. Impatient.

I squeeze my legs tighter, holding on for dear life.

He kisses my eyebrow and returns his tongue to my mouth, a kiss that leaves no doubt what he’s demanding.

Thank God, because I’ll die if we don’t come together.

“Ward!” I whimper, mouthing his name on the charged air more than saying it.

“Come for me, damn you,” he growls, pressing his forehead to mine, and winning the war that began the day our destinies crashed together.

White-hot pleasure rips through me, courtesy of the beast who plunges his cock ever deeper, reminding me with every stroke that I’ll be owned long after this night.

Far longer than any contract.

It’s a whole new level of electric I never knew existed.

Every nerve tingles, a fiery echo of the eruption in my core.

I'm convulsing. Floating on air. I think I'm laughing—silently, of course, because I'm so drunk on this climax I can't make a sound.

This is new. I've had sex before but I've never *floated*.

With a guttural snarl, Ward drives into me one more time, plunging his steel length to the hilt. His arms tighten around me and I can feel him swelling.

“Oh, hell—Paige!”

Then comes a wave of fluid heat that sets me off again. He comes hard, ruts harder, and kisses me like he wants to break me when it's through.

It's just the right kind of roughness and God I'm in love.

But I love the afterglow, too, when we reluctantly pull apart and his head falls near mine, sharing one big pillow.

He turns with a smile that makes me think I hung the stars, and kisses my cheek like a prom date in his glory after his first dance with a pretty girl.

And for once in my life, I'm *her*.

I'm worthy.



I'M STILL REELING when I crack my eyes open the next day, scared the most amazing night of my life was just a dream.

If winding up under Ward Brandt was inevitable, a long road with a dozen nasty detours...then we just made up for it in spades.

Is this real life?

Chiseled gods don't go for plain artsy nerd-girls. My heart still wants to leap out of my chest and take flight like the hyperactive sparrow it is.

Smiling into the sunbeam splashed across my face, I reach my arm out. It lands on a fluffy mattress and a snatch of tangled sheets.

“Ward?” I turn my head.

I’m still in his bed. Alone.

Well, chiseled gods *don’t* go for plain art nerd-girls. It was real, it was fun, but it’s not the kind of thing to last.

I find my crumpled dress on the floor, step into it, and pull the corset tight enough so I’m not exposed, then shuffle to the guest suite with what’s left of my dignity.

Crap.

He sits in the game room I have to cross to get to my suite, a soul-rending grin on his face.

“Mornin’, sweetheart. That dress looks even better on you today than it did last night,” he says in this low panther-like purr. It’s still fraught with desire.

“It-it does?” I stammer.

“Technically, it looks better on the ground, but yeah. You’re damn near glowing, Paige.”

Ward, keep it to yourself.

There goes my heart again, but this time it’s bound for orbit.

Leaning against the couch, I rest my hand on the sleek leather and try to keep my gaze focused on my fingers. “So, I was thinking. We have roughly two months left in our contract ___”

“Yep,” he says, melting me in his island pools for eyes.

Crap-o-rama.

He’s not going to make this easy.

“But since Winthrope agreed—” I try again, tripping on his gaze.

“Yep. I had the contract sent the second I woke up.”

“Wow, that’s fast. Do you think we should—”

“Yeah,” he cuts me off again, his eyes leaving no doubt whatsoever what he’d like to do. “The fun doesn’t end there just because he bought our little lie. We’ve got to keep up appearances, Paige.”

“We do?” It comes out like the faintest squeak.

Why is he making this so difficult? I was going to give him an easy out, an excuse to put his shields back up, a reason for us to start keeping our distance like sane people.

He’s a careful man.

He can’t possibly want a repeat of last night...right?

But my Warden nods firmly.

“You heard me. Can’t have the guy thinking I’m doing something insane like faking an engagement to a pretty girl just to convince him I’m a decent man.”

I giggle. “Oh, of course. Who would do such a thing?”

He shakes his head, a mock-pained grin on his face. “Leave it to those Brandt boys. So, we’ve got two months, and I’ve done some thinking of my own. I hope you’ll hear me out.”

Like I have any choice. I nod briskly.

He stands, moves behind the couch with me, and pulls me into his arms.

“Paige, we could have a lot of fun with this illusion. Actually, I think we should continue just as we are until the Winthrope hotel’s well into final approval. You open to that?”

I’m nothing but open.

Not when biceps strong enough to hold up the entire world envelope me.

Dammit, Ward, I’ll play your fiancée as long as you’ll have me.

I answer him with a kiss more syrupy sweet than raw honey.

“Now that it’s settled, do you want to go out for breakfast or should I order something here?” he asks.

At some point, my gaze falls to his lips. “If you have a stocked kitchen, I could cook for you.”

“You cook?” His head cocks adorably.

“Duh. It’s an art form.” My eyes are still focused on those full lips that moved over my body last night.

He leans down and kisses me. “I’m not sure how stocked the kitchen is, but let’s find out.”

I stand on my tiptoes to kiss him again. He meets my lips. The kiss comes long, slow, and entirely obsessed.

“Paige, last night—”

Oh my God. Worry bleeds into my eyes. He’s going to tell me it was a mistake, and it can never happen again. I mean, I get it, but...

“Yes?”

“Are you sore?” He beams the world’s wickedest smile.

Wardhole. I should’ve known. He only mentioned it to humiliate me.

“Why would I be?” I throw back, jabbing my nose in the air.

His low, gravelly snort is shameless.

He pulls the lace of the very loosely tied corset. My dress falls. And my cheeks are on fire when I dive into his hungry dark eyes.

“Because if you’re sore, I can soothe you. If you’re not, we didn’t go at it hard enough, and I’m a man who fixes his mistakes.”

His bravado makes me snicker.

“You make mistakes, bossman?” I narrow my eyes and grin.

He combs a hand through my hair. “Let me make it up to you for coming too fast last night.”

That was fast? What the what? Half-hour jackhammer sessions where he almost spun me inside freaking out?

My body was ready to explode.

And that body gets swallowed by his gaze a second later when he says, “You’re not wearing panties.”

Someone’s bravado evaporates. I bite my lip.

“Um, yeah, couldn’t find them.”

His grin shrinks me into the floor. “Should I make it up to you, then?”

My face gets hot. “Believe me, you did *nothing* wrong, Ward. I...I floated.”

“Floated?” he repeats.

I close my eyes, my lips wavering.

“I never floated before. Not even once. Not with anyone else.”

It’s a hard thing to admit I’ve never come before with a man. But when your dating life consists of one incredibly selfish ex plus a few Tinder boys who could stand to revisit *She Comes First 101*, it’s easy to wind up deprived.

He’s quiet for a minute, then says, “Oh. Oh, shit.”

Like some big revelation just occurred.

I mean, it did for me, considering I’m here naked in front of a man who mauls me with every glance.

I’m suddenly feeling too bare and start reaching for my dress.

“What are you doing?”

My fingers grasp the cloth, and I start pulling it up. “I just...I need to have this talk a little less—bare?” It comes out like a question.

His eyes blaze.

Then he pulls the dress up for me, scoops me up in his arms like a bride, and sits us on the couch.

“If you were floating, Paige, then I’ve been on cloud damn nine since the evening I came to your rescue,” he whispers. “That whole stupid tried-to-get-you-fired-thing aside, of course.”

Damn, Ward. Go right ahead and make this as embarrassing as possible.

“You’re—God, I’ve told you you’re perfect. My hormones got the best of me that night when you white knighted me. You weren’t wrong to wonder about me,” I say.

“You know what I think?”

“That I was drunk and reckless and totally willing to have a one-night stand?” None of which is actually wrong, and the only thing that is might be the fact that if I were a guy, it would all be completely acceptable.

He smiles. “I think a woman who’s never floated before needs to be airborne. And once she’s mastered the art of floating, it’s time for her to soar.”

Holy Hannah.

I can’t look at him for more than a too-hot second. Not if I want to believe he’s just talking about sex, and he totally isn’t looking at me like a man who cares. Deeply.

He lifts my head off his lap, stands, then kneels in front of the couch on his knees.

“Ward, what are you doing?”

He doesn’t answer with words.

His hands cup my legs, pulling them forward. He’s arranged me in some weird seated position, but my bottom barely touches the couch. His lips start at my calf, intent on destruction, gradually inching up my leg.

“What on earth are you doing?” I ask again.

But more of those slow-burn kisses on the side of my knee are the only answer I get, right before he traces the bend with his tongue.

A rough giggle falls out of me.

“You...you don’t need to—”

One fierce growl against my skin indicates what he needs.

Oh, sweet heaven.

His head swoops under my dress, hidden by folds of pale-blue gauze. His lips roam the side of my knee again before he looks up, pinning me to the seat with gas fires for eyes.

“Sweetheart, you don’t want me to quit. I promise you.”

He kisses my lower thigh and his lips continue their long march, inching up to a spot that makes me start to shake. Each time his lips meet my skin, he drags his tongue across my inner thigh.

Apparently, floating means going much higher the second time with this man.

His tongue traces the crease between my thigh and pelvis before he looks at me. “Hey, I have a special assignment I need you to do.”

What?

“Right now?” I squeak.

“Yeah. Start counting how many times you float for me.” His tongue flicks against the little nub he tortured so sweetly last night, pushing against it and letting up.

How is he so good at this?

Oh, right.

Wardhole.

And that Wardhole’s tongue is velvet drenched in kerosene, a lit match striking my flesh, intent on leaving ashes in his wake.

God. I need more. I need him to—

His beard brushes my inner thigh as he moves against my folds, pausing to inhale my scent. He lifts my legs over his tense shoulders, securing them in place, making me a willing prisoner for his glorious mouth.

The next minutes are one hot mess of ecstasy.

Burning breath. Thundering desire. Tongue brushing everywhere, invading my folds, darting against this sweet spot that makes my toes curl.

And when he moves to my clit, pulling it between his teeth and lashing his tongue, just as I'm on the edge...

Gone.

I dig my nails into his leather sofa and push forward, riding his face, surrendering to the maniacal strokes rocketing me to nirvana.

“Ward!” His name is a ragged whisper before everything goes deliciously breathless.

I'm coming so hard I see stars.

Correction: I see *Orion*.

His kiss tickles me sometime later, bringing me out of my death-by-mouth. My body shudders as he sucks my clit one more time so tenderly, just before he looks up.

“Are you floating now, sweetheart?”

How do I even answer that? I don't want to feed his colossal ego, but the confident smirk on his lips says it's plenty well fed.

“God, yeah. That was otherworldly. You gave me everything I never knew I needed,” I whisper.

“Little liar,” he says with a deep laugh.

“Huh? No, it's just—”

“You're telling me you can't float some more?” He doesn't wait for my answer.

His tongue skims down my thigh again, moving back and forth across my opening.

Soft, quick strokes and teasing as hell.

I press a hand to my mouth, stifling a raw whimper.

Unbelievably, I'm ready for him again, like my body just up and decided it can't ever have enough of Ward flipping Brandt.

My hands fly to his head, pulling him closer to my bare body, before I realize what I've done.

"Sorry." I gasp.

I loosen my grip. My hand is still in his hair, but not demanding illicit favors.

He answers with his tongue sinking deep inside me.

His rough hand covers mine, threading my fingers with his.

"Oh. Oh, Ward." I push my body toward him and pull his head to me.

His hands move to my thighs, pushing them apart. Then his tongue carries me away, over and over and over again.

My fingers curl in his hair, urging him on, bent to this storm of a man who's upended my life.

"Ward...ah, Ward!" His name becomes my mantra as he delves into me faster, his hunger only deepening with every growl.

His tongue dips in and out, so fast it's hypnotic.

I'm on the verge of tears, this state I can't even describe, when he pushes me over the ledge.

Gasping, wrecked, and viciously sated, I tumble back against the couch with my legs still quaking and balanced on his shoulders, my hair crisscrossing my face.

I'm guessing I look like sex-addled roadkill.

But I feel divine.

He makes me feel like a goddess.

And he slides out from under me a second later, running his tongue over my lingering wetness on the biggest smile I've ever seen him wear.

"You floated, all right," he whispers.

"To the moon and back," I say with a muted sigh.

And for the next twenty minutes, every breath tastes like undiluted happiness as Ward sits down beside me, pulls me into his lap, and kisses me like the woman he's been waiting for his entire life.

Even though I'm content, I shudder in his arms.

The stars aren't supposed to shift so fast, so swiftly, and not for anything less than true love.

And I think I'll need help from all the heavens when I realize just how badly I want to belong to Ward Brandt's constellation—*permanently*—as he cradles me in his perfectly sculpted arms.

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MESSY INVITATION (WARD)



Nick strolls into my office and doesn't shut the door behind him.

"How are you, little brother?" I look up with a lazy smile.

He stops midstep, turns his face up, and slow blinks.

"Who the hell are you?"

My brows pull together. "Who else? The guy who spends his days breaking your balls."

"I can't remember the last time you asked me how I was. That's not you," he quips.

I don't know what to say to that.

Nick shakes his fool head.

"Anyhow, I wanted an update on the Winthrope contract. Trista keeps asking if she should press the button on setting up orders."

"Oh, sorry. I thought I texted you." I was preoccupied and grin at the memory. "He's ready to move forward and I think we're in a place where we can, too."

Again, Nick gives me that thousand-yard stare.

"Jesus. You're in a good mood. It's scaring me." Nick walks to my mini fridge and takes out a water bottle, twisting off the cap and glugging half of it down in seconds, his eyes never leaving me.

“Why shouldn’t I be? I just closed a billion-dollar deal.” I shrug.

“*We* closed it. Remember who came up with the sham engagement?” He holds his hands out, basking in the sun falling through my window.

“Fine,” I grunt. “You helped. A little.”

He takes another slug of water, glaring.

“Shit, I’ve seen you close deals before tons of times. You’re usually in a good enough mood to have a drink and pick up the tab. This...this is different.”

“Knock it off, Sigmund Freud. I’m not sure what the hell you’re getting at. Also, you’d make a terrible shrink.”

“I haven’t seen you this happy in—” He goes quiet, drumming a finger against his chin. “I was going to say years, but I don’t think I’ve *ever* seen you this happy.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” I throw back, just as a click of approaching heels announces my crime.

Paige stops in front of my open door.

She’s wearing a black blazer over a snug purple dress and a necklace with a low hanging pendant.

“Looking sharp today, darling,” I call out playfully.

She smiles and blushes.

“Thanks. Can I come in? I didn’t want to disturb you but since it’s open.”

“You’ve never asked before.” I chuckle.

She comes in and hands me a tall coffee stamped with The Bean Bar logo. I can’t believe a part of me misses those stupid handcuff drawings. Maybe I should give her a better reason to continue them.

“It’s black drip, but it’s pecan roasted. I thought you might like it.” She turns to leave. “Oh, hi, Nick. Sorry, I didn’t see you there. Your mocha’s on your desk.”

“Thanks, Paige,” he says, staring after her. “Will you please shut the door on your way out?”

The purple dress bobs up and down midway on her thigh with every switch of her hips.

Goddamn, can she use those hips. It’s almost worse now that I know what they’re capable of.

The door clicks shut.

“You asshole. You got laid!” Nick says, his flaming green eyes aghast.

“What?”

“You forgot to text me about the Winthrop details this weekend because you were busy getting *busy*.” He doubles over, clutching his sides, an obnoxious hyena of a man I wish I could banish to the cornfield like that infamous *Twilight Zone* episode.

“Lower your voice, dammit. We’re at work,” I spit. “How would I get laid, anyway? I don’t even have a girlfriend.”

“No, but you do have a mink of a fake fiancée who brought you flavored coffee without threatening to kill you. I wondered why she was starting to like your grouchy butt. You banged your EA.” His laughter rises, and so does my urge to throw him out the window. “Holy shit. My straightedge Boy Scout brother dipped his pen in the company ink—something he swore he’d never do. Juicy.”

I’m on my feet like an unsheathing sword.

“Shut it, Nicholas. Nothing inappropriate happened. Keep her name out of your dirty mouth.”

“You’re such a shit liar.” He rolls his eyes. “And I see a hot night or two still couldn’t loosen that yardstick up your—”

“Get out!” I bark, rounding my desk, ready to show him what it feels like to have an Italian shoe up his butt since he’s so damn fixated on what’s up mine.

He marches out, flipping me a middle finger over his shoulder.

I limp back to my seat, settling against the tall black leather with a groan.

Apparently, the price of making Paige Holly float twelve times is my total humiliation.

And a terrible part of me says I'm willing to pay it again.



AN HOUR LATER, I'm in a meeting with Paige, Nick, and Clarise Devreaux, a longtime repeat client and a friend of Grandma's.

I give Clarise the most charming smile I can muster. "Long time no see. How are you, Mrs. Devereaux?"

"I'm fine, but I was distressed to hear about Beatrice. How is she doing? Is she going to pull through?"

"Grandma's fine. It was a minor event, thankfully," Nick says calmly. "She's grateful for the flowers you sent and said they reminded her of better times in Malibu."

Clarise smiles and looks at Nick.

"I'm so glad to hear it, but I'll remind you, young man, at our age nothing's minor." Her eyes move to me. "I hated to hear it, especially with all the dreadful luck that runs in your family. When I heard she was in the hospital, I feared the worst."

"It's not all bad," I mutter.

Clarise lifts an eyebrow. Paige looks up from her laptop and meets my eyes. Nick hides a shit-eating grin, pretending he's scratching his nose.

Fuck. I've said the wrong thing, and the reason why is sitting too close, dolled up like a ripe plum.

I have to play this off. I'm wearing my lucky tie today, and Clarise knows my secret.

Smiling, I put my hand on the tie and hold it out.

“See? It’s a good day, or else I wouldn’t have this thing around my neck.”

Clarise laughs like a bird. “Your lucky charm! It’s so sweet that you still wear them after all these years. Ward, you always were a funny one.”

“Nah, Nick keeps up the comedy routine,” I say. “Now let’s hear about this expansion.”

With a happy nod, she opens the folder in front of her, rifling through some notes.

“Our candle company is really growing. I need room for eighty more people. Is building up an option? I don’t own the parking lot, so expanding out isn’t an option. And if we build up, how do I keep my employees working through the construction?”

I open her file and scan the proposal, plus the old place we renovated years ago.

“Building up is definitely an option, but we’ll need to inspect the building to find the load-bearing walls and go from there. The contractors can do a section at a time, so you can keep people working. But expanding up requires ripping off a roof. It would be difficult to keep the office as is while the work’s being done. Your best bet would be teleworking or office sharing.”

She gives me a polite smile. We run through a few more details for the next ten minutes, then she looks at me and says, “Oh, what’s the use in dragging this out? You’re hired. When can we do it?”

“Let me call my construction contractors and find a date.”

“Thank you!” Clarise gushes, picking up her purse and slinging it over her shoulder, but she doesn’t get up.

She’s not done, so I wait.

“You had big shoes to fill when your grandmother stepped away, Ward, but I must say...you’re doing a great job. Far better than anyone expected. Oh, and congratulations, you two! I heard the big news—*The Chicago Tea* even has a

wedding countdown.” She leans over and gives Paige a grandmotherly pinch on the cheek

I hold in a sigh. Even though we haven’t set a date—and we never will, I remind myself—leave it to Osprey and his tabloid scum to find some way to torture me.

“Thank you,” I force out, then stand to walk her to the elevator.

By the time she’s on her way down, I’m shocked.

Clarise was never an easy client. I expected this meeting to be difficult.

Instead, it’s like I’ve found my stride thanks to one frightfully gorgeous woman. I shudder to think what happens when she’s gone.



“WHERE ARE WE? This doesn’t exactly fit the definition of ‘on the way home.’ Millennium Park would’ve been closer. Just saying.” I tighten my hand around hers so she knows I’m joking.

Paige hits me with that grin. “But it’s across the street from Sweeter Grind, and I wanted *good* coffee.”

“There have to be closer coffee shops. We both know there are better ones. This small-town coffee shop is too damn sweet for Chicago tastes,” I grumble, leading her to a park bench.

She force-feeds me one of those Heart’s Edge truffles, though, and I almost change my mind.

It’s wet after an afternoon rain, so I put my coat down beside me and motion to it.

“Ohhh my gosh. I can’t believe I ever thought you were a Wardhole,” she beams.

“Yet you still love to use that word.”

She winks. “Why not? I invented it.”

I slide an arm around her waist, my eyes lingering on her teeth, her lips, her blond hair framing a face that's too easy to feel too much about.

“With a smile like yours, call me whatever you want.”

She leans closer and kisses my cheek. I watch her head bend to the cinnamon-perfume drink in her cup and her eyes fall on my neck.

“Okay. What's the deal with the ties? I have to know.”

I laugh, shifting on the bench.

“It's just an old tradition my grandparents started.”

“Oh? I've never seen Beatrice wear a tie.”

“When I was ten, they made me go to this glitzy charity gala with them. Grandma bought my first tie for that event. She insisted it had to match my eyes. Since then, every year after that, my grandparents bought me a new tie in the right length. Grandpa swore they were good luck. I think I started to believe in it somewhere along the way. Mostly, it's just happy nostalgia. It reminds me of them and makes me feel like Grandpa's still with me.”

Her face softens. “How long has he been gone?”

“Almost seven years. It's been rough.”

She rests her hand on my knee. “I bet. But what did that woman mean about all the bad luck your family has?” She turns her head away from me and looks straight ahead. “Brina and I searched around, I mean. Everything we found was kind of wild, but...there were so many articles. It could still be tabloid trash.”

My shoulders slump like a condemned man.

No point in pretending I don't know what she's talking about.

Paige deserves the truth. She linked her trust, her reputation, to mine with this desperate arrangement, after all.

“I'm not sure what you found, but it's probably all true. My parents are both selfish people from rich families. Dad

never appreciated the blood, sweat, and tears my grandparents put into building the firm, and Mom was no better. She was a senator's daughter. The senator filed for bankruptcy after losing his seat and having the SEC come down like a ton of bricks for insider trading. She had to find a way to maintain her lifestyle. Dad was her answer, a man with plenty of money and unlimited greed."

My temples throb, so many shitty moments flooding back.

"That's interesting. Did your dad want to be a politician?"

I scoff. "My dad doesn't want to be anything but wealthy, a playboy, and an idiot. Yes, in that order. He liked being connected to a powerful family and offered my mother plenty of money. It was a done deal."

Her eyes go wide when she meets my gaze.

"A deal. Like ours?"

Fuck, don't remind me.

For one, arrangements founded on anything but love expire, and so will this. More than that, I don't want to be anything like my father, yet here I am with this angel staring at me like we're more than a pretense.

I swallow.

"Their arrangement was supposed to be more permanent, but it was all about fast money and ladder climbing. Mom turned into a huge alcoholic by the time I was seven. She hardly talked to me, and she lurched between babying Nick and treating him like crap." I take a deep breath.

"Oh, God. Ward, I'm sorry," she whispers, rubbing my shoulder.

"I'd might as well tell you the rest. Dad drained the last of his trust fund money and used it to start a Ponzi scheme. Then the shit hit the fan and people came after him. He used his lawyers to extricate himself from any wrongdoing. He worked for the firm a few years after that. Mostly stood around talking and acting like a major asshole. Employees said he bothered

them while they were working—especially the women—so he left when Grandma made him.”

“Horrible,” she whispers, shaking her head.

“And not the end of it. He tried his hand at Vegas next. Turns out, he doesn’t have a poker face, so that resulted in huge gambling losses. My grandpa paid off the bookies because the whole family started getting death threats.”

“Holy crap. Wow. I’m so sorry you had to go through that...”

I put my hand over hers on my leg.

“I think my parents—well, all of us—finally hit rock bottom with the Parnell incident.” For a moment, I’m quiet, hating the fact that I have to rip myself open for her sake.

Her fingers massage my shoulder, crawl down my arm, and wait until I’m good and ready.

“Everyone on the yacht was drunk and high. Mom said Dad steered. Dad said Dylan Parnell steered. We don’t know who was driving, but they both blamed the wreck on the storm. Parnell died, and so did America’s favorite boy wonder movie star who never should’ve been invited to talk about a big merchandising deal with my idiot parents.” My throat feels raw.

“I’m too young to remember, but it was big news, wasn’t it?” Paige asks quietly.

“For us, that wasn’t even the half of it. My parents lived. I was so happy for them, but that only lasted so long. It would’ve been better if they were the only ones on that boat when it sank. They would’ve only hurt each other then...”

I slouch back against the bench, despising this shit.

“Dylan’s parents swore it was murder. A setup. Reporters hounded everyone for years. We had to hide in my grandparents’ house and go to boarding schools on the East Coast. We couldn’t come home without bodyguards swarming us for over a year. It was hell. Every time we tried to have a normal day, someone shoved a microphone in our face and

started slinging questions. We were kids. We had nothing to do with it.” I shake my head. “My parents are lucky they’re not rotting in jail—”

“So, you believed Parnell’s family? You think it was murder too?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Reckless manslaughter, maybe. The press made a lot of noise about smoke, but no fire. But I’m sure my parents supplied the drugs, and that was reprehensible. They were trying to pry more money out of that young man, knowing he was young, rich, vulnerable. They wanted to get him high and sign onto shit no one in their right mind would agree to sober. Things went catastrophically wrong. They divorced as soon as the investigation ended, and neither of them ever really recovered. They never learned a damned thing.”

“If they never got over it, maybe their marriage wasn’t about money. Maybe they loved each other,” she says quietly, tickling my neck with her nails.

“You give my parents too much credit, Paige,” I whisper. “The only things they ever loved were their own reflections and how much booze they could knock back in one night. Anyhow, they’re still causing drama, and I’m goddamn sick of it.”

“The letters? The boat?”

“I’m sure you know it was a replica of the yacht Parnell died on. The letters were all personal and would’ve upset Grandma regardless. I’m not having it. She can’t have another emergency. That’s what my dad’s gunning for.”

“But she’s gone to Hawaii, hasn’t she?”

“People talk. If that shit got put in a museum, she’d know about it, and it could destroy her.” I look down, my hands balled into fists, feeling a fury that’s only under control because I’ve got this beautiful woman’s hands stroking me. “Believe me, I’ll do anything to keep it from seeing the light of day. Especially that stupid model yacht. A murder-

negligence case might be the one thing to sour Winthrope on a deal. We've come too far for that."

She shifts her hand, twining her fingers through mine.

"But not *just* that, right? It's about more than the deal."

Guilty.

I don't want to dwell on it, though. I'll sound like one of those homesick grunts I made fun of back in the day, but something in my chest cavity flutters when she asks me that.

Is she asking what I think she's asking?

I close any space between us, cup her face with my hand, and lean in for a kiss. My tongue chases hers like a lion.

She matches my pressure, my vigor, my need to drink her in.

Her delicate hands come to my face, lightly stroking both of my cheeks.

I break away with a gasp. "Enough nightmares for today. Ready to go home?"

She nods. "But, Ward, are you okay?"

I answer with another kiss that feels like a mortal sin. "I'm a whole lot better than I'd be if I had to go through this crap with anyone else."

We walk back to the car, arm in arm, and once we're inside, I cradle her to me. She gazes up, her emerald eyes in a dreamy haze that makes me smile.

I love how she looks at me.

Hell, I could swim in that bright-green wonderlust all day long.

"You two look intense. What happened?" Reese's worried eyes peer back in the mirror.

Paige's chin juts out like she's about to say something.

I shake my head at her and hold her closer to me.

"We're fine, Reese," I say.

No part of me hides the way I'm clinging to Paige. When we get home, I want long, slow kisses, but I don't want to kiss her in the car again.

It makes no sense. We only made out here a few days ago, but something's changed.

Our next kiss has to be private, intimate, a sweltering secret only for us.

I can't bear to share her with anyone else.

The Lincoln stops in front of my building a little while later.

"I've never seen you two so quiet. Hope everything's okay with the company," Reese says, peering over her shoulder at us as she puts the car into park.

I open the door and help Paige out.

"We're fine, and Brandt Ideas has never been better." My words are clipped. "Take the night off."

The only thing wrong is having Paige too far away.

I wrap an arm around her waist, closing the distance between us. She's tucked under my shoulder. We move in synchronized steps until we're at the elevator.

Of course I stab the button to shut the door, shove her against the wall, and make her lips mine.

Of course I don't tear myself away until we're on my floor.

"Thanks for listening back there. I usually don't talk about my past," I say once we're back in my place, closing the door behind us and bolting it.

"That was no way to grow up, Ward, and I'm sorry you had to endure it."

"A lot of people lived a lot worse." I glance away. "We didn't grow up starving or being swapped around by sick pukes."

She nods, teeth teasing her bottom lip and drawing my eye. "Maybe, but that doesn't make what you went through easier."

Everyone has problems.”

I grin. “Even a Wardhole?”

“I guess.” She gives an exaggerated sigh that turns into a grin.

“I have a problem right now.”

“What?” Her smile disappears and her eyes twinkle.

“You’re too far away.”

“C’mon. There are like two steps between us!” She takes another step into the living room, coming closer.

“Two steps too many.” I throw my arms around her from behind, pushing against her ass so she can feel how hard I am.

Her laughter rolls out of her like Christmas morning.

Turning her slowly, I pepper her head with kisses before I stop to stare into those big green eyes.

“What are you doing?” She whispers.

“Taking you to my room.”

“Straight to the point, huh, Lucky?” She pulls at my tie.

“No. I just—” I pause.

How do you tell a woman you’re bristling with agony every second her skin isn’t on yours?

A minute later, I lay her down on my bed and sprawl out beside her. Sliding an arm under her, I close my other arm around her. She’s pressed to me, this blond bundle I want to savor.

We’re tangled together like no tomorrow as our mouths go to work.

“This.” I kiss her forehead again, letting my lips linger. “This is all I need.”

I move my hand up her back and thread my fingers through gold silk, twining her hair in my fist. She gives me a boiling look when I pull, gently at first.

Her face goes rosy when she smiles up at me.

“Ward, this is nice. I feel safe with you.”

My grip tightens. I’m squeezing her closer to me, rumbling like thunder in her ear.

“You are, sweetheart. I’ll never let anything hurt you.”

Her lips find mine with a sweetness like a strawberry love potion.

The kiss is long, slow, infused with emotion I’ve never known. It’s so fucking intense I can’t help but squeeze her even closer, then worry my arms are too tight around her. But when I loosen my grip, *she* hugs me like she’ll die if I let go.

This is a woman like none I’ve known, and I don’t deserve her. The sympathetic ear, the comfort, it was never part of the bargain.

I deepen our kiss as my cock throbs with a fever, howling to be inside her. I’m gasping for air when I break away.

“Need to take my shirt off,” I grind out, eager to be free from my clothes.

“Let me,” she says.

I can’t say no to those playful eyes.

