



DADDY'S *Bossy*
BEST FRIEND

MADISON RICE

DADDY'S BOSSY BEST FRIEND

DAUGHTER'S BEST FRIEND ROMANCE

THE BRENTWOOD BROTHERS



MADISON RICE

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Also by Madison Rice

ROARKE



“LEFT!” A WOMAN’S VOICE CALLED OUT AS I WAS JOGGING around the park and I moved over slightly, taking a look to see if there was anything worth looking out at. A pair of long legs in a pair of yoga shorts jogged by me, and I looked up at her face to grin at her.

The woman I’d been appreciating had black curls and bright blue eyes, and I nearly stopped in my tracks. Oh no. Not *her*.

“Getting slow in your old age?” Magda Riley taunted, sprinting past me, and I rolled my eyes. I put my head down and sped up, trying to catch up with her, but she was over a decade younger than me and I had a sore knee so I only managed a few hundred feet at her speed, slowing down to rest near a bench.

Her laugh was audible for way too long after she was out of sight, and I groaned, annoyed. Magda was a fellow lawyer at my firm, and the word was that she was out for partner. I couldn’t imagine we would give it to her. Not because she was a woman, of course, but because she was young and inexperienced. Sure, she’d won a few cases for the firm but that firm was my baby and I wasn’t going to let just anyone make partner.

Magda annoyed me. She was like any other beautiful woman, thinking that she could slide by on her looks alone. She wasn’t a bad lawyer, but she wasn’t very experienced and she was arrogant enough that she thought she had nothing left to learn, even from those who had been in the game longer

than her. She thought she knew better than me, who had over a decade of experience on her, and always had something to say when I talked to her about a case.

When I was in a good mood, I found it a little amusing, but most of the time, she just irritated me.

If this wasn't her, I might find her sass and confidence a bit of a turn-on. I had a thing for powerful women. I'd never been the type to sit back and let things happen to me. I'd always taken the risk, and unfortunately, it hadn't paid off when it came to matters of the heart. In the end, I knew that it probably wasn't the women I was choosing, but something about me. Love was one of those things I wanted and yearned to live but just wasn't very good at.

Knowing that didn't stop me from hoping to settle down again. Hoping to find someone who was just right for me. I didn't know if that person was out there, but I hadn't lost hope yet. And sure, I wasn't always easy to live with. I was what people perceived as arrogant and I thrived in chaos. But most of all, I lived and breathed my job.

If I were to find love and make it last, I needed to find someone just as dedicated to her career as I was to mine. Someone who would understand me. Who would support me. Who would love me regardless of my flaws, not resent me for them.

I looked at my watch and noticed I had half an hour until the meeting with my partner, so I headed home to shower and dress in my most expensive three-piece suit.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I appreciated how far I'd come. Life hadn't always been easy for me. I might have a lot of money now, but I remembered what it was like not knowing where my next meal was coming from. Don't get me wrong, I loved to pamper myself with cars and clothes and expensive things, but deep down I was still the same kid that had come from Valdosta.

My hair had almost dried when I got to the office, and my best friend and partner, Richard Webster, called me in right away.

“Roarke,” he greeted, standing up to shake my hand.

I shook it firmly, making eye contact, something I prided myself in doing with anyone I came across, friend or foe. As a lawyer, you needed to be trusted, and no one trusted someone who couldn't look them in the eye.

“Richard,” I said coolly.

Richard frowned. “Why are you acting all weird?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know. Like I'm your boss or something?”

I rolled my neck around on my shoulders, trying to crack it. “Oh, I dunno, maybe because you're allowing Magda Riley to throw her hat in the ring for partner without running it by me first. Thought maybe you'd been promoted without my knowledge because last I heard, we were partners. *Equal partners.*”

Richard sighed. “She deserves it, Roarke, and we need a woman on our team. In divorce law, women tend to win more cases, you know the statistics.”

I nodded. “Sure, but there are other women up for the position who have more experience, so why her?”

“Listen, I didn't call you here for that,” he said, deftly avoiding the question. “We've got a case that seems right up your alley, so I thought I'd run it by you first.” He handed me a fairly thick file folder, and I flipped through it, seeing the notes “no prenup” and “infidelity.”

Working as a divorce lawyer made sense since I'd been divorced three times. I'd definitely done my due diligence looking for love, maybe not always in the right places, but now that I was older, I liked to think I was getting wiser, and setting my standards higher. Though I was still looking, I was fine with being alone for now, because I needed the time to regroup after that last disaster of a marriage. So, for now, it was a lot easier just to deal with other people's marriages and divorces than worry about my own love life.

“We’re representing the wife?” I asked, hoping that he’d say no since, from the notes, I was learning that she was the one that had been unfaithful. That would sway a judge to give her very little of the marital assets.

Webster nodded and I groaned inwardly, flipping through more of the file. We didn’t have any dirt on the husband, and from all accounts, he’d been a wonderful, supportive husband.

Great. My partner had just accepted an impossible case, and was expecting miracles, I guessed.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Webster said, and I raised an eyebrow. I seriously doubted that. “It’s a hard case, so I thought this would be perfect for you to see Magda’s skills first-hand.”

“What do you mean, perfect for me to see Magda’s skills first-hand?”

“I mean, I think you should partner up. This is a perfect opportunity. Give her first chair and put her to the test. See if she rises to the challenge. Maybe she’ll surprise you into giving her that partnership.”

Very doubtful. *Very*. I couldn’t even believe he was thinking I would partner with Magda on this case. She was barely fresh out of college, and although she’d won a few cases, she wasn’t ready for a case like this. There was no way that she could win it either unless I was missing something in the file. I was hoping that since I’d just skimmed it, there was something I could find to help.

I was really torn. On the one hand, I didn’t want us to lose, so I’d have to actively work on this in order for us to even have a chance. I liked winning, and though this was a tough one, it was no exception. On the other hand, I didn’t want her to be partner, mostly because she drove me crazy and I couldn’t imagine working closely with her, but for that, I’d have to let her lose, and the thought alone made me squirm.

“Why her?” I demanded to know since he’d dodged my question the first time. I needed to try to understand his motivations for choosing her for partner in the first place.

“She works hard and she is motivated. It’s also an added bonus that she is damned good. So, you have the perfect opportunity to decide for yourself if she’s got what it takes. I know where I stand, so it’s your call. But remember, this should be a merit call.”

I scoffed, but Webster just hummed and pushed a button on his desk phone. A tinny voice answered.

“Send Magda in,” he said, and I wanted to roll my eyes but restrained myself.

I could say no and either work on it myself or assign literally any other lawyer working for us, but I couldn’t deny that I was curious, and I kind of wanted to see Magda struggle with this one. I would show her what being partner was all about.

Magda came walking in the door an instant later, wearing a pair of red stilettos and a black A-line skirt with a white blouse. It fit her like a glove and I made sure I kept my eyes on her face.

She had her jaw set, looking more rigid than she had this morning when I saw her jogging.

I guess for some people, Magda was what might be perceived as beautiful, even if she had her head up her ass. Her face was nice enough to look at, if a little stony, always set in her resting bitch face. However, I couldn’t stand her personality. She was so egotistical that any good looks she might have could never make up for it.

“We’re giving you the Martinez case,” he told her, and she smiled widely. “You’ll be answering to Roarke on this.”

Her smile faded just as quickly as it had spread across her face.

“What? Why? I always answer to you,” she argued.

I looked from Magda to Richard, wondering why Richard allowed her to back-talk to him like that. He was a bit of a hard ass, but for some reason, Magda said whatever she wanted to him. She didn’t seem to worry about her job the way some of the rest of the staff did.

“If you want to make partner, Roarke’s the guy you’ll have to work with.”

Magda huffed out a breath. “So, what? He’s going to be testing me?” she asked, flipping through the file and probably coming to the same conclusion I had, it was an unwinnable case. Or maybe she was just cocky enough to think she could win this, and the satisfaction of watching her fail would be even sweeter.

“That’s exactly right,” I said, plastering on the most charming smile I could muster. If she was irritated about answering to me, wait until she learned we would be actively working together. I was looking forward to testing her and watching her struggle to make something out of this sinking ship. This should be fun. She was young, inexperienced, and overly cocky. I couldn’t wait to witness this train wreck.

MAGDA



THIS COULDN'T BE HAPPENING TO ME. *ANYONE* BUT ROARKE Brentwood. I would have trouble enough winning this case already. Or at least, *try* to win this case. My boss had certainly given me a lot to do on this seemingly unwinnable case. I was sure that there was something else there, though, especially given how men sometimes talked about their ex-wives.

I bet that the husband was just trailing her name through the dirt and trying to avoid paying alimony, especially since he seemed to have quite a bit of money. The richer the men, the more they ended up being distant to their wives, at least as far as I had witnessed so far in my experience as a family lawyer. But I needed to prove that first.

And if the fact that this was a seemingly impossible task, I had to answer to Roarke freaking Brentwood. How frustrating!

I didn't even know enough about Roarke Brentwood to hate him. I knew he and Richard had started Webster and Brentwood Law Firm and I knew of his reputation in the field. I hadn't worked here very long, just a couple of years, but from what I knew of him, I could guess at how Roarke viewed me... and women in general.

As far as I'd seen so far, he wasn't a misogynist. Just an egotistical and jaded man who most certainly didn't seem to believe in love. Unlike me. And working as a divorce lawyer didn't faze me when it came to believing in a soulmate. I knew that one day I'd find my true love. I'd never had a serious boyfriend. I wasn't really focused on relationships in general, thinking more about my career since the time I was little. I still

thought that maybe someone would come and sweep me off my feet, Cinderella-style. Maybe a love-at-first-sight kind of thing like in the movies.

I was waiting for that one man who made me get those butterflies in my stomach, that feeling that all the movies and television shows talked about, that all my friends in high school talked about.

I'd never felt that, and I worried if I ever would. because more than anything, one day, I wanted a family. Children. And I knew that nowadays a partner isn't essential to having kids. There were a lot of single mothers who were doing an amazing job out there. But growing up watching the love between my mom and dad, I wanted that for myself.

I had time, though, and love and family were still some time away. For now, what was more important was that I wanted to make partner. I wanted to focus on my career and make the most of it so that, when the time came, I could enjoy motherhood to the fullest and not miss out on it or a career.

The law was my life and I loved it. I went to an Ivy League college, worked extra hard to finish summa cum laude, and passed the bar the first time I took the exam.

I knew that I was good at what I did, but I also knew I had to constantly prove myself, not just because I was a woman, but because my dad was also a lawyer. A great one at that. I wanted to prove myself to the world. To prove that I was my father's daughter but I could do it without his help. And for that, I needed to work with people like Roarke Brentwood, who doubted me every step of the way. It only made me want to succeed that much more.

I thanked both of them and left the office with my head held high but fuming on the inside. Roarke followed me, holding a box of paperwork.

“Shall we get started on this?” he asked.

“What do you mean, ‘we’?”

“*We* are working as co-council on this.” His smugness was revolting.

“But this is my case. And I always work alone,” I sputtered.

“Well, this is my firm and I can take on any case I want, so...” He waved the box. “Now, unless you want me to take this solo, I’ll ask one more time, shall we get started?”

“I think I’m going to take lunch first,” I said tersely.

Roarke raised a dark eyebrow. “You don’t want to get started right away? I’m surprised at you, Riley.”

I inwardly groaned. I hated that he called me by my last name. “You don’t know me well enough to be surprised by me, Mr. Brentwood,” I shot back.

“You’d be surprised what I know,” Roarke drawled, following me into my office and putting the box on my desk. “These are all the files Richard had on the case. Seems like the woman is a cheating bi-”

“Don’t use that word,” I snapped.

Roarke shrugged. “Man or woman, sometimes it’s necessary,” he said. “We’re going to have to find an interesting angle to win this case for her and get her the alimony she thinks she deserves.”

I huffed out a breath. “I’m going to lunch,” I said, not wanting to argue with him, but he blocked my office doorway, leaning against the doorjamb.

His shoulders were so broad, his hair slicked back and styled well, dark hair barely streaked with silver. His eyes a bright green and he didn’t really have any wrinkles, despite being quite a bit older than me. I guessed that he was probably in his late thirties, early forties.

The essential problem with Roarke Brentwood wasn’t that he was egotistical and annoying. It wasn’t even the way he thought that most women were man-eaters.

It was that I couldn’t stand his cocky, smug personality. And despite his traditional good looks, I couldn’t look past his narcissistic ego.

“You’re in my way,” I said flatly, and Roarke smirked at me.

“Sorry,” he muttered, not sounding sorry at all, and he moved just enough so that I had to brush past him—gross—and I got a whiff of something like sandalwood and roses. He must have showered after his workout earlier. The shoulder I brushed past was hard and his bicep muscular, and I drew in a deep breath to clear my senses from him as I headed to my car.

I banged my hands against the steering wheel, frustrated. I was going to have to work with Roarke fucking Brentwood for God knew how long until we figured out this case. But I would show him my skills in the courtroom and out, and he’d have to recommend me for partner.

I wasn’t angry because someone was “testing” me, but I was irritated that it was Roarke. I knew that he was a good lawyer but we had different angles when it came to working cases. He was ruthless in divorce and custody cases, and I approached things with more empathy. We were just two different types of lawyers, and it was certainly going to be an experience being evaluated by him.

I just hoped that he didn’t let his jaded attitude about women affect his judgment when it came to my skills. I might have technically gotten this job because of my dad, but I’d kept it because I was damn good, and I intended to show Roarke Brentwood just how good.

ROARKE



I DIDN'T CATCH UP WITH MAGDA UNTIL THE NEXT MORNING.

“Left,” she yelled as I was jogging and I inwardly groaned.

Why did she pick this spot in the park, anyway, jogging away from me with her long, lithe legs pumping? At this point, I felt like she was doing this on purpose.

Maybe she was.

I snorted to myself, thinking how ridiculous that was. I usually took it easy, listening to rock music as I continued my slow jog around the park. I sprinted to catch up with her, barely breaking a sweat.

“You ready for today?” I asked her conversationally.

“I stay ready,” she responded, staring straight ahead. She was one of those psychopaths that could exercise without music, apparently, because I didn't see any earbuds in her ears.

“Good to know,” I said, sprinting up ahead of her. I'd ran track in college, and I could run very quickly, but I was working on my stamina of late and preferred to do longer runs. Besides, my knee sometimes acted up I had to pace myself. I was halfway through my five miles already but I'd finish in no time at this pace. I told myself that I just needed a change, that the stamina training was getting boring and I was wearing a brace on my sore knee, but deep down, I just wanted to annoy Magda Riley.

Especially since she was wearing nothing but a sports bra and a pair of jogging shorts that were tight across her ass. I

stopped myself from looking. The package might look nice but the rotten personality inside was not worth it.

I knew that I was an attractive man, and I was at a point in my life where I yearned to get home to someone. I craved the companionship and touch of a warm body against me when I fell asleep. Lately, I stuck to one-night stands and flings when things got too lonely and cold. I didn't love it, but I needed the occasional human touch.

Though getting married hadn't done me any favors, since I was thrice divorced, I hadn't given up on love yet, even if most of the time it just felt like love was one of those things that only happened in the movies or television, that it didn't really mean anything, wasn't actually real. It was just something to make people feel better about their boring lives, and the butterflies you felt when you met someone new were just excitement, just chemicals.

And so far in my experience, all love resulted in was hurt feelings, broken hearts, and alimony payments.

So that was how I approached my work, too. I figured that usually, things didn't work out, that usually, people weren't good, and those people who stayed together forever were the exception. My parents had been together until my father's death, but they were never exactly happy together. They weren't happy with me and my three brothers, either. They wanted us to be powerful and successful so that they could have our money, so that we could support them and give them the good life they felt they deserved. But they didn't really care about us.

It was hard to learn to love another person when you never really had that growing up, and I guessed that was part of the reason that no one I'd married had worked out.

Well, that, and I'd been cheated on by two of my three wives.

Magda grunted as she passed me and I grinned, never one to back down from a challenge. I made it past her again and looked behind me. She was struggling to keep up, flagging, and eventually as I rounded the corner of the sidewalk, she

doubled over, bracing her hands on the bench to steady herself. I couldn't help laughing. She'd gotten the best of me yesterday, but not today, and I felt victorious like I did right after a big win at the courthouse.

AFTER A SHOWER AND DRESSING IN ANOTHER OF MY THREE-piece suits, I made it back to work.

Magda was already in her office even though it was only eight-thirty and Richard wasn't there.

I knocked on her office door and entered without waiting for her go-ahead. After all, I owned the entire building along with Richard, so I owned her office, too, whether she liked it or not. She enjoyed pushing my buttons, so I was going to push hers back and see how she liked it.

And she definitely didn't like it, scowling at me as I walked in. But it was time for her to learn who was the boss here. Spoiler alert, not her.

"I'm busy," she said, and I shrugged.

"You're about to be busier," I told her. "I need you to make this Martinez case your priority."

"I make *every* case my priority," she said smugly, and I rolled my eyes.

"Okay, but you can't win this one without me, so you're going to have to make room for me to come in here and work with you. Or you could come to my office. We could even work on neutral ground if you're too scared."

She raised a groomed, black eyebrow. "Scared? What makes you think I'm scared of you, Mr. Brentwood?"

"I decide whether or not you make partner."

"Along with Richard," she corrected.

Richard seemed to like Magda for reasons I couldn't begin to understand. He seemed to like *everyone*, though. He was

one of those annoying guys with a bright personality who gave everyone a chance and believed the best in every case. In fact, maybe that was why he liked Magda so much. As mean and ruthless as she acted, she had a bleeding heart, especially for the woman in the case that we faced.

I smiled.

“Yes, exactly. *Along* with him, which means we both have a say. It has to be unanimous, which makes me the deciding factor in this case. So, as you can see, it *is* all up to me.”

If looks could kill, with the way she was glaring at me, I’d be dead and turned to dust by now.

“What, you ran a little faster than me this morning and now you’re all puffed up?” Magda taunted. “Maybe you managed a little sprint but you’re still a worn-out old man.”

I put a hand to my heart dramatically. “Oh, no, a girl who’s fresh out of law school and still wet behind the ears thinks I’m old. I guess I might as well get my affairs in order.”

Her comments about my age did sting, especially since I tried to keep myself in shape, but I wasn’t going to let it get to me. Not from a young brat like her. I didn’t know exactly how old she was but she was probably barely old enough to drink.

“I knew you weren’t partner material. You know what partner even means? Partner is someone who shares tasks and works together with others for the betterment of the company, so you fail before the test even starts.” I shrugged. “I’ll be taking the case by myself, since I’ve seen all I needed to see and my mind is made up.” It was high time little miss self-important be put in her place. She needed to learn some humility and to follow the rules and take orders like everyone else.

She seemed to be under the impression that she was untouchable for some reason and I had to put an end to that.

“Besides, you were never going to win this case,” I told her again. “Not without me, anyway.”

“You don’t even know me,” Magda snapped back. “So stop pretending that you’re the only lawyer in this office who

can win a case. I can do just fine on my own.”

“Like I said, I knew you weren’t partner material,” I continued, my face going blank. “So, I’ll just take these now.” I took a step toward her, staring into her angry, flashing blue eyes that were brewing up a storm.

“Don’t you dare,” she hissed, and I smirked at her.

“If you can’t work as part of a team, you’ll never be partner, not here, not as long as I have a say.” I shrugged. Magda growled at me, smoke all but coming out of her ears.

“You’re a narcissistic *bastard*,” she said loudly.

“And you’re a high-riding—”

I was cut off by Richard’s voice behind me.

“What in the hell is going on in here?” he demanded to know in a low, even tone. I could tell he was angry, because when he was absolutely seething, he went quiet and calm.

I held up my arms. “Just telling Ms. Riley, here, the truth.”

“He’s being a jerk!” Magda insisted, giving a pleading look to Richard and pouting a little. What was she? A child?

Richard grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the office. “You are an employee here and you need to treat Roarke, your superior, with more respect,” he said to Magda before we exited the door, and I grinned. “And *you*, Roarke. I’m surprised at you.”

My grin faded. Richard was a few years older than me and had been just as much of a big brother to me as my *actual* big brother, Liam, had been. So I valued his opinion, and I felt kind of bad that he was upset with me.

“I’m sorry, Richard, but she needed the wake-up call,” I stated. “She needs to grow up and learn to be a team player, or she’ll never be partner.”

“You two need to learn to work together,” he said. “Because I do not want us to lose the Martinez case.”

I nodded. “That was what I was trying to tell Ms. Riley, Richard, so I have no problem with that.” I gave him a sloppy

salute and he smiled, shaking his head.

I was still grinning smugly when I got back into my office. At the very least, I'd gotten under her skin, even if Richard was annoyed with me.

MAGDA



SO, I HAD TO WORK WITH ROARKE BRENTWOOD, AND THERE was nothing I could do about it. I had been given that *look*, the one that told me I better get in line, and I could admit that I was being a little childish. I didn't like Roarke and I didn't want to work with him, and it made me act immature.

I had to learn to work with him if only for this case, so that I could make partner.

I drove all the way across town for my favorite Chinese food, a place that had amazing eggrolls and fried rice, as well as dumplings and wontons. I didn't know what Roarke's favorites were, but I'd seen him with this restaurant's to-go boxes in conference rooms. He never cleaned up after himself, and when I first started at the office I'd just been a runner for coffee and lunch, so I remembered.

I gritted my teeth as I took lunch to Roarke's huge office with an amazing view that looked out over the city. I blinked at the huge, glass windows all around the office. I didn't know if I'd like an office like this. I would either be constantly distracted by the view or terrified I might break a window and fall out at any moment.

His desk was large and full of paperwork, looking messy and disorganized. I fought the urge to wrinkle my nose. His feet were up on his desk and there was a folder in his lap that he was looking down at, his office door open.

"I brought a peace offering," I said, although my tone came out flatter than I wanted it to.

Roarke grinned. “What is that?”

“Chinese.”

“Did you get eggrolls?” he asked.

I nodded. “Comes with the meal.”

“Then come in,” he said, not even bothering to put his feet down.

I sat down and he instantly took out his eggroll and began to eat it while I spread my napkin in my lap, putting my briefcase next to me.

“So, I’ve been looking into the Martinez case,” I started, and he kept reading, seemingly ignoring me. I huffed out a breath and continued. “I think that there’s an angle since the husband accused the wife of infidelity.”

Roarke looked up at me over his reading glasses, his eyes bright green in the sunlight streaming through the glass windows. “Why? You think we can weasel around why she did it? Say something about how she was driven into the arms of another men?” Roarke flipped through the file. “*Two* other men,” he whistled. “She got around.”

I frowned. “No. I don’t think she did it. The husband is just trying to get out of paying alimony.”

“There was a pre-nuptial agreement,” Roarke said, looking back down to the file and back up at me. “So, if she did cheat, she’s not entitled to a cent.”

“But where’s the proof? All it says in the briefs is that she went away on vacation with her sister three different times and came back...” I paused, rifling through my briefcase and finding the right page instantly. “Came back ‘smelling like cologne,’” I continued, reading aloud from the brief. “That’s not much evidence. She could have brushed up against someone at the airport, or hell, even tested some men’s cologne while shopping. For her *husband*.”

Roarke scoffed. “I don’t know. In my opinion, women are likely to cheat, especially if the husband has a busy job. He was a doctor, right? Martinez?”

My brows furrowed as I frowned deeper. What was he trying to say? That all women, left to their own devices, would cheat? “Yes, he was a doctor, but don’t the statistics say that *men* are the most likely ones to cheat?”

Roarke shrugged. “I don’t cheat, and two of my ex-wives did.”

I choked on my dumpling. “You have two ex-wives?”

“Three,” he corrected, and I choked again, finally managing to get it down with a swig of cold coffee from my travel mug.

“Three ex-wives,” I murmured.

“Do you have a problem with that?” Roarke asked.

I looked at him innocently. “None. I guess I’m just surprised three different women agreed to marry you.”

Roarke snorted. “Okay, that was a pretty good one, I’ll give you that. Anyway, since two of them cheated, I’m more likely to believe she was unfaithful instead of him.”

“I don’t think *either* of them was unfaithful,” I explained. “Couldn’t it just not have worked out? Just not been the right fit?”

Roarke tapped a pen against his lower lip.

“I guess so. That’s the way it was with my first wife. We just got married too young and grew into different people.”

“So, you agree that not all women cheat?” I asked smugly.

Roarke pointed at me. “I never said all women cheat. I said *most* women cheat.”

I scoffed, “That would be like me saying most men are jerks because...”

Roarke frowned at me. “What?”

“Well, look at who I’m talking to,” I teased.

Roarke’s face relaxed. “Ha...Ha... Aren’t you funny? Not,” he grunted.

I stared at him for a long moment. He actually had a sense of humor. Maybe he wasn't a *totally* lost cause.

"So, for our first hearing, we're going to play up the idea that the infidelity is just the way that Mr. Martinez is trying to get out of the pre-nuptial agreement."

"I think that's the best course of action," Roarke agreed. I thought this was maybe the first time he'd ever agreed with me, period, not just since I'd extended Chinese food as a truce.

"Really?"

Roarke looked up from his shrimp-fried rice and locked eyes with me. "Are you not sure of your own strategy? Are you questioning your skills? Should I?"

I huffed. Of course, he would turn it around on me like that. Just because we had an uneasy agreement about how to approach the case didn't mean I liked him any better.

"Of course not, I was just surprised that you didn't fight me just for the sake of it, that's all," I said.

Roarke grinned and it lit up his whole face. "I wouldn't dream of it, Ms. Riley."

We drew up our plans, with Roarke dictating and me typing away on my laptop. For the initial hearing, we were going to ask for what the pre-nuptial agreement had detailed: half the marital assets, including the house, the estate, and all of Mr. Martinez's classic cars, as well as half the bank account balance. That would come to a sum of around one point five million dollars. The Martinezes had done pretty great for themselves.

"I can't imagine what I'd do with that much money," I marveled, looking over the plans.

"I'm sure you'd find a way to spend it," Roarke drawled.

"Was that a crack about how women shop a lot?" I asked tiredly, and Roarke barked out a laugh.

"No, even I wouldn't make a joke that bad. I was just saying, when you have plenty of money, you find ways to spend it."

I looked at his expensive desk, his designer suit and his shoes.

“You know that from personal experience?”

“You asking me how much money I make, Ms. Riley?” Roarke taunted. “Because I think that’s probably against the rules in the handbook.”

I blushed. “Of course, I wasn’t asking.”

Roarke shrugged. “I don’t mind. I don’t brag a lot, but I’ve made some really good investments over the years.”

“So, your marital assets would be around what Mr. Martinez’s are?” I asked. I couldn’t help being curious. He carried himself the way that men with a lot of money did, so I always assumed he was a millionaire like my father.

“Bit more than that,” he murmured, and my eyes widened.

I didn’t say anything more, though, not wanting him to think I was interested in his money. I didn’t want him thinking I was interested in anything about him at all.

ROARKE



OVER THE NEXT COUPLE OF WEEKS, MAGDA CONTINUED TO come to my office after lunch, and we took turns on who bought lunch. While we were waiting for the hearing date, I found out that she loved dumplings and wontons, and that she *hated* salad with a fiery burning passion.

“Even the ginger salads?” I asked her one day. “They’re just lettuce and sesame seeds with that great ginger dressing.”

She wrinkled her nose, looking pretty cute if I admitted it to myself. Where had that come from? Cute? What the...?

“That’s exactly it. I don’t like lettuce.” Hearing her voice pulled me out of those disturbing thoughts.

“You’re weird,” I muttered.

“You’re the weird one,” she shot back. “You don’t like Italian food.”

“I don’t like tomatoes,” I corrected. “It just happens to be in a lot of Italian food.”

“I eat cherry tomatoes raw and unseasoned; I love them,” she responded.

“You’re a freak of nature,” I said, groaning, and she actually laughed. It was a strange sound, and I wasn’t sure I’d ever heard her do it. It was a pretty laugh, loud and open, coming from her chest instead of a nasal giggle like I’d expected.

Fuck. I was struck by how pretty she was when she smiled and laughed. I’d finally been able to crack her sense of humor

and the difference in her was huge.

I used humor as a front, most of the time, having a hard time expressing any of my emotions. I joked and teased people, and it seemed to get me through life. Unless I was in court because there, I was all business.

“We’re going to have to start working in my office,” she said, and I frowned.

“Why’s that?”

“It’s so messy in here,” she complained. “You can’t possibly know where everything is.”

“Ask me for a brief in the case,” I said to her.

She stared at me blankly.

“Come on, ask me,” I repeated.

“Brief number twenty,” she said after a moment, and I reached underneath a pile of mail in my ingoing box and grabbed it, handing it to her.

She glared at me. “How did you do that?”

I shrugged. “I know where everything is, even if it seems messy to you. I have a process.”

She looked around in wonder. “What kind of process could that possibly be?”

I tapped my head. “Up here,” I told her proudly. I was proud of my intellect and my good memory.

Magda shook her head. “I can’t even imagine. I have to have everything in its place or I lose track of it.”

“That’s because you don’t have an iron trap up here like I do,” I joked, and Magda rolled her eyes, but she was smiling.

I was glad we’d reached some kind of truce, at least a simple one because it was frustrating to be at each other’s throats all the time. I still liked to tease her and get on her nerves, but at the same time, the only way I would be able to evaluate her skills as if we actually were able to work together.

“So, the marital assets were all sent over by Mr. Martinez’s lawyer?” Magda asked.

I looked through the paperwork we had on it. “Looks like it. We just have one hiccup.”

“What’s that?” Magda asked, keeping her eyes focused on her laptop. I had to appreciate her work ethic. She didn’t mess around, getting straight to work every day after we ate lunch. She would stay hours in my office, sitting in the little chair I reserved for clients across from the desk, scrolling through the assets and double-checking everything.

“The wife’s business,” I said. “She started a soap and candle-making business back in—” I consulted my notes. “Two-thousand and ten.”

“Has she generated much revenue?” Magda asked, looking up at me. I’d never noticed, but he had the most intense blue eyes I’d ever seen, and I cleared my throat and looked away, not wanting to think about how pretty they were.

I was coming to learn over this time spent with her that there were a lot of things about Magda Riley that were pretty. I kept seeing glimpses of her beauty. I didn’t need to be distracted by a pretty face.

“About fifteen thousand a year. Nothing to sneeze at, but not exactly enough money to live on,” I said.

Magda tilted her head, thinking. “I think Mrs. Martinez would want to keep her own business assets,” she suggested.

I snorted. “Too bad for Mrs. Martinez. She’s divorcing her husband and taking half his savings, half the house, and half the cars, so she’ll have to give up half her business.”

Magda groaned. “Why do you have to talk about her like that? This is our client, for god’s sake.”

“Just because she’s our client doesn’t make her automatically right,” I pointed out, and Magda sighed.

“Fair enough. But I think the husband is just trying to get out of giving the wife what she deserves. She worked two jobs

according to her statement while he was in medical school, supporting him through it.”

“That’s true,” I agreed. “I don’t think Mr. Martinez will care about her fifteen-thousand-dollar-a-year business. He makes that in a couple of months.”

“We should reach out to his lawyer,” Magda said. “Who is it, anyway?”

I groaned. “It’s Garrison Redding,” I said, and Magda groaned right along with me.

“God, he’s worse than you are,” she complained.

“I resent that,” I said, making a face.

“He always sides with the husband, no matter what. Even when it might win him the case to side with the wife.”

“That’s a bad way to do business,” I agreed, munching on my salad.

Magda wrinkled her nose again and I couldn’t help but smile.

“Don’t know how you eat those things,” she said.

“Don’t know how you don’t and keep that figure,” I replied.

She blushed and lowered her eyes to the file. Shit. What was I thinking mentioning her figure? Now I was the one embarrassed and I didn’t get easily embarrassed.

“We’ve got to re-evaluate the hearing,” Magda said, focusing on her laptop. “I just checked my email and Richard sent me something new. Something they’ve been hiding from the courts.”

I looked up at her from my glasses where I’d been going back through the briefs to make sure we hadn’t missed any points in the marital assets.

“What? What could they be hiding?” I asked.

“They have two children together,” she said flatly.

“Fuck me,” I cursed, putting down my salad.

I stayed away, for the most part, from family and custody law. It was part of my job sometimes, but I preferred simple divorces. Just two people who didn't want to be together anymore. Cases with infidelity were easy, especially if there was a pre-nuptial agreement, and I was good at splitting marital assets. Most of my cases settled out of court, and I hadn't yet lost a case that actually made it to court, but none of the ones who went to court had been custody cases.

The reason that I didn't do many custody cases was simple: I had an extremely soft spot for children. I hated it when parents used their children as bargaining tools. It made me think of my family, of my little brothers, Elijah and Carter, of the way that Liam and I mostly had to take care of them because our parents simply didn't care enough. Now, both Liam and Elijah had made families of their own, with my adorable niece and nephews, but Carter... Carter was still having trouble.

As the second eldest, I had kind of a caretaker syndrome when it came to kids, and I wanted what was best for them – and that usually wasn't what I was fighting for in settlements. I hated that this case just got that much more complicated because it involved kids. As far as I was concerned, they were the real victims, and they were the ones that needed to be taken care of, regardless of their parents' egos and wants.

“Goddamnit,” I cursed again, and Magda looked up at me.

Great. Now I would have to spend even *more* time with her, and even though that was now more tolerable than it'd started out, I doubted that she had the chops to navigate a custody case.

MAGDA



ROARKE'S DEemeanor had definitely changed when I mentioned children would be involved in this case. It made me curious enough to ask him, "Do you have children?"

Roarke looked at me. "That's a pretty personal question, Riley."

I flushed. "I'm sorry," I said, and Roarke laughed.

"I'm only teasing you, Riley. Keeping you on your toes. I don't have any, no. You?"

"God, no," I said quickly. "I'm too young."

"I'm certainly not," Roarke admitted and he looked almost... regretful.

"Do you like children?" I asked him curiously.

"Love kids," he confessed. "Two of my brothers have kids," he told me. "I love them to death. Eric, Magnus, and Mikayla are great and we all get along like wildfire."

"You have brothers?" There I was again, asking him more personal questions, but I couldn't seem to help myself. Roarke Brentwood might be turning out to be a lot different than I'd initially thought. I would have never thought of him as the type of guy who liked kids, for example.

"Three of them," he said. "Liam's the oldest, then me, then Elijah, and the baby is Carter."

"Are you close?" I asked. "You must be, right?"

Roarke sighed. “Not for a long time, no. Until recently, we hadn’t talked in years. But Liam and Elijah reached out because they needed some legal help because of my nephews, so that kind of changed things a bit and now they are back in my life and I’m in theirs. I try to stay in touch.”

“I’m an only child,” I offered, and then shut my mouth. Why was I offering personal information about myself, now? I certainly didn’t need him asking questions about my family. Not if I didn’t want him to know about.. Argh. I was acting weird, and maybe I needed to get out of here. But we had a lot of work to do to prepare for a custody case.

“Makes a lot of sense,” Roarke muttered under his breath.

“What was that?” I asked, although I’d heard him just fine. I just liked pushing his buttons. That was the most fun about this whole case, really. Getting to irritate Roarke Brentwood.

“Nothing,” he said brightly.

“You don’t want children?” I asked him, unable to get over how much he seemed to love kids.

“I do. I really do,” he admitted. “None of my wives seemed very interested, though.”

“Does that mean you’re still hopeful?” I didn’t know why I kept asking questions. I didn’t care to get to know Roarke Brentwood any better than I already did. I already knew I didn’t like him, and nothing was going to change that, so why did I care?

“I’m always looking for the next ex-Mrs. Brentwood,” he grinned, and I rolled my eyes.

“You’re certainly in the right business, then,” I said snarkily, but Roarke just kept smiling.

“I am. Divorce is a part of life, right along with death and taxes.”

“I just don’t believe that,” I said stubbornly. “I believe in true love.”

“Do you believe in the tooth fairy, too?” he teased, and I frowned, not in the mood to be talked down to.

“No, and before you ask, I don’t believe in Santa Claus anymore, either. But my father loved my mother until the day she died, and someday, I want that kind of love.”

“It happens for barely anybody,” Roarke argued. “It’s a myth for most of us.”

“Maybe for you,” I shot back. “But maybe you’re just not anyone’s Mr. Right.”

“I would settle for being someone’s Mr. Right Now,” Roarke drawled. “You interested in the position?”

I scoffed. “God, no. You’re so damn full of yourself. You know that? It’s not even that you’re not attractive. You’re just... full of ego and a pain in the ass.”

“So, what I’m hearing is that you think I’m attractive,” Roarke said, standing up to throw away the stupid salad he was eating.

I let out a long breath and stood up, gathering my things and putting my files back into my briefcase.

“I think I better go before you make me blow your top.”

“No, stay,” Roarke insisted. “I’d like to see what happens when you really lose it.”

“Why would you want that?” I asked, exasperated, turning around.

He took a step toward me. “You seem like one of those women who might be hot when she’s angry,” he murmured in a low tone, and I hated the way his voice sent a shiver through me.

Roarke was standing too close to me, so close that if he so much as tilted his head his nose would brush against mine. I put my hands up on his chest, intending to push him out of my way so that I could exit the room behind him, and I tried. But he didn’t move a muscle, just standing there, looking down at me. His chest was firm beneath my palms, his green eyes half-lidded as he looked down at me.

“Stay for a while,” he said in that same low tone. “Let’s see if you’re as much of a wildcat in bed as you are in court.”

“Oh, fuck you,” I hissed, but it came out weak, and he leaned his head down, pressing his forehead against mine.

“What’s the matter, Riley? You scared you’ll start to like me?”

“No danger in that,” I snapped, but again, my voice came out quiet and weak. God, why was I reacting like this? Why was he even flirting with me? Just to get under my skin? And why was it working?

What the hell was wrong with me? What was I thinking? I couldn’t want Roarke Brentwood to kiss me, no way. No matter how hot he was. And why was I thinking of him as hot?

I pulled away from him before his lips touched mine, backing up against the door and leaving without another word.

When I got back to my office, Mark Windham was waiting for me, frowning as he stood outside my door.

“Hi. I’ve missed you these last few weeks,” he said softly, and I flushed, looking down as I fumbled for the key to my office.

“Been working out of my office,” I said weakly. Mark was really a nice guy. I liked how he always took the time to say hi and often wondered if he was building up to asking me out, but then I remembered I would have to turn him down because I was too busy.

So why had I just almost kissed Roarke fucking Brentwood? Maybe I was coming down with something. I couldn’t imagine what the hell was going on with me that I almost kissed my mortal enemy, the man I hadn’t been able to stand the whole time we’d been working together.

“Did you already have lunch?” he asked.

“I did,” I said, doing my best to sound mournful. “I’ve got this new case and I’ve just been slammed, Mark, I’m sorry,” I apologized.

“No worries,” he said, smiling. “Maybe we’ll catch up later this week?”

It was already Wednesday, and I had the custody hearing on Friday, so I really doubted it, but I plastered on a smile anyway. Mark was a nice guy and I didn't want to hurt his feelings. I really enjoyed his company when I had the time, since he wasn't pushy, but I was really not interested in taking this any further, so I hoped he wasn't either.

"Sure thing," I said, and walked into my office, softly closing the door behind me so that Mark wouldn't follow me.

After what had just happened in Roarke's office, I needed some time to myself. I had almost let Roarke Brentwood kiss me! Why? Just because he was fond of children and not all that horrible to me? Just because he'd flirted with me in a very contentious way?

I didn't even *like* guys like him. Guys who bragged about how great they were all the time, who were messy and disorganized. I especially didn't like Roarke Brentwood, so why had I put my hands on his chest like that? Why hadn't I moved away?

I needed to re-evaluate my life, and fast.

ROARKE



I SPENT THE NIGHT AFTER WORK AND THE TWO DAYS AFTER IN a daze, skipping my morning jogs and barricading myself in my office. I didn't want to run into Magda, that was for sure. I didn't know what had gotten into me, why I had thought so much about kissing her, how I had leaned down to press my forehead against hers.

Of course, I was attracted to her. She was a gorgeous woman. I was a man. But she was too much. Too young, too bratty. She was cute, but she was trouble. She didn't respect me as a lawyer, or as a superior, and she seemed to think she knew everything, even though I was older than her and more experienced.

More and more, my body was betraying me, her bad attitude not turning me off at all. I didn't know why I was suddenly finding her attractive, but I wasn't too worried about it. I never mixed business with pleasure, not even with some of the very attractive paralegals that Richard seemed to be fond of hiring.

I didn't date people I worked with, or even other lawyers at all, as a rule. We usually ended up just talking about work, and when I left the office, I wanted to leave work at the office. I enjoyed my downtime even though I was dedicated to my career, and I knew that not a lot of people were like that. Most people still brought their work home, especially other lawyers. I wanted someone to share a life with, sure, but I wanted more out of life than just work twenty-four-seven.