So I flip back, easing her up by the wrists, and let her go to work.

She doesn’t frantically rip it all off like she has before. Instead, she undoes each button with slow, almost loving precision. I sit up, allowing her to peel the shirt from my arms.

When I drop to the mattress again, I’m on my back, resting one arm on the bed. The other, ready to seize Paige for life.

Her soft face rests on my chest, planting sweet kisses. The bare skin of her arm grazes mine.

Not enough. I need more, dammit.

“Arm.” Paige reaches for my other arm.

I chuckle, rolling to my side again, all so I can cradle this girl the way she wants.

“Trade you an arm for a leg,” I tell her, my mischief reflected back in her eyes.

She giggles but lays her leg over mine.

My turn.

My lips find hers like a hawk. She meets my mouth with intoxicating warmth, delicious pressure, and the sweetest flick of tongue known to mankind.

This woman is a destroyer, and feathery kisses are her chosen weapon.

The only thing that interrupts us is shifting our weight to shed clothes, and we find each other again quickly when we’re happily naked.

Paige lies on top of me, her bare legs hugging my waist.

We’re skin to skin, and she’s so fucking soft and perfect.

My teeth claim her lip—because it’s either that or else whisper something I can’t take back. Whisper something that doesn’t belong in a contract that isn’t made in the flesh.

I roll us over, throwing her gently on her back so she’s finally under me.

My hand strokes down her body, aiming for the heat between her thighs and intent on caressing until she begs for more.

But she’s already drenched.

My dick throbs so hard my heart stops.

“Damn, you’re ready,” I growl, smothering her eyes with my gaze.

When she doesn’t deny it, I find her lips again and hook my teeth in.

Hell yes, I bite her.

This wild nip of teeth she gives back, our lips sharing the newfound fury in our blood, the need to go at it so hard we *hurt*.

And it's the most beautiful pain I've ever known when I slide into her.

She gasps, her eyes flitting shut, teeth bared.

"You okay?" I ask, anchoring myself in to the hilt, loving how her pussy molds to my length.

"No. You need to kiss me. Now, Ward." The words are breathy, barely there, lust channeled and given voice.

I kiss her brows before our tongues meet again and my hips start moving.

Every thrust comes like a hot gale, slick with a need so intense it's obscene. My mouth claims her nipple, sucking it between my teeth.

I take my sweet time punishing her tits between lavish strokes.

I lay claim to every maddeningly honey-sweet inch of her.

Mostly, I try not to bust too soon because the way she shakes, jerks, and gasps on my thrusts ignites a fire in my balls like nothing else.

Her first orgasm hits in such a fierce convulsion I'm afraid the ripple around my cock might break me.

This isn't like the last few times we fucked.

Each thrust gets a languid kiss back.

Her legs fuse to me, but it's not frantic, even when she goes off in screaming fireworks of clutched limbs and wordless pleas.

She's just taking me deeper—closer.

Shit, does she feel it too?

The absolute shot of insanity when we're joined?

The one that pinches my ear and whispers a jealous commandment. *Keep her, you fool.*

That harsh voice owns me tonight as surely as I own her.

And it's too much for my sizzling blood.

My hips ram hers like a war piston, and we go careening over the hottest finish of my life together.

“Paige, fuck!” I groan, the only warning before I press deep, grinding her clit, snarling as my spine electrifies.

I’ve never come like this.

Muscles I didn’t know I had flex, intent on spilling every drop of my seed into her like rutting season just started.

We’re fucking mated, and I’m basking in her warmth and her heat and the sharp oblivion of her tight silk robbing my balls.

Yeah, it’s a damn good thing she’s covered with birth control. Because if she wasn’t, there’s no doubt I’d have her knocked up with quadruplets before this ninety days ends.

“Oh, Ward,” she moans, her voice so shrill, so beaten by our pleasure.

I stay balls deep, lingering inside her for the longest time.

“You’re the only man I’ve ever let—umm, finish inside of me, you know,” she whispers. “I always thought I’d save it for the man I’d marry.”

Shredded. She’s determined to leave me in smithereens tonight, isn’t she?

“Close enough,” I growl, before sealing her lips with another fuck-hot kiss.

Ten minutes later, she’s in my arms again and I’m teasing her lips with the same intensity as before.

She breaks away, taking rough breaths, and lays her head on my chest.

“Paige, do you really need the guest suite?”

She raises her head, her green eyes flickering with delight.

“Uh-oh. Is that an invitation to spend every night with you?”

I smile. “This room’s obviously big enough for two, and there’s no use in being lonely.”

Smiling, she bites her lip.

“Oh, Ward.” She kisses me with a new blistering intensity.

And just like that, I’m a dead man.

Rest In Paige.

I meant to ruin her tonight, but it’s the Ward Brandt I used to be who’s fading like a ghost.

She can’t hide anything.

She feels everything I do.

We’re sailing into shark-infested waters now.

The engagement was fake, but this—whatever this is—sure as hell isn’t.

It’s real, it’s lunacy, and it’s not going to stop.

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STILL A BRANDT (PAIGE)



When I open my eyes, the first thing I see is I'm being watched by a bear.

Ward. A million happy bubbles want to burst out of me. It's been so long since I woke up beside anyone, and I've never started my day beside a beast this perfect.

He greets me with a smoldering kiss. "There you are. I wondered if you'd ever wake up. I need to go into the office, but—"

"You waited for me," I whisper, totally in awe.

This time when he kisses me, his tongue traces the inside of my mouth. "Don't make a big deal out of it."

I laugh. "I won't."

"I kept you up last night. You can take the morning off if you're tired—"

"Ward, you can't treat me differently. People will talk."

"Anyone who uses your name with shitty intent is done," he grinds out like a threat. "And that's not what I meant. I need you at a conference today. No point in having you go to the office, then across town."

"Ward?"

He plays with my hair. "Yeah?"

"I'm glad I agreed to this craziness." It's not what I want to say, but it has to suffice.

I won't risk saying the dreaded L-word first and nuking my heart.

"Me too, sweetheart," he says, then he takes my lips.

Eventually, we're able to peel ourselves off each other to get ready for work. I throw on sweats and head to the kitchen to start coffee.

There, I sit at the aged blackwood table, responding to emails when Ward crosses the room. It's insane how he looks almost as hot in a suit as he does wearing nothing.

"I made you coffee. It's on the counter," I say.

He smiles.

"Thank you, but I've got a better pick-me-up." He moves next to the chair I'm sitting in.

You'd think I'd be used to his presence by now, but some things don't change. He steals every iota of my breath as he kneels in front of my chair, cups my face with his hand, and brings his mouth to mine.

My arms fall around him.

I have no idea how long we're marooned in our kiss, only that I'm dizzy when it's done.

"I'll see you tonight?"

I laugh.

"Well, I do live here now."

"And how the hell did I live here before you did?" He stands, stamps another fierce kiss on the top of my head, and leaves.

Yep, I'm slayed.

Somehow, I return to my emails and marking up documents. I like being home in my pj's but with the way things are moving at the office lately, I'm not falling a whole day behind.

A ringing phone pulls my attention away from the laptop in front of me. I glance over to see Mom's face flashing across

the screen.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hey, sweetie. How’s your faux-gagement going?”

My nose wrinkles. Could she be more cringe?

“Great, thank you. I think the gazillionaire hotel mogul’s ready to hire the gazillionaire architect who hired me.”

“Woo, finally!” An audible breath fills the phone. “That means you can move on with your life. Thank God.”

I’m silent.

“Mom, I have to stick out the ninety days we agreed on. We can’t give the guy any reason to suspect this was a ploy...” My toes curl, bracing for impact.

“I hardly see how that’s your problem. Paige, I don’t want you in this tangled mess longer than you have to be. I still don’t understand why you couldn’t just let your dad help you out with a studio. You wouldn’t have had to resort to something like—”

“Like what? The biggest success of my life? I need to do things on my own, Mom.”

“By pretending to be some rich man’s girlfriend? Have it your way. You’ll be explaining it for the rest of your life, how you got mixed up with a family with a supermodel fetish and sordid history—”

“That’s Nick.”

“What?”

“Nick, the brother, he has the supermodel fetish. I’m engaged to Ward. He’s as straight-edge as they come.”

“And yet he’s playing at being engaged. You’re pretending, and he’s paying you to lie.”

Way to twist the knife, Mom, I think with a sigh.

This is hard enough without having it pointed out by someone else.

“I hope you haven’t lost your head in this. Brandts aren’t good people, that lovely older woman aside. I’ve seen women they dumped on tabloid covers in checkout lines for ages. They always look like deer caught in headlights, never knowing what just hit them.”

She’s fixated on Victor Brandt’s sins, and I don’t know how to tell her his sons are nothing like him.

“You don’t need to worry. Ward’s nothing like his dad or his brother. I mean, Nick is pretty fun and a little broody, and Ward didn’t know what fun was before I showed up. He’s a serious guy.”

My eyes flick to the time, wondering how long this suffering will go on.

“So serious he’d fake an engagement to my daughter and let her name be dragged through the mud? A charmer, I’m sure.” Mom pauses. I can see her pinching the bridge of her nose like she always does when she’s about to drop a bomb. “Paige, this family doesn’t need more scandal. Your rock star cousin’s misadventures with addiction and strange men—”

“Mom, Milah’s a pop star,” I correct, trying not to laugh.

She only made a fortune and fame around the world with her music, and Mom still can’t nail down the right genre. Her sister, Liv, is a bestselling women’s fiction author.

I made it through art school with a 3.75 average.

Yay me.

“Whatever. She’s so famous, she shines a spotlight everywhere she goes. Milah’s last overdose was all over the news for months. Then that mafia hit with the girls...it was all anyone talked about.”

Let’s be real. It was all over the world. Milah is an international sensation.

“And Milah’s been clean for a long time, Mom. She just needed help, and Liv got through everything and landed a hot new husband. I wish I could have those Enguard guys cleaning

up *my* problems. Besides, Milah's married to her music. It can't be easy when you're famous."

My art will never rival hers. She has a dedication I'm still chasing, and a talent made to tap the sweet spot of eighty million people looking for their next earworm.

"Back in my day, people kept that kind of drama quiet."

I laugh. "Now you sound like Gran."

"Sorry. She did raise me, after all. But our family doesn't need more scandal. *I* don't. I didn't sleep for weeks when I was worried sick over your poor cousins." She sighs.

"Oh, Mom, I'm not in that kind of danger. Thank God. If you want to fret over me playing charades with a man who has his crap together and just gets a little growly sometimes, stock up on melatonin," I say with a smirk.

"All I'm saying is, think about things, dear. I don't want you hurt."

"And I'm just saying it's too late now. I signed a contract with a mammoth payoff. I have to see it through."

Also, I can't bear to see it end.

Not after the frantic nights we've shared under the hot glow of fiery kisses. When the contract is up, it's going to suck royally, coming back to real life. I can't tell her that, though.

"I don't understand why this circus has to go on if it's over. When the client signs, are you still keeping up the ruse?"

"Ninety days, Mom, and we're about a third of the way there," I say. "I can't leave Ward hanging."

"Why not?"

I don't answer.

"Paige, you're going to be crushed if you've gotten some foolish notion in your head. That man can't possibly care about you, or he never would've involved you in this. Men don't toss women they care about into their little games."

She's right, of course.

They don't, but at least Ward was open about his. That's what makes this so confusing now. I might as well wait for the fall out to be crushed.

"I'm doing a job, Mom. Is this all you called for?"

"I called because I miss you. I haven't seen you much since this crap started—" She stops.

I don't point out that she didn't see me much before I became a phony bride-to-be, either.

"Just remember, Brandts are notorious for trouble. You're going to meet a very nice man someday who wants nothing more than to be with you, and you don't want to have to explain this involvement with *them*," she continues, stressing the last word like it leaves a bad taste in her mouth.

"Mom, they're titans in the art world. The freaking skyline would look different without Brandt designs."

"Uh-huh. So respected that—that *Warden*—just has to pretend to be betrothed to my daughter for his precious appearance. That should tell you something."

I try not to burst out laughing when she realizes how well Warden fits. Guess I didn't fall far from the tree.

"Well, guess what? Hearing you tell me I'm stupid isn't helpful, okay?"

"I didn't mean to upset you."

Ugh. What *did* she mean to do then?

"Whatever, it's okay. I have to get ready for a conference this afternoon. Call you later."

She doesn't say goodbye immediately, and I know there's more. I'm not in any mood to hear it.

"Can I say one more thing?" Mom asks quietly.

"Would it matter if I told you no?"

"You're not a child anymore. Be serious, Paige."

"Fine. What, Mom?"

“I think you should talk to him about ending the contract early if his client signs. It’s not helpful for either of you to drag this out.”

Yeah, no way am I doing that.

And unfortunately, the reason why I won’t validates her concerns.

“We’ll talk later. Love you,” I say, punching End Call.

But even when it’s over, her words echo in my head. *Men don’t toss women they care about into their little games.*

Maybe I should just accept this isn’t real and move on.

My phone pings with a text from Ward. ***Reese will pick you up for the conference.***

I squint at the unexpected thing at the end of the sentence.

A heart emoji with an arrow through it.

Stop literally everything.

Who knew Ward Brandt could be so adorable?

I find myself gawking at it, wearing a smile so crooked it hurts, and physically have to slap my own cheek.

Mom’s right. I can’t lose my head...

...and if it’s gone, I need to get it back.

I go to the guest suite to change clothes. At least my clothes still keep their own closet.

Sure, my heart leaped when Ward asked me to stay in his room, but now I realize how dangerous that might be.

My dresses are probably smarter than I am when separation is key.



“YOU LOOK UPTIGHT TODAY,” Reese says.

I slouch in the back seat.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I say, even though I do.

I’ve gotten myself too deep in a situation that’s guaranteed to end badly.

“Hope this helps.” She turns and hands me a bouquet of purple flowers being clasped by a fluffy teddy bear. “Full disclosure, I grabbed it, but he picked it out. He pretty much insisted on purple roses. They’re super rare.”

Stupid sexy Wardhole.

Abandon all hope. A smile spreads across my face as I take the flowers and their fragrance hits my nose.

My fake fiancé bought me flowers. A feat my almost-real fiancé never accomplished.

I’m beaming, and it occurs to me that Ward Brandt is the only man on Earth who makes me go from sad panda to overexcited hamster in all of two seconds.

What if I’m the stupid one?

I can’t argue with everything Mom warned me against. Then again, it’s in her nature to second-guess everything I do. I shouldn’t let her get in my head.

Flowers and a bear. A nice gesture. Nothing more.

Can’t I just leave it at that?

I pick up my phone and start typing. *Thank you, dah-ling.*

Must’ve made your day if you’re doing accents by text. Enjoy the conference. I miss having you in the office, he sends back.

Reese pulls up in front of the Palmer House, and when I look up, my face resembles a sun-ripened tomato.

“I’m going to leave the flowers in the car so I don’t have to carry them around, if that’s okay?”

“Totally cool!” Reese tosses back with a grin.

I hand her the bouquet.

She lays the flowers in the passenger seat. “I have to say... Ward never struck me as the flower buying type before. You really did a number on him, lady, hacking away at that glacier around his heart.”

Do not read into it, Paige. Repeat: Do not.

“And all it took was a whole lot of messing with his coffee,” I joke, smiling as I get out of the car. “Thanks for the ride.”

The sessions are each at least an hour long. I type notes until my fingers might fall off.

I raise my hands in front of me, shake them out, and keep going until the laptop battery dies. By then, they’re calling a break with catered food.

Awesome. I’m starving and I can’t wait to find a place away from the crowd to recharge my computer. I pack up my stuff, head to the lobby, pile a plate with cheeses, fruit, mushrooms, cured meats, and olives, and escape the boisterous crowd.

I set my stuff down at the end of an oversized couch, plug in the lappy for the final leg, and cut into a cheese-stuffed mushroom. *So good.*

Deep in snack time heaven, I don’t notice the shadow blocking the light from a window I’m sitting at right away. When I look up, she almost makes me jump.

A frowning older woman with dark frizzy hair. It’s a nice color, though. A good hot oil treatment would work miracles on her.

“Paige,” she says.

How does she know who I am? I search her face and it’s a little familiar, but I just can’t place it.

She points at my chest. “Your name tag. How are the mushrooms?”

I smile tentatively. What does she want?

“Heavenly,” I throw back. “You should grab a plate and try them.”

The corners of her lips turn up, but it’s not really a smile. She nods and moves to sit beside me.

I scrunch over to the other side of the couch as far as I can.

“I’m surprised he sent you here to represent the whole company at an event this big. This is normally Beatrice’s turf, you know. He must trust you a lot,” she says softly, greenish eyes flashing.

Okay. Who is she?

She’s way too old to be a jaded ex. Not that I’m jealous, perish the thought.

Her head turns as she fluffs her bob of hair. “I didn’t think my son had any trust left in him—especially for a woman.”

Wait. Back up.

Son?

My heart stops and I try not to choke on my bottled tea.

This is the terror who birthed Ward? The narcissist who was all about drinking herself into a crater, and wound up getting that kid killed on the yacht?

I squint at her, trying to remember the photos from the articles I’d Googled.

Yes, she’s older, but there’s no mistaking that face. If you could make a thin, petrified lemon rind into a pair of lips, it’d be a good stand-in for the sly almost-sowl she wears like an accessory.

Like she knows too many appalling secrets nobody should.

“You’re Ward’s mom. Giselle,” I whisper through my numbness.

She laughs like a dry door hinge. “Took you long enough. Congratulations on the upcoming nuptials, by the way.”

Woof. Is she being sincere?

“Thanks,” I clip, realizing that if this was a real wedding—and if Ward wanted anything to do with her—she’d be my mother-in-law.

Big yikes.

She pulls a cigarette out of her purse with her bony fingers and lights it, blatantly disregarding the hotel’s No Smoking signs.

“Um, I don’t think you’re supposed to smoke in here,” I venture.

She puts the cigarette in her mouth and exhales a cloud of smoke. “Oh, honey, I’m technically still a Brandt and before that I was a Simms. I’ll do whatever the hell I please. I suppose I should welcome you to the family. Hope he’ll have more time for you than he ever does for me.”

Welcoming me to the family is pointless when she’s not part of it. But I hold my fire.

I say nothing, straining to even look at her.

She blows a puff of smoke too close to my face.

“Let me give you some friendly advice for my son’s sake. Don’t let that bitch put you under her thumb—”

Oh, no. She can’t possibly mean who I think she does.

“Beatrice is a sweetheart,” I say, meeting her eyes with an anger I can’t hide. “How could you have anything against her?”

Giselle snorts, the one mannerism she might share with Ward.

“Keep believing that, missy. Oh, she might start off perfectly charming, but it’s all for show. She’ll run you off the instant you step out of line.” She takes another drag from the cig. “My ex-husband was a flawed man. I’d never deny it, but he had to learn it somewhere, didn’t he?”

If she wants an answer, I’m not coughing it up.

I don’t want to play whatever twisted game she’s after.

“Sometimes the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” she continues. “I know people think Victor’s a disgrace, a spoiled brat gone rotten. You weren’t around when his dad was alive, but you can take my word for it. Godfrey Brandt was a very nice man. He learned that shit from his mom. She screwed her son up so bad he’s a total basket case, and then she wanted my poor sons so she could play with them like dolls, too.”

I don’t mention that’s because Giselle was a chronic alcoholic and a danger.

“You think I’m full of horseshit, fine, but let me tell you this,” she says sharply, wagging a finger at my face. “Beatrice Brandt wants to be the only woman in any Brandt boy’s life. If you get under her thumb, God have mercy.” She scans me up and down. “You’re not his usual type, but you look like a nice girl. I’m sure you’ll make Ward very happy—assuming you’re real.”

Assuming we’re real?

So, our farce isn’t even believable to this wretched woman?

Panic time.

“What do you mean, Giselle? Why wouldn’t we be ‘real?’” I throw back my most dismissive eye roll, making finger quotes on that last word in the air.

With a dead look, she puts out the cigarette on the bottom of her pump and tosses the butt in the trash can at the end of the couch.

“I’ve heard a lot of things lately. Like Ross Winthrop becoming awfully interested in using Brandt Ideas for a new hotel development.” She pauses long enough for the air to solidify in my lungs. “Look, I’m sorry the old crone had a heart attack, and I hope her ticket isn’t due to be punched anytime soon. Still, I wonder...what extremes would Beatrice use to get her way if she’s had a brush with the undertaker? The grand hotel was on her bucket list forever. Would she get her sons to lie for her? Would she recruit a sweet little slice of

arm candy to keep Ward company for an engagement based on less noble things than love?”

Holy crap.

I don't say anything, flattening my face like a stone. It doesn't really matter if it was Beatrice's idea or not. It *is* a scam to close the hotel.

And if I give Giselle the tiniest hint she's clearly fishing for that she's right...who knows what this strange, scary woman might do?

I wrinkle my nose and try to stare her down.

“Look, lady, if you're here to insult me—”

“It's not you I'm insulting. The fairy god-bitch was always a schemer—she had to be to get as far as she did—and she's always had Nick and Ward twisted around her finger. They'll do anything she says.” She shrugs with a sad sigh. “For Ward's sake, I hope this time around it's less damaging, anyway.”

Damaging? What?

Ward said she has drinking problems. Maybe she's drunk or high off her butt right now because she's making no sense.

“What damage do you mean?” I ask, hating that I'm too curious not to.

“Oh, you know, his last engagement...it was over in the blink of an eye. I don't remember how long they were together, but he clearly loved her.”

Loved her? My world is spinning.

Ward made it sound like he didn't talk to his mom. And flipping engaged? Before me? Not that we're really—

No. No, she's not getting in my head, and I'm letting her.

She's got to be wrong. Ward would've mentioned a past engagement, I think.

“Get help,” I bite off, standing, inviting her to get the hell away from me.

“I see I’ve upset you. How unfortunate. This time will probably be different,” she says flatly, without budging from the sofa. “But if you guys have kids, they can’t call me grandma.”

Who would want to? I think with a sickly twist of my stomach.

“They’ll have to call me Gigi or something like that. I’m too young to be a grandma.” She winks, and I can’t tell if it’s a real attempt at a joke or a torture tactic.

I’d never allow kids around this odd cataclysm of a woman.

Or maybe I just want there to be something wrong with her because she’s telling me things I don’t want to hear. The worst part is, I can’t dismiss everything as pure insanity. Or deliberate sabotage.

Ward never mentioned being engaged, and Beatrice did give this sham engagement her stamp of approval...

I frown, hating the Googling I’ll have to do later to prove this lady crazy. She could be lying or embellishing a lot.

“Well, I have a conference to get back to. It wasn’t nice meeting you,” I quip, not bothering to look back as I gather up my things and slip away.

Once I’m back in the conference room, I cringe while my fingers punch “Ward Brandt engagement” into my search bar.

A few links pop up but they go to 404 error pages or old blog posts long since deleted. There’s just a single remaining piece from the local gossip mill, *The Chicago Tea*.

And holy monkey balls.

Ward was engaged to a supermodel distantly tied to the Spanish monarchy.

Maria Duchessny.

Figures.

So bad mom wasn’t lying. Why did he hide it, though?

I can't be mad. It's none of my business who he dated before I even knew him.

Besides, this is a contract. An arrangement with mind-blowing sex. I shouldn't care.

Still, I blink back poison tears that shouldn't be there as my heart starts pounding. There's no picture in the article, but I imagine she's gorgeous and refined and exactly right for Ward's bulging, ink-covered arm.

I clench my phone and rush to the ladies' room. I don't even bother packing up. I call Brina in a desperation fever.

Pick up. Please. You can't not answer.

"Hey, Paige," she says a second later. "Is something wrong?"

"Ward...Ward was engaged to this Spanish princess slash supermodel and...he never bothered to mention it," I say between harsh breaths.

For a moment, she's quiet.

"Why would he? It's just a contract, right?"

"No, you're right. I'm being ridiculous and I know it, but...Brina, I'm *being* ridiculous. I'm freaking out over a Wardhole." A searing tear rolls down my cheek and my lip quivers. "Wait. Did you know about Maria?"

"No, of course not. Paige, what set this off?" she asks gently.

"His mom found me at the Built Better Conference. She said a lot of nasty things about Beatrice Brandt, and then she told me all about his past engagement. She also thinks we're probably only engaged because his grandmother was desperate to close on the hotel. She sees right through us, and I'm worried. If she gets in touch with Winthrope..."

I swallow a jagged rock in my throat.

"Well," Brina starts. "Listen, I don't think it'll go that far. She seems pretty shadowy if she's been out of Ward's life this long like you said, right?"

“You don’t understand. We—well, we—”

“You slept together!” Brina finishes with a gasp. “Whoa. Was it good?”

Aaand I’m all out of tears now as an emotional freight train slams through me.

Shame. Regret. Memories. Growls. Smiles. Laughs. Tears.

Also known as love, that cactus-thorn cocktail with a bittersweet aftertaste—and somewhere along the way, I was stupid enough to get drunk on it.

“Paige?” Brina calls my name again, waiting patiently.

“I’m still here. And yes. He was being so sweet to me. I’m not sure it matters now. All the red flags are waving, Brina. My mom called me this morning and reminded me how stupid this is because men don’t play games with women they truly care about. Then when Reese came to pick me up for the conference, she gave me this cute bouquet Ward bought, so I thought maybe Mom was wrong and he actually likes me.” I wipe my eyes, sniffing needles.

“Gah, oldest trick in the book,” Brina scoffs. “Billionaire bad boys are all the same. Mag aside, I mean. And your mom’s wrong about one thing. Women men care about are the *first* they play games with because they’re too damn scared just to be honest.”

A shaky smile pulls at my lips.

I miss Brina and her bluntness. I wipe my eyes again. “His mom said she doubts we’re real, and we won’t last. I’m worried what she could do with that information.”

“You didn’t give her any proof, right?” Brina asks.

“No.”

“Well, I don’t know Ward well enough to say if he cares about you or not, but he doesn’t not care. That much was obvious when I saw you two together. Before you go nuclear, go home and just ask him about it. If it’s all a game, it gives him a fair chance to tell you. And if it’s not, he’ll probably tell you that, too.”

Probably.

Yeah, right.

The day I get anything but heart-stabby signal noise from Boss Grump the Irresistible is the day they'll need space heaters in hell.

But for once, I hope against hope that Brina's sage advice hits the mark.

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INAPPROPRIATE (WARD)



It's six o'clock, and Paige hasn't come back to the office.

Strange. I asked her to return after the conference and give me her immediate impressions. Notes can't always suffice for some things.

She's never not followed a professional directive.

I drum my fingers on the desk, trying to ignore the scenarios playing out in my mind. If she hadn't been there when Reese went to pick her up, I'd know about it. If there was an accident on the way home, I'd know about that too. Grandma had the car equipped with world class security and emergency alert services.

After another minute of trying to be the heartless, steely-eyed avatar I present to the world, I fucking crack.

I pick up my phone and start typing, ***What are you doing?***

Working. What else? she texts back less than a minute later.

You're supposed to do that here. I add a devil emoji to the end.

God help me.

It's worse that I'm teething my lip, waiting for the second when my phone pings again a minute later.

I went home, Ward. Didn't see the point in going downtown again.

What the hell? What's eating her? Is this some new game?

I asked you to report in. Especially about the folks you met there. Notes can't summarize tone or facial expressions like a human brain, I send, doing my damndest to keep it polite.

A few seconds later, she replies. *Sorry. If you really want me, I'll be there. I just thought I could get more done here today.*

Shit. I may be bad at texts but I know when a woman wants distance.

You don't have to, the report can wait.

I just wanted to see you.

I glare at the screen, wondering who just typed that. What the hell has she done to me?

Then my phone chimes again.

Okay! Be there soon.

I reply instantly. *Don't. I'm coming home.*

And I do, heading downstairs and hopping in the Lincoln, locking eyes with Reese in the mirror.

“Was Paige okay today?” I ask, hating how I can't even hesitate.

“She's been a little weird. What did you do to her now?” Reese flings back.

“The whole day? She was fine when I left this morning. You gave her the flowers, right?”

Reese pulls into the street.

“Well, she seemed kinda miffed when she got in the car to go to the conference. I just assumed you were fighting about something. Brandt men do a lot of boneheaded things—”

“I didn't ask for your opinion of me or your—whatever your deal is with my brother,” I snarl.

“Relax! I was mostly talking about Nick...” She clears her throat and looks away quickly, turning red, making me wonder

what the hell is up with her and my brother. “Anyhow, she blushed and got excited about the flowers and the cute bear. She loved them. I thought that was that. But when I picked her up, her eyes were red, and she wouldn’t say more than two words.”

“We didn’t fight,” I insist, my hands balling into fists.

Reese laughs. “Someone pissed her off. Lucky it wasn’t you, I guess, because if looks could kill...Paige must have ninja moves.”

“*Who?*” My question rockets out harsher than I realize.

“Down, boss. Jeez.” Reese holds up her hand. “I don’t know. I told you, she didn’t say anything.”

I sink back against the seat, thoroughly bewildered.

What fucking gives?

Paige is warm, friendly, and always helpful. Who would possibly want to hurt her?

This caveman urge to smash in the face of whoever did her wrong tears through me.

“When I find out, they’re dead,” I grunt, more than half serious.

“Calm down, Rambo-Romeo.” Reese snickers. “Overprotective much?”

I don’t respond.

Soon, the car stops in front of my building and I jump out, almost forgetting my briefcase in the rush to the elevator.

“Paige,” I call as I walk through the door.

When I don’t find her on the couch, I stalk past the wine room, taking a quick glance through the kitchen, then beeline upstairs to my room.

She’s not there.

“Paige!” I call again, my heart hammering louder and meaner with every step.

By the time I rip her guest suite door open, I've lost my shit.

Too soon.

She's flat on her back in bed with her phone hovering in front of her face.

"I thought you were working?" I clear my throat, raking a relieved hand through my hair.

"I finished what I was working on and decided to call it an early night. I like pacing myself sometimes. What are you going to do? Fire me?" She doesn't even look up.

I laugh because she's right. I can't fire her until the engagement shenanigans end. But the oddly deflated aura around her isn't the Paige Holly I know.

"What's wrong?"

She casts me a half glance. "Nothing."

Total bull.

Crossing the room, I flop down next to her. "I left a different girl this morning. What happened to her? Talk to me."

Sighing, she puts her phone down.

Fuck, Reese was right. Her eyes *are* red. Irritated. Wounded.

"I just...I met your mom, Ward."

I do a double take as she nods.

"That's a rough day," I growl absently, trying not to launch into the instant anger surge I feel. What the hell did Mother say to her?

Slowly, I trace a puffy eye with my fingertip, cradling her face.

"Did she upset you?" I ask, searching her eyes.