Besides, I had *just* finalized my divorce with Grace, and I wasn't ready to jump back into anything else after how messy that had all been. Grace had been my latest shot at love, and when that hadn't worked, I'd felt defeated. I even considered giving up on love for a while, but some part of me refused to do that. I wanted and felt I deserved my happily ever after, and I was going through as many happily for now as I had to until I got to *The One*.

Until then, I still had needs, of course. I had a high sex drive, but I hated one-night stands. I preferred to have casual friends-with-benefits relationships, but I'd been so busy with the divorce and work that I hadn't had time. Friends with benefits required having female friends, and I didn't have any and I didn't have time to develop any. Besides, all the women I knew were either other lawyers (who I didn't want to mix with), or my clients (which I couldn't mix with).

Maybe I just needed to get laid, and I'd been spending most of my work days with Magda, and that was the only reason that I'd gotten so close to her.

Just thinking about her hands on my body. I'd wanted to kiss her so deeply she'd melt against me. And it had been so hard to resist. If she hadn't pulled away and left, I didn't think I could have held back.

I didn't want to put myself in that situation again. So, my plan was to avoid her as long as possible. The only problem was that it was Friday and we had a preliminary custody hearing for the two children at eleven. Martinez was asking for emergency custody of both the children, stating that their mother's infidelity was bad for them to witness.

I agreed, but at the end of the day, Mrs. Martinez was our client, not her husband. I needed to go over our strategy with Magda, but if we ended up losing this part of the hearing, we could still win the marital assets later. My strategy would be to let the cards fall where they may, and I figured she would understand that and go along with me. After all, I had a lot more experience.

I didn't even have to go to Magda's office. She came to mine, her cheeks flushed red, blue eyes downcast. I guessed she was embarrassed about what had happened, too, and that was all right, because I didn't want to talk about it either.

"So, we're on the same page about the hearing in a couple of hours, right?" she asked.

I nodded. "I think so."

"So, we're going to try to keep custody of the kids with Mrs. Martinez," Magda said firmly, and I stared at her.

"Uh, no, I thought we'd let custody go to the father since she's clearly been unfaithful and flaunting it around the children," I argued, not believing that she thought otherwise.

Magda groaned low in the back of her throat. I found myself wondering if she sounded like that in bed and had to suppress a shiver.

"Roarke, how could you possibly be against a mother retaining custody?" she asked.

"Because the mother doesn't always deserve custody," I said, thinking of both Liam and Elijah's boys who were much better off without their mothers. "Especially if she's been unfaithful. It's not good for kids to grow up thinking that kind of thing is okay."

"All right, fine, but we still have to argue for custody because that's our angle, Roarke. We're arguing that Mrs. Martinez did not commit adultery and that Mr. Martinez wants to keep all his assets. He has no proof that she cheated, and we can keep her with half the assets that way."

I sighed. Magda was actually right. We couldn't argue that our client didn't deserve custody of her children but did deserve half the marital assets. I hated this case. It was hard to go against what I believed in just to win a case.

"Fair enough. You're right," I said, and Magda blinked at me.

"You're admitting that I'm right?"

“Even a blind squirrel finds a nut now and then,” I cracked, but Magda didn’t seem to find it funny. I sighed. “We’re taking my car to the hearing.”

“Why don’t we just meet each other there?” she asked.

“Because we’re working this case together, and I want us to look like a unit,” I explained.

In fact, I was starting to wonder if maybe Magda could be that fling I was looking for. We wouldn’t exactly be friends, but I was looking forward to the benefits part of things.

Magda agreed to ride with me after a moment and we went through the custody brief one last time before we got into the car.

“You know we’re probably going to lose this one,” I told her. “But it’s just temporary custody. We can win it back later.”

“You’re not going to tell me that it’s what’s best for the kids?” she asked dryly.

I shrugged. “Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t. But I guess you can be a cheater and still be a good parent.”

“You and I are just never going to agree on this, are we?” she asked.

“Probably not,” I agreed. We arrived half an hour early and met with Mrs. Martinez, our client. She was a buxom blonde, a trophy wife, for sure, and she was patting her eyes with tissues.

“Listen, Mrs. Martinez,” Magda said softly. “We’re going to do the best we can here, but—”

“But most likely, your husband will get temporary custody,” I blurted out.

The woman blinked at me and then her eyes ever so slowly filled with tears. I wanted to roll my eyes. This was one of the most obvious acting jobs I’d ever seen. She should win an Oscar. No one actually cried like that, gracefully, like she was trying to.

Magda took the blonde's hands in hers. "Even if he does, it'll just be until the next custody hearing. First, we're doing the divorce proceedings and fighting for your half of the marital assets—"

"And my business?" Mrs. Martinez asked, squeezing Magda's hands. I found it interesting that she seemed more worried about her business than her children, but I kept my mouth shut.

"We'll be asking for that in the divorce proceedings," Magda explained patiently. "The permanent custody hearing will take place about a month from now. If the judge decides in your husband's favor for emergency custody, we'll negotiate visitation."

"I don't want to lose my children," Mrs. Martinez sobbed.

"Mrs. Martinez... Sandra. Can I call you Sandra?" I asked, patting her shoulder, and she dropped Magda's hands and looked at me, her brown eyes barely even wet even though she had just been making sobbing noises.

"Yes, of course," she said easily, blinking rapidly as she looked up at me.

"You don't have to lose your children. You did nothing wrong, right?"

She looked me right in the face as she lied to me. "I never stepped out on Brantley. I would never do that," she said.

I just *knew* she was lying, but it wasn't exactly my job to figure out who was telling the truth or not. It was my job to win cases for clients, even if that went against my moral code now and again. All I could hope was that the custody turned out the way it should, even if Sandra Martinez ended up with half the doctor's assets. I guessed that was what he got for believing in love.

Magda could learn something from this case, in more ways than one.

"Well then, don't worry about today's hearing. It'll only be a month before we can get your children back to you," I said, even though I wasn't sure that was true at all.

Sandra Martinez hugged me and kissed my cheek in gratitude, her lipstick leaving a mark on my skin that Magda wiped off quickly with a napkin, frowning.

“Jealous?” I whispered to her as Sandra walked off toward the bathroom.

“What, of our charm or Sandra laying a wet one on you?” Magda joked. “In either case, absolutely not.”

“You have to admit I’m charming,” I whined, and she rolled her eyes as we went into the courtroom. I nodded to the judge, who I’d worked with several times before, and he nodded back.

The custody hearing went about as quickly as I thought it would be, and Mr. Martinez was awarded emergency custody pending the divorce proceedings.

Sandra Martinez burst into tears, and Magda frowned after her, trying to catch her before she got into a two-seater car, meaning that she definitely hadn’t had the kids when she’d arrived at court.

“I feel so bad for her,” Magda said, and I turned to stare at her.

“Why? She’s clearly not a great mother. You didn’t notice those were crocodile tears earlier?” I asked.

“What?” Magda frowned at me. “Do you really hate women that much?”

“I don’t hate women!” I insisted. “I love women, but that woman? She clearly is only after her husband’s money. I don’t think the children matter one way or another to her.

“How can you say that? Of course, her children matter to her. Didn’t you see her crying when she left?”

I snorted. “Some people can cry at will. Dollars to donuts Sandra Martinez is that type of person.”

Magda looked downright *offended* and she scoffed at me as she stormed toward the car, looking at me angrily when she pulled at the door handle and it wouldn’t open.

I lifted my hand with the key fob in it, clicking the doors open, and she wrenched open the door and slipped inside, slamming the door shut.

I winced. My car was expensive and it hurt me when my baby was treated so badly.

God, she was so young and so fucking naïve. How could she believe that Sandra Martinez wasn't a snake?

She'd learn, but I wasn't going to be the one to teach her.

MAGDA



ROARKE BRENTWOOD WAS SUCH A PIG! THE WAY HE TALKED about Sandra Martinez. She was a mother fighting for her children, fighting for what was *rightfully hers*, and Roarke just dismissed her as a gold digger. He didn't know anything about women, and at his age, it was appalling.

I was surprised when he told me he'd been married multiple times, and I still thought he seemed more like one of those guys who didn't do commitment. Turned out, he was a serial monogamist, but I would bet that all of his ex-wives had a different story about the divorces than he did.

I couldn't even stand being in the car with him, but luckily for me, he just cranked up his music – classic rock – and sang along while he drove us back to the office. I just stared out the window, glad that he wasn't trying to talk to me, or worse, *charm* me.

One thing I could admit. Roarke had a certain level of charm. He dealt well with all the clients, male and female alike, but female clients seemed to love him. They clearly didn't know this side of him I now did. And I couldn't believe that at some point I'd almost let him kiss me.

That must have been a temporary lack of judgment. In law terms, temporary insanity. That was all.

I got out of the car and slammed the door, smiling when Roarke winced as if I was hitting him. Good. His two-seater sports car could take a beating, for all I cared.

I went into the office, hoping that I wouldn't have to see him for the rest of the day.

When I opened my office door, a voice sounded behind me and I jumped, startled. It wasn't Roarke's low baritone, at least.

"Have a bad time in court?" Mark asked, and I smiled, relieved.

He followed me into my office as I put down my things and I turned to him. "It went as I expected, but it still wasn't a good outcome for our client," I admitted.

Mark hummed in sympathy. "Sometimes it goes like that."

"Yeah," I muttered, sitting down at my desk. "I've got plenty of paperwork to file, so I won't be having lunch until later," I said apologetically.

Mark smiled pleasantly. "No worries. I know how busy you are. Just checking in and being friendly."

He gave me a little wave as he left my office, heading back toward his, and I smiled to myself. Mark was nice. So much nicer than Roarke. I didn't have time for dating or relationships, but if I did, he would be a *much* better choice.

Halfway through beginning the paperwork to file a couple of motions for the other case, I was working on, I came across the prenuptial agreement that the Martinezes had drawn up before they got married. I read through it and it was pretty standard, but then I read a paragraph that surprised me.

Oh, damnit. I needed to talk to Roarke.

I sighed heavily and got up from my desk, taking the file with me and going across the hall to Roarke's office. He had a huge office with a beautiful view, but it was so messy in there you could barely appreciate how nice it was. His blinds were drawn, which was unusual, but I knocked anyway.

"Come in!" he called.

I opened the door and stopped in my tracks. I dropped the file in my hand and began to pick it up, blushing.

Roarke Brentwood was standing over me. I could see his shadow falling over me because he had the back blinds open. He was also shirtless.

It wasn't like this was the first time I'd ever seen a shirtless man, but I just wasn't expecting him to be so....*big*.

I only got a quick look before I dropped the file like an idiot, but it was enough to get an eyeful. His shoulders were broad, just a dusting of hair across his chest. His abdominal muscles were very defined for a man his age. I didn't know what I had expected Roarke to look like shirtless (*not that I'd ever thought about it at all*) but this certainly wasn't it.

As I stood up, I nearly bumped my head on his chest, he was standing so close.

When I looked back at him, he'd put on a shirt, but he hadn't buttoned it yet, so I still tried to look him directly in his green eyes. That didn't seem to help, because they were sparkling with mirth.

"What's the matter, Riley? You look a little..."

He trailed off and I was glad that he did because I could *not* stop blushing. What was wrong with me? I had seen men a lot more naked than this and not had this reaction. Why was I suddenly finding Roarke Brentwood attractive? I'd disliked him so much that I guessed I hadn't noticed that he was an objectively attractive man, even though he was quite a bit older than me.

"I'm fine," I managed, handing him the file which still had papers sliding out of it. It crumpled a bit in my hands and I felt so flustered I didn't even care. "There's something in this prenu you need to see."

"What is it?" he asked, throwing the file down on his desk. I frowned. It was a mess over there, so I didn't even know how he'd find the file later.

"You could just read it and find out," I said, struggling not to look down at his chest.

"Or, you could just tell me now and we'll save a lot of time," Roarke insisted, smirking a little.

“You’re changing,” I said dumbly. “I’ll just come back later.”

I turned and Roarke grabbed my hand, tugging me back toward him. I stumbled just slightly in my heels and he steadied me with one hand on my lower back. My hands went up to his chest and I put my palms there.

I squeaked in the back of my throat and dropped my hands and Roarke chuckled.

“I didn’t expect you to be such a wilting violet, Riley. You’re tough, so why are you all flustered over a shirtless man? Surely, you’ve seen one before.”

His teasing made anger rise in me, and it was welcome. It felt more familiar than the butterflies in my stomach.

“Plenty,” I barked, and Roarke hummed.

“You sure don’t act like it. I guess I should be flattered. It’s not every day a young woman admires me so obviously.”

“I was *not* admiring you,” I insisted. “I was just...”

“Just?” He hadn’t taken his hand off my lower back and we were standing way too close, but for some reason, I didn’t back away. I kept looking right into his eyes, my chin tilted up.

“I was just startled, that’s all,” I said softly, losing my train of thought, unable to think of a witty comeback. My head felt fuzzy somehow like I’d had a couple of glasses of wine at lunch instead of only coffee. Maybe it was because I’d drunk the coffee on an empty stomach. That had to be it.

Roarke kept his hand on my lower back and reached around me to push the door closed. I swallowed hard.

“Thought we might need some privacy to go over the prenup,” he murmured, too close to my ear. I’d always thought he was dark-haired because of the smattering of gray around his temples, but this close, I could tell that he was more of a dirty blonde. He had stubble that was blonde, too, and I found myself wondering what it would feel like against my neck if he kissed me there.

What? What kind of thought was that? I couldn't think much of anything, with how close he was, and I didn't understand why my body was reacting the way it was.

"Is that so?" I asked, finally finding my voice. "I think you just wanted to get me alone," I said, trying to throw him off, but he just gave me a half-smile.

"Believe what you want, sweetheart," he crooned. "You're the one who turned bright red whenever you came in here and found me changing."

"I'm half Irish," I said. "I'm just ruddy." That first part was true and the latter was too, to some degree. When I got too hot or started drinking alcohol, red blotches appeared on my cheeks. Not just when I was embarrassed.

"Uh-huh," he murmured, and I was so mad that he seemed to be getting the upper hand. I wracked my brain, trying to think of a comeback, but instead of saying anything at all, my brain just started misfiring. That's the only explanation I have as to why I suddenly leaned up in my heels and pressed my mouth against his.

There was an alarm going off in the back of my head, trying to tell me that I had just *voluntarily* kissed Roarke Brentwood, my nemesis, in the office, but that quieted as soon as he kissed me back, sliding his tongue against mine. His hand got tighter on my lower back, pressing me against him. The silk shirt he's changed into felt nice under my palms when I clutched my fingers into it.

That alarm, the one that said "*stop*", the one that said "*you hate him, Magda*," was completely silent, and when he pulled away to take in a deep breath, I kissed him again.

ROARKE



MAGDA RILEY TASTED LIKE COFFEE AND SPEARMINT AND I wanted more, pressing hard against her lower back to bring her closer to me. Her breasts pressed against my chest, her hands clutching in my shirt like she was desperate to get closer too. I could have gone on kissing her forever, but I finally pulled away, pressing my forehead against hers.

My brain kept telling me that this was a bad idea, that she was too young, that we worked together, that this was *Magda*, for god's sake, but my body was telling me something altogether different. It was telling me that I had a couch in my office and a lock on my door for a reason.

"I had a date tonight, which is why I was changing, but I can reschedule if you're interested," I mumbled, my head spinning a bit. I did have a date, that much was true, but it was one that Richard had set me up with, and he wasn't the best at finding me blind dates. The last three had been vapid divorcees who were ex-stay-at-home moms. There was nothing wrong, of course, with a homemaker, but we just didn't seem to have much in common.

Magda shook her head as if trying to clear it and let go of my shirt, taking a couple of steps back. My hand dropped from her lower back and my heart dropped, too. I didn't want her to leave. I wanted her to stay in my office and finish what we started, but I'd gone and put my foot in my mouth by mentioning my date.

"No," she whispered. "No, no, this is all wrong."

“Come on, Riley. What’s so wrong about it?” I pleaded, licking my lips as I looked down at her. She was breathing slightly hard, almost like she was panicking, but all I could notice was the way her cleavage rose up and down in that blouse with the sweetheart neckline of hers.

“We’re *coworkers*,” she insisted. “I don’t even *like* you.”

I snorted. “What’s like got to do with it? You’re a beautiful woman. I’m a handsome enough man. Plus, if we’re going to fight at work together, might as well fight in bed together.” I raised an eyebrow at her. “Could be fun.”

Magda bit down on her full bottom lip with one of her canines, looking up at me with bright blue eyes. They seemed even brighter with the sunlight streaming through my back window.

“No strings?” she asked.

“Not a single one,” I said confidently. I had no worries that either of us were going to fall into feelings for each other. Like she said, we didn’t even like each other.

“You won’t tell anyone?”

I tried my best to look offended. “I’m a gentleman. I don’t kiss and tell.”

Magda barked out a laugh. “I don’t know if I’d go so far as to call you a gentleman.”

I shrugged, smiling. “Maybe not, but I’m definitely not the type to spread this around the office. You’ve never heard of me sleeping with a coworker before, have you?”

She seemed to think about it for a moment and then shook her head.

I spread my hands. “There you go.”

She frowned. “Does that mean you *have* slept with coworkers?”

I made a zipping motion across my lips. “You’ll never know.”

I hadn't ever slept with a coworker, of course, but Magda didn't have to know that she was the first one I'd considered sleeping with. That would only stroke her ego.

Magda looked at me for a moment longer and I took a step toward her, backing her up against my office door. She pressed her back against the door but she didn't move my hand when I put it on her face, threading my fingers through her silky black hair.

"How about you kiss me again while I think about it?" she breathed, and I did just that, delving into her mouth and tasting the espresso on her tongue.

She moaned against my lips and pushed my shirt as if trying to get it off and I worked myself out of it and let it fall to the floor. Her hands spread across my chest, palming across my nipples and my erection grew even harder in my slacks. God, she was a good kisser.

"Okay, where do we do this?" Magda asked. "Do you have a place near here or a hotel room or—" she said between kisses, and I cut her off, kissing her again before pointing to the couch.

"Here?" she asked.

I nodded. "Why not?"

"Because this is our place of business," she hissed. "Because we could get caught!"

She wasn't turning to leave, though, so I just smirked.

"Isn't that part of the fun?"

Magda took a deep breath in through her nostrils and moved toward the couch, placing her heels right at the edge of the couch arm. She bent over across it and her skirt spread across her ass. She turned around to look at me and my breath caught in my chest.

"Like this?" she asked throatily, but she wasn't really asking and I didn't think I'd ever been harder in my life.

"Exactly like that," I murmured, and stepped behind her. I ran my hand across the fabric of her skirt, squeezing gently

across one cheek and then the other. She wasn't as curvy as most of the girls I went after but there was some weight to her ass, as if she did lunges.

Magda dropped her head and moaned, rolling her hips back so that she pressed against my erection.

I hissed, "Fuck." Magda made an impatient sound in the back of her throat.

"You going to just look at my ass or are we going to do this?" she asked, and I grunted in response, bunching her skirt up around her hips. She was wearing a cotton thong and as I leaned down to pull it off her, she spread her legs further.

I couldn't stop myself from pressing my face into her sex from behind, lapping at her clit and she moaned loudly before slapping a hand across her mouth. I grinned and kissed her inner thigh before standing up, loving the taste of her on my tongue.

Thank God I had a condom in my back pocket in preparation for the date, hoping that it might go well enough for a one-night stand, at least. This was so much better. Magda might be annoying and naïve, but she was hot, and it was weird that I didn't notice that before now. I guess I'd disliked her so much that I hadn't even been able to realize that she was very attractive.

Her legs were thick, and muscular at her calves. All that time running in the park must have paid off. I wanted to know what they looked like around my waist, but I was too impatient to change positions right now.

My dick was standing up and demanding attention, uncomfortable in my slacks so I unbuttoned them, freeing myself from my boxer briefs and resting my erection against her as I opened the condom with my teeth. I slid on the condom and then reached down to slide my fingers through her pussy, finding her wet and ready. I put one finger inside just to test and she made a muffled noise through her palm.

"Wish we didn't have to be so quiet," I mumbled. "Want to know what you sound like screaming my name."

“Big talker,” Magda shot back and then I guided myself into her, hard, not giving her time to adjust before I continued and she choked out a long groan.

“Fuck, you’re tight,” I managed, and that wasn’t just dirty talk. She was clenching around me like a vice.

“You’re just big,” she panted, rolling her ass back against me.

I gritted my teeth and tried to keep up the banter as all the blood drained from my brain into my dick.

“Don’t tell me that, Riley. You’ll give me a bigger ego.”

“God knows you don’t need that,” she gasped and then clamped her hand back over her mouth. I wanted to pull her long hair, make her drop her hand and let the whole office hear, but I didn’t think that Richard would like me having loud sex in my office.

It wasn’t as if my best friend didn’t know that I’d hooked up with a couple of my wives here. It wasn’t strictly against the rules to sleep with a coworker, but Richard was all about keeping up appearances and looking professional. I didn’t think he’d consider me fucking the woman up for partner over my couch arm professional.

“Harder,” Magda said and the words were smothered beneath her hand.

“What was that?” I teased, and slowed down my strokes. I couldn’t stop, my body wouldn’t let me do that, but I could edge her at least this much.

“Harder, you bastard,” she said in a loud whisper, and then put her hand back over her mouth as I started to move my hips more quickly, harder, rough just like she must like it.

That was good, because that was how I liked it too. Fast and dirty and hard over a couch arm wasn’t something I’d done in this office yet, but it was certainly on my bucket list.

I didn’t usually mix business with pleasure but I couldn’t help myself. The way she’d looked at me when she’d walked

into the office, like she wanted to eat me alive had just pushed me over the edge.

I was about to go over the edge right now as Magda let out a low whine, burying her face in the couch cushions and spreading her legs further. All I could hear in the office was the sound of my heavy breathing, her whining and the lewd sounds of me pumping in and out of her.

“Oh, God, Roarke, I’m so close,” Magda whimpered, and that was all it took. My balls started to draw up and I tried to think of anything but how she felt around me.

Magda cried out, probably too loud but I didn’t care. Feeling her pulsing around me, I spilled inside the condom, breathing hard and continuing to fuck her through her orgasm and mine.

I slowly pulled out of her and Magda made a grunting sound and slowly slid onto the couch, putting herself in a fetal position.

“Shit,” I muttered, concerned. I crouched next to her on the couch after adjusting myself back into my slacks and buttoning them. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

She looked up at me, the eyeliner around her blue eyes smudged. “You’re not *that* big, don’t flatter yourself.”

I laughed, surprised.

Maybe this would be even more fun than I thought.

MAGDA



AFTER MY LEGS STARTED WORKING AGAIN, I PUT MYSELF together and did the walk of shame back to my office. I saw Richard come around the corner and darted into my office, closing the door and locking it. I pressed my back against it, trying to catch my breath.

I had just slept with Roarke Brentwood.

Roarke Brentwood, of all people. What the hell was I doing? It was like my brain had completely shut off and I had just reacted, which was something I simply didn't do. I always looked before I leaped, and I couldn't believe that I had actually gone through with sex with Roarke in his office.

I had sex in my law office. I always thought that people who had sex in offices were *crazy*, risking being caught and fired, but here I was.

That was it. I was never going to do that again.

I hadn't even talked to Roarke about what I found in the prenup but I was damned sure not going back now. Who knew what I would do? Jump him again?

I sat down at my desk and took a deep breath. I picked up my phone to call Roarke's office.

"Roarke," he answered in a bark, not recognizing my office number. I guessed I shouldn't be surprised. He had barely given me a second glance other than to criticize me before I started working on the Martinez case with him.

"Um," I started. "It's Magda."

“Calling already? I thought you said no strings,” he murmured.

My face felt hot as my cheeks flushed. “Shut up,” I murmured. “It’s about the Martinez case. The prenup.”

“Oh, right. I forgot about that. Something distracted me,” he teased.

I rolled my eyes. I should have known he was going to tease me about this forever. Oh well. I just needed to get through this case and make partner, and then I’d just try to avoid him forever. It’d be hard with us both being partners, but I thought I could keep from being alone with him for a long while, at least.

“There’s a clause in the prenup that states that they keep the assets they had *before* they were married.”

“Yeah, so? That’s a standard clause.”

“Maybe so, but Sandra Martinez isn’t a standard homemaker. She came into the marriage with a trust fund.” I flipped through my notes. “We’re asking for what? One point five million?” I asked.

“Around that would be half, yeah.”

“Magda had a trust fund that she used primarily to pay her husband’s tuition and take care of them while he was in school.”

“How much?” Roarke asked, finally sounding excited. He was starting to understand.

“Two million dollars,” I answered with a smile.

“So that means—”

“That means that she gets the two mils even if everything goes ass-up,” I said, my smile widening into a grin.

“Fucking A!” Roarke cheered, and I held the phone away from my ear, laughing. “Why didn’t you tell me that sooner?”

“I was a little busy,” I said dryly, and Roarke laughed, loud and open. It was a deeply masculine sound, and it made my heart race just a little.

“We should celebrate,” he said suddenly. “A bottle of champagne at my place?”

“Uh, no. Absolutely not,” I said.

“Come on, Riley,” Roarke said, and I bit my lip.

There was no way I was going to do this. I was absolutely not going to hook up with Roarke again. Even if I *did* go over to celebrate.

“After work?” I said.

“When will you be done?” Roarke asked.

“Why, you got a hot date?” I teased.

“I did,” he admitted. “Someone talked me out of going.”

“I didn’t talk you out of anything,” I said, but I felt a stab of jealousy. I had no idea why. I’d only just hooked up with him. It didn’t mean anything. I guessed maybe I was just the territorial type after sex.

“Call me after you’re done,” he said, and I looked at the paperwork on my desk. I was halfway through, and I could finish everything later at home. Because I *was* going home. I was definitely not going to stay the night at Roarke’s because I was definitely not having sex with him again.

“I’ll meet you in the parking lot,” I said and hung up.

This was fine. This would be absolutely fine. I’d have a couple of glasses of wine and go home to sleep in my own bed.

TWO HOURS AND HALF A BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE LATER, I HAD my ankles around Roarke Brentwood’s ears as he pounded into me and I was crying out his name.

I didn’t even remember how I got here, exactly. It wasn’t the champagne, either, it was just like my brain turned off as soon as Roarke and I got alone together. We had been sitting on either side of each other from the couch and he popped the

champagne and it hit the ceiling and made me laugh, and then he slid closer to me on the couch.

The next thing I knew, I was in his bed on his extremely high thread count sheets and he was inside me. I should hate myself, but God, he felt so good.

His dick dragged against my g-spot in all the right ways as he moved his hips, and his hair was falling over his forehead. I grasped onto the headboard bars with both hands, gasping and trying to remember how to breathe as he pumped in and out of me.

“Jesus, fuck,” Roarke cursed. “I’m going to fill you up.”

My head felt fuzzy from the champagne and from his dirty talk.

“Do it,” I whispered hoarsely.

He was wearing a condom, of course, but the thought of it was so nice, how warm it would feel when he spilled inside of me. I’d already come twice and I couldn’t imagine orgasming again but he slid against that spot again, pressing his pelvis up against my clit. I came so hard I could see little explosions behind my eyelids.

“Roarke!” I shouted, and he grunted as he came, his thrusts slowing until he finally stopped and collapsed on top of me.

My hands immediately went to thread through his hair, which was getting longer than it was when I first started working at Webster and Brentwood.

“I’m glad you decided to come and celebrate,” Roarke said.

“Are you being sarcastic right now?” I accused, tugging at his hair.

“Ow!” Roarke lifted his head and pouted. He had such a full, generous mouth. Why was I only noticing this now? “No, I was being serious. Do you just always assume I’m being sarcastic?”

“Most of the time,” I admitted. “It’s not like you’re the most serious person.”

“I’m serious about my work,” he said. “In my personal life, I try not to take things so seriously.”

“Which is why this is all no-strings,” I commented.

“No. It’s all no-strings because like you said, you don’t even like me,” he corrected.

I tilted my head. “Fair enough.”

“I’m not afraid you’re going to fall in love with me.”

I snorted. “That’s good, because I’m not.”

“Great. I’m not going to fall in love with you, either,” he reminded me.

I rolled my eyes. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Roarke kissed along my jawline, nipping at my neck, before rolling off of me and looking up at the ceiling, still breathing hard.

I rolled toward him and put my hand on his broad chest. “How often do you work out?”

“Me? Used to play hockey. Lately, not as often. Especially went I thought about starting a family.”

“But you didn’t,” I said.

Roarke frowned. “Way to wound a guy, Riley. I still want kids, someday.”

“You’re not getting any younger.”

“Jesus. You really know how to pillow talk.” Roarke continued to frown at me and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“I’m only joking. I’m sure you’ll find your future ex-Mrs. Brentwood who will pop out a couple of crotch goblins for you soon enough.”

“Did you just...crotch goblins?” Roarke erupted into laughter. “You’re not one of those child-free people, are you?”

I laughed. “No, not exactly. I just want to focus on my career for a while.”

I wanted kids one day too, even if the little ones seemed to just be so much *responsibility*. I was a single woman, making on my own, and the thought of facing it alone anytime soon was daunting.

“I want plenty of crotch goblins, hopefully soon,” Roarke stated, and I snorted out a laugh.

This was one of the many reasons that we shouldn’t be doing this. We had little to nothing in common. I had more in common with the other junior associates, like Mark Windham, for example. Regardless, I just didn’t want to get involved with anyone at work, including Roarke.

“I should go,” I said suddenly, sitting up naked in Roarke’s bed. He frowned.

“Already? Thought we could go another round or two.”

I blushed, which wasn’t something I did easily. “I don’t think so. I need to be home in bed, I have a deposition tomorrow morning.”

“Not for the Martinez case,” Roarke said stubbornly.

I gave him a withering look as I pulled my clothes back on, running my fingers through my hair to finger-comb it.

“The Martinez case isn’t my only case,” I reminded him. “Unlike a partner, I can’t just focus on one case and one case only.”

Roarke stretched. “I could take you off everything else.”

I stared at him, anger rising in me. “Why, don’t you think I can handle it?”

“Whoa, whoa,” Roarke said, holding out his hands as if in defense. “I was just offering a . . . professional courtesy.”

“Doesn’t sound very professional,” I snapped, grabbing up my purse and putting on my heels.

I wanted so badly to slam the door of his apartment when I walked out, but I didn’t give him the pleasure of seeing how much he had affected me. I had spent my whole life working to get to where I was on my own, trying to succeed without

any help, and I'd be damned if I accepted help from Roarke Brentwood just because now we had slept together.

Had being the operative word. I wasn't going to ever do it again. Besides, I didn't even *like* Roarke. Did I?

When I arrived home, I saw that Mark had texted me: ***Breakfast before the deposition?***

I sighed. I had way too much on my plate to be dealing with either man.

ROARKE



MAGDA HAD RUN OUT OF MY APARTMENT LIKE IT WAS ON FIRE, and I didn't know what the hell I'd said to piss her off. Women were crazy was all I could figure. I expected her back before lunch after the deposition for the Santos case, which I found out was her only other case. She wasn't slammed with back-to-back cases like she'd made it seem.

Sure, I'd looked into the computer schedules to find that out, since Richard usually handled all that kind of stuff, but it wasn't stalking. I was just curious as to how much work she had.

"You're doing scheduling now?" Richard asked wryly when he saw me at his desktop, walking into the office and closing the door. "You know you can access all those same programs on your computer."

"But your view is better," I joked. In reality, our offices were close to each other so we had almost the exact same view.

"My *chair* is better. I told you to buy a new one last year."

My office chair was leather and cracked, nearly falling apart. It had sentimental value, though, because it came from my first studio apartment, when I'd been making money primarily from winning hockey games and betting on myself with bookies. I hadn't always been the billionaire I was today. I'd come from an unhappy, impoverished home, and for a while, I'd thought being on the wrong side of the law was the only way to get ahead.

Some things I kept, like that office chair and my hockey trophies. I'd blown out my back before I'd ever gotten to go pro, but for a while in college, I'd been a big shot.

Now, I was still a big shot, just in a different, warmer arena, and I didn't have to give someone a black eye to get to the goal anymore. Instead, I used my law degree to beat them. And I was going to beat Mr. Martinez.

Even if Mrs. Martinez didn't exactly deserve it.

"How has it been going with Magda....er, Ms. Riley?" Richard asked, and I stared at him for a long moment.

"Do you have something going on with Magda??"

Richard's face was blank. "What do you mean?"

"Never mind," I muttered. I was seeing zebras where there were just horses. Magda was fiery and driving me crazy lately, and I guessed I thought maybe her way into the partnership had something to do with Richard. "She's...something."

Richard snorted out a laugh. "That's for sure. She's won a lot of cases based on her grit alone."

"I don't know if I'd call it grit," I drawled, thinking of Magda's breasts bouncing in my face as I pumped in and out of her the night before.

"Fire, anyway. She's got what it takes to be partner, I just know it." Richard sounded almost proud.

I raised an eyebrow. "If you've already decided to put her on the table for partner, why ask me to vet her?"

Richard kicked my legs off his desk and I made a grunt in the back of my throat.

"Because you're my partner, Roarke. Why else? I would never make the decision on my own."

"Well, I'm not totally sold," I said, although I was getting closer and closer to a decision. Magda Riley might be a pain in my ass, but she seemed to be a good lawyer, regardless of how good of a lay she was.

“Give it time,” Richard said. “At least until the end of this case. Then we’ll talk about it.”

I nodded. “Fair enough.” I sighed as I stood up, my back hurting a bit. I was too old to stay up all night drinking wine and having sex.

“Late night?” Richard asked, and I grinned.

“You know it.”

“Blind date went well?”

Oh, shit. I’d completely forgotten about that. I cleared my throat. “Sure, went great. She’s a peach.”

“Good to know,” Richard said with a smile. “I’m glad you two got along. Maybe you’ll be able to settle down again.”

“Fourth time’s the charm,” I muttered under my breath, leaving his office to go by Magda’s.

When I arrived, her door was closed and someone was in there with her. She didn’t have the blinds drawn, though, and I saw that it was another junior associate, Mark Windham.

She was working on the Santos case with him; I’d seen that much on the schedule. I guessed they must be talking about it. I narrowed my eyes, watching him lean over her desk to point at something. He sure was standing close to her.

I busied myself at the water cooler, even though I had a mini fridge in my office. I couldn’t help that I wanted to know what was going on in there.

I was partner, after all, and I had a right to know how every case was going, not just the ones I was working on.

When Mark opened the door, he was grinning. “I’ll just ask you again tomorrow,” he said, and something dropped in my stomach.

Magda tittered out a laugh, and I didn’t like the sound of it at all. I felt a little jealous, if I was honest with myself, feeling like there was a rock in my gut. I knew that it must just be that I was territorial. Once I’d had sex with a woman, I didn’t like the idea of her having sex with anyone else.

Magda couldn't have been sleeping with Mark, right? Her blinds weren't drawn, the door hadn't been locked, so not in the office, anyway. But outside the office? Even if it wasn't Mark, it could be someone else.

I walked into her office. "I ordered the moo goo gai pan for lunch," I said, knowing that it was her favorite.

Her usually intense blue eyes widened in what looked like happiness.

"God, I've been craving it all day," she groaned, and I grinned, sitting down in the chair across from her.

Fuck Mark Windham. Magda was in *my* bed last night, not his, and that was all that mattered.

"I was thinking after we ate, we could go out," I whispered, leaning across her desk as I sat.

"Out for a second lunch?" Magda asked incredulously.

"No, Riley. Out to a hotel room." I kept my voice low and she blushed, scrambling to get up and go and shut her door, drawing the blinds this time.

I grinned. Somehow, her drawing the blinds made me feel better. I was on a different level than Mark Windham.

"Didn't you just hear me tell Mark no to going out to lunch? We need to stay in and go over the prenup to be sure that I'm right about Mrs. Martinez's trust fund."

"We'll have to go over it line by line," I said. "It'll take a couple of days. So a couple of hours for lunch won't hurt."

Magda bit her lip, which I already knew from the past couple of weeks meant that she was considering it heavily.

"I'll make it worth your while," I murmured.

Magda looked at me for a long moment. "Fine, but I'm taking my own car," she answered.

"Who said you could ride in my baby, anyway? You always slam the doors," I teased, and Magda scoffed.

"You love that car more than anything else."

“Damn straight. That’s my baby girl,” I answered. The car wasn’t even brand-new. I’d bought it when I’d made my first million, and it was getting older. I kept it well maintained, though, but it was one of those sentimental things, like my old office chair.

I sauntered back to my office to work on a few other things while we waited for lunch. It was mostly just my signature to buy office supplies, things like that. Richard dealt with most of the hiring and firing, and I dealt with the budget. I was good at it. Growing up somewhere that you had to really stretch meals helped me stick to a tight budget, and we spent far less money than our competitors. Add to that, we had the best divorce and family lawyers in the state, in my opinion, and that included Magda Riley. She was a good lawyer, even if I disliked her personality a bit.

That was changing, too, though, I had to admit. I remembered her favorite lunch, the way she took her coffee. When I started to think about it, it made me panic just a little, my chest and throat felt tight. There was no way I was developing *feelings* for her, was there? Surely, not.

I’d known her for a couple of years now and we’d only just started sleeping together. I wouldn’t develop feelings that quickly. It did all seem sort of domestic, though, me buying her favorite lunch, bringing her coffee in the mornings. Me jealous of Mark Windham. Maybe I should take a step back.

We had already scheduled the hotel meeting, though, and I wasn’t about to take a step back from *that*.

Magda was a great lay, and I was going to do that as much as I could while we were working on the case. I was definitely what one would call a serial monogamist, but at the same time, I was taking a breather from relationships. And it didn’t matter anyway, because it wasn’t like that with Magda. We were casual. Just blowing off steam with each other.

MAGDA



ROARKE WAS ALREADY IN THE HOTEL ROOM WHEN I ARRIVED, sending me a text with the room number. The penthouse, of course. I rolled my eyes.

He could be so much, sometimes. He just had to show off all his money and rent out a penthouse for a simple two hours of sex. I couldn't stand him. But yet, here I was, having ditched my panties in the office bathroom and stuck them into my purse because I knew he liked to just bend me over any available surface.

Ugh, why did he have to be so handsome and good in bed? I didn't even find him attractive when I first met him, nor in the two years I'd been working at Brentwood and Webster. Now, though, the more I got to know about him, the more I noticed how objectively good-looking he was.

He had a few strands of silver along his temples, little wrinkles around his eyes that showed some of his age. I assumed he was in his mid to late forties, but who knew? He had one of those faces that made it hard to tell, with a strong jaw and a clean-shaven chin. There was a dimple in his chin and one in his cheek when he smiled, and it made me weak in the knees sometimes.

A lot about him was making me weak in the knees lately, and it was starting to worry me. I put that out of my head, though, telling myself this was just a little bit of fun, a couple hours to get out of my own head. One of the only times I didn't think too much was during sex, and it was safer to do it

with Roarke outside the office than some stranger at a bar, right? That was all this was. Convenience.

I wasn't going to let myself catch any kind of feelings for him.

Roarke was sitting on the bed, naked, the sheet pulled up just over his hips. He had the lights dimmed low, and my throat went dry as I shut the door behind me.

"You certainly are eager," I said, but he didn't respond, just looking at me and making the come-hither gesture with his fingers.

I swallowed hard and walked toward the bed, climbing on top of him, straddling his lap, and I could already see the sheet tented where he had an erection. He pressed it against me, kissing my neck, but he wouldn't look at my face.

He still didn't look into my eyes when I took off my top, knowing from previous times that if I didn't, Roarke would rip it off me and pop a couple of buttons. He was rough during sex, and I had to admit that I loved it.

Roarke stared at my breasts instead, reaching around to pop open my bra with one hand. I raised an eyebrow.

"Lot of practice?"

"More than you know," he rasped, his voice low and hoarse with lust. He pressed insistently against me and I could nearly feel his dick pulsing. He wanted me badly, and that made heat pool in my lower belly.

I wanted to frown, not liking the idea of all the experience he had. I was a little bit of a possessive person, especially when it came to sex. Up until Roarke, I'd seen sex as a fairly intimate act, and I'd only done it with people I had some kind of connection with. I didn't have any connection to Roarke other than we were both lawyers and worked in the same office. He was my *boss*, for god's sake, but maybe that was part of what made this even hotter. Pushing all thoughts of Roarke with other women out of my head, I yanked down the covers and scooted back on his lap, throwing my bra to the ground.

Roarke's hands immediately came up to cup my breasts, dragging his thumbs across my nipples and I moaned loudly. My hair brushed up against my lower back when I threw my head back, making me shiver. Maybe the shivering had more to do with the fact that Roarke's fingers were teasing my nipples.

He was looking at my breasts, and when I pushed my skirt up, my pussy, but he wasn't looking me in the eyes. I frowned a little, wondering why that made me feel so strange. I guessed it was because I could be anyone.