"It's just allergies," she lies, strumming the fury vibrating through my veins.

Yeah. If her medical records on file with HR don't confirm a prescription for an Epi-Pen, Giselle will pay.

"What are you allergic to?"

"Smoke," she says quietly.

Maybe it is allergies. Partly. My mother always was a walking chimney.

"Where did you run into her? People don't smoke inside the Palmer House anymore."

"She's still technically a Brandt, and before that she was a senator's daughter, right? She can do whatever."

My jaw pinches.

That sounds familiar, and not at all like the girl I'm fake-engaged to.

"Shit. So you really *did* meet my mom—those are her words. Paige, if she's done something—"

"I'm fine, Ward. She strutted up and sat down right beside me during a break in the panels. She practically blew smoke in my face."

"Because she thinks we're engaged?" I guess, shaking my head. "If this goes off the rails, it's not because we don't look engaged enough. It's because my parents could fuck up a billion-dollar lotto win."

She smiles faintly, her eyes distant.

"That's the first smile I've seen since I got home." I lean over and kiss her lips. "Don't let her get to you. She doesn't have the guts to sabotage what we're doing. It's Dad I'm worried about with that bullshit."

"She said something interesting," Paige says.

"Yeah?"

"Well, it's none of my business, but—"

"You've tied your reputation to mine," I cut in. "It's your business. Our business, woman."

“Are you sure? I guess I was just surprised to find out you were engaged before this.” She bites her lip and turns her head away. “It wasn’t fake that time, was it, Ward? But your mom clearly knows that I am.”

Fuck. My gut churns, sick with bad memories, so much crap packed into that singular statement.

“You didn’t admit anything, did you?”

“Of course not. If that’s what you’re worried about, don’t be. We’ve come too far to ruin this,” she snaps. “Could you go? I need sleep.”

She needs to know I’ve got her. I never concealed anything to hurt her.

Hell, being *able* to get hurt was never part of this sham. It just happened, and we’re still falling a little deeper with every illicit kiss.

I slide an arm under her and try to pull her closer, but she anchors herself to the sheets, intent on keeping her distance.

“I thought you were staying in my room?” I ask quietly.

“That wasn’t in the contract.”

I turn my head and try not to laugh. That won’t help, but damn she’s cute when she’s pissed and stubborn.

“I was engaged before, if you’re dying to know. It ended badly. Her name was Maria, and she was from a different world.”

Slowly, Paige turns and faces me again.

Finally.

“Like me, you mean.”

“No. Like I didn’t have the pedigree to walk in her footsteps. Her father was from Spain, a distant royal. They were old money with access to big, powerful names. Not the kind of people who enjoy getting a whiff of any dirty laundry,” I say, swallowing the bitterness that tries to creep into my voice.

“I heard she was a princess.”

I look at her. “What else have you heard?”

“She’s a supermodel. Maybe a superhuman princess,” she says with a snort.

“She’s a model. Not a princess—the noble titles are tenuous at best, even if they were very proud of them. Point is, her family was wealthier than mine and far more blue-blooded.”

“Wow. I kind of thought Brandts were the cream of the crop.”

“Hardly. In the billionaire world, we’re comfortable, but still very much new money.” I clasp my fingers together, trying to work out the tension.

“So what happened?” she asks, her voice unsure if she wants an answer.

“The Parnell incident was ripped open again after we announced our engagement, just like my dad—and probably my mom—wants to do now.”

“Why? I don’t get why your parents think it helps them to keep bringing up a horrible experience.” Her green eyes flicker in the shadows, baffled and afraid.

“Dylan’s family started a civil suit. They couldn’t get anywhere poking at the criminal justice system, not with flimsy evidence and the killer lawyers my parents enlisted. The new lawsuit put it back in the headlines. And right now, I think my parents hope that if they bring it up again, Grandma will pay them to go away.”

“That’s crazy!”

“*They’re* crazy. Anyway, with Dylan’s death rehashed and Dad mouthing off about it publicly, there was a ton of bad press. Maria told me to my face she deserved better, but she wouldn’t back out. She gave her word to marry me. I told her she could walk the fuck away and blame me. She chose not to, swore it would all blow over, and I was relieved. Truth be told, I didn’t want more humiliation. In the media’s eyes, I’d go

from being the billionaire bad boy with psycho parents to the billionaire bad boy with psycho parents who was also dumped by a duchess.”

“You’re not bad,” Paige says with a whisper of a smile.

“You’d like to believe that.” I wink, trying like hell to lighten the mood. Really, I’m trying to deflect the ache tainting my bones.

“But you couldn’t move past it, could you? She became your ex.”

“I’m getting there,” I whisper, running my hands over my face before I continue. “We made the mistake of having this big engagement dinner for our families to meet. I didn’t invite my parents, because—well—you’ve met my mother.”

Paige nods, barely breathing as she waits for more.

“Dad got pissed he wasn’t invited and showed up anyway. Drunk as a skunk, of course. Grandma asked him to leave, and he grabbed a bottle of wine off a waiter’s tray and smashed it against the table. He yelled and screamed at everyone there until the cops came.”

“Oh my God,” she hisses. “Ward...”

“It gets better. They dragged him off in handcuffs because he refused to go peacefully. As you can imagine, dinner ended early. I went back to my penthouse, wondering how I’d ever explain the shitshow, and Maria arrived a little later. She didn’t hold back. I’ll never forget her words, when she said, ‘I don’t see how I’ll ever have a normal family with kids. Not with that hideous man in my life.’”

I pause, watching as Paige’s eyes widen.

“Key word being *my life*. Not *ours*. I knew where it was going then. She cut my heart out and the worst part is—the fucking worst—I couldn’t blame her. No one should have to put up with the shit Nick and I deal with. So I told her I’d make it easy and call the engagement off. I expected her to act upset, then tell me I was right. No, she just smiled and hugged me. She thanked me for doing the right thing, for freeing her,

and walked right out the door.” I’m pinching the bridge of my nose, the physical pain numbing the sting of that night.

“It’s okay,” Paige whispers, stroking my arm. “She sounds like a selfish piece of—”

I don’t let her finish.

“No. I was selfish that night. I could’ve put Nick to shame with my stupidity when I hit the closest bar and brought some woman home. One of Osprey’s bloggers got a nice picture of her leaving with me the next day when I gave her a ride home. Rumors flew that the engagement ended because I cheated. Maria never spoke up to clear the record, not after she was back in Paris and far from Chicago drama. I never corrected it.”

“Holy shit. That’s almost worse than Austin!”

“I’m over it,” I grind out, hoping that’s true.

“But you loved her?”

With a heavy sigh, I shake my head.

“Maybe once in another life. Maybe I was just fooling myself. Anyone I can extricate from my life that easily, I couldn’t have had much of a connection with.”

“You have no reason to protect Maria. What she did was disgusting, Ward.”

“She didn’t deserve my family’s BS. She panicked and bailed for herself. Frankly, you don’t deserve it either, Paige. Can you imagine if you were stuck in this abusive drama web that has no end? It’s no damn wonder I’ve lost my capacity to love. You don’t need this shit. You’re the warmest person I know.”

“What did you just say?”

She stares at me, her lips trembling.

“I don’t want a dysfunctional life for you. Not after we’re moving ahead with Winthrope. Your parents worry about you. Your dad called me after you gave them the NDA, you know. He told me you’d better come out of this better off than you

went into it, or he'd castrate me. And if anyone ever asked why it ended, I'd admit to wrongdoing."

"Crap! I wish you would've told me sooner. I never wanted them butting in," she says, turning a shade paler.

"Your old man was looking out for you, and he should. That's the kind of family you deserve. You don't need a man who can't feel."

She stares at me like I'm insane and purses her lips into a thin pink line.

"What?"

She inches closer and cups my face with her hands, brushing her fingers through my short beard.

"Ward, you're so wrong. You can still love just fine. You love Nick and your grandma like crazy. You'd do anything for them. You're only a dick to people in the office to hide how much you want the best for them. And with me, you care—you care *so much*."

Damn her, I want to deny it.

Instead, I pull her closer, gripping her wrists, and this time she makes no effort to stop me.

"I know it hurt, but you should forget her. Any woman who'd throw away the chance to be with you because your parents belong in a nuthouse isn't worth your time. You're no loveless beast. You're just a bossy grump who doesn't know how to let down his guard."

Before I can blink, her mouth attacks mine.

I open, tracing her bottom lip with my tongue, needing her taste more than I need oxygen right after I've flayed myself open.

My brain throbs like hell, trying to figure out why.

Or am I just struggling to admit the reason because I fucking know?

Paige trembles against me as her arms tighten around my neck.

She pulls away just as I slip my teeth into her lip, gasping for breath.

She's not alone.

Goddamn. This girl pierced my armor.

My defenses are useless around her, and I have no idea how I'm supposed to walk away from this when our contract is up. So I kiss her again, deliriously stumped, and all because I want to find out how to reach deeper than her body and taste her soul.

I know how absurd this sounds.

I know how dangerous.

I know how I feel about her—far stronger than I have any right to feel.

Could I do this to her? If I'm not sane enough to walk away when the contract ends, could I condemn her to being a Brandt?

Would she even agree to it after meeting my mother?

It's one thing to offer comforting words. It's another kind of hell to actually live in this family and the never-ending mess.

“Paige, if I asked you for something, would you do it?”

“If I could,” she says.

“Don't come in this room again. Put your clothes in my closet. Don't wait for Grayson, I'll move them myself.” I knot my fingers around the comforter and wait.

Wait, because her answer matters more to me than it should.

More than anything, Winthrop included.

Her mouth answers with a crush of sweetness and such force my head hits the mattress again.

Fuck, do I love the way her tongue moves in my mouth, like she wants to inhale me.

I pull her on top of me and mold her body to mine.

She takes several ragged breaths before breaking away in a whisper.

“Done.”

One word from her heart-shaped mouth, and I’m grinning like a fool.

She’s agreed to share my room even after meeting Giselle Satan Brandt.

Maybe she *would* agree to my insanity? If only I’d let her.

Standing, I grab her and sling her over my shoulder.

“Hey, what? What are you doing?” She squeals and starts pounding my back playfully, kicking her long legs.

“Taking you to our room,” I growl, holding her tighter as she giggles.

“Ward, I’m so glad you chose me to—to be—”

I know what she means even if she can’t finish the words.

Smiling, I readjust her so I’m carrying her like a bride now.

“Yeah, sweetheart. Me too.” I set her on my bed, lie down beside her, and wind my arms back around her where they belong.

“Why did you come home early today?” she asks, twirling her hair in that way that murders me.

“You want the truth or a pretty lie?”

She pauses and stares, eyes lit like a purring cat’s.

“The truth, bossman. Never anything else,” she says.

“When you didn’t come back to the office, I knew something was wrong. I had no idea it was as bad as meeting my mother, but I know when you’re off.”

“So, you were worried? That’s adorable.”

I glare at her.

“No,” I lie.

She laughs and kisses me on the cheek.

“Are you sure that’s all she said? Picking at our arrangement? You were upset. I’ve never seen you so shaken, honestly. Worse than the day your ex showed up at the art gala.”

“She wished me luck—if we’re real. I know it shouldn’t have upset me so much. We’re not real, but I didn’t like how she acted. Like she couldn’t even fathom you choosing me. And I hated how she blamed Beatrice for basically everything.”

“She despises Grandma and always has. Mother blames her for the financial collapse she found herself in later on, and the divorce. If Grandma hadn’t cut them out of the trust, she thinks they’d still be married.” I shrug. “Who knows. Money’s all they care about. In fairness, Grandma knows about it, and approved of this arrangement. She even thought it’d be fun.”

And God help her, she was right, I think to myself with a smile.

“But it was Nick’s idea,” Paige says.

I love the way she wants to protect my grandmother to the end.

“It doesn’t matter whose idea it was,” I say. “I got the best end of the deal—spending time with a beautiful woman who cooks and kisses like a devil. Winthrop committing is almost just the icing on the cake.”

She grins. “Awww, you probably tell all the girls that.”

“Only the ravishing ones who kiss like sin made flesh.” I brush my lips to hers for effect. But she doesn’t back away and a second later, we’re joined in another withering kiss.

When we break away, Paige molds her head to my chest. “You asked for a favor. Can I ask you to return one?”

“Anything.” My fingers crawl through her silky hair.

“Don’t make me learn anything else from a chain smoker in a hotel lounge. No more big secrets, okay?”

Fair enough.

“She only knows what she reads. I agree, though, we’ve made it this far and you’re entitled to anything I know. I wasn’t hiding the engagement, Paige. I just don’t like reliving it. I keep hoping I’ll forget.”

I stare down at the rock on her finger, bizarrely wishing she’d let me put it there without an expiration date.

A wild fantasy, obviously.

Also, the way things went up in smoke with Maria should’ve been a lesson. Brandt boys aren’t meant to marry.

I can’t bring Paige into this mess. Can’t let family dynamics I was cursed with destroy such a good heart, one more fragile than her biting sass lets on.

My grip around her tightens.

I have to make the most of the days we have left, and then give her back to the happy life she deserves.

Nothing else is sane.

“I need the key to your apartment,” I say.

“Huh? You made me swear not to leave your room. And why would you need a key to my place?”

“You’ll find out tomorrow night,” I tell her with a wink.



IN THE MORNING, I give Paige’s key to Reese so she can take something hostage.

I also leave her with a list of strict instructions.

We’re at the office for ten hours, working nonstop. Even faint whispers of the big Winthrop project were good for the firm’s clout. We’ve got a stampede of new clients beating down our door.

Once we’re finally home, I say, “Let’s go to the dining room.”

“Did you already order dinner? We weren’t here to accept the delivery.”

“Just go. No questions, brat,” I say softly.

A table against the wall holds a tower of Italian appetizers, a bottle of sweet red wine, and chocolate-dipped strawberries. The table seats ten people, so it’s perfect for this. Her tabletop kiln, sculpting wheel, and a bowl of clay are at one end, with two place settings and a candelabra at the other.

Paige’s mouth drops adorably. For a split second, I think she’s forgotten how to speak before she whirls around and flings her arms around me.

“Ward! You...you did all this for me?” She stands on her toes to kiss me and I kiss back with an equally furious joy.

“I did it for myself.”

She laughs. “Yourself? What?”

“Yeah, tonight’s the night. My fiancée’s teaching me to sculpt,” I tell her matter-of-factly.

“Ward,” she says the word like it’s scripted, and also like she’s not done. There’s more on her lips.

“What?”

She’s on her toes kissing me again, her leg curled around mine. I want her to enjoy the food and the clay, but the way my body reacts to her—thunder vibrates my blood.

Placing my hand under her thighs, I hoist her up, aligning us perfectly.

She wraps both legs around my waist.

I pull away from the kiss to take a breath, then our mouths crash together again like that spot where oceans meet, desperately trying to join.

My hand moves up her thigh, under her skirt, and up to her—*bare?*—bottom.

“Shit. You’re not wearing panties, you minx,” I say with a rasp that burns.

Her satisfied giggle ends the kiss early. She's so red-faced I smile.

"Do I even want to know?" I ask, cocking my head.

"I keep hoping we'll be alone one day and you'll be—inappropriate. In the office, I mean, and I thought—"

I blink. "Inappropriate?"

"You know. Like on your desk. The janitor's closet. Somewhere tiny and secret or in front of the whole city through the windows. It's all the same." She's grinning sweetly and awkwardly.

I burst out laughing, amused and brutally turned on by her hot, tense expression.

"Hey, don't laugh! Wardhole," she mutters.

"I'm not, but there's a certain code in the office," I say, knowing I'm damn near fated to break it now. Still, I won't give up without a fight.

Her forehead creases like she's offended.

"I can't keep my hands off of you in this house, the car... but you know that. Still, I won't risk making a spectacle of you or our relationship at work."

"Wait. We have a relationship?"

Fucking hell.

I'm not ready to answer that mishap, so I walk to the empty center of the table with my girl still clinging to me and lay her across it.

I know when to shut it and I think my dick appreciates me more for it.

"What are you doing?" she whispers, finding out a second later as my hand runs up her leg and hikes up her skirt.

"What we can't do at work, though I may keep a room on call at the hotel up the street. I'd rather have you for lunch any day, Paige." I sink down on my knees, dragging my lips up her thighs greedily.

“Oh, Ward,” she whispers, the first of many times.

The second time that phrase leaves her mouth, I think I’ve convinced her we can be inappropriate damn near anywhere.

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HIGH MAINTENANCE (PAIGE)



“If we flipped this around—” I point to a wall on the design plan. “It would require less backsplash. We’d get the same look but lower the bid because we’d need less imported tile. I’ve seen Trista’s estimates.”

“Uh-huh.” Ward’s eyes flick between his phone and computer screen.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

“What did I say?” I ask, frustration rising.

He plays with his phone again.

“Ward!”

He looks up at me. “Buy the imported tile. Just tell accounting I approved the budget.”

“That’s...not what I said.”

“I trust you on this one,” he says quietly.

For a second, I wonder if this is some new game, but his eyes are dull, even in the summery sun filtering in.

“What’s wrong?” My hands land on my hips, waiting.

But his eyes are on his phone again, reading.

“Nothing,” he grumbles.

“Yeah, right. I’ve never seen you this distracted. What’s wrong?”

He pushes his chair away from his desk and pats his leg, finally looking up with a bearish sigh.

I sit in his lap.

His arms close around me a moment later.

“I didn’t want you mixed up in this,” he begins. “But since we agreed you wouldn’t find out any shit from other people, I guess I should tell you. Nick and I tried calling my dad. He’s not answering. He’s not at the cheap travel motel either. We don’t know where the hell he is, and I don’t know what he’s planning if he’s disappeared. I just know it’s not good.”

It all makes sense now. I lay my head on his shoulder.

“I hope he didn’t find out Beatrice is in Hawaii.”

“Same. I can’t help but think this is the calm before the storm. It’s about to go down,” he says darkly.

“Your parents are walking trauma. Not sure there’s any ‘storm’ coming, it just feels that way because you’ve had so many bad experiences. I bet he’s given up and moved on to the next scheme.”

“Hope you’re right,” he says.

“If something happens, we’ll get through it together,” I say, searching his deep, dark eyes. “I promise.”

“That’s the thing. You shouldn’t have to ‘get through’ this. A million dollars can’t be worth it.”

I grin. “It’s a million and a half, and I want my money pretty bad.”

He lips turn up in this kissable pitchfork.

“If you backed out, I’d still pay you. You’ve definitely gone above and beyond the call of duty.”

I turn in his lap so I can see that gaze, sharp as a ceremonial dagger. “If you canceled the contract, we’d still get through whatever comes next. Together. You’re stuck with me now, bossypants.”

His smile warms me faster than the balmy sun crisscrossing the office.

“I have no idea why a woman as beautiful, talented, and lively as you wants to be mixed up with a Wardhole—or my insane family—but sometimes I’m glad you do.”

I wrap my arms around his neck, proving just how mixed up I want to be.

He kisses me, but his body feels stiff, almost rigid.

I pull away and slide a hand over his face.

“You’re still tense.”

He nods. “You should probably get up before someone sees us like this. Compromising positions feed a lot of gossip.”

“Oh, right, because sitting in my betrothed’s lap is the scandal of the century. Should I text it to that Osprey guy?”

He laughs, but doesn’t argue. His cell rings, he accepts the call, and puts it on speaker.

“Hey, Ross, how are you?”

“I’m good, but son, I have some bad news. Someone’s out to get you,” Winthrope says.

My heart skips a few beats.

“Get me? What do you mean?” Ward demands.

“It has to be one of your competitors, I’m sure. It came in an unmarked package and without any hint who sent it. I can’t tell you who to sue, but I’d get an attorney and investigator going on a libel case right away.”

Well, crap. Apparently I was wrong. A storm *is* coming and the feral look on Ward’s face says he’s ready to barrel straight into the headwind.

“Can you be more specific, please? What was in this package?” Ward asks.

“The packet of info claims your engagement is a scam to con me into thinking you’ve grown up.” For a second, it’s dead silent until Winthrope continues. “Don’t worry. I didn’t

give a second thought to that outrageous nonsense. I've seen you two together. You'd both have to be professional actors to bamboozle me. I *saw* the love in your eyes, and that fine young lady hangs on your every word."

I'm doubled over with the sigh of relief hissing out of me.

Ward looks like he's ready to find whodunit and skin them alive.

"Mr. Winthrop, thank you. I deeply appreciate you passing this along," he says coldly.

"Certainly. I just wanted you to know. I'm probably not the only client the vultures are trying to poach. I can forward you the packet if it will help you get to the bottom of this. It's simply diabolic that someone would use the transition going on in your firm right now to swipe clients. A changeover caused by a wonderful, talented woman's health slipping, of all things. If you do find out who it is, tell me. I'll have someone this unethical blacklisted. If they'll do it to you today, there's no telling who'll wind up in front of the firing squad tomorrow."

"Absolutely. Thank you again. Forwarding the info would be very helpful," Ward says, his fist clenched so hard in front of him his knuckles are bone-white.

"Consider it done. I hope the next time we talk it's under better circumstances. Mrs. Winthrop wants to know where Miss Holly registered for the wedding. Send me a message when you find out."

"Of course. Thank you," Ward says.

Winthrop cuts the call.

Then it happens.

Ward slams his jackhammer fist against his desk so ferociously I jump, pressing a hand to my drumming heart.

"Who...who do you think it could be?" I ask, cringing because I already have a good guess.

"The six-foot pile of crap I call dad. Who else?" he growls, before his face softens. "Sorry. I knew it was coming, but

having it dropped on my head...”

“Are you sure, Ward?”

“Who else would it be?” He’s quiet for a minute. “Mother? She’s not this bloodthirsty.”

“If you know it’s your parents, why did you ask him to forward the information?”

“Evidence. Plus, I have to keep him thinking it’s from a competitor. Otherwise, he’ll run for the hills.”

“Calm down. We dodged the bullet. Let’s not forget that,” I say softly, taking a step toward him, but he shifts his chair, avoiding my touch.

“We’ve dodged nothing, Paige. Not yet. And it won’t end until I’ve shut this shit down. There’ll be other grenades, and if Winthrope is a dead end they’ll go to *The Chicago Tea*. The asshole won’t stop until he gets what he wants. That’s how my father is. He’s greedy, dirty, and never figured out how to think.”

He picks up his office phone and punches a direct line button.

“Nick, get your ass in here.” He hangs up.

Nick Brandt comes through the door a second later, his easygoing grin replaced with a scowl. “What’s your problem now?”

“Not what, *who*. And the answer is, our fuck of a dad,” Ward says.

“Jesus. What’s happened?” Nick asks, taking a chair.

I listen tensely while Ward fills him in on the call and the mystery character assassination packet.

My heart aches for Nick when he looks up, his face morose, loaded with decades of pain caused by these people.

“What are we going to do?” he asks.

I don’t hear Ward’s answer.

I'm too busy beginning to understand the dark side of becoming a Brandt.



A FEW HOURS LATER, Ward calls me into his office.

It's the first time he's spoken to me since the phone call ordeal earlier.

"You rang?" I push his office door open.

"I need the biggest black drip you can find. And if you can't, six shots of espresso, please," he says.

I quirk an eyebrow. "Friendly reminder, the coffee runs aren't back on the table just because you said 'please.' But I know you're having a bad day, so I'll get your coffee because I care. Not because I'm your fake whatever."

"Thanks," he says, giving back a smile like the sun.

Oof. It almost makes putting up with his growliness worth it.

He's so tense he's gone from sculpted Orion to militant Hercules.

I linger in front of his desk, waiting for more, but it never comes. I'm off to The Bean Bar with a fluttery smile, and when the barista passes me the cup, I pull out a pen and quickly sketch a certain constellation—only this hunter wears a long, exaggerated tie.

"Back so soon? Thanks, sweetheart," he says, barely looking up.

He doesn't notice my little doodle.

I ignore the cue to exit, clearing my throat. "Ward, are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah, just can't afford to lose focus. You should concentrate on your job, too."

What the hell?

“I hope that wasn’t implying I don’t do my job,” I say sharply.

That gets his attention. He meets my eyes.

“No. You work your cute ass off, never any doubt about that. Sorry. We’re all on edge.” He sighs, leaning his massive body back in the tall leather chair.

His new angle makes him notice what’s on the cup as he lifts it for another slurp. For a second, that mile-wide grin returns with a slow understanding nod.

I smile back.

“Thank God. You had me worried, Paige. I was starting to fear I’d have to settle for your smart mouth and never get another message by coffee cup again,” he says with a chuckle.

I wink at him and return to my desk, my heart twisting like a rag. I want this easy banter and loaded smiles.

I want it *all*, truth be told, and I know I can’t have it. Not while his psycho parents are out there scheming up so much misery. I stay long into the evening, even after my own work is done, hoping for some tiny crumb of good news.

Around eight p.m., Ward emerges from his office and blinks when he sees me. “You didn’t have to stay this late.”

“And you don’t need to work yourself to death, mister.” I stand, reaching for my purse, my eyes searching his for any hope.

It’s not there.

When we head down the elevator together and step outside, Ward almost climbs into an Uber waiting for someone else and not the usual jet-black Lincoln.

My heart aches for him.

This stress is making him lose it.

Back at the penthouse, he still doesn’t have much to say. He orders dinner like we do several times a week. I only cook if I want to.

I grab the mobile order when it shows up, put the food on the table, and go to his study. “Dinner! Hope you’re hungry.”

“Thanks. I’ll eat later. Don’t starve yourself waiting up for me,” he says, still hunched over his computer, a ragged fighting look on his face.

Right.

I promised Ward I’d stay out of the guest suite and I’m not sitting at that massive table by myself, so I grab my General Tso’s chicken and flop down on the couch. At least Netflix still has time for me.

He hasn’t come out of his office by the time I finish dinner and binge-watch three episodes of a small-town suspense series inspired by the intrigue in Heart’s Edge, Montana.

It’s closing in on midnight when I pad to his office again and knock softly on the door.

“Ward?” I try the knob and open it.

He pushes his chair around to face me. “What’s up?”

“Do you need help? If you’re crunching this late, you shouldn’t have to do it alone.”

“You can’t help me with this,” he says darkly. “It’s not technically company business...even if my asshole father wants it to be.”

Right, because I’m so incapable.

“Well, why don’t you take a break so you can eat sometime tonight?”

His face looks like I’m tearing him away from his pride and joy.

“Paige, I’m fine. It’s just a late night like a thousand others I’ve had in my life. If you’re tired, rest. Whatever else he’s trying to steal from us, I’m not letting him take your beauty sleep,” he growls.

I cast him a longing look, but I know there’s no winning. Not without an elephant to pull him away from his desk.

Just before midnight, I lie down in Ward's California king bed alone. Should I have gone to the guest suite? Or would that upset him more? Does he expect to find me here?

I'm a mess of nerves and restless thoughts for at least an hour until sleep overtakes me.

At least he's in bed when I wake up in the morning with a dull white light flowing in, illuminating every hard ridge and nick in his skin that makes him so unbearably beautiful.

And so deserving of much more.

I'm reaching out to stroke his back when he turns over. His steely jade-blue eyes greet me with a massive yawn.

"Morning. My back feels tight." Ward sits up and turns his head from side to side with an audible crunch. "Shit. My neck hates me too."

"You want a massage?"

"Nah, I'm good."

He's not good.

There has to be something I can do.

It's not just the latest ambush from Victor and Giselle. He's withdrawn so much this past week, and after we've moved past this hoax to something approaching real.

If he doesn't get out of his head, I'll lose him, and it's all that's on my mind as we dive back into another grinding day.

We work fourteen hours straight, fielding design questions for the Winthrope team, and negotiation contracts for several smaller clients. Even Nick seems on edge, growlier than usual, and Ward only speaks to me if he needs a file or a follow-up.

We're practically limping through the door of the penthouse that night with a packaged meal from Grayson waiting when he starts for his office.

"Hold up! Haven't you worked enough today?" I call after him.

“The *other* work isn’t done till it’s done,” he says with a grimness that leaves no doubt what that other work is.

This quest to put away his parents is killing him.

I close my eyes, dreading what I’m about to say.

“Look, I know your cup runneth over with the parentals going rancid, but it’s just...you’re very distant, Ward. After you invited me to live with you—live like a real couple—I thought—”

His brisk movement doesn’t let me finish.

Ward turns away from his office, steps back to me, and presses his lips to my forehead with a searing force that scares me. “I’m sorry for worrying you. I just need time. There’s a hell of a lot going on right now, Paige, and everything on the line.”

I nod. I get it.

“I could help if you’d let me—”

“No. Not this. I promise you, we’ll be in the clear soon enough, and you’ll be richer and drama free.” His eyes fill mine with total assurance.

That’s the thing. I don’t *want* to be done with this. I don’t want it to end if shedding the drama means losing him.

But I don’t have the energy for more words, and he goes to his office without waiting for me to speak. My stomach twists.

If I don’t find a way to help him out of this insanity, there’s no future for us.

“Think, Paige. There has to be a way,” I whisper to myself, mulling everything over.

The Brandt-Simms ex power couple are both manipulative, self-centered, and skate the law like an ice rink. Blackmail seems to be their go-to, but what if we flipped it around?

There must be something on Victor and Giselle we can hold over them.

Something that would make them shut up and disappear.

Cracking open a blood orange kombucha drink from the fridge, I take a biting sip and let it fill me with determination to hop on my laptop.

An hour later, I'm frowning.

Nothing new comes up in search that isn't already common knowledge. Victor has a few DUIs and misdemeanors for disorderly conduct. I hate drunk drivers, but a ticket for hitting a tree while drunk is nothing compared to drowning a beloved actor.

Giselle was rumored to have been an uptown madam for a while after her divorce, but there's no hard evidence and no prostitution busts. I also doubt she'd care if I could prove it.

They're both self-propelled nightmares. There has to be something else.

I need help, but since this is beyond Brina's skillset...

I glance at the time, grateful it's a couple hours earlier in California.

My cousin, Liv, answers on the first ring. "Paige? Holy crap, it's been forever!"

"I know, lady. I miss you. Still killing it with your books?"

There's a long pause on the other end where I can imagine her awkward, giddy smile. "The latest was on *The New York Times* list for ten weeks! So, um, I guess you could say that. Turns out people really love grumpy single dads in small-town sagas."

"Way to slay, cuz. Can't wait to see your stuff on Netflix someday." And I totally believe I will.

"Oh, Paige, I can't imagine! I'm flattered, but...something tells me this isn't why you called, is it?"

"How'd you know?" I ask with a smile.

"Your voice. You sound a little tired and a lot worried."

I sigh. Leave it to the kick-ass author to read people like a book—and read them so well she deserves all the lame puns.