I took his chin in my hand and forced him up to look at me and his green eyes flashed with something like arousal. He groaned.

"Wanted you to look at me," I murmured, guiding him inside of me, and he moaned again, louder this time, almost a growl in the back of his throat.

His hands moved from my breasts to my hips and he bounced me on top of him, leaning up to catch my mouth with his own.

"Roarke," I breathed, but he didn't say my name.

Was he imagining I was someone else? Did I care if he was?

I definitely did. It was just my possessive nature, and I didn't care (much) if he was seeing other people. I just wanted him to be with me when he was with me.

That was normal, right?

"Say my name," I whispered close to his ear.

"Riley," he started, but I shook my head, stopping the movement of my hips and clenching my thighs around him so he couldn't bounce me.

He growled in frustration, and I knew he was close to flipping me over. I wasn't done yet, though.

"Not my last name," I corrected.

“Magda,” he breathed, and that was what I needed, that made my insides clench like I was close to the edge.

I began to roll my hips, and Roarke bucked up beneath me, not content to let me take control.

“You want to flip me over, huh?” I asked, smiling wryly, and Roarke groaned and pulled me off him, pressing me face-down onto the bed, one hand on my lower back.

I squeaked and pressed my face into the pillow. I was a little disappointed because I liked for him to look at me, liked to know that it was me he was seeing, but then he slid back inside of me and I stopped thinking. I just gave in to how my body felt and nearly screamed into the mattress when he hit a sweet spot inside of me.

He tugged on my hair, lifting my head, and I looked over my shoulder, my mouth open.

“Now you say *my* name,” he commanded, taking control back one hundred percent, and it made me feel like I was about to explode I was so close to coming.

“Roarke,” I croaked out, and when I started to come around him, I said it again in, louder. “Roarke, Roarke,” I chanted, and he groaned and kept fucking me, hard and fast.

He let go of my hair, putting both hands on my hips to pull me back against him, just chasing his orgasm, but it felt so good in the aftershocks of my own that I could barely move, just mewling and whimpering into the hotel pillow. Spots of lights appeared behind my eyes when I came again.

Roarke pulled out and spilled onto my ass and lower back, and I frowned. I was on the pill and we’d been sleeping together for a while, and I liked the feeling of a man coming inside me. But I wasn’t about to complain when I’d gotten two orgasms out of just one session.

I laid there for a moment, panting, while Roarke cleaned me up with a damp hotel towel. He’d been careful not to get it on my skirt, and I was grateful since I had to go back to work.

When I finally lifted my head, Roarke was half-dressed, picking up his briefcase.

“What? Where are you going?” I asked, confused and still a little light-headed from my orgasms.

“Back to work,” he said shortly. “See you there.”

Then he walked out, leaving me half-naked on the bed with my skirt pushed up over my ass. We had been at it for less than half an hour. I thought he’d said a couple hours, that we would take our entire lunch break up making love.

He was blowing me off.

What the fuck?

ROARKE



I'D PLANNED TO BE WITH MAGDA THROUGHOUT MY WHOLE lunch break, but given the odd feeling I'd gotten in my chest when I'd seen Mark Windham in her office, I didn't think it was a good idea. Especially when she'd tried to take control of the situation. It wasn't that I minded having a woman in control on occasion – in fact, I liked it quite a lot. I was attracted to strong women, and Magda Riley was indeed a strong woman. I liked it better when they submitted to me, though, and she'd done that like a champ when I'd flipped her over.

She'd made me look in her eyes first, though, made me say her *first* name, and that had made something in my chest flutter. I didn't like it. It felt too much like *feelings*. I refused to have any kind of feelings for an associate at my firm, especially Magda Riley. When she made it back to the office, she knocked on the doorjamb of my open office door.

“Are we going over the prenu?” she asked.

“I'm already three-quarters of the way done,” I said, not looking up at her. “Don't worry about it. You work on filing the motion with the judge to dismiss his case. She gets her money back, period. We've got this.”

She kept standing there, so I finally glanced up at her. Her clothes weren't ruffled in the slightest, and her makeup was immaculate, like our tryst had never even happened.

“I thought... I thought we were going to do it together,” she said quietly.

I smiled. “No worries, Riley. I’ve got more experience, so I thought I’d get through it faster alone, that’s all.”

Magda bit her lip, and I looked back down at the prenup, hating the way my heart jumped in my chest when she did that.

“I’ve got this,” I said firmly. “Just go work on the motion.”

She didn’t speak for a long time, and when I looked up again, she had left my office. I let out a long sigh and closed my eyes. I sat back in my seat and rubbed a hand across my face.

In a few moments, there was another knock on the doorjamb.

“Riley, I told you—” I started, but when I opened my eyes it was a very different woman standing in my doorway.

Grace fucking Williams. Former Grace Brentwood, AKA my most recent ex-wife.

“What in god’s name are you doing here?” I growled, and she smiled, showing her white veneers – ones that I’d bought and paid for.

She was carrying a large cardboard box. “I’m bringing by your things since you refuse to come and get them,” she said, setting the box down on my desk.

I looked over at it. I had gotten everything important out of her house already, so all that was in there was some old DVDs, a couple of ties, and a pair of sneakers.

“You thought this was important enough to bother me at work?”

Grace quietly shut the door behind her and sat down in the chair across from my desk.

“Not just that. Thought that we could talk, Roarkey.”

I rolled my eyes. I hated the way she added a “y” to the end of my name, like I was an infant. She was five years younger than me, for God’s sake.

“I don’t think there’s anything to talk about. Your alimony check should be direct deposited on the fourth,” I said harshly.

Grace frowned. “Surely you don’t think I care about *that*, Roarkey.”

To be honest, I guess she didn’t. I’d insisted on paying for everything, buying the house and her car, but Grace came from a rich household and she had a trust fund much like Mrs. Martinez had. She could have paid for it herself, but I’d been in love and wanted to take care of her.

“Then why are you here?” I asked tiredly. I didn’t want to go through this again. I’d finally begun to move on from Grace and I didn’t want to go back down this road. I felt nothing when I looked at her, not even bitterness.

“I want us to go out to dinner and talk,” she said, looking at me from underneath her eyelashes. She had these big, brown doe eyes, and they used to really do something to me. Not so much anymore.

“Again, Grace, spit it out. What do you want to talk to me about?”

Grace huffed out a breath. “You know what I want to talk to you about.”

I stared at her blankly and she groaned.

“I want us to think about getting back together, Roarkey.”

I snorted out a laugh that I tried to hide at first. I cleared my throat, hoping that would help but I laughed again, unable to help myself.

Grace pouted at me. “You’re making fun of me.”

“I’m not making fun of you, Grace,” I said when I finally got it together. “I’m just wondering how much wine you had at lunch to consider asking me that.”

“I didn’t have *any* wine at lunch. I’ve been cutting back, Roarkey. For you.”

“For me?” I snorted again, staring at her incredulously. “Did you also cut back on fucking other guys or...?”

Grace stood up, her face turning red with anger. “If you’re going to be like this, I’m going to leave.”

“Don’t let the door hit you,” I mumbled, and she stormed out of the office, slamming the door. It made my blinds shudder with the force of it. Grace had been another one of those strong women that had gotten under my skin.

This was exactly why I should avoid Magda, do the work myself. I didn’t want to go down that road again, because I knew where it ended.

I threw the box of things that Grace had brought into the corner, there was nothing there I couldn’t live without, and went back to the pre-nup. I had lied to Magda when I said I was three-quarters of the way through. I wasn’t even halfway, and I could have really used her help.

But I just couldn’t be in close proximity to her right now, not with the way I got butterflies in my stomach when she was near. That wasn’t going to work for me. I could *not* fall in love with Magda Riley, and I knew from past experience that I was the type of guy that didn’t fall easily, but when I did, I tended to fall quickly and hard.

It wasn’t that I couldn’t keep things casual, it was just that when I met someone that clicked with me emotionally and physically, it was hard for me not to go too fast. Grace and I had moved in together within three months, and gotten married within six.

I wasn’t stupid enough to think that I wasn’t on the verge of having feelings for Magda Riley. I had enough experience to know that I might already like her a lot more than I should.

Especially since I knew she didn’t like me or share any of those feelings, I had to stay away from her. Which was a real shame, because the sex had been phenomenal.

I just had to keep working with her and try not to want her anymore.

That might be harder than I imagined, but it was better than the alternative: heartache and rejection.

MAGDA



I FELT AWFUL AFTER LEAVING ROARKE'S OFFICE. I FELT USED and rejected, somehow, after he had started the prenup without me. I thought it was because the sex had been so *impersonal*. He hadn't looked at me, and I could have just been anybody to him. There was something hot at the moment about being used in that way, but I didn't like the aftermath.

It seemed like he was avoiding me, and I decided that was fine with me. I didn't have feelings for him anyway, right? I holed myself up in my office until nearly three, but my rumbling stomach called me down to the coffee shop downstairs to at least get a bagel. I'd barely eaten my lunch, too excited to get to the hotel and not wanting to seem bloated during the act.

That had turned out to be a bust. It wasn't like the sex hadn't been amazing, but it'd made me feel terrible, and I thought I didn't want anything else to do with Roarke Brentwood. I was better off, really, not sleeping with anyone that I worked with.

So why did it feel so bad?

When I walked out of my office, I saw a woman storming out of Roarke's office, slamming the door so hard it vibrated through the office. She was a redhead, her clothing and makeup immaculate, and instantly, jealousy bloomed in my stomach.

It was probably just a client, but I couldn't help my heart lurch into my throat.

I walked toward the elevator and she was already inside. I was going to wait for the next one but she reached forward, holding the door for me.

I smiled at her. “Thank you,” I said.

She smiled back. She was really quite pretty, and seemed nice. I, of all people, knew that Roarke could be a jerk, so I wasn’t surprised that she’d stormed out of there.

I couldn’t help myself from asking.

“Are you a client of Mr. Brentwood’s?” I asked quietly, looking at the elevator door like I wasn’t concerned about her answer.

She scoffed. “Not exactly a client, although I might as well be, at this point. I’m his ex-wife.”

She turned to shake my hand, and I shook it, shell-shocked. “Grace Brentwood.”

Grace Brentwood was absolutely *gorgeous* upfront, making me very insecure, and I wondered what she had been doing here.

“Nice to meet you,” I muttered, and she smiled.

“I hope you’ll see me around the office more,” she chirped, dropping my hand gracefully as the door dinged.

“Oh?” I asked, desperate for her to tell me why.

“Yes,” she said, stepping off the elevator and turning toward me, flashing her very white teeth when she smiled. “We’re getting back together, you see.”

She walked off toward the doors, and I swallowed hard and punched the third-floor button, going back up to my office. I’d suddenly lost my appetite.

My chest hurt and my stomach hurt and I felt slightly sick. I’d had this feeling before, and I hated that I knew what it was: heartbreak.

Fuck. Tears burned at the backs of my eyes but I refused to let them fall, just going back into my office and planning to shut and lock the door. Roarke was still in his closed office, so

it wasn't like I needed to worry about him coming in there. He didn't want me, after all. It made a lot more sense why he'd been so impersonal at lunch, why he'd shut me out of the pre-nup.

He was getting back together with his ex-wife. There wouldn't be any more teasing and flirting, no more amazing sex in his office, apartment, or a hotel room. He would be married all over again, and I would just be some girl that he wasted time with in between their breakup. Roarke had told me that only one of his ex-wives hadn't cheated, and Grace seemed so nice I bet it was her.

It was meant to be, soulmate-type stuff, and I shouldn't care. Roarke and I were casual, but something felt broken inside me, now. Damn it. I had feelings for him, real ones, and I hadn't let myself explore them or figure them out. I was afraid of them for this very reason. I choked out a sob as I tried to shut my office door, but a foot stopped me from closing it.

“Magda?”

It was Mark Windham. I could recognize his voice after how many times he and I worked together, most recently on the Santos case.

I took in a deep breath to calm myself and pasted on a smile. “Mark,” I said. “Did I miss something on the Santos case?”

“No, not at all,” he said. “I just came to see if you'd eaten.”

He smiled at me. Mark was a nice guy. He was maybe the nicest guy in this office, definitely nicer than Roarke, and I'd been blowing him off left and right. And what for? Because I didn't want to date someone at work? I was sleeping with the *boss*, for god's sake. What had I been thinking? I knew that Roarke Brentwood was the type to break my heart, but Mark Windham wasn't.

“I haven't, but I can't right now,” I said finally. “But how would you like to go to dinner?”

Mark's blue eyes lit up. "Absolutely," he said. "Pick you up at eight?"

"Sounds good," I smiled. "I'll text you my address."

When Mark went back to his office, he was whistling and happy. I should be happy too.

Instead, when I shut my door and the blinds, tears began to roll down my face.

I let myself cry for a long moment, sniffing and sitting behind my desk. There was a knock on the door and I sucked in a breath, wiping at my eyes and checking my makeup in a compact mirror.

I walked to the door slowly and opened it, and my dad was standing in my doorway. But he wasn't my dad right now. He couldn't be. Not here. And for a second that made me sadder.

"Mags?" he asked. "Are you okay?"

I wanted to sob, hug him and press my face into his suit, but he was my boss right now and I couldn't do that.

"Everything's fine," I lied. "Just had a long day."

He looked at his watch. "Well, it's nearly four. You can go home early if you'd like."

I shook my head. "I've got plenty of work to do here."

"That's an order, not a request," he said firmly, and again, I wanted to burst into tears. He could tell that I was upset and stressed and only wanted what was best for me.

"I'll go home," I said quietly, grabbing my things.

"And Magda?" Dad called as I went past him, my shoulder brushing his.

"Yeah?"

"You're doing a great job."

That only made me want to cry harder, but this time, I made it all the way to the parking garage before I burst into tears, holding on to my steering wheel. I absolutely hated

feeling this way. Heartbreak was the worst way to feel, and I hadn't felt it probably since college.

My first college boyfriend had played with my mind and my heart, and I hated the way it felt. I felt that way about Roarke Brentwood now, and I hated myself for letting these feelings grow. I had no idea that I liked him so much, had grown to understand him, until his ex-wife told me they were getting back together.

Now I was going to still have to work closely with him on this case, all the while pretending like my heart wasn't in shards. How the hell was I supposed to do that?

ROARKE



I KEPT TELLING MYSELF NOT TO GO TO MAGDA'S OFFICE. Whatever I wanted to tell her could happen over the phone, but what I needed was for her to go through the second half of this prenup. I'd gone through the first half and my eyes were starting to cross at all the legal language. It was a language I was well versed in, of course, but at the same time, things began to blur together when you read line after line of it.

I needed her help, and I didn't want to admit it.

I finally sighed when my eyes blurred out for the third time and took the file toward her office. Her light was off, the office door locked, and when I knocked, she didn't answer.

Webster walked up behind me. "She went home for the day."

I frowned. "Why?"

He shrugged. "She wasn't feeling well, and you didn't seem up for teamwork."

"I was coming to get her for teamwork," I muttered under my breath. Richard was a few years older than me, and even though he was my best friend, he often seemed to take the lead on things. Most of the time, I let him, because I was pretty laid-back. I did a lot of the court work because he handled a lot of the paperwork, and it worked for us.

Outside of the office, we were the same, but inside the office, I was the shark and he was the one who sat back and made sure everything was by the book. I didn't like following rules, and sometimes Richard overriding me pissed me off.

This was one of those times.

Was it just because it was Magda? Because I wanted to see her? Because I wanted her back in my bed? I probably would have talked her into coming home with me, so this was probably for the best.

“You’ll never believe who I scored a date with,” I heard one of the junior associates say. Magda’s office was near the water cooler, so a lot of gossips happened there, and I wasn’t really paying attention, trying to think of how to respond to Richard overriding me about sending Magda home. Then my ears perked up.

“Has to be Magda Riley,” someone else said, and it was like that was now *all* I could hear.

When I turned, Mark Windham was standing at the water cooler with another associate I didn’t know by name, something like Lynch or Lynchburg, I thought. I didn’t know much about Lynch but I knew that Windham was a bit of a snake in the grass. That was all well and good when it came to the law, because sometimes it could be good to manipulate, but a date? With Magda? Absolutely not.

“She asked *me* to dinner,” Mark continued, and I didn’t like the way he was boasting about it.

In fact, I didn’t like that she asked him, either. What was she thinking? She was the one always going on about how she didn’t want to get involved with anyone at work, especially me. Now she was dating Mark fucking Windham? He manipulated the law and the clients we worked with, especially the women, and he had the reputation of being a bit of a scumbag around the office.

Hadn’t Magda heard the rumors? And why the hell was she dating him, anyway. While we were sleeping together? It wasn’t like I’d broken things off with her. I was pissed off, and I glared at Mark Windham. He ignored me, laughing and chatting with Lynch/Lynchburg.

Richard gave me a hard look. “Roarke, I know what you’re thinking.”

“I really fucking doubt it,” I said under my breath. What I was thinking about was my time as a hockey player, how I could sweep by and clothesline Mark Windham in the span of a few moments and he’d be none the wiser.

I went back to my office before I did something that might get a lawsuit thrown at me, slamming the office door and immediately calling Magda.

I didn’t think that she’d pick up, but after the fifth or sixth ring, she did, her voice sounding hoarse as if she’d been sleeping.

I wilted a little. Maybe she really *wasn’t* feeling well.

I drew in a breath through my nostrils and out through my mouth to calm down the adrenaline racing through my veins. Adrenaline mixed with jealousy, if I was honest with myself.

“You left the office before I could get your help with the preup. Can I email it to you?”

Magda paused. “I don’t think so, Mr. Brentwood.”

Mr. Brentwood? She hadn’t called me that outside of teasing me in forever.

“What do you mean?” I asked, frowning.

“I mean that I have plans this evening,” she said shortly, and I squeezed my eyes shut, angry, fuming.

“I don’t care about your plans,” I snapped. “This is the job, and you don’t just work a nine-to-five, Riley. There’s a reason we pay you salary.”

“Well, my boss sent me home, so maybe you should take it up with him,” she spat back, her voice harsh.

I knew that my voice was harsh, too, but I couldn’t help it. I was angry and jealous, and I hated the idea of her going out with that snake Mark Windham.

“What kind of plans?” I asked.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I have a date,” she said simply, and I wanted to throw my phone. So, Mark hadn’t been just talking shit, then. She was really going out with him.

“With Mark fucking Windham?” I asked.

“How the hell did you know that?” she asked.

“Because he’s been telling the whole office!” I burst out.

Magda scoffed. “I’m sure it wasn’t like that.”

She was right, it wasn’t like he was bragging out loud to everyone, but he might as well have been. I didn’t like the look on his face when he talked about her, that was for sure. It wasn’t just jealousy, either. I knew what kind of man Mark was, and I didn’t want Magda dating him for a variety of reasons.

“He’s not a good guy, Magda,” I said, hoping that she would hear that I was genuine.

“Are you jealous, Roarke?” she asked, but it didn’t sound teasing, more curious.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said back.

“Good, because you have absolutely no right to say anything about who I’m dating,” she snapped.

What the hell did that mean? Before I could respond, she heaved a deep sigh.

“Leave the prenup until tomorrow morning. I’ll finish it up then.”

“Magda—” I started, but I was met with silence on the line. She had hung up.

I threw my phone across the room, shattering the screen and cursing.

MAGDA



THE DATE WITH MARK WENT AS WELL AS IT COULD, GIVEN MY mood, but I just really wasn't that into it. I kept telling myself that it wasn't because of Roarke, that it was just that Mark was such a gentleman and I appreciated a little more bite from my men.

Roarke had plenty of bite, and it had bitten me in the ass, though, so maybe I should have given Mark more of a chance.

"You didn't have a very good time, did you?" Mark asked with a sigh when we got back into his car after dinner.

I turned to smile at him. "It isn't that. You're lovely, Mark. I just... have a lot on my mind. The Martinez case has been tough."

He nodded sympathetically, showing me his straight, white teeth in a smile. "I know that it is. I'm sure you'll make partner from this, though, Magda. You're amazing."

I could feel my smile turn genuine. Mark was a good guy, just not *my* guy. Mark leaned over to kiss me and I turned my head at the last second so that his lips fell onto my cheek.

He blushed a little but didn't comment, and we drove home in awkward silence.

When I exited the car, he grabbed my hand, and I turned to face him, shutting the door when he dropped my hand and looked in. He had a convertible, so he didn't have to worry about letting down the window.

“Could we try this again? A fresh start when things have calmed down with the Martinez case?” he asked hopefully.

There really was no point. There was nothing there for me. He was a good friend, but nothing more, so I gave him a sad half-smile and shook my head. “I don’t think so, Mark. But thank you for dinner and dessert. I had a good time.”

Mark just tightened his jaw. “Fair enough.”

I felt bad that I didn’t like him in the way that he liked me, and I wondered if maybe I should have at least let him kiss me. Maybe I would have felt something. But I knew deep in my heart that I wouldn’t. I knew that it was partly that I just wasn’t into Mark, but I also knew that it was because my heart was already tied up: with Roarke Brentwood.

It was nearly midnight when I arrived home and turned my phone back on, and I had a series of texts from Roarke.

How did your date go?

You can’t still be out.

Riley, answer your phone.

As I looked at the text messages, my phone rang and I jumped, startled. It was Roarke.

“Hello?” I couldn’t help myself from answering, my heart leaping.

“Magda,” he breathed, and I could tell by the way he said my first name that he’d been drinking.

“Roarke,” I said simply, plopping down on my bed, feeling emotionally exhausted from the day.

“Are you with him?” His voice sounded both harsh and hoarse.

“No,” I said. “He just brought me home.”

“Did you let him kiss you?” he asked.

I blinked, surprised. “That’s none of your business,” I snapped.

“I kissed you last, so I think it is my business.”

“You didn’t even kiss me at the hotel,” I said, and I hated the way my voice sounded hurt and a little broken.

“Is that why you went out on a date with Mark fucking Windham?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the way he said Mark’s name. It made me feel a little giddy that Roarke was jealous, that he seemed like he couldn’t stand the thought of me with someone else.

“No. I went because I thought I might have fun,” I said, and that was mostly the truth. The rest of the truth was that I’d hoped it would take my mind off of Roarke.

“Did you?” he asked, and when I hesitated I could hear him breathing, waiting for me to respond.

“I don’t know,” I demurred, not wanting to lose this giddy feeling of Roarke caring so much about who else I was with.

“Come over,” he murmured, and I nearly gasped I was so surprised.

“What?”

“Come over to my place,” he repeated. “I know you know the address. I’ll leave the door unlocked.”

“Roarke,” I started, but it was too late. He had already hung up.

I bit my lip, considering. I’d just been out on a date with someone else. Wasn’t it a little wrong to go and see Roarke? What if I just saw him, talked to him, and didn’t sleep with him?

I snorted at my own stupid thoughts. Yeah, right. As if that was going to happen.

Nevertheless, I found myself putting my heels back on. I was wearing a miniskirt and a red blouse, quite different than my normal attire. I usually just went out in what I wore to work, but I’d thought that it might be a little more fun to dress up for a date.

I made it to Roarke's in half an hour, since he lived in a penthouse apartment near our office. I buzzed in at the gate, hoping that he wasn't asleep now, and sighed in relief when he let me in immediately.

I didn't even knock on the door or ring the doorbell before he jerked the door open, pulling me inside and letting it shut behind me.

He leaned down to kiss me, tasting like some kind of hard brown liquor and mint, like he'd tried to get the smell of it off his breath. It tasted amazing, actually, and he slid his tongue across mine, making my belly tighten.

Roarke kissed rough and hard, usually, but this time it was deep, thorough, as if he was trying to prove something. When he pulled away, he looked down at me with his normally bright green eyes a little dim.

"Was that kiss good enough for you?" he murmured.

I didn't have time to answer before he kissed me again, harder, hungrier, popping open my shirt and uncaring that it broke and buttons flew across the room. I couldn't bring myself to care, either, even though this was among my favorite tops.

He was already shirtless, and I spread my hands across his chest. He moaned into my mouth, picking me up easily and taking me to his bedroom. He had a huge, king-sized bed with an amazing view of the city, and he had the blinds open. I didn't care if anyone saw us, even though they couldn't from this high up.

I wouldn't care if we were doing this in the street. I wanted him so much I could barely stand it.

Instead of bending me over or pressing me into the mattress like he'd done before, he placed me gently down on my back, kissing down my neck, looking into my eyes when he removed my clothes. He took off everything, my thigh-highs, my panties, painstakingly slowly, trailing his fingers along my skin.

I was trembling, quaking, when he slid his fingers through my wetness, looking into my eyes.

“Magda,” he said softly, my first name, my real name, not my last name. “You’re so beautiful.”

I shuddered again, his words making my stomach clench with need and his fingers doing magic between my legs. Roarke didn’t talk like this. He didn’t tell me I was beautiful, didn’t kiss every inch of my skin. We fucked hard and dirty and quickly, in his office, in a hotel, in his apartment. This was more like making love, and my heart ached with the intensity of it.

This was the intimacy I thought of when I thought of sex, and I didn’t know how to feel getting it from Roarke Brentwood.

I didn’t respond to his praise vocally, but my body did, my back arching, my hips thrusting against his hand. I was near orgasm before he’d ever put his fingers inside me, just his thumb and forefinger slipping along my clit.

“Roarke,” I moaned. “Roarke, I’m going to—”

“Not yet,” he said harshly, moving his hand from me and licking his fingers clean. “I don’t want you to come until I’m inside you.”

That command didn’t help matters, my stomach clenching with how much I wanted to orgasm.

“Roarke, please,” I pleaded, and he smirked at me.

“I’m going to give you what you want, sweetheart, don’t worry.”

Oh, God, a pet name. I was a sucker for pet names, and Roarke had barely ever used them, calling me “Riley” most of the time like a damn football coach or what he really was, my boss.

He shoved down the sweats he was wearing and guided himself into me, slowly instead of quickly and hard like usual. He began to fuck me in long, slow strokes, and I was nearly there already, crying out, squeezing my eyes shut.

“Oh, fuck, I’m close,” I moaned, but Roarke didn’t speed up, just continuing to roll his hips slowly, his hands on my upper thighs.

I was still trembling all over, my body reacting to the slow, intimate way he was making love to me, and I couldn’t keep my eyes open until Roarke took my chin in his hand.

“Look at me,” he ordered. “Look at me like you made me look at you.”

My eyes popped open and his brow was furrowed with concentration but his eyes were focused on my face.

“I’m coming,” I whimpered, and my orgasm hit me like a truck, taking over my whole body while he continued to move inside me.

Roarke groaned. “You’re clenching so tight around me, sweetheart, you feel like heaven.”

The praise was almost too much, made my heart do jumping jacks in my chest, but I loved it, rocking my hips up to meet his thrusts. I was going to come again, and fast, especially if he sped up his strokes. Like he was reading my mind, he sped up, fucking me harder and faster and I was vaulted into my second orgasm almost immediately, nearly screaming out his name.

“That’s right, sweetheart,” he crooned. “Come for me again.”

When Roarke said that, my body clenched all over again, and I was almost afraid I was going to come a third time, that it would be too much, and I was so close when he spilled inside me that I was clenching around him all over again.

I took in a deep breath, happy that he’d come inside me, my whole body warm from my orgasms and the intimacy of the sex. I was afraid, suddenly, that he’d roll off me, ask me to go home, panic rising in me, but he didn’t. Roarke slowly pulled out of me and cupped my pussy with one hand, as if to keep his come inside.

It was a possessive move that made me feel hot all over, still clenching inside from the aftershocks of my orgasm.

He finally moved his hand and lay next to me, seeing goosebumps all over my skin and kissing them in a line across my shoulders before pulling the duvet up around us.

“Magda,” he said. “You were perfect.”

At that moment, I *felt* perfect. Felt sated and happy, and I wished that this moment could last forever.

ROARKE



I WOKE UP WITH A BLINDING HEADACHE AND MAGDA'S THIN arm wrapped around my waist and tried to remember what happened the night before. I'd drunk way too much whiskey, opening up an old bottle that Richard had gotten me for my birthday the year before.

I hadn't been able to handle the idea of Magda going out with Mark Windham, letting him kiss her, maybe taking her to bed... the idea of it made me feel nauseous.

I fucking liked her. I liked her way too much to be professional about this, and now that I was awake, I realized that I'd called her, made love to her, kissed her and touched her in all the ways I'd wanted to.

Goddamnit.

I'd fucked up. What was I supposed to do now? Now that I had the memory of her quaking under me, her lips on my throat when she moaned my name.

Now, how was I supposed to forget her?

I wriggled out from under her arm and sniffed myself. Ugh. I smelled like whiskey and Magda, and I needed a shower badly. I'd go to the gym and shower there, not wanting to see her bright blue eyes when she woke up, her dark, blue-black hair sticking up from the sex the night before. It would be so easy to fall deeper and deeper in love if I saw her like that.

I set out a T-shirt for her to wear since I'd ruined her blouse and thought about leaving a note. In the end, all I wrote

was *The door locks automatically.* -R

It wasn't much of a note, but it was something. I couldn't think of anything else to say that wouldn't imply how much I'd enjoyed the night before, and I knew now what I had to do: I had to break things off. I'd been in this situation before.

Three times, to be exact. And contrary to popular belief, it had not been the charm.

It wasn't like I didn't want to settle down, I'd tried, but I was still too raw from what had happened in my two previous marriages. Too afraid of what came later. Hell, my first wife and I were married for five years and though she hadn't cheated on me, that still hadn't worked out. How was I supposed to believe that Magda would be any different? She wouldn't. She was too young, too bratty. And she could do better than me.

Hell, she'd just been out on a date, for god's sake, and this was the way I was acting about it. I'd already lost my marbles, drinking too much thinking of how someone might be taking her home. There was no way I could do this. I had to stop it, and now.

So I just left her there, slowly shutting my door so that it wouldn't wake her.

I got to the office early, which wasn't unusual for me.

I was able to get absolutely no work done, looking at the elevator doors and waiting for Magda to arrive. Finally, I shut my door and drew my blinds, hoping that I could focus. I managed to fill out some paperwork that had been piling up and check my emails, and do a couple of hours of work before I couldn't take it anymore.

I had to see her. I couldn't just blow her off and not tell her that I was cutting things off. It wasn't fair to her or our working relationship. It definitely wasn't that I wanted to see her and see her reaction. Absolutely not.

I walked to her office door, taking in a breath and hoping she was dressed conservatively so I could do this instead of bending her over the nearest available surface.

As I got closer, I could hear Magda whispering on the phone. “No, I’m sure he didn’t see us at breakfast,” she said.

I froze in my steps. She had breakfast with someone? And I was sure that she wasn’t talking about me, but it sure as hell felt like it, something knotting up in my stomach.

“He doesn’t know,” she said. “So don’t bring it up.”

My blood started boiling. She was out having breakfast with Mark Windham while I was stressing out over her getting into the office. While I was worried about how she might feel if I broke off our physical relationship, she was out having a grand time with Mark.

Jealousy knotted my guts and anger rose to the surface of my skin. I felt hot all over and like I was going to start shaking, I was so mad. I shouldn’t be. She had the right to do whatever she wanted, this had never been exclusive, and I was about to break it off anyway, but I couldn’t help the way I felt.

I could wait, listen more, but when I pushed the door of her office wide, she paled and immediately hung up the phone.

“Who was that?” I demanded to know. It was like my brain had shut off, like there was nothing inside me but instinct and anger.

“Nobody,” she said quickly, moving things around on her desk while I closed her door and shut her blinds. She frowned at me. “What are you doing?”

I shrugged. “Just giving us some privacy.”

Magda licked her lips and I wanted to kiss her, mark her, claim her. And I wished I had left the blinds open so Mark fucking Windham could see it.

“What do we need privacy for? Did you find out something bad about the Martinez case?”

I shook my head, putting my hands in my pockets and taking steps toward her. She was standing in front of her desk, looking at me.

“Roarke,” she said, sounding exasperated. “We can’t do this here.”

“Do what?” I murmured, as if I was walking toward her with no intent but to talk to her. I didn’t lean down and kiss her, not yet. I put one hand on her hip and she took in a breath but didn’t push me away.

“You know what,” she said in a low tone, looking up at me from underneath dark, long lashes. I knew for a fact they were natural because I’d watched her sleeping in my bed, seeing them fanned across her cheeks.

I kept eye contact with her as I slid my fingers across the waistband of her slacks. They were high-waisted and looked great on her. I pushed my hand beneath the waistband, down to her sex, which was hot underneath my hand before I ever spread her lips with my thumb.

“Didn’t have time to put on panties this morning?” I asked in a low timbre.

“Left them at your place,” Magda said throatily. “Thought you might like a souvenir.”

Lust rushed through me, almost replacing the jealousy and anger, but not quite. I still wanted to claim her, wanted to make her mine. I knew that was a dangerous thought. I knew that it meant something was happening to me, that I was developing feelings for her. I was only ever truly jealous when I really cared about a woman, and I felt like I was on fire with it.

“I didn’t get you anything in return,” I said, and slipped my fingers over her clit.

Magda’s back arched, her hands grasping for purchase on the desk as she rocked her hips toward my hand. She was already so slick that it was hard to keep my fingers on the right spot.

When I slid my fingers down and into her, she breathed out my name.

“Roarke,” she sighed. “Roarke, that feels so good.”

I knew that soon she would want more, and I wanted to give it to her. I wanted to put her up on her desk and press myself inside her, but I wasn’t going to let that happen.

“So, you went out to breakfast,” I said, and her eyes popped open.

She looked guilty as sin, and I swallowed around the rock in my throat. There was no reason for her to feel guilty, but I hated the way it felt to think of her spending the night with me and going to breakfast with someone else.

“You were eavesdropping,” she accused, but she kept rocking her hips against my hand to get me deeper.

“Maybe,” I muttered, “I just don’t like the idea of you leaving my bed to see someone else.”

Her face changed, anger flashing in her bright blue eyes. “You left me first.”

She was right. I’d walked out first, leaving her only with a random note. But it seemed different to me, or at least the instinctual, caveman-possessive part of my brain.

I dipped my fingers deeply, not knowing how to retort, and her eyes rolled back into her head. I could feel her clenching around me and I knew that she was close, so I smirked, kept going until she was nearly incoherent, breathing hard and mumbling, her thighs trembling.

Then I yanked my hand out of her pants and she focused on me.

I popped my index and middle fingers into my mouth, sucking slowly as she watched, and then turned around and headed for the door.

“Roarke?” she called, but I just opened the door and shut it behind me, striding back to my office.

MAGDA



WHAT THE HELL WAS *THAT*?

Roarke had edged me so close toward an orgasm just to stop right before I came, and in the middle of my office, no less. Who does that?

Roarke Brentwood, apparently. I was still shivering when I sat down behind my desk. Of course, I was all hot and flustered now without any chance of release. When there was a knock on my door, I called immediately.

“Come in,” I said almost excitedly, just knowing it was Roarke, but I should have known better. He would have tried the doorknob first.

“Magda?” It was Mark Windham, holding a truly enormous bouquet of roses. “I wanted to, uh, bring you something.”

He blushed and smiled. Ugh. He really *was* handsome, but I just wasn’t attracted to him in that way. Not in the way I was attracted to Roarke.

Anyway, there was no point in going from one office romance to another. I was already having enough trouble with the one I had.

“Thank you, Mark,” I said, plastering on a polite smile. “That’s very kind of you.”

He sat the vase of flowers on my desk and I could barely see around it. God, this was awkward. How do you tell

someone that you'll never be interested in them without being a bitch?

"I know what you said last night but I thought maybe we could try again," he said, still blushing slightly and not meeting my eyes. "I'd really like a do-over."

I peeked around the flowers. "I don't think so, Mark," I said gently. "I just have a lot of work going on right now..."

"I understand," he said easily. "No worries."

"You can take back the flowers," I offered. "Maybe send them to someone more deserving."

Mark frowned. "Absolutely not. You still deserve them." He smiled at me.

The door was still open, and as I watched, Roarke walked past my office and then past the other way, quickly. I guessed he could just be getting some coffee or some water, but he had a French press in his office and a mini-fridge.

What was he doing?

I was barely listening to Mark, who was going on and on about some restaurant he's been dying to take me to.

"I need to meet with Roarke, uh, Mr. Brentwood," I said suddenly. "I need to go over some things on the Martinez case."

"Oh yeah? How's that been going?" Mark asked, still wanting to talk to me.

Lord, he was persistent.

I walked past Mark out into the hallway and he followed me. Roarke's door was open and I wanted to get in there and ask him what the hell was going on. He was acting weirder than normal, and I wanted to find out why.

I suspected it had something to do with last night. That had been different from us hooking up at a hotel or the office. That had been so...intimate.

Part of me was hoping that he understood that I had feelings for him, that maybe he'd decided not to get back

together with Grace, but it seemed stupid to hope. Besides, I couldn't just keep sleeping with a partner of Brentwood and Webster. That wouldn't go over well at all.

"Excuse me," I muttered to Mark, but he followed me halfway down the hallway until I walked into Roarke's office and shut the door.

As usual, there was paperwork everywhere. God knew how this man kept up with all of his files. It was crazy to me, as a very organized person.

He was standing, holding onto a filing cabinet with one hand and looking for something. His knuckles were white on the filing cabinet drawer.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"The fucking prenup," he growled.

"It's probably on your mess of a desk," I said, trying to keep the tone light. He seemed to be in a *mood* for sure.

"How would you know? You've been with Mark fucking Windham all morning," he accused.

I held up my hands as if in defense. "Excuse me? It's not my responsibility to keep your files in order," I shot back.

Roarke turned around to face me, looking at me with intense, dark green eyes. "It's your responsibility to help me with this case. You're trying to make partner, and you're too busy dating a coworker."

"Yeah, I've been busy," I said dryly, finally feeling anger spear through me. What did he think, I was some kind of office harlot? "I get around with all the junior associates, didn't you know?"

"Guess I was an upgrade, then," he muttered, pacing around the room but not quite looking for the file.

"Hardly," I snapped, too angry to think about what I was saying.

"You were all but begging me to spread you out on your desk just a few minutes ago, so I wouldn't get too cocky,

Riley.”

“What is *wrong* with you, Roarke? You call me over last night and make love to me—”

Roarke snorted. “Is that what you call it?”

A tiny arrow stabbed through my heart. He didn’t care. Of course, he didn’t. I was just a stepping stone on his way to the next ex-Mrs. Brentwood. Or Grace again, apparently.

“Sorry, I misunderstood,” I said, turning to storm out.

Roarke grabbed at my wrist and I whirled around to face him.

“He’s not a good guy, Magda,” he said seriously, and I scoffed.

“Who? Mark? He’s a better guy than you’ll ever be,” I said harshly, too angry and hurt to censor myself.

Something like hurt flashed in Roarke’s green eyes, but then his expression shuttered again.

“I guess you’ll find out on your own time what a snake he is,” he said. “Don’t know why I even bothered.”

“Me either,” I said, fighting tears. “It’s not like you care.”

“Heaven forbid,” Roarke muttered, looking away from me and dropping my wrist.

I knew that I was going to cry. I felt it in the back of my eyes, clogging up my whole head. I had to get out of here, and fast. I didn’t want Roarke Brentwood to see me shed a single tear.

I stormed out of there and slammed the door. Before I could make it to my office, I heard a huge ruckus in there, and when I turned around, Roarke’s blinds were still open and he was destroying his office, throwing paperwork around, upending a file cabinet that fell on the ground.

I huffed out a breath, hurrying to my office and shutting the door behind me, ignoring Mark’s glances. Mark came to my door, knocking on the doorjamb and I wanted to scream. He’d been texting me incessantly, nothing pressing, just “hey”

or a “what are you doing for lunch tomorrow?” but it was annoying given everything else I had going on.

“You want to get out of here?” Mark asked, and part of me did want to, did want to leave the office, but not with him.

“Can’t,” I said bluntly. “Work.”

Mark tilted his head, giving me a smile that I once thought charming. Now it just irritated me.

“C’mon, Mags. You can take an hour away. You look like you need it.”

“Not now,” I mumbled, and shut the door in his face.

I could still hear Roarke throwing things around, and I was sure it wouldn’t get any better with Mark standing at my office door.

Roarke sure was acting jealous for someone who was going back to his ex-wife.

It didn’t matter. He wasn’t the first man to be territorial after a few hookups. I just didn’t expect it from him. He’d said it himself: he didn’t care about me.

Now if only that didn’t hurt so damn much.

ROARKE



AFTER MAGDA LEFT, I COULDN'T HELP MYSELF. I WAS FULL OF such rage and emotion that I didn't know what to do with it. I threw everything in my office, just trying to get it out. But it didn't help. Not one bit.

I started cleaning it up but then stopped, breathing hard after my energetic display of rage and jealousy. It was childish, I knew, but I couldn't help myself. When I cared about someone, I didn't do it half-assed. It was something that I had always hated about myself.