“So, I know this might be a big ask, but you’re the only one who can help me. I need information—well, *dirt*—on two people. Victor Brandt and Giselle Simms.”

“Ohhh, scandalous. Did they pee in your cereal?”

“Umm—not mine. They’re hurting someone I care about.” I’m afraid to say more.

“Oh, no. If it’s that kind of danger, I’ll have Riker go straight to Landon Strauss, and he’ll use the full weight of Enguard to—”

“No, no!” I rush out. “Not *that* kind of danger. No one’s facing hit men or creepers like you and Milah had to. We don’t need bodyguards. This is more like...a blackmail thing?”

My heart climbs as I realize it’s not that far off from the scary threats on her life Liv went through before her hot future hubby saved the day.

“Wait. Your fiancé?” she asks quietly. “I saw you were engaged. Ward, right? I can’t believe you didn’t call me for wedding tips yet!”

Oh, boy.

“It’s complicated, Liv. But I know you’ll understand,” I whisper. “So let’s leave it at ‘engaged’ for now, and in a couple of months, I’ll explain why I didn’t call.”

“Gotcha. But you need dirt on what, your future in-laws?”

“...yes.”

She giggles. “Paige, everyone wants dirt on their in-laws. My advice is, suck it up and get along for his sake.”

“I don’t have a problem with them. He does—a very serious one involving a lot of money and deeply personal information—and he doesn’t want to bring me into the drama. I’m going to lose him, Liv, if I can’t figure something out.”

A hot tear rolls down my cheek again.

“I’m so sorry. What’s the deal with his own parents?”

“They were involved with Dylan Parnell’s death and...they kind of want to keep using it as a weapon against their sons and Ward’s grandmother,” I say, trying to give the best summary.

“Parnell? Name sounds familiar...”

“He was an actor years ago. Super famous. Every teenage girl had him on their posters. He drowned in this horrible accident on Lake Michigan.”

“Oh, right. God. I remember that case now. I was just a kid, but it was all the buzz for a while...”

I sniff. “The investigation didn’t prove any wrongdoing, but Ward doesn’t trust them. I think now they’re trying to blackmail him, but I can’t say more than that.”

“Well, I’ll have Riker see what he can come up with. Enguard Security has a lot of resources. If there’s something to find, he’ll get it,” she tells me.

“Thank you so much,” I say.

“Tell me about this guy you’re marrying when he’s not being blackmailed, okay? According to the Twitter-verse, he’s an arrogant skirt-chasing snob.”

I laugh. “A lot of that’s tabloid driven and they’re not exactly fond of Ward and his brother. He may come across as aloof, but he’s no snob. He just has very high standards and expects the same from everyone else. All the scandals his parents made were hard on the family business, and he thinks keeping everyone in line helps their reputation. I can’t say he’s wrong.”

“You admire him,” she says happily.

I do? I’d never thought of that.

“Maybe.”

“What about the women? If someone plans to marry my cousin, that’s what I’m more concerned about. He could hurt you, and then I’d have to kill him,” she says with her best mock ice-cold mafia don voice.

I laugh. I miss Liv more than I realized.

“I think he gets blamed for his brother’s antics sometimes. He had a messy breakup with one woman a few years back that got twisted around. Ward’s not that kind of man the internet claims.”

A kid screams in the background and her husband’s booming voice echoes.

“Umm—I should go investigate. Probably Em practicing her latest ninja moves. Let’s just say it’s interesting since her dad decided she’s old enough to start sparring with him,” Liv says with a laugh.

I’m a little jealous of her perfect family, especially the badass math-whiz older step-daughter.

“Have fun! And thanks again, lady. I owe you one.”

I’m actually feeling better after the talk and make myself a hot tea to take to the balcony. A dark silhouette leans against the railing, staring into the distance.

“I thought you were still in your office,” I say.

Ward’s head flicks toward me, his hair a sexy mess, then turns back to the skyline. “I couldn’t concentrate.”

“What are you brooding about?” I step up beside him and take a sip of my tea, wrapping an arm around his shoulders—or trying when they’re so broad.

“I’m not brooding. Just thinking.”

“It’s all the same, isn’t it?” I try to joke.

“Brooding implies angst and the inability to control your emotions. I have no emotions, so—”

“If you believe that, *okay*.” I sputter a laugh.

He glares. “Brooding doesn’t solve shit. I’m trying to figure out the quickest move to corner my father. There has to be a kill shot that doesn’t involve literally shooting him.”

“If he’s after money, have you considered just...paying him? You offered me one point five million dollars to be part

of a hoax. You could buy his silence.”

He shakes his head.

“I thought about that a long time ago, but my dad’s a selfish piece of shit with no shame. If I pay him off this time, what’s to stop him from coming back in a few years and asking for more? What if he wants a lot more to play nice? The day will come when he pushes too hard. You don’t negotiate with terrorists for a reason.”

“So beat him at his own game,” I say slowly, then take another long pull of my tea.

“How?”

“Everyone has skeletons. Find his—anything that’s still secret, I mean—and let him know he’ll knock it off or face the consequences.”

Ward snorts gently into the night, shaking his head.

“I wish like hell it was that easy,” he says. “The thing about having no moral compass is there’s no good reason to hide anything. And after the Parnell shit, he couldn’t look worse in the public eye.”

“I find it hard to believe someone as corrupt as your father has nothing else to hide.” I pause, hesitate, but then decide to say the next words. “And, um, I might already be working on it.”

I grin as he throws me a scolding look.

“What do you mean?”

“I enlisted some help from people who know how to dig.”

He bows up, an angry bolt against the night.

“Jesus, Paige. You have someone pecking at my family’s bullshit? Without even asking me?”

Oops. But there’s no backing down now.

I hold his gaze without flinching.

“You’re not in this alone. I’ve told you a hundred times. My cousin’s married to a high-level genius at a major security

firm. If there's dirt to be found, he'll dab it up and send it over."

"Goddammit, Paige," he snarls, throwing his arms up and raking a hand down his face before he looks at me again. "I thought I told you to stay out of this. If you really want to help, do *not* get any deeper. Understand?"

Holy crap.

I flinch now, but before I can answer, he's sighing like thunder, pulling me into him. Those massive arms grip me so tight because he cares.

No matter how grumpy, growly, or ridiculous he gets, every touch reminds me of the truth that makes me tear up.

I'm pressed against his chest. His muscles are solid steel shields—but I'm not the one who needs protecting.

Whimpering, I melt into his constellation against the blackness and the soft glow of the city's lights.

We stand there like that—him holding me up, me a soft puddle against his chest, both of us fully entangled—for God only knows how long.

"I'm sorry as hell. Didn't mean to snap. My parents can't ruin—can't destroy you the way they do everything else. I won't fucking let them."

"It's okay," I whisper, meeting his eyes.

They're midnight blue and bottomless in the nightscape.

"I've got to get ahold of Nick. Our family bullshit *has* to stop spilling over into every other part of our lives. Our parents' bad decisions shouldn't affect us anymore."

We peel apart and I nod.

Then he leads me back inside, closes the sliding door, and kisses me.

"You should go to bed. I'll be there soon," he says.

"Oh, we're speaking again?" I sass, showing my tongue between my teeth.

He huffs out a breath. “You’re high-maintenance. When were we not speaking?”

I slap his chest playfully.

“Sure felt like we weren’t. But I’m glad you’re back.” I give him a shy smile.

“And I don’t even think I can live without you anymore,” he rumbles.

This man.

I throw my arms around him and squeeze. “Give me thirty more seconds before your call.”

His lips stamp my head, vibrating with his laugh.

“See? High-maintenance.” He puts his forefinger and thumb under my face, lifts my head, and kisses me passionately.

“I’ll be back soon,” he says, heading for the door.

There’s an “I love you” trapped in my throat, but I don’t let it out, even if it’s true.

I’m determined now.

I won’t say it first, even if the only Wardhole I’m worried about now is the Ward-hole he’s left in my heart.

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ON A ROLL (WARD)



I pour two fingers of scotch and sit at the desk in my study.

Life has gone to shit pretty well the last few days. My parents have always been demons, but until now their drama was confined to the family and anyone else unlucky enough to get sucked up in their orbit.

Don't get me wrong. What they let happen to Dylan Parnell was atrocious, but even the kid actor made a choice to stumble into their dealings.

Paige didn't. She's completely innocent, and the thing that keeps me up with bleary eyes and a mighty headache is the fact that it's me.

I'm the selfish prick who dragged this sweet woman into the muck. And all to run an engagement con job on an eccentric British deca-billionaire.

Am I my father's son after all?

I'll never forget the gleam of fear in her eyes when I rammed my fist into my desk after talking to Winthrope. I'm the one who put it there, and I'm the heel who's making her sick as a dog with worry over my dumbass.

Her words earlier this week about how I care for people, how I'm no beast, loop through my head. So does the horrific truth that she's falling too hard, too deep, and it's proven by her urge to help.

I take a burning sip of scotch.

No, I can't let Paige get wrecked. My baggage will smash her to bits like the funny, achingly beautiful, and creative butterfly woman she is.

She can't come out of this fuckery as jaded as Nick and me.

Everyone thinks my little brother is a joker playboy, and he is. But Nick dives into his pursuits for good reason.

It's a hell of a lot easier than thinking too much, carrying the cross-sized chip on my shoulder. Nick keeps women at a distance so he doesn't have to get close to anyone. It makes sense.

If he doesn't, he can't damage them.

With Paige, I have to do better.

I have to throw her back from the brink before she steps into a raging fire.

The door to my study creaks opens.

My doting bride-to-never-be stands in the doorway with a silver tray of food she must've swiped from Grayson. "Hi. I made you dinner."

I'm up like a shot with a muttered "thanks," wondering why my throat feels so raw.

She moves to my desk and sets the tray down with a crooked grin.

Then I'm beyond any help. I hold her like a wrecked man clinging to a rock, lost in a bellowing sea.

Fuck, I shouldn't do this.

If I'm going to protect her, I've got to quit encouraging this, feeding these...feelings.

She stretches up on her toes and brushes her lips against my cheek with a soft sigh that ignites my blood.

"Don't keep the vampire work schedule, okay?" she whispers.

“No promises. I’m part Dracula.” I wrap her tighter, finding her lips with my own. “Vampires are still sexy, right?”

“Um, not the Count kind,” she throws back with a laugh. “I mean it about working yourself to death, Ward.”

Awesome. Not even truly engaged and I’ve got myself a beautifully bossy one.

How do I quit encouraging this? With the way her blouse dips into her cleavage, I want to tear off her top right here. “The sooner I finish, the faster I’ll join you.”

“Hope I didn’t disturb you,” she says with a wink.

I don’t know what it is about her words, but they make me want her more.

I bend down and crush my mouth to hers.

She matches my urgency with a heat that drops through me like a spinning bomb.

We kiss like it might be the last time, and that scares me.

Still, if I’m strong enough to protect her like I should, the end was always coming.

“Paige, you never *disturb* me. You’re a distraction,” I tell her, pulling away.

She grins gloriously. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Haven’t figured that out yet.” It’s more honest than I mean to be.

Her face falls, and I regret my words.

I quickly clasp her chin between my thumb and forefinger.

“Give me a few hours. I’ll be done here.” I kiss her on the forehead again, wishing like hell my lips never had to leave her flesh.

“See you soon, Warden.” And with a smile flung back over the switch of her hips, she’s out the door.

Gulping down the rest of my drink, I slump back into my chair, picking at the food.

The seared buttery steak with herbs and garlic mashed potatoes she's thrown together revives my dead appetite.

I'm shoveling it in like a horse when three bangs come from the front of the house, followed by a pause, and then two more. The alarm system blips as the door opens.

I'm on my feet, racing through the place with a need to investigate.

"Nick?" Paige says in a hushed whisper I can hear from a few paces away.

"Paige, I'm so sorry. Fuck, I'm so sorry."

Great, he's drunk tonight. His voice says it all. And here I thought he'd been sobering up lately.

I guess dealing with manipulative, psychotic parents isn't enough—I need an ugly-drunk little brother on top of it.

"What's wrong?" Paige asks.

"Is Ward home?"

I come stalking around the corner, ready to scold his ass. Instead, I find him looking too much like a wide-eyed, disheveled kid I haven't seen in decades.

What the fuck is going on?

"I'm right here, Nick. Are you okay?"

"Ward! I, uh...I...I really boned us," he rushes out, hanging his head. "I'm sorry."

"Define boned." I fold my arms, staring him down, unsure if I'm scared for him or just pissed.

"Please don't be mad," he grinds out, his face red and ragged.

A soft hand clenches my shoulder, and I rub Paige's fingertips, before pushing her off me softly and closing the distance with Nick. I grab his shoulders.

"You have to talk to me, man," I growl.

He nods like a scoundrel accepting his sentence.

“Little bro, it’s okay, but you’re freaking out Paige. Let’s go outside?” I pat his back, leading the way.

“I’m fi—” Paige starts.

I raise an eyebrow at her and mouth, “Sorry.”

This is between brothers. I hope she understands.

Her brisk nod and incandescent green eyes say she does.

I lead Nick to the balcony and pull a chair out for him.

“Sit down and tell me what’s wrong,” I insist.

“The shit with Dad and Winthrope. I’m...I’m the mole, Ward,” he says, refusing to look at me.

What. The. Hell.

Maybe he is drunk.

I cock my head. “Okay, I’m not sure I follow. I know you wouldn’t do anything to hurt us—not intentionally—so take a deep breath. It’ll be okay if you tell me what—”

“It’s not okay. I fucked up! I let everyone down. You, Grandma, Paige, the company,” he splutters. “It’s all my fault. Thank God it didn’t hit, but if it had, it would *still* be my fault and an even bigger problem.”

I’m officially lost.

“You need some water?” I wait for him to shake his head. “Then take a minute to pull your thoughts together and tell me what this is about.”

For a second, he’s a hissing rock of a man, his face tilted up and nostrils flaring, sucking in air.

“Dude. It’s like you’re not listening. Almost losing the Winthrope deal? My fault. Having him call you and tell you your engagement is fake? My *fault*.”

It’s no one’s fault but Victor Brandt’s, and maybe Mother’s for confronting Paige at a conference before this shit went down. I wonder if they’re coordinating, even if they loathe each other now.

I shut the door behind us before turning to him again.
“How is this your fault?”

“Well, you know I stayed in touch with Mom over the years...”

My brows knife down.

“Yeah, and I’ve never understood why. If you don’t care about all the hell she’s dragged us through, what about the hell she brought on Grandma?”

“She’s still our mom,” he says weakly. “Even if she’s a monster.”

“You’d be better off if our mother was a Komodo dragon, Nicholas.”

“Grow the fuck up, Ward,” he snarls, squaring his shoulders. “You haven’t wanted me to talk to her for years, because you hate her.”

I roll my eyes and look at the sky, flexing my fist.

Everyone should have to deal with a little brother for the ultimate test in patience.

I meet his gaze, chasing down the urge to knock some sense into him.

“I’ve always said it was your goddamned choice. If you want to subject yourself to a slow and painful poisoning, who am I to stop you? I’m slightly pissed you covered up any recent contact, and not just to me, but to Grandma too.”

“Yeah. No reason to lie by omission. It’s not like you’d react like a human volcano or anything.” He snorts, those eyes that are a shade greener than mine flaming.

I’m racking my brain for a retort when something dawns on me.

“Wait. Why did you say this thing with Winthrop and the mystery package was your fault? Did you tell her?”

“Dumbass, of course not,” he flings back.

I push past the strong desire to bloody his nose. “It’s not your fault, then. Why are you here?”

“What?”

My shoulders bow out.

“If you didn’t give her information, it’s not your fault. It can’t be. I don’t think she went to Winthrop or Osprey and the *Tea* anyway. That was Dad. Sorry. I shouldn’t have raged when you told me you’ve stayed in touch with her. She’s our mother. It’s natural you’d want her acceptance—even if it’s not something she deserves to give.”

He holds a hand up. “We’re not close, but she is our mom. I talk to her once a month or so, just enough to ease her conscience.”

I nod, then squint.

“What did you say to her?”

“She came into the office a while ago while I was working alone. I know, they’re not supposed to be allowed on company property, but...she cried and apologized for all the shit she’s done, Ward. She begged me to forgive her—”

“And said it was going to be different this time,” I finish with a hard roll of my eyes. “The usual song and dance.”

“Right, and since I’ve heard it before, I thought it was just another one of her drunken guilt trips. It was that week when we were all pushing hard, trying to close the Winthrop deal, so my desk was a mess. I cleaned it this morning, looking for something for Trista. That’s when I realized some media plans were missing.”

Where the fuck is this going? Nowhere good.

“Okay? And? What media plans do you mean?”

“The big plans we hatched a couple months ago. A detailed page of media events complete with love cues to help you and Paige come across as authentic, in love—”

“What?” I damn near bite my tongue.

“The page that was missing. Ward, it was *that* page.”

“You fucking idiot!” It tears out of me like a Nick-seeking missile.

He doesn't try to defend himself.

“You're the leak. You're the reason our mother knew where to find Paige, and lay into her...” I swipe a hand over my face, temples pulsing.

Silence.

“You should have cut her off when I told you to. You know what she is,” I snarl.

He turns his head away from me with a rough sigh.

“I'm sorry, Ward. You know I couldn't. I wasn't fucking strong enough.”

“You shit the bed this time. There's no telling what she could've done with hard evidence,” I say. “I don't need to tell you how lucky we are that Winthrope didn't bite.”

“I know.”

“But like I said, it's not completely your fault.”

“How is it not?” He meets my eyes again, that lost boy look on his face.

“No one wants to think their parents hate them enough to wage war like ours. You're constantly seeking her approval.”

And constantly getting rejected, but there's no point in stating the obvious.

“You don't have a problem keeping your distance. It's easy for you,” he says glumly.

“I maintain I was born in a test tube.” I shrug.

“I wish I could be as cold as you sometimes,” he says.

“Even if you didn't keep confidential information as secure as you should have, you didn't make her steal it. She knows she's horrible. She knows we're fucked up because she's the most selfish bitch on the face of the planet, and she preyed on that. You want to know whose fault this is?”

“Whose?” His voice is so quiet it’s like he’s six, and I’m eight and need to protect him again.

“Giselle and Victor’s. No one else’s.”

He’s quiet for a minute.

“I realized something, though.”

“What?”

“For Mom to be involved with this, I don’t think it’s just about money,” he says.

“Like they ever cared about anything else?” I snap.

“If you did pay Dad off, what’s the chance he’d share it with Mom?”

I shrug. “She’d pop up and make the same demand. Pay me or I’ll blow the cover on your engagement hoax.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t think so. If money is what she was after, she would have gone straight to Winthrope herself. Why involve a man she hates? There was at least a page or two of that media material in the bombshell they sent with Dad’s handwriting on it.”

That’s a good question. I don’t know.

“This was about hurting Grandma and getting even. Spite, maybe,” Nick says with a sigh.

Maybe.

“She always was a vindictive witch.” I scratch at the needling sensation in my throat.

“We got lucky, Ward. You fell so hard for your girl—”

“Paige is a sweethe—” I stop mid-word, horrified at how fast it spills out of me.

Nick’s smile is the kind a man reserves for casino wins. And I’ve just given him the damn jackpot.

“Easy, bro. I didn’t mean to insult your girlfriend,” he says smugly.

“She’s *not* my girlfriend!”

“When are you proposing for real? Don’t you think it’s about time?”

“I’m not the marrying type, and you know it,” I whip back.

“So, you’re cool if I marry her then? Because I’ve been considering making a move.”

My stomach knots, even if I think he’s just messing with me.

Joking or not, I’m still ten seconds from pushing my own brother off the balcony.

“You’ve never even been on a real date in what, five years? Not since you were swept up with Carmen what’s-her-face.” I don’t add more, knowing Nick’s stormy relationship with that terrible woman is almost as big an open wound as my torched engagement.

He laughs so hard he bends at the waist.

“Relax! I’m just fucking with you, man. I’ve never seen you so pale.” He stops to laugh it up some more before throwing a glare. “Seriously. Hurry up and propose before someone else beats you to the punch. She has plenty of eyes on her, and not everyone’s going to be playing.”

The jackass keeps grinning, enjoying how he has me pinned.

“I’m ten seconds from kicking your ass. You’ll deserve it, too.”

“Yeah, the only problem is you won’t kick anything because I deserve it. It’ll be because you’re pissed I had the balls to tell you that girl has you wrapped around her finger—and you like it.”

“Does not,” I mash out between pinched teeth.

“Yeah, but it wouldn’t be cool if I took her out after the ninety days, huh?”

“You’re taking this shit too far.”

“Get it over with. Wife her. Tell her the ring means business. A serious wedding might fix our problems,” he says,

stroking his chin.

“Whatever. So that’s what this is about. If I marry her, you don’t have to feel bad that you let Mom in your office. Man up and deal with it, because I told you, I’m not the marrying type—and if I were going to marry someone it wouldn’t be Paige Holly in a million years.”

I mean it, too.

There’s no way I’d ever let my parents destroy such a warm-hearted angel.

“Ward!” Nick raises his eyebrows.

“I told you, there’s no room in my life for love. I’m better off sticking to greasing the machine that keeps us employed. Why would I give that up for fucking nuptials? Paige is better off without me.”

Nick looks past me, a pained look on his face.

“Ward—”

“Besides, I’d have to love her first, you know.” I pause, glowering, hoping my face doesn’t give up a single flash of what I feel—what I’m terrified to admit. “I don’t even think I’m capable of love,” I add.

“Damn it, Ward. Shut up,” he snarls, leaning forward.

“No, we’ve got to get this done and end this game with our parents before it’s too late. This fake out has gone on long enough. I can’t marry her and it’s not fair to her to keep drawing it out. She’s getting obsessed. She even cooks for me now, and it’s decent grub.”

“Ward. Brother. Would you shut your fucking mouth?” Nick growls, waving his arms.

I cock my head.

“You’re the idiot who brought it up. If you’re pissed at getting an earful, I—”

Thud.

Crash.

Slowly, I turn to face the noise.

Paige crouches just outside the entrance of the patio, picking up pieces of a broken mug.

“I’m the only *idiot* here,” she hisses, her voice is so quiet I barely hear it.

“I’ve got it.” Nick slips past me and bends down beside her, gathering up the mess.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “You seemed upset. I thought some tea might calm you guys down.”

Nick’s voice is gentle, tense. “It’s okay. Don’t worry, I’ve got it.”

She nods, her shoulders dropping, wiping at her eyes.

“Paige,” I say.

She stands and stares at me. Tears stream down her face. She’s pallid, bone-white, hugging herself like she’s been sliced open and has to struggle just to hold herself together.

And I’m the goddamned butcher holding the knife.

If I’d heard her say what I just did—fuck. I can’t even think about it.

My gut dives and crashes so hard it almost doubles me over.

Par for the course when I’ve just dashed my whole life against the rocks.

“Paige—” I step toward the entrance, trying to find the words, begging my brain to work.

She throws up her palms.

“Just stay back. Please? I...I can’t right now.” Her voice is so small, hurt, timid.

Another sucker punch plows my gut, a hideous realization. I was so worried about my parents crushing her, I just did it for them.

What the hell is *wrong* with me?

I take another step toward her, a strangling lump in my throat.

Before I can reach her, the sliding glass door slams shut between us with a rattle, and she walks away.

“How long was she there?” I ask Nick, not even bothering to face him.

“Long enough, you chucklefuck.”

“Why didn’t you—”

“I tried, stupid! You were on a tirade.”

The worst part is, he’s absolutely right.

I yank on the door and almost rip my arm off.

“Shit. She locked us out.”

Can’t blame her in the slightest. I stand on the balcony, looking through the glass with no way to move forward.

“Now what?” Nick asks.

My foot flies up in answer. I kick the door. The glass rattles in the frame but doesn’t break. High-end materials are made too well.

“Hey, cut it out! Have you lost your mind?” Nick roars.

Yes, and I need to go find it.

Another savage kick makes a crack in the glass.

“Ward, get ahold of yourself. Jesus. What are you doing?” His hands are on my shoulders, trying to rip me back, but I’m not a sane man anymore.

I’m frantic to save my heart from drowning in my own wretched quicksand I poured.

Desperate, mad, and single-minded to save what I could’ve had with her, but was too chickenshit to admit.

“What does it look like?” I yell, my third roundhouse kick shattering the glass into beads. “I’m going after her. If people see her like that, news of our scam will be all over town.”

“That’s not why you just kicked your own door in!” Nick hisses. “At least be honest. Be honest with her if you won’t be with me.”

God, when did my little brother grow a brain? It scares me.

“You’ve got Grayson’s number, tell him to call somebody to fix this mess.” I pull my jacket up over my face to miss the jagged glass bits still hanging around the edges and pound the floor to my bedroom.

Paige isn’t there, and she’s not in the guest suite either.

I tread back to my room and open the closet door. A few of her outfits are still hanging up, but most of her clothes are gone.

She’s left me.

Just like my parents did.

No, this is different.

She didn’t leave because she doesn’t love me enough. She left because I practically told her to her face that *I* don’t love her, and never will.

Because I was no better than that frat boy dick-wit who stabbed her in the heart years ago, and now I may have just bled the last sweetness out of her.

I told her I have a heart of stone.

I lied like the lying bastard liar of a Wardhole I am. I’d might as well have kicked her heart to pieces rather than the door.

She can’t leave.

I need her in my home. I need her in my life. I need her because—because I just do.

With a gnarled breath in my lungs, I rush to the front room just in time to catch the tail end of her lavender suitcase going out the door. My shoes squeak on the tile and I almost fall in my mad rush to catch her.

“Paige. Paige, wait!” My voice doesn’t even sound human. More like a hundred-year storm.

Maybe I should just let it go.

This way she’s not mixed up with my dysfunctional family. She doesn’t have to lie anymore. She doesn’t have to sink to my hell-bound debauchery.

But can I really leave it like this and still have a pulse? And what about Winthrop?

Taking a fierce, deep, soul-ripping breath, I follow her into the hall and chase after *us*.

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DONE DIRTY (PAIGE)



His front door slaps shut behind me and I'm thankful for the barrier between us.

Tears roll down my cheeks like an avalanche. I wheel my suitcase to the wall and pause to catch my breath, collecting my thoughts.

Will I ever learn? It's just like Austin. No, it's *worse*.

I was the effing placeholder. Again.

And this time, I can't even blame him. At least he was honest about his intent to use me from the start. He just wanted a prop for a business deal. I agreed to be his cardboard cutout for over a million bucks and was stupid enough to get swept up in a lie.

How many idiot awards do I win?

But it's not all my fault.

Why deliver the kisses, the caresses, the sunshine looks that made me trust make-believe?

Why make love to me every night and then hold me and ask me to stay in his room?

Why?

Because I was convenient. Good enough for now, but not forever.

Duh. Not marriage material for a Brandt.

The glassy tears staining my face won't stop. I collapse to the floor, fold my face into my hands, and sob.

“Paige.”

His voice is so infuriatingly calm I swear it's in my head. He couldn't have found someone to let him in this fast anyway—I locked the door intentionally—and even if he did, it's not like he cares.

Great. So now I'm having Wardhole hallucinations?

My sobs become painful spasms.

But a strong arm hooks around my waist and lifts me to my feet. Ward's familiar hand is under my eye, gently wiping at my tears.

I'm too stunned to speak.

“I'm so sorry you had to hear that, Paige. There are no words,” he begins slowly. “I never wanted things to end. Not in this horrid, messy way. You're a brilliant woman, and I respect your work. If it weren't for the contract, the whole damned situation, I would've told you sooner—”

“Screw you and your contract,” I say, my voice hitched.

“Paige—”

Nope. Not doing this. The instant he says my name, I'm straining against him, and my nails accidentally rake his arm.

He stumbles back, his eyes like dusk, gazing in shock at the two thin red lines I've left on his arm.

“I...I didn't mean to,” I whisper, the endless tears assaulting me again. “Just stay away! We've only got a few weeks left if it's your stupid arrangement you're worried about.”

He stares at me slowly and nods, his face sinking like he finally gets it.

“Fair enough. You'll get your money. I promise.”

He looks damaged. Whipped. Raw.

If I weren't even more torn up inside, I might feel bad for him, but I steel myself for the madness on the tip of my tongue.

"Screw the money, too. Just let me go. I don't want this anymore." My eyes pinch together. I wanted to say *you* instead of *this*, but lying doesn't come easy to me.

Unlike him.

"Paige, please," he growls.

"Can't have me making a scene, right?"

"That's not what I meant. I want you getting what you're entitled to." His voice is a chemical explosion, lurching between bruised whispers and furious pleas.

"I said keep your dirty money out of my life." I push the ring off my finger with my other hand and throw it at him. "Keep your ring, and keep your hands to yourself. I've still got the deposit and my dignity. That's enough."

But I'm not even sure I want the fricking deposit anymore for my trouble. I'll probably send it back, but I'll decide later with a cooler head.

I manage to fight back another wave of crippling tears until I'm on the elevator. Then I burst into unabashed death sobbing. Technically, my car is in Ward's garage, too, but I can't drive like this.

I could call Brina, but I don't want to drag her into my pit, if she hasn't jetted off with her hubby to some happy tropical place. I want to be out of here like now.

I text Reese. ***Do former employees still get one more ride?***

She pings me almost instantly.

What? Where are you? And what happened?

The penthouse, I text back.

On my way!

In the meantime, I find a visitor bathroom in the lobby to hide in, lock myself in a stall, and bawl until my eyes hurt.

When my phone buzzes, I'm still ugly crying my soul out.

I wash my face in the sink, cross my arms in front of my chest, and bite my lip. Even after running cool water over my eyes, it's still obvious I've been ruined.

Somehow, I make it to the Lincoln without tripping on my own misplaced feet.

Reese turns around and looks at me with a gasp.

"Oh my God. Should I kick his ass, Paige? I'm ready!"

She throws the driver's door open, her hair flapping as I realize she's fully intent on marching up to Ward's door.

"Reese, no. Just take me home. Please."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

She shuts her door and puts her seat belt back on. "The old apartment, right?"

I hug myself and nod. Good thing I kept paying rent after all.

"What Neanderthal thing did he do?" Reese asks gently, pulling the car onto the road.

"Nothing."

"C'mon." She scoffs. "I never knew nothing could be so... harsh."

At this point, why lie? I shrug.

"He doesn't love me, Reese."

"That's...a little hard to believe," she says carefully. "I mean, not that the Brandt boys are awesome at being honest or healthy or even sane with their feelings. Believe me, I *know*."

I'm half tempted to ask what her deal is with Nick, the rumblings she's hinted at before, but I just can't.

I'm also tempted to tell her the truth, but she never signed the NDA, and I'm not about to toss away my professionalism.

“He just...he doesn't love me. That's the long and short of it. And all I can say per the NDA.”

“NDA?”

Oops. I didn't mean for that to slip out.

“Nondisclosure agreement,” I whisper.

“Wha—you mean, the Warden broke up with you and made you sign an ND-freaking-A? Oh, he'll enjoy his next ride to work, let me tell you.”

I manage a bitter, barely there smile.

“I still don't believe he doesn't love you, by the way,” she adds a minute later. “Before you, I never thought Ward and flowers could coexist in the same universe without a black hole opening.”

“Then you're as naive as I am.” A poison laugh falls out of me but soon turns into uncontrollable tears.

End me.

I'm never going to live this down, am I? At least I'll be gone before everybody in the office hears about it.

“Oh, I hate seeing you like this. I hope he's a hell of a lay to put up with this trash.”

I wipe my eyes and sniff until my nostrils bend in. “I'm not putting up with anything. This was pretty final, but yeah. He has a PhD in horizontal acrobatics and judo kissing.”

Reese snickers. “TMI about the bossman.”

“Sorry, you asked.”

“Fair.”

She pulls up in front of my old apartment a short while later.

“You sure you'll be okay alone? Maybe you should stay with a friend tonight? Or family. You have folks around here, right?”

“I'm fine. It's not like this is my first rodeo being dumped.”

Technically true, only this feels like a mess of scorpion stings to the heart.

I fling the car door open.

“I’m telling you, he loves you. I’m sure of it,” Reese insists, trying and failing to make me feel better.

I bite my lip. “And I’m telling you you’re wrong. Love isn’t something he does, not after this. He didn’t even know I was there, standing behind him when he said I meant... basically nothing.” My chest feels hollow.

“Jackass!” she hisses.

I shake my head.

“No, just a Wardhole who handles his emotions like a stick of dynamite. Thanks for the ride.”

I shut my door and head upstairs.

The second I collapse on the couch, I’m texting Brina. ***Come bearing alcohol. Do not bring Maggot. Single people don’t need to see kissy faces. TY.***

Brina: Who’s single???

Me, I type, feeling a shot to my chest.

Brina: But your contract isn’t up yet! And what happened to the moves he was making? Last I checked, you looked anything but single.

I wince as I type, ***Amazing show, wasn’t it?***

Brina: ...you’re joking?

Nothing funny about the Winthrope crap, I send, twisting my lips as I add, ***Or Wardholes with empty shelves where their hearts should be.***

Brina: Paige, I’m coming.

I sigh with relief. ***Thank God. Don’t forget liquor!***

With the cavalry coming, I turn on Netflix, looking for a happy distraction until Brina arrives. It doesn’t help. The cushions on the couch sink under my weight. I nestle deeper into my body-shaped indent and dry sob.

How was I ever blind enough to think a man like Ward Brandt was interested? And how could I be that dumb twice in one lifetime?

Prince Charmings are a myth, and even when they're not, they definitely don't fall for sculpting nerds who compare their handsome, grumpy, heart-stabby faces to the stars.



WE'RE FACE-TO-FACE. Skin on skin. Soul in soul.

Connected.

But I still need it deeper, both the thrust and the burn of his kiss.

As if he can read my mind, he plunges deeper, marking me with the fire in his lips. My legs tighten around him.

“Paige.” He breaks our kiss on a torrid groan.

He pulses inside me, his stubble rakes my throat, and his eyes are a little mad in the way that always sets me off. My body responds, clenching around his, twining my tongue in his rasping mouth like I want to be consumed.

“Don't ever leave me. Promise?” He rolls off and cradles me.

“Promise,” I whisper.

His lips are about to brush my forehead when—

A harsh tapping noise yanks me from my dream. Memory? Memory-dream?

Ugh. What planet am I on?

The banging starts again.

“Paige, it's cold! Let me in.”

Cold? How long have I been zoned out?

I pull myself up and stagger to the door with my eyebrows knit together. “It can't be cold. It's still summer,” I say.

Brina hits me with the widest grin. “Yep, but it got you off your butt. Nice to see you too.”

I laugh. “Get in here.”

“How not okay are you?” she asks, reaching into the bag swinging from her hand. “I’ve got four pints of ice cream, half a carrot cake, a whole box of Heart’s Edge truffles from Sweeter Grind, and...oh, yeah. The big guns. Wine or lemon vodka?”

“I’m...surviving, so it’s your call,” I say.

“You’re too pretty so don’t take this the wrong way, but lady...you look like a crap sandwich,” she says with a worried look.

“Thanks,” I say with a snort.

“That’s it. We’re baking a pie. I’m going to catapult it right in his face.” She sets the bag on the counter and starts pawing through my cabinets with a focus that makes me laugh.

“Brina, no. Just stay out of it.”

She turns back with a smirk. “You don’t mean that. If you did, I wouldn’t be here.”

Dragging myself over to the couch, I collapse again.

“True. But don’t make it worse. No point.”

“How could it be worse? He’s a giant heartbreaking douchebag with a billion dollars. Reason enough to take him down a peg or fifty.”

I shrug—but can’t because I’m sunk too deep in the couch.

“Also, you pied my husband. It’s my turn at the karma wheel serving up justice!”

“If Ward shows up here, then pie-bomb away. But don’t get too excited. He’s not brave like Mag. Also, I think he’d have to care first to come over, and he doesn’t.”

She sighs, then pulls out a couple glasses for the wine. “What exactly did he say? I saw the way he looked at you. Hard to believe it meant nothing.”

“He said it was time to end this before I got more obsessed. Oh, and he doesn’t love me or anyone else because he’s a freak who can’t fall in love.”

“Wow. At least he’s not subtle.” Brina hands me a wineglass filled to the top.

I throw back half my drink in one long toss, and choke when I remember a single glass of wine was what got me into this mess. Kinda.

Setting it down with a clink, I go back to leaving a Paige-sized impression on the sofa.

“Um, you might want to pace yourself,” Brina says, lowering her wine. “If you need water...”

“It’s like the opposite of last year, isn’t it?” I ask morosely, ignoring her offer.

“Last year?” She acts like she doesn’t get where I’m going. “*Oh*. That worked out pretty well after a mountain of drama, didn’t it? There’s nothing my husband won’t do for me, and I don’t mean to brag, but...knowing what we had to lose just made us stronger.” She smiles, transported to a better place than my miserable apartment.

I lift the bottle from the table and top off my glass. “Yeah, well, no happy endings here.” I grab the remote from the arm of the couch and turn on Netflix. “What’s a good break up movie?”

“Something funny. You’ll feel better if you laugh.”

My phone rings.

It’s on the couch between us.

Brina picks it up and glances at the screen. “Liv?”

“My cousin.” I sit up and break from drinking my weight in wine, holding my hand out.

She nods and hands me the phone.

“Hello?” I say.

“Paige, are you okay? You sound funky.”

“I’m fine, my throat’s a little dry,” I lie, hoping her author spidey-sense doesn’t lead her to interrogate me.

“You sure? You’re not sick?”

“Nah,” I say. “What’s up?”

“Riker got your dirt and the okay from the big boss to keep things nice and neat legally. He’s going to email you pictures and documents. But I thought I’d just give you the rundown, so you know what you’re looking at.”

“Awesome,” I say, wishing I were brave enough to slam the door shut on helping the man who took a chisel to my heart.

“You’ll find bank statements and stock options for Victor. If you know what you’re looking at, it shows enough insider trading to buy some major jail time. And if it’s not, that’s okay. Because his investment in a shady biker bar in Florida that went down a few years ago in Federal RICO drug dealing charges will *definitely* mean prison.”

Ouch.

It’s almost anticlimactic hearing this now, but excitement flares through me before I remember my stake in this is gone.

“Wow. That’s crazy interesting. What else?” I ask, fighting to keep my voice level.

“Check out the pics of Giselle Simms in the car. She’s driving a vehicle registered to her boyfriend. She goes everywhere she wants in that ride and parks it at her house at the end of the day. Here’s the fun part: she lost her license years ago after hitting a pedestrian.”

“What the crap?” I gasp.

“I hope you know this guy well. Because if he’s anything like his parents...whoa, mama. I’m not sure you’ll enjoy what you’re getting yourself into.”

I hold in a sigh, ignoring Brina’s look of concern over her glass.

“Don’t worry about that. We’re no longer a...thing.”

Long pause.

“Oh, Paige. So that’s what’s wrong, huh?” She pauses, waiting for an answer I don’t give. “If he’s being an asshole, do you still want the info?”

I hesitate. Brina slides a finger across her throat, encouraging the little devil on my shoulder who’s dancing around with his pitchfork, telling me to bury Wardhole alive. Let him suffer. Check out of this human circus for a warm beach and a chance to get drunk from a coconut.

Too bad it means a lot to Beatrice, Nick, and everyone at Brandt Ideas. Plus, his parents are actual raving monsters, and a legit menace to society.

“It’s not just about him. His parents hurt people, Liv. There’s no point in letting that continue, so yeah, please send it over.”

“You care about him,” she says quietly.

My throat tightens.

“I care about my coworkers, his brother, and their elderly grandmother. Why should they suffer just because he’s a selfish prick?”

“Ah, now we’re getting somewhere. Do you want to tell me about the prick?”

“Another time. I promise. It’s been a long day. Right now, I kinda want to overconsume alcohol and pass the hell out until morning, but if you send that email, lovely.”

“It *will* give you an excuse to talk to the selfish jerk, you know?”

“Ha. Nice try. I’m blocking him as soon as I hit forward.”

“Okay, lady. Riker just sent it! Look for a summer flower special. Gotta keep it low-key so it can’t be traced.”

My phone pings with a notification from an anonymous florist address that definitely has nothing to do with a dozen red roses. “I see it. Thank Riker a hundred times for me and tell him I love roses. Oh, and say hello to Milah!”

“Will do. I’ll have her call you at some point if you’re up for her yakking your ear off about her latest tour and the lavish gifts she’ll probably want to dump on you. Talk to you soon. Watch out for hangovers,” Liv says.

“Later.” I cut the call and shove the wine to my lips in a long, satisfying sip of triumph.

At least my agony with one very huge bosshole wasn’t all in vain.

“What was that all about?” Brina asks as soon as I sit back.

“Loose ends. You remember how my cousin married that hot bruiser guy from the big security firm? Well...” I continue with a quick summary, and fill her in on why I brought Liv in to help secure the dirt that could finally end a lot of people’s misery.

“Dang. Total cloak and dagger territory.” Brina sits up straighter. “What are you going to do with it?”

“Just what I said. Forward it to Ward when I finish this drink.”

“You’re sure you want to help him after what he did to you?” Sabrina cringes.

“It’s not just for him. It’s for Beatrice, Nick, and everyone else who works at Brandt Ideas.”

“...you’re sure you aren’t hunting for a reason to talk to him? If you really need to get him the info, maybe I could have it delivered?”

Oof. She has a point.

“Brina, I’m big enough to talk to my ex-fake fiancé all by myself,” I say with mock-pride.

“Yeah, but you don’t *have* to. Talking to him might make you feel worse.”

I shake my head. “I’m just going to unblock his email, forward Riker’s message, and reblock. Easy-peasy drama-squeezy over for tonight.”

“Go for it,” she tells me.

I polish off my wine and pull out my laptop. I unblock Ward on my personal email and hit forward on Riker's message.

WARDHOLE,

THIS SHOULD HELP SETTLE matters with your parents. I don't want to hear about how it turns out. If you ever contact me again, I'll get a restraining order. -P

MY FINGERS HURT when I even think about signing my name for him.

He won't reply, though, not after I block his address. Threatening him with a restraining order was just bitter.

I close the laptop and sink into the couch.

"Who was worse—Ward or Austin? Can't believe I fell for this crap again."

But I don't need Brina's vote.

This is worse, hands down, because Ward wasn't trying to be malicious.

Also, I fell for my bossman far deeper than I ever cared for Austin.

Ward never lied. He never said he loved me. He told me this was a hoax to woo a client and he paid me to go along with it. I shouldn't have gotten sucked up in the emotional twister and carried far, far away from the Kansas of my boring little life.

"Tough call, honestly," Brina says, curled up on the other end of the couch. "You heard him tell his brother he didn't love you or anyone else, right? Did you talk to him about it?"

"Well...I may have locked them on the balcony, packed my stuff, and left with a lot of screaming when he touched me." I look away with a quick shrug.

“So you!” Brina laughs again. “Uh, you trapped them on the balcony?”

“I figured I’d get out of the building with less drama if they were stuck. Didn’t work. He must have had a key on him. He managed to get back into the penthouse and raced down the hall in time to catch me before I got to the elevator.”

“What was his explanation?”

I curl my knees over my stomach and hug them, so I’m in a ball, deep in sad thought.

“He was honest. He made it crystal freaking clear he was done and insisted I keep his money. At least there’s that.”

“Seriously—get paid. But I’m confused, if he didn’t explain the crap he said earlier, then what was he honest about?”

“He just...he said he didn’t want things to end so messy and I should come back so we could finish the contract. I told him to go to hell and he said he’d pay me anyway.”

“Take. The. Money.” She claps her hands between words. “If you’re off the studio idea, go to Maui, find a hot pool boy, and send Wart lots of photos.”

“Wart,” I snort. “Like he needs more nicknames announcing how big of a dick he is? And you know me, I don’t go back on my word. I already told him I didn’t need his money and left.”

“Listen, Paige.” She fishes a water bottle out of her bag and takes a sip. “I’m a romance writer’s daughter. I always thought I was good at reading these things, but maybe I’ve been around Mom too long and see happy endings where there are just dead ends.”

“Like this one,” I say, rubbing another lump in my throat. It just doesn’t stop.

“It’s funny. At the charity thing that night, I had your bossman pegged for enchanted. Totally smitten with you. But apparently, I was wrong.” She sighs. “At least it’s over now. You never have to see his nasty heart-breaky face again.”

Oh, God, she's...she's right, isn't she?

Never.

I burst into tears.

“Oh, Paige, I'm sorry! What did I say?” Brina flails her hands like something's on fire—and that fiery mess is *me*.

“Nothing.” I wipe my eyes, but the tears won't stop.

The thought of never seeing Ward again hollows me out. Mostly because it's not even true.

I'll see him every night when I close my eyes.

I'll know I fell for his trap.

And yes, I'll be distraught over every insufferable lie, every war of kisses, and every sexy memory.

What does that say about me?

Brina moves to the couch arm beside me, grabs me, and gives me a savage hug. “He's not worth the tears. Mark my words, one day you'll meet someone who makes you forget all about this jackass, and when you do, you'll be glad things ended so you could find him.”

I look up, staring at her through red halos for eyes.

“What if I don't believe in soulmates anymore?”

“Don't do that! You can't let him take that away from you.” She clucks her tongue. “God! I hope I end up at a flipping gala with Wardhole again and a whole bakery case. He'll leave sterile if he doesn't drown in pie-goo first.”

“Maggot might be upset if you murder him. I think they rub shoulders, don't they?”

“Mag will shut up and post my bail. No woman deserves a man who values money over her.”

Right. Ward definitely did, even if the Winthrope deal was about dreams as much as it was dollar signs. Still, it should have been a wake-up call.

This was always a game, and I got played dirty.

I played with teal-blue fire, I flew too close to Orion, and I lost everything except these awful puns.

Shoot me.

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COMING CLEAN (WARD)



Nick drives the rented Jeep through the Everglades, heading for Key Largo, blasting the most obnoxious heavy metal in the universe.

Yep. It's a goddamned breakup song.

"I'm still confused about one thing, bro. Why would a girl who hates your guts want to help us?"

Good question. The material Paige sent from that security firm helped pinpoint the jackass here. He's been hiding out in the condo Grandma left him as a parting gift after she hacked him out of her trust.

"I don't know. Grandma's sake, maybe," I say.

"Are you sure she hates you? You could try talking to her like a human being."

Grinding my teeth, I turn, dumbfounded he even asks.

"Doctor Phil, you were there the day things blew to shit. How is it a question? And as much as I'd love taking relationship advice from a guy who's screwed his way through half a modeling catalog, it's safe to say Paige hates me. Forever. She threatened to whack me with a protection order if I ever contacted her again."

Nick flips the blinker on and turns the corner, biting back one of his insufferable smirks.

"It's your life, Ward, but that sounds like a challenge to me."

Is he for real?

“Is a rattlesnake shaking like a leaf a challenge too? Paige was only a tad more subtle,” I snap off.

He shrugs one shoulder. “If I wanted her, and that’s what she told me, I’d show up on her doorstep with a dumptruck of roses and a barbershop quartet.”

“So, she’d need that restraining order then?”

“You’re no fun,” he grumbles. “Any woman would be delighted.”

“She’d sic the cops on you,” I say, staring at the green line of marshy coast we’re darting down.

“Nah, see, she’d be impressed I *risked* a restraining order to beg for forgiveness. A good groveling session goes a long way. Let me tell you, I wouldn’t sleep at home that night.”

My eyes could cut him.

With an awkward smile, he holds up a hand. “This is all hypothetical, Ward. It’s not about Paige. Lighten up.”

“Why would I care if it’s about her?” I throw back. “I told you, it’s over, and after the shit I pulled...it should be.”

After a half hour silence, we’re closing in on a bank of newer beachfront condos that look like they were sprung from the sands.

He pulls into the lot, muttering under his breath. “Ward, you’re a dumbass.”

I’m not even sure I can argue with that one today, but I don’t have time to worry about it. I throw my seat belt off and open the door.

Nick starts to open his door when he stops and darts me a fierce look.

“Don’t start,” I bite off.

“What?”

“That look. You think I’m about to walk into trouble. I’m the oldest and the calmest—”

“That calm didn’t help you much with Paige, Buddha,” he says.

“Right. I’m also the most pissed off person in this car and getting madder by the minute, so if you don’t want me to take it out on you, let me deal with him. I’ve got this, Nick. Just wait here for backup.”

“You shouldn’t go in there alone, Ward. What if he’s—”

“He’s a wimp, a snake, and a pushover in that order. What’s he going to do?”

“Fucking mind games. You know that’s the worst. Or if he’s really desperate, who knows.”

“I’m immune to his crap and we’re both military men. Dad isn’t. I’d see him pull a gun before he knows he wants to.”

“You shouldn’t have to do this by yourself,” he says with a thick look.

“You’ll take care of Mom, remember? From me, she’d see it coming, but from my baby brother? No.”

His eyes sink to the wheel.

“I hate this shit.”

“Don’t we all. That’s why we’re splitting the work and taking our shots where they count,” I say, laying a hand on his shoulder. “This is my heart-to-heart talk with Dad, Nick. He took too much from me this time.”

Without his fuckery, I’d still have my girl, I think, blinking just a little too long.

Christ, if life had a rewind function, I’d have told her to forget about the contract and stay, signed over half my net worth, whatever she wanted if it bought me another chance.

Even if I was heartless and sporting the world’s dumbest mouth, I was still enough for her.

We were friends.

The deep, tight kind who only start to click after hating each other’s faces.

She fit in my world. We made sense. And we could've had it all if I'd had the courage to gird up my balls and tell her she did the impossible.

She made me fall in love.

Except, I couldn't chain her to a life where two evil gremlins drop in whenever they want money and start raising hell.

I'm more pissed off than I realized, my blood roaring in my ears.

My thoughts propel me up the stairs and before I can blink, I'm beating my fist raw on the door of 3A.

Game show music plays from behind the door.

I'm ready to graduate to kicks in no time.

"Open up or I'll knock the damn door down. Last warning!" I bark through the wood.

Three seconds later, the door opens narrowly, the chain still slung across it.

"What's the big idea? Calm down. Shit, I thought someone was here to repossess the flat screen. Didn't know it was you."

My fist shoves through the open space and I rip the chain off, throwing it on the floor. My hands reach through, pushing the door wide open.

Dad staggers back as I come through the door, his lazy eyes wide and spinning.

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing?"

Squaring my shoulders, I tower over him. He's a small, rakish man, and it seems like he's shrunken another inch every time I lay eyes on him.

I step forward. He steps back. Three more sprawling footsteps and he's cornered, falling down into the leather sofa.

He cowers against the cushion.

"So, you've come to resort to this crude bullying now?" He makes a tsking sound. "That's too bad. I'd expect this kind

of thing out of your brother, but you? I always thought you were the smart one.”

“If you ever say anything about Nick again, I’ll fillet you like a fish.”

He’s silent.

I pull a black folder out of my jacket while his eyes flick with alarm. “Relax. I’m not here for violence. *Yet*. If you fuck my life up again—or Nick’s—I might reconsider. Hurt Grandma, and they’ll never find your body,” I growl.

He rolls his eyes, but I let him think I’m playing for another loaded second.

“I’m here to make a deal.”

“Deal?” he echoes, wrinkling his nose. “You’d actually pay me after...all this?”

I can see the greed, the dark hunger rising in his beady little eyes.

“No, old man. I have no heart, and most of the time my reactions are void of sanity. All of that, I get from you and Mother. Fortunately, I spent so much time with my grandparents, I learned how to be a functioning human being. I’m generous and overprotective. Mostly, I manage my anger well, thanks to them.”

“Quit preaching and get to the point,” he snarls, straightening his crooked body with one hand on the sofa.

“Here’s your payoff.” I hand him the envelope.

He raises an eyebrow but takes it cautiously.

“Don’t get too excited. It’s a one-way ticket to Kiribati. It’s a small island nation in the central Pacific and it’s the place you’re going to live out the rest of your days. I suggest you take it and don’t come back. That’s called generosity.”

“Kiribati?” he spits it back at me like something rotten. “You can’t be serious, boy.”

“I’m not finished. Your alternative is immediate arrest.”

Again, that eye roll worthy of a sixteen-year-old rather than a man in his sixties.

“You always were so dramatic,” he says with a sneer. “I’m not fucking going halfway around the world to some island exile to satisfy your ego. No deal. You can’t make me, kid.”

“Can’t I?” I cock my head, staring him down until that vicious smirk he wears so well fades. “When you open that envelope, you’ll find a copy of a criminal report that’s been filed with the SEC. It involves a lot of illicit trades with a certain pharma company, plus a hint or two of your outstanding gains from funding a biker bar fifty miles up the highway. Apparently, it went down in a serious drug bust.”

His eyes go wide and his lips open, but nothing comes out.

“We found out everything, and you’re boned. Your bullshit cost me too much this time,” I say coldly, Paige’s face flashing in my mind.

He cost me a gorgeous, whip-smart blond who loved me even when I couldn’t pour out emotions for her the way she did for me.

“So, this trip to beautiful Kiribati isn’t so much exile as it is a head start,” I say. “The material we filed should be with a special agent in forty-eight hours. I hear they’ve gotten very good at hunting people down for your sort of trouble across international lines these days.”

“You...you’re sick!” he sputters.

“Sick? Maybe. I’d much rather pick the option where you’re busted right here, today, and I get to watch you rot in a cell with the occasional letter begging me for contraband cigarettes to trade.” I pause, leaning down and leering at him. “But I bought the plane ticket because Nick asked. It’s one less scandal for our company and the tabloids to eat up if you’re arrested quietly overseas in a few months, and Nick always was the softie. I don’t give a damn at this point.”

My eyes bore into his as he takes a breath that rips the air.

“Your choice, but fair warning. If I find out you aren’t on that plane—and there’s someone I’ve hired in Kiribati to make

sure you show up—I'll go straight to the FBI. My net worth is enough to have a decent life even if the company takes a hit over you throwing one more big fit.”

“You'd let that happen to Brandt Ideas? You'd lose her fancy hotel? Bullshit!”

I never flinch. “We'll rebuild. The damage will be worth it to see you get what you deserve.”

“You're as vindictive as your mother!” he shrieks, his voice a strained octave too high.

“Maybe, but between the RICO case and the biker bar's drugs—”

He stands. “Not the drugs again. The damn drugs were Parnell's idea! That whole thing was his fault, and it ruined my life.”

“Tell it to someone who cares. I'm sick of your excuses. If it was his fault, I think he paid the price. Your turn.”

He stares like a scolded little boy wearing a bitter old man's mask.

“Man up and get the fuck over yourself. I've given you options. Kiribati or jail tomorrow.” I move to the door, grab the handle, and look back at the boneless heap on the sofa melting into the shadows. “Can't wait to see what you decide, Dad. *Ciao*.”



“How'D IT GO?” Nick asks the second I'm back in the Jeep.

“I scared him shitless, so pretty well. He'll leave. He knows I wasn't bluffing this time. If the bastard stays, I'll make good on that jail promise.”

Nick pulls out of the parking lot. “Damn, this isn't the way I wanted to visit Florida. Can we stop at my place? I want to unwind in the sunset.”

“Sure. We’ve got time to kill. Gotta make sure he catches his flight tonight.”

A short while later, we’re pulling up to the edge of the glittery sand where the land meets the sea.

“By the way, I took care of my part before we ever left town,” Nick tells me with a sideways glance.

“You did?”

He nods. “This whole thing was my fault. I let Mom steal the itinerary right under my nose. I knew she’d gone too far this time. The package to Winthrop wouldn’t have been sent otherwise. You wouldn’t have turned back into a massive asshole—”

“What do you mean *back* into a massive asshole? Imagine thinking I was one before.”

He looks at me like I’ve grown a second head, hiding a grin as he scratches his chin.

“No way that’s some big revelation. You know you’re Mr. Uptight incarnate, Wardhole.”

Fuck, does that sting.

It’s the first time I’ve heard that name since Paige slipped away—I mean, not counting the annoyed, harsh whispers behind my back every time I’ve been in the office ever since. She beat me to a pulp in the popularity contest.

“Tell me one thing—have I always had this Wardhole affliction?” I ask with a sigh.

“Nah, not always.” He nods and looks away, his green eyes lit in the evening sun. “I remember a time when you were happy.”

“Let me guess, the stone age?” I roll my eyes. “Now this sounds like some sappy chick flick shit, Nicholas.”

“It was recent.” He meets my gaze. “For a few crazy weeks behind all the stress, you were happy and you know it.”

Damn him, I know what he’s implying, and I don’t want to talk about it.

“Tell me how it went with Mother,” I grind out.

“Shitty. I pulled no punches. I told her if she ever meddled in our lives again, or if I ever found out she was driving with a suspended license, it’d be jail time no matter how much time and money I had to spend on locking her up.”

“Did you tell her Osprey wouldn’t even print the trash she sent? Bet it killed her to find out it was too much for that jagoff when the *Tea* was drumming them over Parnell nonstop.”

“Yeah. She shrieked like a banshee and asked if you put me up to laying down the law. I told her we came to our own conclusions, and I was done hearing her excuses. So, if she wanted to try me, she damn well could but she’d be sitting in a cell by nightfall. She hung up when I said I wasn’t having your ruin on my conscience.”

“My ruin? Last I checked, I’m still in one piece.”

He’s always the dramatic one.

Nick just shakes his head. “Whatever, dude. When do you think Grandma’s coming home?”

“With two giant assholes out of the picture, probably soon. Can’t imagine her staying gone more than another week or two.”

“Great. That’s when we get to the hard part, right?” he asks bitterly.

“Hard part?”

He sighs and I know exactly what he means.

“We have to tell her the deal’s off, and it’s my fault,” I say, every word an icicle in the Florida sun.

“It’s not all yours, Ward. I never should’ve let Mom in my office. My desk shouldn’t have been such a mess, and the file damn sure shouldn’t have been out in the open. What did you do? Besides scare off a pretty sweet girl, I mean.”

Does he have to remind me?

I fucked things up with Paige. Royally.

That's what I did and it's enough for ten lifetimes.

“Grandma emailed me last night, asking if I was going to stay engaged for real,” I whisper, watching my knuckles go bloodless as my fist closes. “She saw the latest photos from our final outings and said we looked so happy together.”

“You did. And that's my fault too. If I hadn't been giving you shit about marrying her, the conversation she overheard would've never happened,” he says quietly.

Nick wasn't the one who put the stupid shit I said in my mouth, though. The memories come at me like spinning knives.

Paige drooling adorably on my pillow in her sleep, a mane of blond hair and strawberry-sweet whispers tucked in my arms. The corners of my lips turn up.

Paige insisting I'm no broken, battered beast and kissing me like she meant it. I doubt she still thinks that now.

Paige, on all the mornings we spent at my lakeside estate when she had my coffee ready, greeting me with a smile I'd take any day over her damnable barista cup messages.

Paige, on all the gunmetal Chicago nights at my penthouse, when a single sticky kiss would become a tangled marathon in my bed, unbridled passion we were never too tired for.

Paige, calling me Orion, when all I did with my caveman club was bludgeon her heart into ground beef.

Yep, I'm a Grade A dumbass.

The days with Paige in my office, my home, my life were the best lie I ever told.

Because somewhere along the way, it became the living truth.

Now, I've sunk my grandparents' legacy because Winthrop will find out about our con one way or another. There'll be no deal after that, not after he realizes I tossed away a woman I swore I lov—*fuck*.

I stop short of thinking that word.

“Ward?” Nick waves a hand in front of my face. “Ward, you home?”

I blink slowly, my brows falling down.

“Get out of my face,” I growl, pushing at his arm.

“Shit, okay. You just looked like you were in a trance.”

I shake my head. “I was thinking. You should try it sometime.”

He’s quiet for a minute.

“Earlier, when you said Dad cost you too much this time, did you mean Paige?”

We’re going there again?

“No. I meant Winthrope,” I lie.

“Good, because I’m not sure you can pin the blame on Dad for that one.”

What the hell?

Of course, I can.

He sent the dirt to Ross Winthrope with a little help from our weasel mother. I stare at my brother. Does he plan to elaborate or is he just being a jackass?

“Obviously, our rift wasn’t caused by the package. Winthrope didn’t believe a word of it, and Osprey wouldn’t print it. Still, I knew they wouldn’t stop, and word would keep circulating until someone did believe it,” I tell him. “Paige would’ve been collateral damage.”

It’s true. I may have hurt her, but if I’d let everything drag out, it could’ve been disastrous.

His eyes narrow as he looks at me.

“No...no, I don’t think so. She would have sworn it was no hoax—or that it only started as a sham. She wouldn’t have backed down, Ward. Hell, she’s the whole reason we got something on our parents, remember?”

I wish I could deny how much her Enguard Security link helped us. Almost as much as I wish I could pretend I’m not

missing her like hell.

“She has guts. I’ll give you that, but why would I drag—”

“Forget guts. She would have done anything for you. That evening on the balcony when you had a conniption fit, you were trying to convince *you*. Not me.”

“Why would I try to convince myself I’m not the marrying type? You’re making no sense,” I snap.

“Maybe not. But you’ve never had to declare it out in the open before.” He shrugs. “If you’re doing something stupid because you’re afraid you’re like Dad—”

“I’m *nothing* like Dad.”