I was too intense, and that was why I preferred relationships to flings. Something messy always happened. I just didn't think I would be the one to catch feelings while Magda was dating someone else in the office. I couldn't do this anymore. I couldn't stop wanting her until I broke things off.

I had to go to her now, or I'd never get any work done. Hell, I might take the day off, after everything. I didn't know if I could be in the same room with her without getting angry.

I knew without a doubt that Mark fucking Windham was a shitty person, and I hated the fact that Magda was seeing him. It wasn't just jealousy – I didn't want her to get hurt. But she wouldn't understand that.

I was *also* jealous, bitterly jealous, I had to admit to myself. God knew what they'd done this morning, with her upset that I'd left her alone in my apartment. I cursed myself for not staying, taking her to breakfast myself. I didn't want to

fall in love but I didn't want her with anyone else, either. It was a conundrum.

Magda's door was shut and locked, and so I knocked on it softly.

She peered through her blinds. "Go away," she said flatly through the door.

"Don't be a child, Riley," I warned. "We need to talk."

Magda slowly opened the door and her eyes were red and puffy. It was awful the way my heart ached thinking she had been crying. I didn't care. I had to not care.

I walked in and shut the door and she looked at me, wiping tears from her eyes angrily.

"What is it that you want?"

"I can't do this anymore," I said honestly. I had expected not to be honest, to try and be cold and just shut her out, but that wasn't happening. Everything seemed to be coming out of me in a flood, with my destroying my office. And now all the words I wanted to say to Magda felt like coming out. "I can't do this with you while you're dating someone else. It just...it reminds me of when my ex cheated on me."

Magda stared at me like I was crazy. "Roarke, I'm not dating anyone else."

I scoffed. "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying, Roarke! What are you even talking about?"

"Mark Windham," I said. "You had breakfast with him this morning."

"No, I didn't," she said stubbornly.

"Don't do this, Magda. It's embarrassing," I tell her, plucking a rose from the huge bouquet of flowers on her desk. "What was this all for, if you're not seeing him?"

"I...I don't know! I went out with him *once* and that was it. He asked again, I said no, but he keeps trying. I guess he just likes me. Is that so hard to believe?"

“It’s hard to believe that you aren’t seeing him when I heard you on the phone with him this morning,” I said in a low tone, starting to get angry all over again.

“You have no idea who I was talking to,” she shot back. “You just overheard that I went to breakfast. You’re jumping to conclusions. Are you jealous, Roarke?”

The last part of her sentence was taunting, and I didn’t like it one bit. I thought about lying but words just kept coming out of my mouth.

“Of course, I’m fucking jealous,” I snarled. “After last night—”

“After last night *what*, Roarke?” Magda asked, taking a step toward me, and goddamnit, I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to kiss her, arching her back, make her know how I felt, all the emotions swirling around inside me. I wanted to put it all into a kiss, but I couldn’t. Not like this.

“It doesn’t matter,” I muttered.

“It matters to *me*,” she pleaded. “Please, Roarke. What does all this mean? What do you want from me?”

“I don’t want you seeing anyone else,” I murmured, looking at her mouth.

“I’m not,” she insisted, and I wanted to believe her. I wanted to believe her so much it hurt, but I’d believed women before when they told me lies.

I opened my mouth to say her name, but she leaned up and kissed me, pressing her lips hard against mine, her tongue seeking in my mouth.

I couldn’t help myself. I kissed her back, my tongue meeting hers, my hand in her hair. But after just a moment, I pulled away.

“No,” I said. “I’m not doing this.”

“But *why*?” she asked, and I was horrified to see that tears were welling in her eyes. “I want you. You want me. Why can’t it just be simple?”

“Because things get messy, Riley. Things always get messy,” I said, and my heart was aching. Fuck, I really did like her.

“They don’t have to,” she went on. “I’m not seeing anyone else, so unless you’re not telling me something...” She trailed off and looked up at me expectantly.

I sighed, rubbing a hand over my face. “Riley, please. I know that I’ve been acting like a jealous dick but I have my reasons. I know that you’re seeing Mark. It’s fine. We’re not exclusive or anything.” Saying it was fine that she was dating someone else felt like acid in my mouth. It was a lie, the first I’d told since walking in here.

“What do I have to do to prove to you that I’m not seeing Mark?” she asked, exasperated. When I didn’t answer, she walked around to the other side of her desk and picked up her phone, unlocking it and showing me that the last text message she sent to Mark was after their date last night. He’d sent her a wealth of more texts, but she hadn’t responded.

I frowned, but then I clicked on recent calls, and instead of Mark’s name, it was Richard Webster. I felt like I’d been punched in the stomach.

“Are you sleeping with Webster, too?” I accused, and Magda snorted and threw her phone down on the desk.

“That’s disgusting,” she said. “He’s my *father*.” Suddenly, her eyes widened as if she realized what she’d just said.

I gaped at her. “What?”

My head was spinning. What was she saying? Surely, I’d heard her wrong.

Magda slowly dropped her hand from her mouth, shoulders slumping. “Richard Webster is my father,” she said quietly.

“You...you’re lying,” I sputtered.

She was just trying to keep me from knowing that she was seeing Mark. Granted, this was a ridiculous lie, but...

“I kept my mother’s maiden name. Riley,” she said. “I didn’t want it to seem like I got my job because of nepotism. I’ve kept it a secret all this time and asked my dad to keep it quiet too.”

Suddenly, the pieces started coming together in my head. Him pushing her for partner, the fact that she walked around as if she owned the place from day one, his soft spot for her and how he let her get away with things that no one else could. The way she talked to him, like she knew he wouldn’t fire her. Of course, he wouldn’t. That’s his *daughter*.

This was much worse than her sleeping with Mark Windham. Magda Riley was my partner’s daughter. My *best friend’s* daughter. How could I have been so blind? How could they do this to me?

I turned to leave.

This was the final straw. Now, more than ever, I had to dump Magda. She was a liar as well as a cheat.

MAGDA



I COULDN'T BELIEVE THAT I'D JUST TOLD ROARKE MY BIG secret. I was just so shocked at his accusation.

His face went blank and he started to leave. I rushed around him and braced my back against the door. I couldn't let him go. Not like this.

"Not this again. I refuse to chase you to your office again," I said.

"Get out of my way, Riley." Roarke's face broke into a bitter smile. "Or should I call you Webster?"

"Roarke, stop it. This isn't a big deal."

"Not a big deal? You got this job because your *daddy* is partner. You want partner now, before people who have been here longer and are just as deserving, and for what? You've been playing me all this time. Was that your plan? If you slept with me, you'd make partner?"

I blanched, taken aback. How could he say such things? He didn't know me. He didn't know how hard I'd worked to get to where I was. He didn't know hardly anything about me.

"I worked my *ass* off to get to where I am, Roarke. My father helped me with law school, but after that—"

"After that, he gave you a cushy office in his law firm," Roarke continued. "I don't want to spend any more time with a liar like you."

He nearly spat out the words. He could be so cruel. My heart ached and I slumped, moving so that he could leave. He

didn't, though, just looked down at me with cruel green eyes. There was no angst in them now, just anger. I couldn't take it.

"You know what? You have some nerve, calling me a liar and a cheat—" I started, thinking of how he hadn't told me that he was getting back together with his ex. Maybe he already had.

"Isn't that exactly what you are?" Roarke asked coolly. He'd gone past the point of anger to coldness, and I hated it. It was better to know he was angry at me than that he just didn't care.

"I just kept my personal relationships from you because it was just that, personal," I tried, my voice less steady.

"I guess it should have stayed that way," Roarke muttered. "All this time working together, and it was a joke."

He wouldn't look at me so I put my hands on his shoulders. He looked down at me, his brow furrowed.

"Was being with me a joke?" I asked, tears in my voice, and Roarke stared at me for a long moment before taking me by my shoulders.

I hoped, for a fleeting second, that he would kiss me, but instead, he physically picked me up and moved me aside from the door. He walked out and then back into his office. I didn't follow him, just shut my door again and slid down it onto the floor, beginning to sob.

It wasn't just that Roarke broke things off. I had seen that coming when he left me a mere note this morning. I'd met with my father for breakfast, hoping that somehow it would make me feel better.

"You look happy," my father had said, grinning as I walked up to the table.

"I don't know about happy," I muttered, but I could feel my cheeks getting hot. I guessed that I had been happier, lately, although I didn't want to think it was because I'd started sleeping with Roarke.

“You’re doing well on that Martinez case,” he said. “I think you’re going to convince Roarke to vote yes on making you partner any minute now.”

“I don’t know about that, either,” I said with a laugh. “He’s not exactly the easiest person to work with.”

“Neither are you,” my father said fondly, smiling at me. When my mother died, we had only each other, and we’d grown very close.

So close, in fact, that I’d gone to law school just to walk in his footprints. I’d always loved being in my father’s office, hearing him on the phone arguing with people, and I’d always been good at arguing, too.

I just never wanted anyone to find out that I was his daughter. I thought that it would make everyone think I was just daddy’s little girl, ushered into a job she couldn’t handle. That wasn’t how it was at all. My father paid my tuition at law school, yes, but he hadn’t helped me with a single question on the bar exam. I’d done my studying all on my own, and I’d been applying for several jobs around the city when my father asked me to come to Brentwood and Webster.

Breakfast with my father had made me feel better, but at what cost? Now Roarke thought that I was some kind of nepotism baby, and everything we’d done together on this case was a joke to him. It didn’t mean anything.

I finally got myself together but it took quite a while. I unlocked my door, patting my puffy eyes with a handkerchief. I wouldn’t take this lying down. I still wanted to make partner, and in the end, that was what was important. Not Roarke.

I couldn’t help it that my heart felt broken, though, my stomach rolling with upset. The only work I had to do was on the Martinez case, and a lot of it Roarke and I had to do together. I couldn’t face that right now, so I was going to eat my feelings with the cafeteria’s spaghetti and meatballs.

When I arrived, Mark was in line, getting his own serving of spaghetti. I could have groaned, but I just kept it together.

“You okay?” he asked softly. “Seemed like you had a rough morning.”

“It’s fine,” I dismissed him. “You know how Brentwood can be.”

Mark snorted. “You have no idea.”

I was curious, but I didn’t ask. It didn’t matter what beef Mark and Roarke might have. I was done with Roarke, and I wasn’t going to give in to Mark, either. I didn’t need the added drama.

“Would you like to sit with me?” he asked. “As a friend,” he finished quickly, and I smiled. He was a good friend, regardless, so why not. I could always get up and leave if he started insisting on going out with me again.

I followed him to a nearby table and sat down with him.

I could always use a friend, especially since I really didn’t have many. I’d been too focused on my career to make friends or have boyfriends. I’d always been so laser-focused on getting to be partner somewhere that I seemed to have lost my ability to socialize. Roarke was being ridiculous. Mark definitely wasn’t a snake. He was a good guy.

Roarke never came to the cafeteria, so he wouldn’t see me eating with Mark, either.

Mark talked for what seemed like hours before I was finished with my spaghetti and meatballs. For a nice guy, he sure liked to talk about himself and his hobbies. My eyes were nearly crossing from trying to listen to him, so I smiled politely and picked up my tray.

“Got to get back to the case,” I said, and I decided right then and there that I’d be completing the Martinez case with or without Roarke. If he wanted to act like an asshole, I’d defend Mrs. Martinez myself. She didn’t deserve her children taken from her, and I was going to prove it.

Fuck Roarke Brentwood. Who needs him?

ROARKE



I AVOIDED MAGDA LIKE THE PLAGUE FOR A WEEK. WE DIDN'T have anything pressing due on the Martinez case and I had plenty of other work to do for the firm. Hell, I'd resorted to signing paperwork with a pen instead of with a stamp because I didn't want to have to face anything dealing with Magda Riley. Richard watched me like a hawk, and I supposed it was because things seemed a little dramatic with Magda, even in the office. Things were obviously tense between us, and everyone could see that, including her father.

I still couldn't believe that she had lied to me so blatantly. She knew that Richard Webster was my best friend, knew that he was my partner in the law firm. She said she didn't get in on nepotism, and despite how angry I was, she probably didn't. She was a good lawyer. I could see that just by working with her on the Martinez case. She'd found things that I would have never found on my own, like the trust fund that Mrs. Martinez had set up before the marriage.

She was detail-oriented and driven in the courtroom, and even though I was upset about her lying to me, she did deserve partner.

I just didn't know if I could stay on as partner myself. This was why I didn't date people that I worked with. You don't shit where you eat. I should have listened to that old adage. This firm had been basically my whole life ever since my divorce from Grace, and now it was like I dreaded even coming here. I didn't want to see Magda but I *did* want to see

Magda, and every time I saw Mark fucking Windham knocking on her doorjamb, I wanted to scream.

She had said she wasn't seeing Mark, tried to prove it to me, but I still wasn't convinced. She certainly still spent a lot of time talking to him in the office. She locked herself inside but she always let Mark in, which made my heart pound inside my chest. At this point, it was pointless to lie to myself and pretend that I wasn't jealous. I was. Crazy-jealous, in fact. I hadn't felt this way since I was young, with my first wife, Carla.

I'd always been a little possessive in the bedroom, but it didn't carry over to relationships unless I was *really* attached. Carla had been my first love, my high school sweetheart, so it stood to reason that I'd be jealous of her.

Magda, on the other hand? I'd just let myself get in too deep. I hadn't even liked her when Richard first suggested me to be on the Martinez case with her and feel her out for partner. I'd been so sure that I wouldn't recommend her for partner, but now...

Now I knew that the right thing to do was to recommend her. I sighed, running my hand over my face and looking out of my blinds over at Magda's office. I stiffened. Just like every time I looked over at Magda's office, Mark was standing there at her doorway, talking to her.

With the way the building was set up, I couldn't see into Magda's office from mine, so I didn't know what she was saying back to him. He was smiling like the Cheshire cat, though, so it must have been something nice.

I walked over to shut my blinds, not wanting to see it anymore, and I heard a knock on my door.

It was Richard and he came inside and closed the door behind him.

"What's up?" I asked, and Richard gave me a look.

"Whatever's going on with you and Magda, I need you to tighten up," Richard said.

I snorted. “Nothing’s going on with me and your baby girl, don’t worry.”

“Who said I’m worried? Magda can take care of herself,” he said easily. “But all this staring her down in the office and giving Mark Windham the death glare isn’t going to work out long-term. I need you two to come together, especially since I’m recommending her for partner.”

I bristled, but Richard was right. She *was* going to be partner, and we would have to learn how to work together. I’d have to not want her, not lose my mind when she started seeing someone else. It seemed impossible.

“I’ll talk to her,” I muttered, but I had no plans on doing so anytime soon.

Those plans changed, though, when Mark Windham went into her office and closed the door. My body stood up as if with its own will and I stalked over to Magda’s office, banging on the door. I knew what Magda and I had gotten up to with her door closed and the blinds shut, and I wasn’t about to allow that to happen with Mark fucking Windham.

Magda took a moment to come to the door and I raised my arm to knock again before she opened it, seeming irritated.

“What the hell do you want?”

“I need you to come to my office,” I said, glaring at Mark as he smirked at me like the cat that ate the canary. If they weren’t seeing each other, he certainly wanted to get into her pants, and I wasn’t going to let that happen if I could help it. I might be able to push down my feelings for Magda a little while longer, but I couldn’t push down the jealousy I felt about Mark.

It didn’t help that I just felt deep in my bones that he was a douchebag. I knew he was just trying to sleep with her, and she deserved better. Hell, she deserved better than me, too, if I was honest. Things were too messy. She lied to me and I had too much baggage to forgive her for it. Even if I confessed everything I was feeling, it wouldn’t happen for us.

We didn’t have a future.

Magda sighed and followed me to my office, slowly trailing along behind me. She acted like she really didn't want to be here, and that irritated me further.

"Sorry for interrupting your little date," I snarled, unable to help myself, and Magda closed the door behind her, setting her jaw as she glared at me.

"Don't start, Roarke. What is this all about?"

"You're not supposed to date people in the office. I'm sure there's a clause somewhere," I said, although I knew there was no such clause.

"You couldn't have possibly called me in here to complain about Mark Windham," she said flatly, and I rubbed a hand across the back of my neck, clearing my throat and trying to organize my thoughts.

"No," I said finally. "I wanted to tell you that I'm recommending you for partner."

Magda's eyes went wide. "What?"

"You heard me. You deserve partner, but that doesn't mean that I forgive you."

"I'm not asking for your forgiveness," she snapped.

I looked up at her. "Maybe you should be."

"My personal life is none of your business," she shot back.

I swallowed down all the angry words I wanted to say. "Fair enough."

Magda blinked. "What? Is that it?"

I shrugged. "I don't know what else you want me to say."

Magda looked at me for a long moment, her blue eyes wet with what looked like unshed tears. Her chin jutted up as if she was looking for a fight. That was what we did. We fought, we argued, we were competitive. Now, I didn't feel like fighting at all. I was just tired.

"So, that's it, then?" she repeated, and I looked away.

“That’s it. I just wanted to tell you that we’ll be working together a lot more and clearing the air.”

“Consider it cleared,” she said harshly, and opened my door, not bothering to close it behind her before she went back to her office and a waiting Mark.

I groaned inwardly and looked down at my desk, focusing on the huge stack of paperwork to sign. I just needed to throw myself into work and forget about Magda Riley.

MAGDA



ROARKE HAD WANTED TO “CLEAR THE AIR” BUT NOTHING FELT very clear to me at all. If he didn’t want me, couldn’t forgive me for my little omission about being his best friend’s daughter, then what did he want from me?

He clearly didn’t want me seeing Mark, and I didn’t want to tell him that he had been right about Mark Windham. He’d called him a snake and I had thought he was sweet and charming, that he just wanted to be there for me. Recent events were starting to prove me wrong. Mark had been texting me constantly, demanding I answer him, demanding that we go out, that I owed him. That he deserved a second chance. That we were perfect for each other and sooner or later I would realize that. He was also constantly coming by my office. He had even come to my house twice now, but I pretend I wasn’t home. I was starting to get weird vibes from him and was on the verge of telling him that I was absolutely one hundred percent not interested, right in front of the whole office.

That was the problem, though. I didn’t want to make a scene in my father’s law firm, especially when I was this close to making partner. This had been my dream for a long time, and I wasn’t going to fuck it up over a guy who wouldn’t get no for an answer.

After leaving Roarke’s office, I decided to go immediately to lunch at the cafeteria. There wasn’t much going on with the Martinez case until the hearing, and I had time to kill. I certainly didn’t want to have to go back into Roarke’s office

and work with him. I had other cases, of course, but nothing pressing. I thought lunch would do me some good.

As I walked across the breezeway to the cafeteria, I heard footsteps behind me. I stopped, and the footsteps paused. When I turned around, Mark was standing there, smiling at me.

“You caught me,” he said quietly.

“Are you...following me?” I asked nervously.

“Not exactly,” he said. “Just wanted to get some lunch. Are you on your way to the cafeteria?”

I swallowed hard, not liking being alone with him in the breezeway. “Um, no, I was going to go for a run, actually,” I said, and hurried into the next building to access the parking garage. It was out of my way, but I just didn’t want him following me anymore. I was starting to get really freaked out by him.

I could swear I heard more footsteps behind me but when I got into my car, breathing hard, my heart beating fast, no one was out in the parking garage but me. I took in a deep breath through my nostrils and looked back at my gym bag in the backseat.

I had already planned to go later, but might as well really go for a run now. It’d been too long since I had last done a few laps, and maybe it would release some of the negative energy I’d been feeling. I grabbed lunch first, not wanting to run on an empty stomach, and then headed to the park.

I changed in the park bathroom and stretched out my hamstrings before beginning to jog, my earbuds securely in so that I could run to the beat of the music. I sometimes liked the sounds of nature to accompany me, but I needed to quiet my brain today, and music was a quintessential part of the process for me.

“Left!” I heard someone call behind me, and I moved to the right to let them sprint past me. When I glanced at the man, I realized it was Roarke and I stopped in my tracks. I forgot that he was a runner, too.

I frowned. He hadn't so much as looked at me. I started to run faster, sprinting to catch up to him.

"Left!" I called out, but Roarke didn't move over, just running faster.

I growled in frustration. He sure was fast for a guy ten years older than me. I pumped my legs, my muscles burning, but he was too quick for me, running full tilt. I started to jog and then walk, getting a stitch in my side, and I saw him up ahead, doubled over with his hands on his knees.

"You're getting too old for this," I teased, hoping that we could get some of our old banter back. My heart ached to know that it would never happen for us, but I wanted to at least be civil again.