“No, you’re not. That’s the whole point.” He turns toward the sinking red sun, this wizened look on his face that’s totally unlike my dumpster fire of a brother.

I stare at him. Waiting.

“What point, Nick?” I growl impatiently.

“You don’t have to throw people you care about away to protect them. You’re not our parents.”

“The whole thing was a contract, a show, and I didn’t throw anyone away.”

Technically, it was worse. Paige left the moment she found out who I really am.

“She ran because she heard what you said.”

“Because it’s breaking news that I’m a cold-hearted freak? Did you forget the part where she locked us on the balcony and I had to kick my own door out?”

“Man, if any girl I was with pulled that shit, I’d call someone with a key. Not bust out a door I’d have to replace.”

I roll my eyes. “The only other moron with a key was *there*.”

“Dude, I said I was sorry.” He gives me a sheepish look. “Hard to remember I had your backup key in my pocket when

there was so much commotion. What did you say when you apologized?”

“What makes you think I apologized?”

“You said you didn’t want her to blow the cover on the NDA, but we both know why you really went after her. What did you say, Ward?”

For a moment, I’m silent, having a staring contest with the sun.

“What else? That I was sorry for the way it ended. I didn’t want things to implode like they did, and I thought we should still finish the contract. She didn’t want to hear it.”

“She almost kicked you in the balls. You got off lucky.” He laughs like the eternal knucklehead he is.

“I offered to pay her anyhow, you know. Even when she was hell-bent on leaving.”

He looks at me slowly.

“How did that go?”

“She threw her ring and almost decapitated me with a look. I didn’t see that coming. I told her when I gave it to her it was a gift, and she could keep it once this was over. I thought she’d sell it.”

“She might’ve been serious about the restraining order after all. I’m starting to get why you’ve only ever had a couple girlfriends,” he says, scratching his jaw.

I glare at him.

“I have no desire to fuck my way through half the city like you, idiot.”

“I know. You were engaged to your last girl, but Paige is the first chick you’ve lost sleep over in years.”

“I haven’t lost sleep over her,” I hurl back.

He lets out a long huff that says he’s entirely done with my shit.

“I’ve known you for thirty years. You’re a dick when you’re angry and an even bigger one when you’re tired. Don’t try to lie to me. You’ve been unbearable since it happened,” he growls, wagging a finger in my face.

I chop his wrist down, annoyed that we’re still bickering like we’re ten years old. He brings out the worst in me—or maybe he’s right and it’s not his dumb antics at all.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t kick your ass into the ocean right now, Nick.”

“Because we don’t have an assistant anymore and you need me. Reese doesn’t do coffee runs. Also, Grandma’s still on vacation, and you can’t afford for me to be out in a coma.”

He can take his good reasons and shove them somewhere darker than this sunny beach.

“Any word on when HR might get us some fresh blood, anyway?” he asks.

“Susan posted the job. When enough applications come through, we’ll start interviews.”

Those simple, mundane words shouldn’t taste like a toilet brush. But they do, and it’s all because she’s lodged in my brain, the woman I can never replace in a billion interviews.

The green-eyed pearl I lost who saw meaning in my stars, and now with nobody there to see them, my whole world is getting dimmer, colder, and it’s about to hitch a karma ride to hell.



THIS HAS to be the very definition of self-destruction, but here we go.

It has to be done.

Winthrop’s going to find out the truth sooner or later with Paige gone, and it’s better coming from me. There’s also no denying it’s the right thing to do.

With a double shot gulp of brandy, I set the glass on the desk and begin my confession.

DEAR MR. WINTHROPE,

YOU'VE BEEN SO KIND to my family that this email is hard to write, but I know it's the right thing to do.

I once again appreciate you bringing the nefarious packet regarding my relationship with Paige Holly to my attention. While the package was sent maliciously, it's partly my fault it happened.

Brandt Ideas produces beautiful and functional designs. It always executes its contracts with nothing less than the very best quality and professionalism. With you, I regret to say I failed to live up to our lofty standards.

I read your hesitation to continue working with me after my grandmother's heart event as a lack of trust. I feared you felt that my brother and I weren't prepared to handle your needs.

We brainstormed ways to look more impressive, and decided a looming marriage would make me look like a grown-up.

Paige was my warm, outgoing executive assistant. She has an art degree and a keen interest in architecture. She's also beautiful, smart, and likes to spar with me—at least she did.

She was the obvious choice for a fake engagement.

I paid her to play the part under an NDA. The goal was to convince you I was responsible enough to secure a contract for your Chicago jewel.

The events of the last few weeks with my family have been horrific, but somewhere in all the noise, I found the truth.

My intentions were less than honorable, and I'm deeply sorry.

I also understand if you no longer wish to do business with us. I wouldn't want to do business with someone I couldn't trust either.

However, the love you saw in my eyes on your yacht that day—the reason you assumed the package was fake—was a bigger truth. How could I not fall in love with her?

Not for the sake of a phony engagement, but for real.

My grandparents always dreamed of designing a Winthrop hotel. Grandma considered it her crowning achievement, and it was the last great dream of my grandfather. I thought immortalizing their legacy was the most important thing in my life.

I thought losing this contract and letting my grandmother down was the worst thing that could happen.

However, my priorities were misplaced, and I was wrong.

Losing Paige Holly over my lies has been a cataclysm.

If I thought it would win her back, I'd trade any deal, any dollar amount, and fall on my sword any way she wanted a thousand times over. Of course, that's entirely my problem and not yours.

But I had to come clean.

I apologize sincerely for this whole fiasco and hope you'll find the right firm to partner with on your best endeavors.

THANK YOU,

Ward Brandt

Senior Partner, Brandt Ideas Inc.

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DREAMING ALONE (PAIGE)



After three weeks of hardcore moping in my apartment, I've almost watched all of Netflix.

Now I'm jobless, Wardless, and have to face the fact that I'm not good enough.

Again.

Oh, and Brina's not here.

She can't be around nonstop the way I was for her when Mag went on a heart-smashing spree. We're not roommates anymore and she has a life that's fluid. Progressing. Evolving.

Wonderful changes and movement I'll never have.

My phone rings, jolting me out of my stupor.

That stupid unrealistic hope pops in my head like it does every damn time my phone makes a noise. I glance at the screen and—

Nope. Not him. Ward remains MIA with my heart.

I dread taking the call, but she is my mother.

She was also right. I shouldn't have let the fakery with Ward leave me open to sticking my heart in a bear trap.

Blech.

As soon as Winthrop was ready to sign, I wish I'd insisted on collecting his signature and severing ties. But I didn't, and I'm so not in the mood for another "I told you so" talk right now.

Still, I slide my finger over the answer call button, steeling myself.

“Hello?”

“So, I guess he’s snagged his client?” Mom asks.

How would I know?

“I guess,” I say flatly. “What does it matter?”

“Milah called today. She’s worried about you. She saw your breakup news online.”

Oh, good. The whole world knows now, and I guess I’ll get gossip obsessed bird-people chirping under their breath wherever I go, desperately snapping pictures of the poor girl who got dumped by a Brandt.

I fake a shrill laugh into the phone.

“Well, you know the truth, so you don’t have to worry.”

“I do, though, because this is another scandal.”

“This is America, Mom. Engagements end all the time. It’s not that big a deal.”

“So when you meet Mr. Right, how will you explain your pretend engagement? And how do you think he’ll respond?”

“If he’s got my glass slipper, he’ll laugh about it and we’ll split the cash.”

“Paige! At least tell me you’re hunting for studio space and not sleeping all day?” Mom says in a rush.

It sucks that she cares, even if she can be annoying and way too concerned about appearances that are actually a *me* problem.

Also, I refused the rest of the payment.

I’m kind of afraid to spend the deposit when I didn’t technically finish the contract. It’d be the ultimate parting shot from a self-absorbed Wardhole to slap me with a lawsuit.

There isn’t going to be any studio. Not anytime soon. I might as well tell her.

“So, I think you know I kind of fell for Ward a smidge,” I say. A massive understatement, but I know she’s been talking to Liv since doomsday hit. “We got involved, and then he played me like Austin did, so I packed my stuff and left before the ninety-days were up. I didn’t finish the contract. He offered to pay me anyhow, but...I told him I didn’t want his money.”

I close my eyes and wait for a mortified “*what?*”

Instead, she’s deathly quiet before she says, “Oh, Paige. What did he do to you? You knew the engagement was fake.”

“Yeah, well, the engagement was fake until it wasn’t. I know that’s my fault for opening the door, but...” I trail off, closing my eyes.

But what?

Ward asked me to stay in his room. I was totally good enough to fuck. Not up to snuff for anything more.

I can’t tell my mom that, though.

I’m not that big a sucker for punishment.

“Honey, what are you going to do now?” she asks. “You can’t keep working there, I’m sure.”

“Yep. No idea. But I have a lot of savings and they didn’t dispute my unemployment claim. I have time to figure it out.”

“This is what I was afraid of...” she whispers.

Awesome. Here it comes.

“I knew this would happen.”

That counts, right? Totally an *I told you so* without using the words.

“Do you need me to make you a trophy saying you’re right, Mom?”

“I’m sorry, dear,” she says after a long pause. “Why don’t you come home for a few days? I’m sure we could still convince your dad to invest in your studio. Whatever else happened, now’s the right time to go after your dreams. You’re

young, you're free, and I've been telling you for years that you're too dang talented for anything else."

See? She can be sweet.

Even so, I'm frowning. I don't want Dad funding my studio, and no big fat mistake with Ward changes that.

I'm a grown woman. I don't admit defeat.

"I don't know. I'll probably just go back to freelancing or something."

"Come home anyway," she insists.

"We'll see. Today, I'm just staying in. I don't feel well."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I just need some sleep."

"Should I bring you soup? Tea? Something with rose hips will have you doing cartwheels!"

I let out a low sigh. If only rose hips could mend frayed hearts.

"I need a nap, not gymnastics. I'll let you know what's going on this weekend," I tell her.

"Okay. Rest up, sweetheart."

"Love you," I say.

"I love you too." She ends the call.

Thank God.

To think I used to like talking to my mom before I went and hooked up with my boss.

Still, I can't waste another three weeks like I've wasted the last three. I have a comfortable savings nut built up, but I can't hide away from life forever.

I need a plan, but I'm so miserable it's hard to think. I force myself into the shower.

A trip to Sweeter Grind and then the art museum has to make things better.

After I'm cleaned up, I put on a summery green dress and try to forget how Ward used to say it brought out my eyes, then head for the door. A large white envelope snags my eyes, sticking out of my mail slot.

It freezes me in place.

I came home from Brina's one day and found it under my door, my name written across the top in Ward's chicken scratch.

I should just rip off the bandage and open it...

...but I promised I'd wait one year.

That's long enough to resist his excuses, his lies, his bait.

My fingers itch with curiosity, though.

I sigh, pick up the envelope, and carry it to my top dresser drawer.

Out of sight, out of mind.

I'll last a full year without opening it on pure willpower, but not if I have to see it every day.

There's no dialogue left with Ward flipping Brandt and the Pandora's box of feelings with sharp little teeth he unleashed.

We're over.

Done.

Kaput.



LATER, I go through the barren members only line of the Art Institute.

The first place I ever laid eyes on Ward. He was a couple paces ahead of me and my dating wreck. He looked like a dark knight from the back, broadside shoulders ready to face down anything.

Then I saw his grumpalicious face, already taut with frustration at the seemingly drunk girl and her horrible date.

Why did I come here again when everything reminds me of us?

That's how bad this lovesick virus is.

He's even invaded my favorite place, leaving scorch marks everywhere on the fabric of my life.

Ridiculous. I blink back tears. I'm not going to cry.

Straightening up, I wander through the abstract paintings and contemporary photo section. I must want to punish myself—or maybe I just have Ward on the brain—but I'm also facing my demons.

I don't even pause when I get to the architecture exhibit.

All the snarly, hurtful barbs in the world can't murder the beauty of Beatrice Brandt's work.

He won't ruin this for me.

I won't let him—or will I?

My stomach sinks. Every step feels like weighted cement in this exhibit.

Around the corner, there's the place where Tinder-freak had me cornered. I twisted my ankle, slid across the floor, and plowed headfirst into a sculpted god's very human knee.

He did the pretending then.

He took me in, a stranger damsel in distress, already entranced by his smoldering charms.

But it didn't take long at all for the raging, arrogant jackass to come out, did it?

If I could've seen past his physical perfection and through my raging hormones, I would've kept a safe distance.

A man who does a good deed and then tries to punish someone for it isn't worth a single second of love fever.

Memories attack me like kitten claws, darting through my brain, demanding attention.

Ward the handsome, too intriguing stranger at my apartment, feeding me a sandwich.

Ward the asshole, working me half to death, always spitting coffee when I struck back.

Ward the man, the lover, the fake who got too real.

Ward the bitter memory, the hole in my heart, the grumpy, sexy, cruel thing I have to keep in a vault and bury in the center of the Earth.

And I'm doing a pretty pathetic job of that right now.

I take a deep breath, release, and retreat to the stairwell. I'm not strong enough for this exhibit yet.

That's okay.

I know where I'll find my true love. I walk downstairs and out the back door to the sculpture garden.

The eclectic statues never hurt, but they don't offer me much peace today. They've lost their magic. Their normal beauty feels tainted, and I can't enjoy it.

I sit down on a bench, hugging my arms around my waist like I can hold myself together.

This sucks rotten eggs.

I feel like a crazy person, wandering around this beautiful place and suffocating, too trapped in the past to enjoy the art.

Maybe I should just Netflix and chill with my bad self until I feel human, and worry about it then. I could go home and start emailing old clients to see if anyone needs help with a project.

My creativity might be tapped out, but if someone bites, it could be the jump-start I need.

A woman in a grey dress wearing dark sunglasses with a burgundy scarf over her head sits beside me. I'm a little annoyed when there must be five other benches, and only one of them is populated.

"How are you doing, dear?"

What? That voice?

"Beatrice?" I blink, wondering if I'm hallucinating.

Shock knifes through me.

Jesus. He's using his sick grandmother to harass me now?

But then again, would she ever agree to being Ward's messenger?

Nah.

One look at Beatrice Brandt's tense expression tells me she wouldn't be here unless she wanted.

"Do you know why I hired you?" she asks quietly, looking over her shades.

"No clue." I rub one eye, checking one more time to see if she disappears.

Nope.

"You attached a personal statement with your application," Beatrice says. "In it, you called yourself a dreamer, and it resonated instantly. Dreamers are something we all needed then, and still do. My family was short on dreams, and has been for a while, including yours truly."

I tilt my head, unsure where she's going.

"No one ever recovered from my husband's death, and the boys just wanted to not be mistaken for their parents. They grew up in the firm. I'm not sure it's something either of them would have chosen under other circumstances."

"I can't speak for Nick, but I can't imagine Ward being anything but a CEO," I say, wondering what she's looking for.

She gives me that regal smile. "He loves to be in charge, but ordering people around isn't his true passion. I know my grandson."

Do you? I wonder.

"Some people just find something they're good at and stick with it," I say, hoping I don't sound bitter.

Beatrice nods.

"Maybe so. The point is, I wanted you around, Paige, because we all needed to learn how to dream again. *I* needed

to dream. I'd let my own vision of designing a breathtaking hotel grow stale and lifeless when we accidentally caught it like a butterfly in the spring. I couldn't let go. I let my big, clumsy beast of a dream shove other dreams aside, and I forgot something simple—no one should ever dream alone. And my dreaming hasn't been the same since I lost my husband."

I slump back in the bench, mulling over her words. They're a lot to ponder, but why?

"I'm sorry," I whisper. Maybe I should come up with a reason to leave before she brings up Ward. "How are you feeling these days?"

She looks over her shades like a woman who can spot a change of subject from outer space.

"I just came back from Hawaii. I stayed longer than intended, but it was good for my heart. Then Nick told me about the mess going on here."

Yep. We're going to end up in Wardhole territory. I'm not sure what to say.

I don't want to dis a brilliant old woman who feels like my grandma sometimes, but I can't do this.

"Beatrice, respectfully, if you're here on Ward's behalf—"

"Oh, no," she whips out instantly, shaking her head slowly. "I'm here to apologize for my own part in your suffering, Paige. The rambling prelude is my way of telling you this whole thing is my fault."

I have no words.

"Young lady, I held on to my own dreams too tightly. I let the Winthrop deal come before something far more important—my grandson's happiness, and yours. I know we joke about him being part grizzly bear, but he's always felt responsible for taking care of everyone around him. He's not a bad guy. He simply cares too much."

Maybe for some people, he does, but not for me.

"I don't understand. How did your dream come before Ward's happiness?"

“He did all this for me. I told him to go through with Nick’s scatter-brained idea to propose to you without actually meaning it. It was selfish, and the rest was pure stupidity. I was blind to how intense a sham love could be, and honestly, I thought you two were perfect together. I expected to come home to a real wedding, however, my instincts were dreadfully wrong. What I’m saying is, I meddled, and I messed up everything.”

My eyes are stinging again.

I crane my neck in something resembling a head shake.

“It’s not your fault. We didn’t quit speaking over the fake engagement. We stopped speaking because he’s a—” I’m about to call him a jackass and don’t want to insult his grandmother. “He doesn’t care about me. Not like you think.”

“He does,” she says firmly.

“No, he said so himself, Beatrice. He told me if he were going to marry anyone, it wouldn’t be me. No other way to read that.”

A pained smirk pulls at her lips. “Ward can be such an overgrown moose sometimes, but whatever dumb caveman thing he’s done—I’ve spoken to Ross Winthrop personally. Did you know Ward came clean about the fake engagement?”

He—what? Why?

Because it looks better than another broken engagement?

I mouth a silent “No.”

Beatrice closes her eyes and opens them slowly.

“He confessed to the hoax to clear his conscience, but he said the ultimate joke was on him. He didn’t care about losing the contract. He fell in love with an angel, and her loss cost him everything.”

Holy crap.

I’m being pulled at opposite ends. My heart sinks. I know how cruel the fallout will be if I’m hoping against logic, and yet some small part of me can’t resist.

“Why would he do that?” I don’t think Beatrice would lie about this, but she’s probably confused.

“From everything Winthrope told me and Nick, I don’t think Ward could have faked your engagement if he wasn’t truly happy. If you two weren’t right for each other. He would only go along with the scheme if *you* were his faux bride-to-be.”

“Really?” I want to slap myself.

Why do I care? This big reveal shouldn’t make me happy. It’s as fake as a three-dollar bill, just like the lie we lived.

“That’s what Nick concluded, and I think he’s right,” Beatrice says. “He knows his big brother.”

“Ward sent me a letter, but I never opened it,” I admit. “Maybe I should.”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t?” I echo, totally surprised.

“Good grief, you sweet thing, go talk to him in person. Sort this out. It’s not going to happen passing notes back and forth like junior high,” she says with a soft grandmotherly smile.

“No promises. Maybe I’ll read it and decide if I want to talk to him...but I don’t think I can handle having my heart ripped out again.”

“Ask yourself one thing,” she says, her scarf billowing in the breeze. “Why would he take the time to write a letter if he simply didn’t care?”

I don’t know.

Maybe for the same reason he wrote Winthrope—guilt.

His conscience can’t carry the load.

“I need to ask you a question. I don’t have the right, but this is my grandson, so I need to know anyhow,” she says.

Jeez. What now?

“Do you love him?”

She's a hell of a shot. My mouth drops. I wasn't expecting that.

"Um, I mean...honestly? As much as you can love a guy who runs over your heart in his fancy Tesla, stops to slather it in that expensive scotch he likes and lights it on fire, then backs up and runs over it again."

Her laugh is too contagious. I can't help smiling back as she says, "Relationships are hard. We've all been there, and someday you'll be there again. It's called commitment because you see it through, even when it hurts."

"But if I read the letter first, at least I'll know what he's thinking."

"You're all he's thinking about," she says quickly.

"He said that?" My eyes go wide.

"He didn't need to. He's grumpier than usual. He never leaves the office. I'm not even sure he's eating unless Grayson shoves a pile of meat in his face. I know he's lost a few pounds."

I smile. "We only ate when I got hungry."

She raises a knowing eyebrow at me.

A moment of silence passes.

"You know where he is now, don't you?" she asks.

"Um, right. I left my keycard for the office at the penthouse the day I walked out."

She digs in her purse and hands me a sleek white card. "Use mine."

"Thanks." I stand. "Should we ride to the office together?"

"And be accused of more meddling?" She winks at me. "I wouldn't dare."

"Okay." I plan to move, but my feet are glued to the ground. "Are you sure? He was pretty clear about how much he didn't love me last time."

“He was talking from his fool head. I’m confident his tongue has had ample time to listen to his heart.”

“So, if I go in and he doesn’t—”

“If I’m misleading you, you’re welcome to hold it against me forever. Also, I’ll buy you a world-class art studio with my personal endorsement. But I’m not wrong. Why would I be?” she says with a wink.

I want her confidence someday—especially now, when I’m biting my bottom lip.

“Wishful thinking?” I venture.

“My only wish is seeing my grandsons happy, and you. Go.” She motions me on with both hands.

I clasp the white card in my hands and force my legs to work.

I’m terrified and elated.

I don’t think she would have tried quite so hard if she wasn’t sure she was right. But I’ll never forget what he said.

He doesn’t love me.

He’s not the marrying type, and if he were, I’m not the One.

God. I hope she’s right, and I hope I’m strong enough for this.

The whole drive there, I’m ten seconds from taking a detour and heading home. If he’s so torn up about it and cares so much, why hasn’t he come to me?

I keep reminding myself of my conversation with Beatrice. She thinks he loves me. It sounds like his brother thinks he loves me, too.

Am I about to make a huge fool of myself?

I park in the company garage. “You can do this, Paige. If he tells you to go to hell, you haven’t lost anything.”

I stop at the café downstairs and order a black drip coffee and a sandwich bursting with curried chicken and bacon. I

wave Beatrice's card in front of the Brandt Ideas elevator.

It dings open.

Nerves swirl so hard my stomach lurches. I wait too long to step out and the doors close again.

Inhale. Exhale. Do this.

It's a little surreal stepping into a sleek, quiet hallway I haven't been in for weeks. I squeeze my eyes shut and move one foot in front of the other, stopping at his office door.

"You can do this," I whisper one last time, even as I'm becoming a human ice sculpture.

Hello, biggest risk of my life.

With my breath stalled in my lungs, I pinch the knob and push the door open.

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THE BLUEPRINTS (WARD)



“**W**hat are the other options?” Nick asks.

“Well, we could—” The sound of a turning doorknob distracts me, and I look over his shoulder.

I’m expecting an interruption.

Definitely not the kind involving a blond, voluptuous, green-eyed angel who ignites my being with a soul-shock stronger than any booze invented.

I blink once. Twice. Three times.

Still there.

Fuck, she’s real.

She stands in the doorway of my office, wearing the same sassy smirk she used when she’d bring me death by sugar disguised as coffee and decorated with handcuffs. And there’s something nervous written on her too.

Insanity.

Seeing Paige Holly again winds me up in a way I haven’t felt since I was stomping around overseas in the military dodging sniper rounds.

That ambrosia bottom lip pulls into her mouth.

I wish it were my teeth there instead. For a second, I have half a mind to storm over and sign my name on her lips with my tongue.

Only, I'd be the universe's biggest idiot to scare her away again.

"I didn't mean to interrupt." Her voice is so quiet, an octave higher than usual as she gives us a fluttery wave.

Interrupting? I've never wanted to see anyone so much in my life.

I search for words to say it, my brain short-circuited, but my mouth isn't working.

"We were just wrapping up, and he was leaving." I lance my brother with a stare that promises a lifetime of ass kickings if he doesn't pick his butt up and move.

Thankfully, he's a good brother, deep down.

With a knowing smirk, Nick claps his folder shut and walks past her, muttering an "awesome to see you again, Paige." He gives me one last raised-eyebrow look before closing the door on his way out.

It's *carpe diem*, or *carpe die*.

She takes a step forward. If I sat up any straighter, I think I'd dislocate a disc. Her hands move to her hips and her smirk blossoms into a grin that turns my heart into a poached egg.

"Mr. Brandt, I heard you wanted to see me?"

My fucking lip curls in a lopsided smile.

She's coy, but formal. Is she flirting, or is she here for something unrelated to—well, my miserable sleepless nights?

Either way, I told Ross Winthrope I'd humiliate myself a million times for this girl, didn't I?

Here's my chance.

"I'm so sorry, Paige," I try to say, but she's already talking.

"Ward, I'm sorry. I should have—"

We both stop in mid-word collision.

"What did you do?" I ask.

"—I overreacted!" she throws out at the same time.

I close the space between us. We're toe to toe.

"Let me go first?"

She nods.

"I'm a clusterfuck human being," I start. "My issues with my parents—"

Her hand moves to my face, silencing me with a single stroke. "Aren't your fault. I'll just have to make not trusting me impossible."

I bend down and plant my lips on her head.

"You already are impossible, but sweetheart, let me finish. My family issues are as resolved as they'll ever be. Between you, me, and this room, I've been talking to a Swiss shrink ever since you walked out."

Her mouth drops and her eyes fill with awe.

"They poisoned me, Paige, and I'm working like hell to draw out the venom. I was terrified I'd be a monster just like them. I thought I'd never be able to make you happy. But after spending time without you, the only thing I want in the world—the only thing I'll ever truly need—is your happiness. Preferably with me. So here's the big question. Can you ever forgive me?"

For a killing moment, she's quiet, her face set like a mask.

"Of course! The whole fake engagement thing ruffled my deepest fears, too. The crap with Austin left me bruised, and then when I heard you say you didn't love me and would never marry me after we—well, after we—"

I fold my arms around her and pull her to me. I love how remembering our passion renders her speechless.

"We made love, Paige, and I started talking stupid. Guess what matters more? What always will as long as I still have a pulse?" I smile into the heated green pools of her eyes, trying not to tremble with the need to fall in.

She closes her eyes and sighs like a whimper.

“Ward—making love? Is that what you’d call it? I felt played.” Her jaw clenches and she turns her head, those green gems so conflicted. “I thought our fun was just convenient.”

My grip on her tightens, heavy as hell with denial.

If only I could rip my chest open and show her my heart.

The wild, drumming throb of my pulse.

The invisible fire that was never there, never my whole life, not before I tasted a girl I learned to love indescribably more than I ever hated her.

This is painful for her, though, and it’s my fucking fault.

I press my forehead to hers.

“Listen. The sex was so good because you intoxicate me, woman. Can’t keep my hands off you, and even when we’re kissing and touching, I always need more. I don’t regret a damn thing. *Do you?*”

She shakes her head so intently her hair tumbles down her shoulders in a beautiful gold cascade.

“After the way it went down, I wanted to, but I couldn’t. You’ll always be a Wardhole, but hate you? No. I just hated that I wasn’t enough to be your everything. I...I didn’t want to be pushed away again.”

The tears in her eyes dismember me.

“Pushing you away—I was trying to protect you from ending up hurt by me or my bastard parents. Paige, you *are* everything. You’re breath for my soul. You helped finally fix things. I put my parents in their place and I came clean with Winthrope, and even if that was for me, for the company, it was always for you.”

“Yeah, Beatrice told me. I kinda hoped she was just buying you sympathy since that’s the whole reason we went through all of this.”

I shake my head.

“He would have found out sooner or later. I couldn’t lie any longer. Not after what I did to you. I let him know it didn’t

matter because I'd already lost the most important thing in my life."

"What's that?" she asks playfully, a sass I'll always adore behind her tears.

"Do you have to ask?" I answer her with my starving lips.

Fuck, I've missed her, every seething second we're joined like twin fires. Her tongue brushes the seam between my lips, and her mouth opens for me. I caress the inside of her mouth.

She even tastes like home. Everything I've ever been seeking. The stuff of right and wrong and forever.

Her leg curls around my thigh, and I'm so hard I could be arrested for packing heat in the building.

My kiss deepens, trying to brand her.

It's all I can do not to take her right here on the table. I place my palm under her leg and hike her other leg up around me. She tightens one arm behind my neck, running her other hand through my hair frantically without ever breaking the kiss.

I walk to my desk with the little devil's mouth pressed to mine and warmth pressed to my hardness. I land in my office chair, barely pulling away from her, gasping for dear life.

She lays her head down on my shoulder, joining me on the chair, and I run my fingers through her silky hair.

"You still haven't said it." She takes a couple of ragged breaths.

"Never said what?"

She glares at me.

Oh. I'm such a dumbass.

I'm in my office with a beautiful woman I hurt in my lap, and she has to remind me what I owe her.

Is there any help for me?

I hope so, because I can't fucking stand losing her again.

I tighten my arms around her until I can't without hurting one of us. We lock eyes. I watch how the light fills her gaze, but only I can make her glow.

“Paige Holly. I love you so much it hurts to breathe,” I grind out, one heaving word at a time, my whole heart pushing it out. “I know what I am without you—an intolerable curmudgeon, haunting this place and making everyone miserable. The three weeks you were gone felt like three years on a bed of rusty nails—you can imagine how that makes me Mr. Congeniality—and it showed me I can live, but I can't live *well*.”

She laughs with this hitched, adorable flutter of her chest.

“Bad news, Wardhole. I can't live without you.”

My hand races to her cheek, tracing her face. I want every inch of her pressed to mine. I'm greedy as hell and I need her closer.

“Yes, you can. You've been doing it,” I say.

Sensing my need, she matches my urgency, sliding her perfection against my skin.

“Not really. Today's the first time I left my apartment since ___”

“God, I'm sorry.”

“It's okay,” she whispers.

But it's not. I demolished her and I might spend the rest of my life making up for it.

We spend twenty breathless minutes fused together, locked in depths so far beyond raw desire I didn't know they existed.

Then the door squeaks open and I'm scowling at the intruder.

“Oh, crap. Sorry,” Susan hisses. “I, uh, just came to tell you I have the interviews scheduled for your new EA.”

Paige sits up. “But I'm your EA? Or...never mind. I haven't shown up in three weeks.”

My smile comes on like whiplash. She still wants to be my EA?

“I’ll come back later!” Susan shuts the door.

“Have you given any thought to the proposal I sent you?”

“Proposal? Oh—the envelope?”

“Yeah. That.”

“Well, I was actually waiting a year to read it,” she says shyly.

“A year?” My jaw drops.

“So I’d be immune to you and all your charms. There’s a lot to protect myself against.” She smiles, running her fingers through my hair.

I stroke my hand through her hair in turn.

“Think you’ll be immune to me now?” I growl, ready to accept one answer.

Her kiss banishes every sane thought in my head but one.

“I’m addicted. Lucky you,” she whispers, before my mouth attacks her again.

Me too, babe.

Me damn too.

“We have to open the package. It has your compensation for me being a very large pain in your very sweet ass,” I tell her.

She lifts off my lap and puts some sorely needed space between us. I keep my arms around her hips, unwilling to let her wander far.

“You’re not trying to buy me, are you, Ward?”

“Never. I just want you to be happy. It’s a proposal—and not the fake marrying kind. You can turn it down if you want, but you’ll make me crazy if you do.”

She laughs. “I’ll have to read it first.”

I kiss her cheeks and then move to her lips. “I’m coming with.”

“Why?”

“Because I never want you out of my sight again.”

Laughing, she leans up on her toes to hug my neck. “I love you.”

And I’m over six feet of stone-cold grinning fool.

“Careful. That’s the first time you’ve said it. Only a billion times to go before we’re even,” I tell her.

“You’re so terrible,” she whispers, her smile drawing out her dimples.

“You made me say it.”

The kernel of truth in her giggle makes me know she’s been waiting a long time to hear those words from my clueless mouth.

Never again, Paige.

Those words will be my daily mantra.



I OPEN the door for my girl, and once she’s inside the car, I dive in and pull her onto my lap.

“So clingy today.” She grins at me like a cat that got the cream. “I didn’t know you could cling.”

“And you mind?” I raise an eyebrow.

“No,” she mouths, a sunburst exploding on her cheeks.

“I’m making up for lost time. You’ve been gone far too long,” I whisper.

“Yeah, well, I kinda know the feeling.” She kisses me again.

Little minx. Nothing about her expression hides how bad she’s missed the fire we started.

“I’m pumped you guys are back together!” Reese claps her hands together in the front seat, whipping her head around to look back at us.

Paige pulls away from me with an awkward blush.

Moment ruined.

“And I’m getting ‘pumped’ for a new driver,” I groan.

“Be nice to Reese,” Paige says, shaking a finger.

“Sorry. I’m just over the freaking moon to see some good news,” Reese says. “It’s been heavy around here.”

Big fat hairy understatement.

And there’s definitely a heavy load on my mind during the drive back to Paige’s place—or am I just that obsessed with her emerald eyes?

She doesn’t get to walk when we arrive. I hoist her up and carry her upstairs, over my shoulder.

“You know this is totally unnecessary and completely ridiculous, right?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know what happens when you show up to my office in heels. I’ve just got you back, woman, and I’m not leaving anything to fate,” I tell her.

“Oh, Ward, you’re such a drama hound.”

“With such strong arms. Remember, you’re here forever,” I say dead seriously.

She beats playfully on my back.

Hell, I didn’t think I could grin so much in one day.

When we’re at her door, I set her down. She unlocks it and we walk inside, hand in hand.

“Where’s the envelope? I need to see you open it.”

“It’s in my room. I hid it away so I wouldn’t have to look at it anymore.”

I stop and stare. She’s been tortured these past few weeks, and I was her inquisitor.

“I’m so sorry, Paige.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” I fire back. “I never meant any of it. I just—”

She turns to face me, covering my mouth with her hand. “It happened, it’s over, and we can’t dwell on it. We’re together now, and that’s what matters, right?”

“I love you, Paige.” I kiss her forehead. “You’ll never have to prompt me to say it again.”

She smiles up with this crescent of pink perfection on her face bound to linger in my mind. That smile holds so much more than if she’d just returned the love verbally.

I follow her into her room, sit down on her bed, and watch as she pulls the envelope from her dresser.

She holds it overhead, trying to see inside the filmy paper through the light.

“What is it?”

“Just open it.”

“Ward, if it’s a check, I don’t want it. Things are already unequal between us. No point in making it worse.” She looks at me seriously.

“How are things unequal?”

“You’re a bazillionaire, and I had to fake being your fiancée for cash.”

“One point five million dollars cash which you negotiated well.” I chuckle. “And I hope it wasn’t that bad the whole time.”

She sighs. “It wasn’t. I fell hard, after all. I just felt bad being paid for it, you lunk.”

“It’s not a check. I promise. Open sesame,” I order.

She rips the envelope open with a crooked smile and pulls out the thick packet of paper inside. Her eyes skim over it. “It’s...a new contract from Brandt Ideas? I thought you were fishing for a new assistant?”

She looks puzzled.

“I had to do something. It’s not appropriate for me to be so involved with an employee. I want you to be our Creative Ambassador. It’s a new role. You’ll go to all the major art galas and fundraisers Grandma used to visit to represent the company. She may or may not be there, but she’s retired and off to greater things. I’d like you to hunt down new art programs worthy of our funding.”

“Ward...” Her lips open and close.

“Also, there’s a bonus—part of the job requires teaching sculpting classes, especially with kids eager to learn. You can do as many classes as you’d like. For us, it’s a chance for good PR and generous tax write-offs. All effective immediately, as soon as you sign and return it.”

For a second, I’m worried she’s about to fall through the floor.

“W-why would you do all this for me?”

My gaze locks with her eyes. “It’s not obvious?”

A heavy silence. And then, she’s moving, something like a squeal slipping out as she screams toward me at the edge of the bed.

“I love you!”

I hold my arms out just in time. She drops the packet and dives into my grasp, bowling me over onto the mattress.

Delightfully flattened, I kiss her lips, tracing a finger up the crook of her neck, her chin, her jaw.

“Well? Is that a yes?”

Her lips meet mine in a lava flow. She takes my bottom lip between hers. The growl that rips out of me takes her over.

“I don’t think I have a choice. I am unemployed.”

“What did you do with your deposit?”

“It’s in the bank, earning pretty crappy interest. Thank you, by the way.”

“Then you have a choice, sweetheart,” I say.

“I suppose,” she says with mock-reluctance. “Unemployment is kinda boring.”

She kisses me again.

I swear, I could do this for hours.

“I want you to keep working with me. I want you to have an office at the firm, so we can still slip out for lunch when I don’t have meetings.”

“You missed that too?” Her lashes flutter.

Shit, what’s wrong with this girl?

“How do I convince you I missed *you*? Tell me.”

She’s laughing when her mouth swoops for mine again.

We collide like the Fourth of July.

When she tries to escape the fireworks, I hold her closer, kiss her deeper, my cock throbbing in delicious agony.

She undoes the first couple buttons on my shirt.

My inner beast snarls as I seize her wrist, pulling myself upright again, butt anchored to the bed’s edge.

“Only if you’re sure, Paige. If you’re not, I’ll hold you all night. I’m here for you—all of you—now.”

She brings the crown of her head to my chest, hiding her face. “Um, don’t you—do you not want to?”

I put my hand under her chin, tilt her face up, and let my tongue show her just how fucking bad I want her.

“Since the moment you walked into my office, but—” I stop. Damn. I don’t want to say this.

“But?”

“You felt played by what happened before, and I can’t lose you again. I’ve lived three weeks without you, a Paige-fucking-desert. I hated it. This can’t be something you regret.”

“I didn’t think that until after things went sour, Ward. And now that they’re not...I need you. In me.” Her mouth crushes

mine.

A ragged groan explodes up my throat.

Fuck.

She straddles me, her long legs winding around my waist. She runs her fingers over the exposed skin where she's undone my shirt, working at the rest of my buttons.

Who knew having her fingers crawling down my chest could feel better than being blown?

I'm titanium by the time she's on the last button.

She pushes the sleeves of the now open shirt past my shoulders. I shed it with a happy grunt.

I have no restraint, no patience, no sanity left.

My hands slide up her dress with the heat of the sun.

I yank it off in one brute pull and roll her deeper into bed with me.

My fingertips trace the bare skin of her back until I find the bra clasp and rip the hook open.

Perky breasts spring free like they were made for my thieving palms, my mouth, my dick between them. I've never wanted to worship a pair of nipples so badly in my life.

Snarling, I work the straps down her arms, dipping her back with a noise that could scare a Siberian tiger.

She's breathing so heavy I could die—happily.

I move away from her face, releasing the dancing tongue in my mouth, desperate for air.

Only, I'm far more desperate for Paige.

“Wait. One more.” My lips are on hers again, tongues mingling, trading breaths hot enough to sear.

I barely pull myself away to kiss down her neck, straight to the top of one round, perfect tit.

Cupping the weight of her breast in my hand, I drag my fingertip across a pink bud, loving how she shudders.

“Ohhh.”

Yeah, woman.

Give it up.

Just like that ten thousand times more.

She thrusts against me, and even through her panties and my slacks, there's no missing the slick warmth teasing my dick to madness.

I wrap my hands around her back, pulling her in, my mouth claiming each nipple like a war trophy.

She pushes down over me again, and I can't help but thrust up, running my cock over the outline of her sweetness.

Her hands grasp my waist. Fingers, desperate and divine. She removes my belt, then fumbles with my button, gliding off the bed and onto her knees on the floor in front of me.

I could stop and help her.

It's hard not to, because I want to sink into her. But her tongue is in my mouth again, and I'm not letting go for anything.

I've been without her for three hundred-year weeks. I don't fucking care if this takes all night.

Hell, I want it to.

I'm just as glad it doesn't when she peels my pants open. They hit the floor with a *whoosh* as I stand.

Breaking our kiss, she presents herself to me in only lacey hip hugger panties and a lush, pensive smirk.

“So. Fucking. Beautiful,” I whisper, caressing her face, pushing the tip of my thumb just past her lips.

The way she sucks almost keels me right over.

I'm madder than I've ever been to cleave her open.

I lean over and pull on one leg, lifting her up. Blue lace falls around her feet. She steps out of the fabric puddle, naked and irresistible.

Growling, I pick her up and plant us both on the bed again, her on my lap, shoving her legs open.

“Shouldn’t we lie down—”

No.

She gets my shaft mid-word and gasps like an angel dragged to earth as I grind her over it.

My arms lock around her back, sealing us together, pressing her tits into my chest.

“Not the hell today, sweetheart. Nothing’s going *down* but this.”

As long as I live, I’ll never quite fathom what happens then as the whole world blurs into this pulsing fire of my girl and piston hips that feel inhuman.

Our tongues meet. I match my thrusts to the strokes of my tongue, gently rocking us at first, and then becoming all too savage.

Heaven’s gates just opened.

Her fingernails rake my back, scrawling hot exclamations on my skin, churning my blood to lava.

Her legs squeeze my waist as she tumbles back in my arms, this beautiful mess of flying hair and green-eyed storms, slashing down on me with every stroke, threatening my balls with permanent damage if I even try to hold back.

Fucking aye.

I fist her hair with a delighted grin, my teeth marking her bottom lip. She rocks down over me, breaths becoming gasps, and gasps becoming husky screams.

Her knees dig at my thighs and her nails almost carve me up.

Harder.

Faster.

Sweeter.

I can't move in slow languid thrusts anymore, matching her urgency, the liquid heat in my balls hurtling toward eruption.

"Oh. Ohhh, Ward!" Her screams are a messy concert for my ears.

I can't hold back. Not tonight.

Even as I'm hammering her first orgasm through her, barely holding myself together, I feel a riptide coming on that just might split me in half.

I tighten my grip as she shakes in my arms, slamming into her as hard as I can. My hand dives between her legs, finds her clit, and rubs every resistance right out of her.

"Don't you *dare* stop coming," I snarl, my eyes like a steel trap.

Her body obeys so beautifully.

Her pussy clenches around me like God's own velvet, giving as good as she gets, begging for my release.

With her eyes molten jade and a scream in her lungs, I explode.

My lips meet hers at the very last second before I'm a pulsing machine, a chariot of ecstasy, ropes like lightning pouring out, filling her to running over with my seed.

If I'm doomed to be a Wardhole, then I'm a deliriously happy one when I'm tangled up in Paige.

She's shaking in my arms. I'm trembling against her. Hot release steams onto the sheet when I pull out of her.

I guide us further back on the bed and a dry spot, inching up to the headboard where we collapse together.

We exchange a few more warm words. We trade more quaking flesh.

Mostly, the smiles speak volumes, and they're full of promises tonight.

It's been a hell of a day.

No surprise, she's asleep in my arms before I can revive for round three. I watch her snoring peacefully in my arms and soon sleep drags me down.

Sometime during the night, Paige rolls out of my embrace and takes the covers with her.

It's cold, and I try to take some of the comforter back, but she has a mobster's grip for a sleeping kitten.

"You're freezing." She wakes up and presses her cheek to my chest.

I close my arms around her. "No thanks to you, blanket-stealer."

She gives me a grin that could age blue cheese.

"Good thing I love you enough to tolerate the arctic," I whisper, kissing her again.

My phone's alarm screams from my pocket somewhere on the floor a short time later.

"Damn it. Time for work. I have the new interior design sessions today. Nick's thinking about this spinoff company he wants to make his baby, and he's intent on driving me insane."

She giggles. "Should I tag along or do we need to work out a start date?"

"We do, but if you don't have anything better on your schedule..." I shrug. "I'd like your help interviewing new EAs. You know the job and you put up with me, so you're probably the best resource."

"You have to buy me lunch then." She pokes a finger into my stomach, drifting dangerously low before I stop her.

"That's a given—if you don't tease my pants off all day."

Her next kiss bursts with laughter that'll sustain me all morning.

Finally, I summon the courage to say what I really want.

"Come home, Paige. Will you?"

She glances around with a devilish smirk.

“Already home, aren’t I?”

“You know what I mean. Come home to our room. And I’ll tell Grayson we’ll get you set up at the lakehouse, any damn way you please.”

She combs her fingers through my hair. “It’s not the décor...”

“What then?” My face tightens.

“We lived together for a fake engagement, right?”

“Yes?”

“Things spun out of control. I love you, Ward, but I’m not coming back until I know it’s real this time.”

“I spent the night,” I say, twining my fingers through hers. “That’s real enough.”

“And waking up beside you feels like Cloud Nine.”

“Then why—”

She closes her eyes and bows her head.

“I just...I need major commitment this time, and we just got back together. I’d like to keep some boundaries until we’re sure. You’re welcome here anytime though. This is my turf, so I’m cool with that.”

For once, I wish she wasn’t so obscenely sensible and stubborn.

“Do you doubt my love?” I ask.

“No, but I think we moved too fast last time due to the charade. This time, we know it’s meant to last. I can’t handle losing you again, so...give me your love and your patience?”

“I need you home with me, but I’ll play by your rules,” I whisper, bringing her hand to my lips.

She giggles when my beard brushes her skin.

“Thanks for understanding. I knew you would.”

“I get it, even if I hate it.”

With her eyes lidded, she leans forward and kisses me again.

“I love you, Wardhole.”

And that’s enough for now.

Patience.

How could I own an architecture firm if I didn’t know it takes time to build beautiful lasting magic?

Still, I have to figure out what the blueprint looks like that’s going to get my girl back for good.

My life isn’t complete until I’m waking up with a woman I’d trade the sunrise for every single day.

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TROJAN HORSE (PAIGE)



Months Later

My Sunday night community class is almost over.

The Chicago-priced ticket fees cover the cost of free classes I do for several YMCA programs throughout the week.

Today we mimicked molding objects from several sample pieces. Most people went with the fruit bowl I provided and a few brought in their own figurines.

“That’s a lovely cat! If you pinch each side together at the top, the ears will be more pointed,” I say.

“Oh, thank you, dear,” the older lady says with a smile.

Her pinch is kinda wimpy, so the ears come out rounded, but they’re more pointed than they were before. Not that it matters when her sunburst smile means everything.

Sabrina and Magnus are here, molding a bumpy pineapple together. Her phone rings. She drags her clay-covered fingers over the apron she’s wearing and answers it.

“Hey, brat.” I give her a pretend scowl. “No phones in class.”

She rolls her eyes at me.

“Hello?”

She’s quiet for a minute, then covers her phone with her hand before I hear her whisper to her hubby, “Jordan wants to

know if he can spend the night at a friend's place..."

"He's not leaving until we're home." Mag looks up from focusing intently on the franken-pineapple like it's his latest genius business idea.

Brina throws her head back and laughs. "That's between brothers."

She puts her phone to Mag's ear.

"Buddy, don't leave before I'm home," Mag grumbles. He's quiet for a minute. "Okay. We'll be home in an hour. Fair warning, if you're not there, Armstrong *will* track you down and deliver you to your mother so she can crucify you. Got it? Even though you just turned eighteen, she still worries herself sick."

He's quiet again. "Yes. I liked me more when I was fun too. Bye."

Brina drops the phone back in her purse, flashing me a wink.

I pick up a flat silver tool from the table.

"Here, use this to smooth out your pumpkin," I joke.

Brina and Mag exchange a worried glance, then her hubby meets my eyes.

"It's a Maui pineapple," he says defensively.

"Oh, it is?" I'm trying not to snicker.

"...the skin's textured," Mag says, twisting his lips as he surveys his misshapen lump of chicken-scratch lines.

Brina gives me a helpless look.

"Don't even say it. I studied graphics design, not playing with dirt. I'm here to support the kids," she says matter-of-factly.

Mag laughs. "And I'm here mangling fruit because my lovely wife said I had to be. Also, it annoys my little brother. He can't leave our place until we're home. Somehow, that's worth everything."

I giggle, the endless banter between Ward and Nick flashing in my mind, even if they're a lot closer in age than Magnus and Jordan.

"Well, that's a nice pineapple in progress. Hang in there, Heron, you'll get there," I say, smiling as Mag shoots me a dirty look.

"You didn't even recognize it," Brina tells me flatly.

"Umm—it's the thought that counts?" I move on to check the other students, offering feedback on a few more sculptures before I notice the clock.

Oh, crap.

"Okay, class, time's almost up!" I call with a clap of my hands. "So if you could start cleaning up, that would be great. If you need to leave a sculpture here to be heated, just leave it at your seat and you can come pick it up in a few days. If you haven't finished or you want to practice more at home, the supplies are yours to keep. You can bring your final back any time the studio is open, and I'll fire it up."

Everyone files out with a burst of giddy chatter except for Brina and Mag. They stay after every time they're here so we can talk.

And I'm already expecting the first question before it darts out of her mouth.

"Okay. When are you and the Wardhole making it official?" she asks.

My cheeks heat.

"I don't know. We're taking it easy, remember? We haven't really talked about—"

"Yeah, right. He's always at your place."

I shrug. She knows he asked me to move in the night we got back together and I turned him down because I like being difficult.

But seriously, I need respect. Commitment. Possibly a real ring this time.

“You mean Mr. Bossypants hasn’t brought it up again?” Brina asks.

“Stay out of it, Fido. These things always work out in their own good time.” Mag drops his hand on Brina’s leg.

“If he’s playing my best friend, he’ll regret it.”

“Not your monkeys, not your circus,” he says.

Before I can agree, Brina looks at me with woebegone eyes. “At the very least, I owe him a pie to the face.”

Mag smirks. “Can’t disagree. I’d love to see the gossip rags move on from my near assassination by strawberries and cream. Word of mouth travels fast, and so do asshole bystanders with Snapchat and an appetite for capturing famous men at their worst.”

The bell above the door rings as somebody enters.

Speak of the world’s sexiest devil.

I glance over to find Ward walking through the door and grin.

“I wasn’t expecting you here tonight,” I say, bounding over to him.

“I was hoping you had time for a private lesson, but maybe class isn’t over?” He moves to stand beside me.

I throw my arms around him and squeeze until it hurts.

“We’re just finishing up. I always have time for you.”

“Brina,” Mag says under his breath.

She stands, leaves the monster pineapple in its place, and turns to Ward. “It’s good that you always have time for her now. You’ve already broken her heart once. I won’t forgive you a second time.”

Ward grins.

She puts two fingers in front of her eyes and aims them at him in warning.

Mag stands. “Okay, I have to get Carrie home before bad things happen.”

“Carrie?” Brina asks.

“Stephen King. Don’t you read, English major?” Mag growls at her.

She shrugs. “I’m just saying—”

“I know. But we have a juvenile delinquent with a hard-on for college chemistry to deal with at home, so we’re heading out.” He slides an arm around her.

“He started it when he made my best friend cry,” Brina whines.

He kisses her cheek. “I know. But it’s over. Let’s go.” He leads her out the door.

“You think she’ll always hate me?” Ward asks, turning to me slowly.

“Not forever, I’m sure. They were married for about six months before I decided Mag was worth keeping around. When I realized he wouldn’t leave her again, I was chill. Brina and I have always been a team. As soon as she thinks you’re serious, she’ll back off.”

He nods, moving to the table Brina and Mag vacated and sits down. He pulls a lump of clay out of his pocket.

“This came in a kit. Can you help me mold it?”

I lean over the table beside him and pick up the lump, working my fingers through the clay. I’m pleasantly surprised he’s taken an interest in making art. Usually, he’s content to be an observer with a coffee in hand.

“This already has a shape, so if we follow the molding... should be easy enough.” The pre-formed shape becomes clearer in my hand. “Looks like a horse?”

“A Trojan horse,” Ward says. “I bought a figurine and dumped it in clay.”

I laugh. “What? Why?”

“Because there’s a secret compartment for your eyes only,” he says mysteriously.

“No way. What’s in it?”

“You have to find it first.”

Oh, boy.

“Um, okay. It’s not alive and doesn’t bite, right?”

“This isn’t *Fear Factor*, sweetheart.” He shakes his head. “It’s something you left behind. I thought this would be an interesting way to give it back.”

“Hmm. I thought I got everything?”

Ward stands, those blue-green lagoons for eyes shimmering in the light.

I push away at the clay with my fingers until I find a pouch on the rear of the horse. I put my nail to the edge of the pouch and it opens with an audible *pop!*

It takes my eyes a second or two to focus.

A diamond twinkles at me, spraying light against the wall. It’s—*holy crap*.

It’s the ring he gave me at the start of our charade. The pretty diamond ring I threw at him when he said he never loved me and wouldn’t marry me.

He kept it and hid it inside a horse that’s like a stripped down version of the sculpture I made in college, inspired by his grandmother’s brilliance.

Oh, no.

Whoa.

Does this mean...

My lungs forget how to breathe. I take a deep, shaking breath but my knees give out anyway.

Ward catches me before I hit the floor.

“I was supposed to do this on one knee,” he whispers in my ear. “Trouble is, you’re the clumsiest person I know, so I thought it’d be safer this way.”

One knee? So it *does* mean...

God.

Still holding me up, he leans over, plucks the ring from the horse, and slides it on my trembling finger.

“This is yours, Paige. It’s always been yours since the night we collided and I spent the next few weeks growling at you like a very stupid bear. You won my ring. You won my heart. I could never trust it with anyone else.” He pauses for a breathless second. “Sweetheart, will you marry me?”

I think I just died.

It’s so hot I can’t breathe in here, even with the autumn coolness.

Wrapping my arms around Ward Brandt, I give him the only answer I can. I press my lips to his so deeply I’m dizzy. He opens his mouth and I deepen the kiss.

His arms tighten, and he pulls away with dark amusement in his eyes.

“Was that a yes?”

I still can’t form words so I nod. A hot tear runs down my cheek.

He touches my tear with his finger. “Tell me that’s a happy tear? I don’t think I can handle it if it isn’t.”

I nod again so fast my head almost snaps off, and his lips come to mine in this feral, claiming kiss that reverberates through me.

This is a perfect moment.

Balmy and magic.

Everything I’ve ever wanted.

“I need a favor,” he says, breaking away.

“What?” I ask.

“Can you come home tonight? If not, we’re eloping. We can be in Vegas and have fake Elvis marrying us before dawn.”

I giggle, pushing at his chest. “I was ready to come home with you the first time you asked! I just needed to know it was permanent.”

“It’s forever,” he snaps too quickly.

Ah, there’s the adorable grump I want to marry.

I grin at him.

“Fiiine. I’ll come home, but we should think about making the lakehouse more permanent. It’s a better place for kids and dogs. There’s a huge yard to play in.”

“We’re having babies and dogs?” he asks slyly.

My face heats.

“Not for a little while. I just wanted to see what you’d say.”

“I say we start tomorrow,” he rumbles, pushing his forehead to mine.

I laugh and slap his arm, now fully smitten with this man for life.

He pulls me tighter to him and kisses me again.

“What do you think of Fiji for a honeymoon?”

“Wherever you want, Ward. If I’m with you, I’d be happy having it in Death Valley.”



Weeks Later

I KNOCK on the door of what’s been designated the men’s dressing room.

“Hey, baby sister.” Nick opens the door and immediately jerks his head away.

“What’s wrong?” I rush out.

“My brother will kill me if he catches me looking at you in a robe.” He turns his head and yells, “Yo, Ward, your lady’s here!”

“Dude. It’s not like I’m naked.”

“Whatever.” Nick walks away.

Ward comes to the door with a freshly trimmed beard and...what’s that redness under his whiskers?

“...I’ve never seen you blush before.”

“I’m *not* blushing.” He reaches out and pulls me inside. “I’m just not sure what I think about my wife prancing around the Art Institute in nothing but a bathrobe.”

“I’m not your wife yet,” I tease.

“You will be in half an hour,” he says with pride.

“I didn’t want you to see me in my dress, so I had to get creative. And Merry Christmas.” I hand him a box wrapped in iridescent white paper.

He tears it open and pulls out an aqua-blue bow tie exploding with pale green stars. “I thought our color was silver?”

“Everyone else’s color, yeah. You’re wearing a new lucky tie that matches those eyes. They were the first thing I noticed about you, after all.”

“Really?” He echoes, lowering the tie in his hand.

I nod. “You were one grumpy god with looks made to electrocute.”

“Electrify sounds nicer,” he corrects, then smiles and kisses me. “Thanks, lady. I appreciate it.”

I undo the silver tie around his neck and attach the cerulean-emerald one in its place. “Don’t worry. I’ll appreciate it tonight when it’s *all* you’re wearing.”

“Fuck, woman, just try to appreciate it half as much as I will.” He smothers my lips so hard I melt.

“This is where we first met,” he says with a lazy realization.

“Kinda why we chose to get hitched here.”

He slides a hand over his face for a second before he gives me that mischievous grin I love so dearly.

Our mouths meet. Our tongues twine. There’s magic in every second today.

Then my phone rings.

“Paige! I have no idea where you are but you need to get back here,” Mom hisses. “We have to get you ready. Your wedding starts in less than an hour.”

Ward takes the phone from me. “Don’t worry. I’ll send her back, but make sure no one starts the wedding without her.”

I giggle.

He passes my phone back as I push the door open to leave.

“Paige?”

I look over my shoulder.

“Next time I kiss you, you’ll be my wife.” His smile—that smile—is freaking catnip.

Warm anticipation spreads through me and it’s enough to carry me through the second half of our epic day.

Back in our dressing room, I step into the simple strapless white dress I picked out. Brina pulls up the zipper in the back.

Mom helps me into a pearl and cubic zirconia long-sleeved getup that trails six feet behind me. I wanted a plain white dress.

Go figure, she wanted something fit for royalty, so this was our compromise.

She kneels down and starts buttoning while Brina buttons from the top. An eternity later, Mom puts the last button through the hole at my waist and holy hell, I’m sick of buttons.

We meet Dad just behind the door of Fullerton Hall.

My sister and Nick walk down the aisle first. Brina would've been my maid of honor, but Mag refused to let anyone else walk her down the aisle.

Ward was okay with her walking alone or with Nick, but said his brother would be his best man, and he didn't care what Mag thought.

I planned for Brina to go down the aisle alone followed by Ward's brother escorting my sister, but Mom thought the pictures would look lopsided with an uneven number of attendants.

So Nick and my sister go first, followed by Mag and Brina.

I come down the aisle with Dad. The frosted glass window over Fullerton Hall is so beautiful this room doesn't need decorations, but Mom's florist did a great job.

Colorful bursts of flower garlands cover all the railings. An arch behind the priest drips flower arrangements that smell as beautiful as they look.

Ward turns to see me.

He smiles at me the whole way, drinking me in, and with all these eyes on me, his grin keeps me anchored to the room. It's the one thing that stops me from freaking out and becoming a runaway bride.

"You look like Princess Di in that dress," Dad whispers as he places my hand in Ward's. "Take care of her for me."

I can't decide which one's a bigger compliment as Ward gives my father a solemn nod.

"She's more bomb than any princess ever crowned," Ward whispers with an edge in his voice that says he believes it.

God, I love this man.

The ceremony goes by in a warm and fuzzy blur, drifting vows and forevers, a priest who makes our bond already written in the stars official.

Ward's hand is so tight I can barely get the ring on his finger as he grins at me sheepishly. And I die again, realizing

just how much this bear of a man adores me.

“You’re okay,” I whisper. “Relax.”

Then it’s his turn to slide the diamond-covered band over my finger.

I miss the fateful words, “You may now kiss the bride.”

But there’s no missing the hunger his mouth has when it collides with mine in one long inferno.

He deepens the kiss with a growl I can feel amid the wild cheers and applause.

My arms close around his neck.

His arms hug my waist, and then my feet are off the floor and I’m floating.

Literally.

I think as long as we live, he’ll teach me new ways a woman can float with love, desire, and so much passion I might need hooks to stay on the ground.

“Hey, maybe wait until tonight!” Nick yells from the side.

A stunningly well-dressed Reese condemns him with a look, making me wonder what their deal is.

Laughter bleeds into the music beating through the room.

The hall clears out with people heading to the hotel for the reception. Mom directs the photographers like they’re trained hunting hawks for what seems like forever.

Finally, Brina and I slip back to my dressing room where this ridiculously heavy beaded outfit gets removed, and I replace my heels with sandals and a sweet smile of relief.

We walk to the reception together, my head on his chest, his arm slung around me like it’s the only thing that’ll ever matter.

And maybe it is.

“You were right. This balcony is beautiful. You can see the whole skyline and even Lake Michigan from here. This was the perfect place.”

“I’m glad we did the ceremony at the museum. No place better,” he says with a glowing look.

It’s also the place where we were reborn, when Beatrice convinced me to go find him when all seemed lost.

Again, the evening blurs.

I’m dancing with Dad one second, and then I’m in the middle of my first dance with my husband(!), our feet clumsily forgetting to sway with the music. Kinda hard when our lips have no chill, growing impatient every minute they’re apart.

Even the beautiful song my cousin Milah sings for us becomes one more awesome moment crammed into a breathtaking day, even though my hands burn in screaming applause and she wipes a rare tear from her eye with congratulations.

By the time it’s over, people swirl around us on the balcony like restless crows.

While dinner’s being plated out, I drag Ward around to each table to thank our guests personally.

Eventually, we reach the Whinthropes’ table.

“Thank you for coming,” I say.

“We wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” Ross Winthrope says. He looks at Ward. “She’s a beauty. Keep her happy, and let her keep you honest.”

“Glad as hell we could work things out, and it’s all thanks to her,” he tells Winthrope, his arm around me tightening.

“Aww. I love you,” I whisper, pecking irresistibly at his cheek.

“Love you too, sweetheart.” He kisses my forehead.

“Paige, I don’t know what’s more beautiful—the ceremony or the reception. The lake outlined by the night skyline is hard to beat.” Mrs. Winthrope taps her husband on the shoulder and points into the distance. “Look, you can even see the new hotel site from here.”

Ross follows his wife's finger with his eyes. "You can. How about that. Once again, I'm thankful cooler heads prevailed."

"That makes two of us. Now we're ahead of schedule." Ward grins.

No sooner do we turn and step away politely than there's another tall figure waiting. The silver tiara perched on her head catches the light and flings it back so it's almost blinding.

"There you are! You're a hard lady to catch." Beatrice walks up and hugs me. "Welcome to the family. You're the daughter I always wanted."

Mom appears behind her. "Careful, she's my daughter."

"She's a Brandt now," Beatrice says intently.

"Maybe so, but I brought her into this world to join your lovely family."

"Ladies, there's plenty of me to go around! I love you, Mom," I say. "And I love you too, Beatrice."

"Take a page from Ward and call me Grandma. You're family now." Beatrice stares at Mom. "Surely, I'm allowed to call her family, right?"

Mom smiles.

"I suppose. It's just...it's hard losing my baby."

Ward's arm around me drops. He steps forward and hugs my mother.

"You're not losing a daughter. You're basically a Brandt now too, and I'm grateful for making my family bigger and better," he says, his words so heavy in my ears.

After everything they've been through, I'm glad too. There's something special about becoming the thread that joins Ward, Beatrice, and Nick more tightly.

Mom laughs. "Hopefully, you'll stay out of trouble?"

"I think I have to. Your daughter gets mean when she's mad," he says with a wink.

Brina comes up and hugs me. “Congratulations! For the hundredth time.”

Ward extends his hand to her.

She shakes it warily.

“We’re hitched. Are we cool now?” he asks.

She cocks her head. “I’m convinced you plan to stick around, so sure, *for now*. But try something stupid and I’ll come at you with a fork, dude.”

Mag comes up behind her, chuckles, and slips an arm around her waist. He looks at Ward. “I’d apologize, but I think I’m doing you a favor with a glimpse of your future.”

Ward gives a shrug that says a screaming meteor impact couldn’t ruin this night.

“No problem. At least she didn’t pie me.”



One Week Later

SOMEWHERE IN FIJI, we stop to rest on a soaring cliff overlooking a mess of fairy-tale rocks surrounded by translucent waters.

It’s almost sunset, and the way the orange light stabs into the sea turns it into a perfect match for my husband’s ever electric—*yes, I got it right this time*—greenish-blue eyes.

Which I’m a little lost in as Ward pulls me close, slinging my legs over his lap, gingerly rubbing my foot with one hand.

“Seriously. If you don’t stop, I don’t think I’ll be able to bring myself to call you a Wardhole again,” I tell him, running my hands across his face.

“Damn, what then? For your information, I never stopped being your Warden.” He grabs my hand, brings it to his lips, and lights me on fire the second they meet my skin.

“You know this is forever, right?” I say with a sugary smile. “You’re going to get the worst of me, Ward. My venting, my bad hair days, my less than perfect skin after I eat my weight in cheese...you’re going to get my freakouts when our kids scrape their knees, and my questions about Nick’s sanity every time he does something majorly dumb.”

“Majorly dumb is what Nick does, so I’m with you,” he throws back with a laugh. “I’m surprised you think it matters.”

“...it doesn’t?” I ask, my brows pulling together.

I hear the happy sigh breezing out of him as he takes my face in his hands and delivers a kiss that stops my heart.

“I’m ready for the worst, woman. Lay it the fuck on me. Because I’ve had you at your best, and I’ve already seen good reason why I shouldn’t bat an eye.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Ever since we got back together—for real—you’ve given me a sweetness I never knew I needed,” he says.

Is that a challenge? I bite back a smile and gaze into his eyes that seem like they were pulled straight from the Pacific foaming below us.

“But all my whining about how bad my feet hurt on the way up here—”

“Gave us this beautiful sunset and a chance to feast on my gorgeous bride,” he finishes, digging his fingers into my heel. “Besides, I’ll have you back to feeling like you’re walking on air, won’t I?”

My smile deepens.

“When I dragged myself home and collapsed after my last class before we left for this trip, I promised to make you dinner and I was out like a kitten.”

“Beauty sleep, Snow White. You napped with your head in my lap like a feline, all right, and then I woke you up with a damn good tikka masala.”

“I mean...I’ll give you that. But, Ward, I’ve gotta say, forever is a *long freaking time...*” I pause, fully aware I’m making his life difficult right now with these silly questions. “Do you really think we can keep this up without going back to hating each other?”

“I hope we do get pissed. Just for a little while. Truth be told,” he growls, lowering his face to nip at my ear. “I was jacking off half the night and getting very little sleep the first few months we worked together, Paige. And I couldn’t just slam you against the nearest wall, spread your legs, and have the hottest make-up sex of my life then.”

Yowza. What do I even say to *that*?

A frantic pulse between my legs tells me to shut up and just kiss him.

“Fair point, hubby. But what about the coffee? You know I’m going to spike it with a sugar lick sooner or later—”

“And you’ve already given me a damn sweet tooth. I might just learn to swallow your cinnamon latte shit without gagging if I spend the next year doing this.”

No words.

No sassy comebacks.

No doubt whatsoever about how much he loves me.

When this perfect grump brings his lips to mine again, I’m swept away with the Fiji breeze that makes this the best moment ever on our honeymoon—at least until we’re back in our luxe room at nightfall.

Then Ward Brandt takes me places I never knew existed in the dark with roaming lips and fevered touches.

And even when we jet back to Chicago, I know I’m never going home to anything resembling my old hot mess of a life.

The sky has shifted, and my stars will always have Orion’s shine.



THANKS FOR READING BOSSY GRUMP! More bad Chicago bossholes are coming soon.

Wondering what true love looks like for Ward and Paige long after the fakery ends?



See what dreaming together whole looks like in [this special flash forward story.](https://dl.bookfunnel.com/5txabevy3r)

Then read on for a preview of another grumpalicious billionaire as Magnus Heron meets Sabrina Bristol in Office Grump.

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OFFICE GRUMP PREVIEW

Happy Friday (Brina)

I know the moment I open my eyes that it's going to be a *day*.

It's Friday the Thirteenth, the worst day ever invented in the history of time.

A date belonging to screeching black cats, tumbling salt shakers, and broken clocks.

Not a day where good things happen to hardworking girls who wake up on the wrong side of their beds—and the achy crick in my neck tells me today's black magic already started on my pillow last night.

Awesome.

Somehow, I manage to crawl out of bed and get showered and dressed, without losing any limbs. But as I hop out of my bedroom in a brand-new outfit, still zipping my knee-high boot while trying to check my phone for the time, I realize what else feels off besides my poor neck.

I'm flipping late.

Apparently, the alarms on my phone love this infamous day just as much as I do.

“Ohhh, Brina, big date tonight? You look amazing! But you're late.” Paige holds out my purse and a paper coffee cup with an easygoing smile.

“Where would I be without you?” I mutter, unsure whether I'm rolling my eyes at her for going all Captain Obvious or the

fact that I *would* be worse off without a friend like her.

I jerk the boot zipper the rest of the way up, then snatch the cup and purse from her. I'm wearing a sweater dress with a jacket thrown over it and high heeled boots, an ensemble pulled together more for Chicago fall warmth than fashion. And I've thrown my walnut-brown hair into a ponytail this morning because it's the quickest fix.

"No dates written in stone yet. You know how flaky Tinder dudes are," I say, checking my phone again, willing time to slow down.

"Don't worry. You'll make it," Paige says with a sunny confidence I wish I had. "Personally, I think you should rock the Miss Superstitious vibe. You've already got the name and we've been through this before—"

"Right, and it always ends with the same question. Do I look like a teenager or a witch?" I watch her lashes flutter as she bats her eyes so innocently.

God. I'm starting to wish I was magic because if I don't make my bus...hello, doom.

As I'm lunging for the door, I realize it's way too early for my night owl of a roommate to be out of bed. "Why are you awake, anyway?"

"I'm going to Lincoln Park to meet a potential client." She runs a hand through her blond hair like it's totally natural for anyone to be so beautiful this early in the morning.

So maybe I wish I could steal her confidence along with her style mojo, too.

"It's Friday the Thirteenth," I remind her. "Be careful."

She sips her coffee with a loud snort. "Oh, you and your hocus pocus. Some of the best things ever happen on Fridays ending in thirteen."

"Like what?" I call over my shoulder, but I don't have time to wait for her answer. I power stomp down the stairs without a second look, hoping she's right.

But seriously?

Good things?

Today?

No. Nope. Never.

Racing down the block, I glance at my bus stop...

...just as the bus drives away.

“Sonofa—” I cut myself off mid-curse when an old lady out for a stroll casts me a dirty glance.

Rather than daydream about how heavenly it must be to waltz around this early without panicking over a job, I push my lips against my coffee cup and slurp so loud I hope it scares someone.

Third time this month I’m late. *Happy happy, joy joy.*

Luckily, no one at the office ever said anything the last two times. Mostly because I work my ass off and I always make up the time in the evenings.

I rage-gulp my coffee and then toss the cup in the trash, waiting on the next bus to come, keeping my eyes peeled for more bad luck.

So far, no velvety black cats on a personal mission to ruin my day.

Small consolation.

When I finally catch the next bus and stumble into the building’s elevator, the metal doors start closing in slow motion right in front of my face.

I’m already forty minutes late. *Again.*

No freaking way am I letting these doors shut before I’m in. Stretching one foot in front of the shiny doors, I jiggle it, hoping to set off the sensor so they reopen.

Instead, they close.

Right over the spike of my high-heeled boot.

Oh.

Oh, God.

I gasp, terrified by the loud *crunch!* that erupts through the silence.

Bones?

Heart pounding, I wiggle my toes, bracing for the worst.

But my foot doesn't hurt at all.

It only caught my heel, tripping the sensor—though the second the door pings open, my mangled heel hits the floor. I throw myself in as fast as a girl on one heel can and scoop up the broken part with a sigh.

These things happen.

It's Friday the freaking Thirteenth.

If shearing off a heel and a late bus are the worst things today? I'll be *fiine*.

Except, from the instant the elevator stops on my floor, I know something's off. It's weirdly quiet inside Purry Furniture & More's downtown headquarters, and I'm half expecting to see the cutesy black cats on the posters come leaping out after me with their claws drawn.

I also spot Vanessa, my boss, as soon as the steel doors pull apart. She stands at the front desk and smiles.

Not a nice one, exactly. More like a wooden smile that says, *oh, hey, I'm trying to pretend I have it all together, but I'm actually juggling atomic bombs, and I'm about to drop one in your lap.*

What now? Is it my timing?

I step out, brandishing my heel.

“Vanessa, so sorry I'm late. My alarms were off and I had a little mishap with a hungry elevator, so...” Before I can even get my whole sob story out, she stops me with a raised hand, her fingers splayed apart.

“No big, Sabrina. Can you come into my office for a sec? I need to talk to you.”

Odd.

So is her ominously formal use of my name. Why didn't she just call me Brina like always? Like *everyone* always has, since the dawn of time.

As I follow her, limping on my broken heel, I swallow a cold, bitter rock in my throat.

Friday the Thirteenth.

My boss wants to "talk."

How screwed am I?

She wheels herself behind her massive glass desk with another awkward semi-smile and tents her fingers in front of her.

"Well. Sabrina, there's no easy way to say this and you're too good for me to sugarcoat it, so here goes. You've been a fabulously talented, hardworking member of our Purry creative team. We absolutely *love* your designs; however...I'm afraid we're facing budget cuts."

"Oh." That sounds like a downer. But I'm a valuable member of this team. I get things done! "I...I thought you told me the designs I did were phenomenal? Half of them are hanging around the office."

"And they are, yes. But the hard truth is, Mr. Tillis, the owner, believes it's time to take a look at hiring talent to save costs in the same places where our furniture is manufactured. Jack found a way to get similar graphic designs from Bangladesh at about one dollar a piece. They're not quite as polished as yours, of course, but..."

I'm not listening anymore.

Jack? Did she just say Jack? *Jack-ass?*

"You mean the frat boy I've been training—um, I mean, the—Jack the Intern?"

Frowning, Vanessa clears her throat and nods.

Holy Hannah. It's hard not to roll my eyes right out of their sockets.

Now I get why the kid was so interested in buzzing around my desk to find out what parts of the process we—meaning *he*—could automate or outsource. All for a shiny unpaid internship to slap on his college resume.

“So this means I’m fired?” I ask numbly.

Her eyes widen in a *Goodness, no!* kind of way.

For a flimsy second, I think this day might not sink into the tar pit it’s heading for.

“Let go,” she whispers, as if that softens the blow. “Mr. Tillis prefers the phrase right-sizing.”

I choke on the air in my lungs and focus on trying to breathe through cement so I don’t flip her the bird by reflex.

You’ve got to love whatever evil genius came up with comically brutal corporate speak like *right-sizing*.

Whatever we call it doesn’t change the cold, hard facts.

This is the third entry-level position I’ve lost this year.

The last time, in the spring, I had to beg Paige to cover my rent for a couple months. Hardly a burden for a girl who’s grown up semi-wealthy, but I hated it with a vengeance.

I also chowed down on ramen noodles and instant mac and cheese for every meal. Going out for a six-inch sub felt like an extravagant use of my funds.

I’ve known young adult poverty in the big Windy City, and it sucks to suck. Definitely not something I want to revisit.

Vanessa stares at me with a worried look from across her desk.

With the resume-dusting, pavement-pounding, ass-kissing horrors of the job search swirling in my mind, I wonder if it’s not too late to rewind and salvage this job. Make such a good impression during my exit interview that she decides she’s making a terrible mistake.

If I could just get her to sweet-talk surfer dude cat furniture mogul CEO Tillis into keeping me on...

“Vanessa, tell me one thing...is there anything I could’ve done differently? To help me at my next job?”

She gives me a relaxed, sad smile. “You’re a hard worker and a positive employee. You haven’t even been here long enough for me to give you any kind of real appraisal beyond that, I’m afraid. These things happen.”

I feel my eyeball twitch.

Why, yes, *these things do happen* on a craptacular day when the entire universe spins on its bitch axis.

“It really is a budget cut. Nothing personal and no reflection at all on your impressive skills,” she drones on. “Your last paycheck will be direct-deposited next week. I’ve paid you for today, but once you’ve packed up, you’re free to leave.”

Lovely.

“Isn’t there like, um, another job here I could take? Maybe a position that pays less?”

Pity flashes in her eyes. So that’s a hard no.

“With the business plan to lower operational costs, most of our personal assistant roles are being handled in the Philippines. If you’d like, I’d certainly be happy to keep your resume on—”

Nope.

Done.

Let her file this.

I scurry up from my chair and walk out without looking back, feeling like I’ve been slapped across the face. Really, though, it’s par for the course in Sabrina Bristol’s career world.

My first job was with a start-up firm. They went belly up when a big, bad G rolled out its own revolutionary app update, rendering their company obsolete a couple weeks after I started.

After that, I took a temp-to-hire position. The pay sucked, and they never kept any of the temps, so that was another dead end.

Purry Furniture & More seemed like an ideal fit. I mean, witchy black cats aside, I love animals.

Once you get past the idea that the entire job was marketing pet furniture, it was a pretty sweet starting place. Crap pay, sure, but it was supposed to be good experience, an open door, one more step up the ladder, dammit.

Three freaking months. That's not experience.

That's a radar blip, just enough time for a boss to decide you're disposable when a penny-pinching knucklehead decides to right-size you right out of a job.

I don't say anything to the few people milling around, avoiding me like I'm carrying the plague. I just go clear out my desk.

There isn't much to remove, honestly.

A lonely picture of Paige and me at the Navy Pier on New Year's Eve. Another photo with my parents from Christmas a couple years ago.

My last designs are scattered across my desk, a set of grinning cartoon cats raving about how *Meow-some* the company's latest cat beds are. I never had time to pitch them properly, and I hope Jack the Rat hasn't seen them.

Contrary to what my supervisor thinks, not everyone can *purr-fectly* picture cat and doggy heaven like I did in these mock-ups. So I'm swiping them for my portfolio before they claim dibs on the rights.

I throw the framed photographs in my purse, and when I don't find anything to put the prints in, I swipe a hot-pink bedazzled folder off an intern's desk. I throw a couple of dollars down to make up for taking her folder. I don't leave a note. I doubt she even knows my name.

All of my high quality, professional work gets crammed into pink bedazzle.

Don't get me wrong, I like pink. But I always pictured myself with a sleek black leather briefcase, not walking around like some high school art kid.

Ten minutes after my unceremonious departure, I'm back in the elevator that ate my heel as my phone vibrates.

A guy I talk to on Tinder, Brad B., messages to ask if I'd like to meet up at two p.m.

So maybe things are looking up?

He's cute from his picture, at least. Seems hard-working, says he's on track to be a partner at his accounting firm. He's cute and funny, and his self-deprecating messages lead me to believe he might be the last normal single guy left in Chicago.

Sure, Sweeter Grind okay? I text back.

It'd better be. I'll die without good coffee and a pastry today.

You're on, Brad sends.

Cool. This fluttery hope sails through me. Maybe Paige is right.

Even though I lost my job and my heel, maybe, just maybe, things can still turn around.

At precisely one forty-five, I plant my butt in a booth chair at my favorite coffee shop and wait for him to arrive. I scour the web for graphic design jobs—nada—all the while glancing toward the door for Brad.

At two fifteen, I message to see where he is.

No answer.

At ten till three, the jackass still hasn't shown up, and I'm feeling like a massive sucker.

What kind of pretty graphics could I make by layering Brad B.'s smirky Tinder pic over a donkey?

I cock my head and ponder. If nothing else, it might be a fun way to blow off some steam.

To hell with Casper the not-so-friendly date ghost.

I need my Sweeter Grind fix and I've waited long enough, so I head for the counter.

"What can I get you?" a chipper redhead with a ponytail asks.

My stomach snarls, famished because I haven't had anything all day. "A medium cinnamon latte and a cream cheese bear claw, please. Oh, and one of those Heart's Edge truffles, too."

"Excellent choice! That'll be nine dollars and nineteen cents," she says.

I wince trying to subtract nine dollars and nineteen cents from the last fifty bucks I had in my bank account this morning. Math was never my best subject, and about an hour ago, I'd really been hoping Brad B. would show up like a gentleman and insist on buying my snack.

"Are you okay?" The cashier studies my face for a second.

I look past her, my eyes flitting up to the large black-and-white photos behind the counter. They're all scenes from some idyllic little mountain town, a smiling family, a huge man with a scarred, handsome face licking chocolate off a spoon.

"Just admiring the décor. I'm fine," I say, already tasting a month's worth of ramen noodles. I finally stick my debit card in the stupid machine. I really shouldn't be spending money on this, but I need the sugar and caffeine rush to get through the day I'm having.

A couple minutes later, she hands me a paper sack holding my treats plus a hot cup of coffee. I breathe in the cinnamon steam.

Sweet nirvana.

Since I'm off work in the middle of the afternoon, I might as well enjoy it. I decide to take my coffee to the park across the street. There's plenty to mull over besides jerks who don't show up for dates. Like what I'm going to do now that I'm jobless, for one.

The scenic park always calms me down.

Even more so at this time of year with the trees casting off their summer greenery for the kaleidoscope reds, oranges, yellows, and browns of autumn.

I tighten my grip around the warm cup in my hand, bracing against the crisp Chicago breeze as I head across the street. My favorite bench is empty, thank God. I plop down there with so much force the cinnamon latte splashes out of the sippy hole in the lid.

Smooth. Now my new sweater dress is stained.

I hate that I wasted a sip of my drink, too. I need to savor the flavor. It'll be my last cinnamon latte before I'm a working gal again.

My half of the rent is a thousand bucks a month. No idea how I'm going to make that, and it's the cheapest place we could find in a decent area.

Paige pays more since her room is larger—not by much. But Paige has rich parents and zero student loans which means she has luxuries like savings.

I have debt that compounds daily and will only blow up faster if I don't find another job, pronto.

It's not just *my* rent I have to cover, either. My parents depend on me, too, whether they know it or not (hint: they don't).

Ugh. It's going to be tricky bulk buying Mom's books this month with no income.

How long does it take to get unemployment, anyway? I doubt I'm even eligible since I wasn't part of Purry Furniture for long.

Also, it's *still* Friday the Thirteenth. The day's barely half over.

Plenty of opportunities to dump more messes in my lap, I think sourly, popping the truffle in my mouth.

For a second, I wilt back against the bench, smiling as a sugar high washes over me.

Good Lord. Whatever else is conspiring to go wrong today, it's got nothing to do with the chocolate goodness bursting in my mouth, sweeping my woes away for thirty whole seconds.

When I open my eyes, there's a camera crew bustling around the park. Their tight, hurried movement pulls me from my thoughts.

A heavysset bearded man frames the shot with his hands, counts down, and yells, "Action!"

Two guys with cameras swing themselves around the scene. A statuesque woman stands in the middle of the circle like this weird oracle, her head tilted slightly up, a blue dress blowing gently in the wind.

On a day like this, how does she even *manage* a gently rustling garment?

The wind almost bowled me over on my way to the bench. Or maybe it was the broken heel.

Models. Bah.

They know how to make life look easy.

All of these people do, actually. They're real artists, creators playing midwives to the images in their heads. Making real art and getting paid real money.

Bitter much?

Yes. I. Am.

I glance down at the stupid bedazzled pink folder on my lap, wondering who you have to kill to be a real artist with a real salary. Also, why does that woman have to be so perfect?

When I look up from the folder, there's a new man staring at me.

Holy Hercules.

When did I miss the lightning bolt that sent him down? If Miss Model looks flawless, this guy is divine.

Over six feet of sculpted muscle stuffed into an Italian suit that probably costs more than my parents' mortgage.

The cut of his chin, lethal.

Thick sandy-brown hair like a lion's mane.

The cheekbones, the brow, the dusting of a well-trimmed beard all hint at an inner wildness tucked behind his *hell no to any and all nonsense* expression.

What really makes me clench my coffee cup until it dents in, though, are his eyes.

Hands down.

Yes, they're blue, but to liken them to a pristine sky or beautiful gems almost feels offensive.

His ocean-blue eyes are riptides, humming with a distant, unforgiving energy. Still so close I can feel it like the ozone before a storm.

His gaze sends an instant shock down my spine, and my whole body tingles. My toes shrink up inside my mismatched heel boots.

He...he has to be a male model, right? But the better question is why he's looking at me like a scorned Casanova.

Oh.

Oh, God.

His expression turns me inside out. One arched eyebrow raised significantly higher than the other and cocky as hell.

I glance down, desperate for an excuse to break eye contact. And halfway afraid I'm in the middle of a terrible wardrobe malfunction I'm clueless about.

Nope.

Sweater dress still intact.

Heart still beating.

Panties still safely concealed where they should be...

I think?

When I look at him again, those feral eyes have shifted away from me, back to the photo shoot. I slowly exhale a sigh

of relief.

This stranger and his sexy voodoo eyes are just the kind of trouble I don't need today.

The chubby bearded guy close to him, who I peg as the photo manager from the way he scurries between the cameramen and Miss Perfect, becomes the focus of the male model's glare. Stroking his chin, he watches the scene with a cold eye and clenched jaw.

I frown.

Everyone seems to be working their butts off to please this guy, and he can't do more than grump-stare and make slight hand gestures now and then?

Life in the arts is hard enough, but having to kowtow to an entitled suit...woof.

Don't feel too sorry for these people, Brina, I remind myself. They're still getting paid by Mr. Entitlement. Well, hopefully.

But still. That's what suit-wearing pricksters do. They treat the artists who make their precious ads that they depend on like trash. Without us, they'd be nothing.

I glare at the annoyingly gorgeous jerkface and take a loud slurp of my latte.

Model Man's stabby blue eyes jerk to mine again. This time, I hold my ground, telling the butterfly swarm in my belly to stay put.

He holds a thick hand up, pointed directly at me, and motions to the statue beside my bench. Like he's telling me to move without even having the decency to come over and ask politely.

Bad, bad move, Neanderthal.

Of course he does it again, this time more forcefully.

Of course.

Really? You don't even know me and you think you can order me around?

With a snort, I dig my heels—okay, heel—into the ground. If looks could kill, there'd be a smoking crater right where his smug, rude, devilishly fine figure used to be.

Their group takes a break a minute later, and the chubby production guy jogs over.

“Hi t-there,” he stammers, stopping in front of the bench I'm sitting on, leaning on the back of it to catch his breath.

I give a floppy wave and sip my latte, bracing for what's next.

“So, I was wondering if there's any chance you'd be willing to move? This spot has better lighting for our shoot. I hate to ask. I'm sure you're just out here enjoying your day, but...it's a big job. We'd be really grateful if you could clear it.”

Could I “clear it?” Sure, let me just vacate public property with a grateful smile. All so your rich bitch boss can get his ever so important shots.

Before I can string the words together to form a nicer response—I know this guy is just a fellow minion doing his job—Mr. Rich Bitch himself stomps up.

“You're going to have to move, miss. We need this spot.” At least his grumpalicious voice matches his looks.

I meet his eyes and smile. Not because he's just as confusingly barbaric and good-looking up close.

“Now,” he adds, when I don't move an inch after several long seconds.

I blink, shocked at his bluntness. I open my mouth to respond, but I haven't gotten a word out before he folds his arms, his brows drawn together like thunderheads.

How fitting that he has the temperament of a heartless Greek god, too.

“This is public property. I'm not going anywhere,” I snap, giving him my best defiant face. “My mom says you catch more flies with honey than vinegar, you know. Maybe you should try it.”

His eyebrow quirks up. “As cute as clichè Midwestern sayings are, there’s a marketing campaign happening here with a very tight schedule, and you’re stealing our light.”

Oh, their light.

I’d forgotten.

How do you *steal* sunlight, anyway? Is he so rich he thinks he owns the sun? Arrogance and entitlement go together like chocolate and peanut butter with this dude.

“So sorry. I bet you’re pouring a ton of money into this campaign, aren’t you?” I ask sweetly.

He nods, his scowl easing. “I’m glad you get it, so if you’ll just—”

“What I *get* is that you should’ve locked down a more private venue for your little campaign if it’s life or death. This is a public park, last I checked, and I’m not moving until every last bit of my cinnamon latte is gone.” I hold up my cup, sloshing the liquid around loudly.

He crosses those huge arms again, his shoulders bowing out like they’re ready to rip through his imported fabric. “Lady, I’m done being polite. If you don’t get your ass in the air, I’ll move you myself.”

Whoa. That was polite? I wonder what rude looks like... but I’m more interested in telling this millionaire bully where he can shove it.

I hold my hand up, showing off the fresh set I had done last weekend.

“Choose wisely. Touch me, and I’ll dig my plastic so deep into your pretty face you’ll need the jaws of life to extract it. *Capisce?*”

His jaw clenches before he answers.

Yeah, *Grump* with a capital G confirmed. Being wound so tight he might break a few teeth must be his preferred facial expression.

But then he just sighs, raking a hand through his hair, before hitting me with another dizzying starlight-blue gaze. “Ha ha, you’re funny. Congratulations. Now if you’re done with the comedy act, move.”

I blink, unsure what to even say to that. And did I really call him *pretty*?

Too late to deny it, unfortunately, and as horrible of a person as our brief encounter leads me to believe he is...the man does make truffle-good eye candy.

Heck, if I were a casting director, this guy would be Mr. Darcy. You know, before the whole redemption arc.

I take another small sip of cinnamon courage, savoring it slowly, thinking how far I really want to take this.

“You’d be better off leaving me alone and letting me finish my coffee in peace,” I say, leveling my tone. “You’re going to run out of good light for quality images soon. The sun craps out way too fast this time of year.”

His death-glare actually makes me uncomfortable.

I shift my legs and that ridiculous bedazzled pink folder slips from my lap, hitting the ground with a *thunk*. Half a dozen cartoon cat cards slide from the pockets, the height of my genius exposed to the world.

I’m about to extend a foot to slam down on top of them, but I don’t get the chance.

The Suit bends to pick up my mess, muscles rippling behind his clothes, his blue eyes filled with this cruel wonder.

Not fair.

Why do so many men with dangerously beautiful bodies turn out to be ogres?

He surveys the cards quietly before making any effort to return my things. I clear my throat and our eyes lock. I don’t dare let on how small I feel right now.

“I propose a trade. Your cats I’ve kindly rescued from blowing away for my camera space.” He smiles, and not in a

friendly way. “Are you a cartoonist? A cat-toonist, maybe?”

I fight back an eyeroll so intense it’ll probably land me in the ER.

“Ha, ha, ha. So original. Hope you’ve got copywriters.”

“My writers are some of the finest marketers in the country, from sea to shining sea,” he says, pride entering his voice.

“Cool, then I’m sure you’re set. God knows no one pays for your jokes,” I throw back.

“Damn, you’re mouthy,” he growls.

That’s it. It’s a statement. And not an entirely furious, insulting one. There’s a hint of amusement, too, like *mouthy* is something that interests him.

Awesome.

He’s known me for three minutes while trying to extract me from a city bench but *I’m* pegged as “mouthy.” Like he isn’t the one who made me that way?

Well, two can do the pegging today.

Besides being a rich suit, an unbearable McHottie, and a park tyrant, he seems like one of those guys who think women should keep their mouths shut.

I shoot him a fake docile smile. “My bad, your highness. I’ll try harder to be seen and not heard. Of course, I’ll be *seen* on this bench until I’m good and ready for a walk.”

His jaw tenses again and there’s the faintest flash of angry white teeth around his lips. He stares up at the sun, muttering something to himself, and then turns back to me.

“Frankly, Miss Hardass, I don’t care where you’re seen or heard as long as it isn’t on this bench. You’re blocking the light. You’ve already been told.”

Funny thing is, I probably would’ve moved in a heartbeat, with no problem, if he just asked me *nice*ly.

But he picked the wrong day to dick with my pride, and now I'm on a mission.

This bench is *mine* until I say it's not.

Want to read more? Get Office Grump HERE.

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ABOUT NICOLE SNOW

Nicole Snow is a *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* bestselling author. She found her love of writing by hashing out love scenes on lunch breaks and plotting her great escape from boardrooms. Her work roared onto the indie romance scene in 2014 with her Grizzlies MC series.

Since then Snow aims for the very best in growly, heart-of-gold alpha heroes, unbelievable suspense, and swoon storms aplenty.

Already hooked on her stuff? [Sign up for her newsletter here](#) for exclusive offers and more from your favorite characters!

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Her website is nicolesnowbooks.com

Got a question or comment on her work? Reach her anytime at nicole@nicolesnowbooks.com

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