Roarke didn't snark back at me. He didn't say anything, just pulled in a couple of deep breaths before taking off again, running so hard it looked like he was punishing himself. I sighed and figured my workout was a bust. It was only making me feel worse.

I picked up my phone noticing I had several messages from Mark already. I groaned. Would this guy never quit? I had to get away for a couple of hours.

I texted my father to tell him I wasn't feeling well.

He called me immediately.

"Is this about Roarke Brentwood?" he asked in a low tone, and for a brief second, I thought maybe he'd found out that we'd slept together and my breath caught in my throat.

"What do you mean?"

"Things have been awfully tense around the office," he said, and I let out a relieved sigh.

"We talked it out," I said flatly, even though not much had been resolved.

"Good to know. He's recommending you for partner, I think," he said.

"Yeah," I said, my voice disheartened instead of excited.

“Are you okay, Magpie?” my father asked softly, and the old pet name made tears well up in my eyes as I pulled up at my apartment.

“Fine,” I lied, and hung up the phone.

Two hours and a long nap later, I felt a bit better, but I woke up to a new series of texts from Mark.

Where are you?

Why aren't you back yet?

You've been avoiding me.

Why won't you have lunch with me? I showed you a good time last time.

You know we belong together.

Magda, answer me.

I frowned, looking down at my phone. This had gone too far. His tone was too demanding for a guy I only went on one date with. It wasn't even a good first date. I had been thinking about Roarke the entire time.

I always thought about Roarke. I knew that at this point, my feelings had progressed from a crush to something like love, even if I didn't want to admit it to myself. I was most likely in love with Roarke Brentwood, and I had no idea what to do about it.

I didn't know what to do about Mark, either, but I figured I had better nip this in the bud. I bit my lip and texted him back.

Look, Mark, I'm sorry that things didn't work out the way you would have liked, but we should just be friends.

He texted me back immediately.

Like you're friends with Brentwood?

I blinked at my phone in shock. Was Mark implying that he knew that Roarke and I had slept together? What was going on? I didn't know what to say to that so I threw my phone off the bed, exasperated. I plopped back down on my bed, covering my eyes with my forearm.

All I had wanted to do was make partner, and my life had to go and get complicated. Now I have both Roarke and Mark to worry about, for completely different reasons.

How did everything get so messed up?

ROARKE



I WAS ABSOLUTELY FURIOUS WHEN I FOUND OUT THAT MAGDA was Richard's daughter. Words couldn't describe it. She wasn't some up-and-comer trying to make partner. She hadn't come from rags to riches. Richard had always been well off, and while I knew he had a daughter, I had no idea it was Magda. I had been stewing on this for a while now and every time I thought about it, it felt like the betrayal hurt just as hard as it had when Magda had uttered the words.

I had confronted Magda but I'd not talked openly to Richard about it yet. He had to know I knew, of course, but these festering feelings inside me were just growing by the day. I had to get this out of my chest. The Magda situation wasn't helping my mood and I was still furious that he didn't tell me. He was my best friend, damnit.

I walked into his office without knocking. Maybe I had been in too much shock, feeling exhausted from all my emotions, to talk to him before when he came into my office, but now all my anger was rising back up in me, and I needed to confront him.

"Come on in," he said sarcastically, and I stared at him.

"Why didn't you tell me that Magda Riley is your daughter?"

Richard sighed. "Shut the door and lower your voice."

I did as he said, turning back around with my back pressed against the closed door.

“You said something about ‘my baby girl’ before, but it didn’t even register then.” He sighed. “How did you find out?”

“She told me.”

Richard blinked, clearly surprised. “She did? That doesn’t sound like my Magda.”

I rolled my neck on my shoulders, feeling tense from being so upset all morning. “*Your* Magda wants partner. Don’t you see a conflict of interest there?”

“No,” he said simply. “I need you to vote for her, too. It has to be unanimous. That’s our rule. Besides, you said you were going to recommend her.”

“I’ve changed my mind,” I said.

Richard waved his hand at me. “Once the case is over, you’ll change it back.”

I gritted my teeth. “So, you lied to me all these years about who your daughter was—”

Richard snorted. “I wouldn’t call it a lie. I was the best man at two of your weddings, Roarke, and it didn’t occur to you to ever ask about my daughter?”

I guessed he was right. That didn’t make me a bad friend, though, did it? Maybe I got too wrapped up in my work.

“It doesn’t matter,” I muttered, because it didn’t. I was just so angry I couldn’t think, but I shouldn’t be taking it out on Richard. This wasn’t about him, not really. He’d been a good friend and business partner, and here I was, violating his little girl six ways from Sunday.

Not that Richard knew that. As far as I was concerned, he would never know it. That wasn’t the type of thing you could come back from.

“Damn right it doesn’t matter. Magda is an ace lawyer, and you’ll see that in time.”

The thing of it was, Richard was right. I’d grown to see that Magda was a good lawyer, finding all the spots we could work on, how we could slide in and win a case unnoticed. I

would never have chosen to go over the prenup with a fine-tooth comb. She made up for what I was lacking, and we were good partners, in bed and at work.

Too bad she was my best friend's daughter.

At least I didn't have to worry about her dating Mark Windham, the arrogant ass. I knew that he wasn't right for her, regardless of my jealousy.

I went back to my office after milling around the building, not wanting to see Magda. I was being a child, and I knew that I had to suck up all my anger, betrayal, and emotion if I wanted to win this case. And Roarke Brentwood never lost a case.

I was going to win this and to hell with Magda Riley. My chest felt tight, my stomach in knots, and I *hated* that feeling. I knew what it was, and I didn't like it one bit: heartbreak. Magda Riley had wormed her way into my heart, and I hated the idea of it.

Especially now that she'd betrayed me.

I kept pacing around my office, and eventually, I went out to the lobby to get coffee. The coffee in the lobby is the shittiest coffee that exists, but there's just something about the burned taste that soothes me. I have my own ground coffee beans and French press, but when I'm stressed, I like the office mud coffee.

Mark Windham stood at the water cooler, and I rolled my eyes, brushing past him and hitting him hard with my shoulder. He made a noise in the back of his throat but didn't say anything. Pussy.

As I poured the coffee, I heard him talking to another one of the junior associates. "I can't wait to get her alone," he said, and I froze, gritting my teeth.

He better not be talking about Magda.

As angry as I was with her, I hated the idea of her with Mark, especially since I just felt it in my bones that he was a snake in the grass. I knew that there was something off about him, even if I couldn't convince her of that. Add that to the

fact that I'm violently jealous that they went on a date, and I didn't know what I would do if Mark kept talking.

Unfortunately, that was just what he did.

"She's too easy," he continued. "She's been playing hard to get but she smiles so big at me every time I see her. I know she can't wait to get some of this."

I took in a deep breath through my nostrils and out through my mouth, trying to count to ten. I was partner here, but I couldn't exactly haul off and hit him as bad as I wanted to. Maybe he was talking about some other woman.

"Next time I talk Magda into going out with me, I'm going to take her to my place. She'll be on my dick before—"

That was it.

Rage washed over me and my vision blurred out around the edges. I was sure my blood pressure was sky-high. I walked over to Mark and threw a left hook that caught him high on the cheekbone. His skin split and he started to bleed down his face, and he gasped out a breath. I punched him in the stomach before he could react and he lost his breath, doubling over.

"Roarke!" Richard came around the corner and made a beeline for me. "Take a walk."

Mark was gasping for breath and all I wanted to do was hit him again.

I set my jaw, staring him down, and he didn't even attempt to look at me. Richard grabbed my shoulder and I let him lead me outside onto the bridge to the parking garage.

"What the hell was that?" he asked, leaning against the brick of the building.

I sighed and rubbed a hand across the back of my neck. "I didn't like the way he was talking about Magda. She's your daughter, you should understand—"

Richard nodded. "I would have hit him myself if you hadn't," he admitted, and I blink, surprised.

“You’re not mad?”

“Not mad, just confused,” Richard said. “You jeopardized this firm for Magda Riley, who I always thought you couldn’t stand.”

“I just don’t like men disrespecting women,” I mumbled, not wanting Richard to know that I’d developed feelings for his daughter.

Richard stared at me for a moment before shrugging. “All right, fair enough. But you’ve got to get it together before the custody hearing.”

“I will, but Richard, there’s something off about Mark. Something bad.”

Richard looked at me. “Is this one of your hunches?” he asked dryly.

I knew what he meant. I often had a certain feeling about something, like a case, a client, or a coworker, and that was the feeling I had about Mark. Richard had learned to trust my instincts over the years.

I nodded.

Richard sighed. “All right, Roarke. I’ll look into it. You have my word.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly, my head spinning with everything that had just happened.

He walked back into the building, leaving me with my thoughts.

I rolled my shoulders, feeling stiff from all the anger I’d just experienced. Part of me wanted to go back in there and throw him against the wall, tell him to stay away from Magda or I’d kill him. It was intense, and I didn’t like the way it made me feel.

Had I fallen in love with my best friend’s daughter?

MAGDA



I COULDN'T BELIEVE I LET MYSELF FALL FOR ROARKE Brentwood. He was my boss and my father's best friend, and I knew all of that before I got myself into this mess. What was I thinking? The sex was one thing, but the way I felt now—my heart ached.

I didn't think I'd ever truly had my heart broken before. I thought I had, but this felt different. This felt *awful*.

I felt like I was going to be sick, I felt so bad. I was in my office, trying not to cry, when I heard the ruckus outside in the lobby. When I walked out to the lobby, my father was dragging Roarke away and Mark was on the floor bleeding.

"Oh my God," I said, rushing to Mark.

"I'm fine," he said, but he sounded breathless.

Mark had been bothering me, stalking me, but at the moment, that didn't matter. He was hurt and I didn't condone violence, particularly in the workplace. And if I was right, this somehow involved me, which just made me feel bad, like I was creating drama in the office.

"What the hell happened?" someone asked, and Mark shook his head.

"I don't know," he said. "He just hauled off and hit me."

I frowned. What was this all about. Was Roarke jealous? That was ridiculous, because he didn't actually care about me. It had just been just sex between us, even if I'd developed some feelings. And he had broken it off.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, and Mark smiled.

“It’s not your fault, honey.”

I wanted to wrinkle my nose at the pet name, but I didn’t, just forcing a smile back.

“You sure you’re okay?”

He nodded, and I touched his arm comfortingly and then walked past him outside, where I saw Roarke and my father going out to the bridge.

My father gave me a look and walked past me, going back toward his office, and I swallowed hard. I wondered what Roarke had said to him. I wondered if he told him. I didn’t think he would, but who knew. Roarke was turning out to be a bit of a loose cannon.

Roarke was leaning against the bridge railing, his head tilted back, and for a moment I froze, looking at his side profile. His jaw was so sharp and the few tendrils of silver around his temples looked bright in the sunlight.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I demanded, focusing on my anger and not my attraction to Roarke. Not my feelings for Roarke. If I focused on those, this would be a wholly different conversation.

Roarke set his jaw and looked at me. “Mark fucking Windham said he was going to have you on his dick in no time.”

I startled, blinking. “He didn’t say that.”

“Yes, he fucking did,” Roarke growled. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“No, but you must have misheard or something—”

Roarke cut me off, taking a few steps toward me. “I didn’t mishear. You’re being obtuse on purpose. Mark Windham is a snake and a liar.” He scoffed. “I guess that makes you two of a kind. Go ahead and fuck him if you want to.”

“Maybe I will,” I shot back, even though I had absolutely no intention of doing so. I was just so *angry*.

Something like rage flooded all over Roarke's handsome face.

"You wouldn't," he said softly, his voice low and almost eerie.

I set my jaw, my chin tilting up as I looked at him.

"You don't know what I would and wouldn't do," I told him, and Roarke looked at me again, staring down at my mouth.

I thought he was going to kiss me when he leaned closer, but instead, he whispered in my ear.

"I know exactly who you are."

My lip trembled but I didn't start to cry.

"You're such a fucking hypocrite," I whispered, and Roarke looked shocked.

"Hypocrite how?"

I scoffed and turned my eyes away from him. "Just leave me alone."

"Gladly," he said, and stalked to the door, yanking it open and going back into the building.

I looked out the open bridge down to the city and burst into tears.

I didn't know what to do. I knew that I was falling for Roarke, but now he hated me. All because I had kept who my father was a secret. I didn't know why it was any of his business, but I guessed I should have thought about how it would affect him. After all, my father was his best friend.

I let out a long breath and pushed my hair back from my face. I had to get it together. The custody hearing was tomorrow, and I needed to focus.

Before I could stop my tears, Mark came outside looking for me.

"Magda? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I said quickly, wiping my face.

“It’s Brentwood, isn’t it?” Mark said softly, bracing his hands on the railing, and I looked over at him, surprised.

“What do you mean?”

Mark sighed and brushed his blond hair back from his face. “You see, Magda, I’ve been keeping your secret for a while now.”

Panic tightened in my throat. “What?”

“I’ve been keeping quiet, pretending that I don’t know, but I heard you and Roarke fucking in his office.” Mark’s voice went harsh, harsher than I’d ever heard it. He’d always been so kind to me.

My breath hitched in my chest. “Mark, please don’t say anything.”

Mark shrugged. “Why not? It’s not like you’ve given me a reason to keep such a big secret, Magda.”

I took a step backward from him, frowning. “What are you talking about?”

“I take you out to a nice dinner, spend a lot of money on it. I don’t even get a fucking kiss?” Mark advanced toward me and I backed up further, toward the door.

“Are you seriously trying to blackmail me into a kiss?”

Mark had flipped on a dime, and I didn’t know what to do about it. I’d always thought he was such a nice guy and felt bad that I didn’t feel the same way about him as he did about me, but now everything had changed.

“A kiss? No, honey, I want my fucking due. He gets to fuck you for free. I paid for it, so I deserve it too. Or the whole office will know your little secret,” Mark spat at me, still advancing toward me and I grabbed the doorknob quickly and rushed inside.

I grabbed my purse from my office and locked the door. I couldn’t help but glance toward Roarke’s office, but it was shut and the blinds were closed. I wanted to tell him what happened, apologize, but if I didn’t figure out how to handle

Mark, my father was going to know I slept with his best friend and partner.

I didn't know what to do, but all I knew right now was that I couldn't be here anymore.

There was a coffee shop nearby with the biggest, most sugary pastries, and that was what I needed right now. I kept myself on a pretty strict diet because I was a runner, but right now, all I wanted was some comfort food.

The coffee shop was busy, bustling, really, and it took me a long while to recognize the woman standing in line ahead of me.

"Oh, hello," Grace Brentwood said, arm in arm with some big, muscular guy.

I frowned, confused. "Hello. Didn't know you'd be around. Are you visiting Roarke?"

"Who is Roarke?" the guy said, and Grace tittered.

"Why don't you stand in line for us while I talk to my friend?" she said, patting his arm, and the guy shrugged while Grace took me by the elbow and ushered me to the side.

"Let's not talk about Roarke," she said.

"What do you mean? Weren't you two getting back together?" I asked slowly, my brow furrowed.

She laughed. "Oh no, honey, I was only teasing you," Grace said, her eyes sparkling as if she was telling a funny story. "I knew he probably got into your panties, so I thought it'd be fun to rile you up."

"What? Why would you think that?"

"I saw you looking at his office when I stormed out of there, so I knew something had already happened or was about to, so I just decided to have my last laugh with him. A final screw you, sort of speak." She shrugged.

"But why?"

"Why not?" She smiled wickedly at me. "And since you're here asking me these questions instead of somewhere fucking

him, I guess it worked.”

My mouth dropped open but Grace just walked away, laughing, back to her date.

Grace was nasty and a liar. A nice little package with a rotten core, apparently. I supposed that package was how she’d wormed her way into Roarke’s heart. She’d definitely fooled me. I really thought they were getting back together. I’d even called Roarke a hypocrite. No wonder he was mad at me. Was that why he was so angry at me about Mark? He thought I had betrayed him? Who knew what Mark said about me, given that he was blackmailing me...for sex.

I needed to talk to my father, but I couldn’t. I needed to talk to Roarke, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t reveal what happened to my father and Roarke hated me and probably wouldn’t talk to me.

I had to do something, though.

I get out of there without my donut, and as I exited the building, I ran into a solid wall of people.

When I looked up, hoping against hope to see Roarke’s bright green eyes, it was Mark’s blue ones and a slow smirk.

“Fancy meeting you here.”

I grabbed his arm and tugged him out toward the parking lot. “Are you following me?” I hissed.

“We didn’t finish our conversation.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “There’s no conversation. We’re done.”

“Oh, c’mon, honey. I know you’re just playing hard to get. You are dying to have me inside you. I’ve known since day one how much you want me to take you. But your little game is getting old now, and I’m sick of waiting, so it’s time to give me what I want,” Mark crooned, getting closer to me.

I slapped him across the face. “Fuck off, Mark Windham,” I spat, and hurried to my car. I hated that fear rose in me, but he was bigger than me and he had a lot of information that could ruin me.

“You’re cute when you’re angry,” he called after me. “Come to my office when you decide you don’t want Webster and the whole firm to know you’re fucking a partner.”

I got into my car, tears stinging at the backs of my eyes. I had to figure this out, and the first step was talking to Roarke.

ROARKE



I WENT HOME AND DRANK MYSELF INTO A STUPOR, HIDING MY phone in my bedside drawer so I wouldn't do something stupid, like call Magda. I hated the way heartbreak felt, and I'd gone through it enough times to know how to handle it – distraction.

I needed more distraction than booze, though, because all I thought about last night was Magda. Her eyes, the way she looked beneath me, her laugh. I couldn't believe I'd fallen for yet another snake.

The next morning, instead of moping around, I focused on Mark fucking Windham. I knew that something was going on with him, and I was determined to find out what. I went to Richard's office when I first entered the building, and he already had a frown on his face. That was unusual for Richard, so I knew he'd found something.

"Mark Windham?" I asked, and Richard nodded.

"The fucker. He's been overbilling clients and pocketing the money. Twenty percent right in his pocket for the last year," Richard said.

I wanted to celebrate, even though that was bad news for our business. We'd bounce back, and now I could fire his ass.

"I knew he was a fucking snake," I told Richard, and he groaned.

"You and your Brentwood intuition," he joked. I'd often called it the family curse, since me and all my brothers seemed to be good at getting certain feelings about things. We seemed

to know when something was off or wrong, probably because of how we grew up walking on eggshells around our father.

I picked at the cuticle of my thumb, thinking. I thought that maybe I should talk to Richard, tell him what was going on with me and Magda, but I couldn't. It was over. She had chosen to believe Mark Windham over me and she had lied to me. I didn't tolerate lying. So what if my heart was aching knowing I'd never touch her again? So what if I didn't know how I would function at work with her in the building? I'd have to figure it out. Brentwoods were survivors. We got through the worst.

I could do this.

"About Magda—" Richard started, and I held up a hand. I didn't even want to hear her name.

"It's okay," I said. "I know you were trying to protect her."

"It wasn't me," he said. "She begged me not to tell anyone when she took the job. She wanted to rise through the ranks with no help, and she has. She's a good lawyer, Roarke."

"I know," I said softly. If there was one thing I was certain of now, it was that Magda deserved the partner position. She was as good as me and Richard, even though she was young and the odds were stacked against her.

I'd lied when I said her father got her the job. I was just angry. I knew that I should apologize but after what she'd done... I never wanted to talk to her again. I couldn't stand the lying, the betrayal.

It was over, anyway. She never had any feelings for me and all I had was a stupid crush. My chest felt tight when I thought about her, but I'd get over it. Right?

"So, you're voting for her to be partner?" Richard asked, and I nodded tersely. He grinned. "I'm glad you were able to get over your disdain for her. She's really a great daughter."

"I'm sure she is," I said politely, and left the office, running a hand through my hair. I felt exhausted and it was only nine in the morning. I knew it was emotional and mental exhaustion, which was way harder to shake than physical

exhaustion. Back when I'd thought I would be a professional hockey player, I had pushed myself past the point of breaking physically many times.

Until I couldn't anymore. Injuries due to overworking my body had kept me from going professional, and that was when I turned to law. I wondered if it was possible to push yourself past the point of breaking emotionally. I guessed I'd find out, because I planned to avoid these negative feelings for as long as I could.

I made my way back to my office slowly, hoping the elevator would break and maybe I'd be stuck alone for a while. It didn't, unfortunately, and when I arrived at my office, Magda was standing next to the door, looking up at me with bright blue eyes the same shade as my best friend's. How hadn't I noticed? She even had his sharp chin. She'd pointed it up defiantly at me often enough I should have known.

I sighed and ignored her, opening the door of my office and going inside. I hoped she'd give up and leave, but she didn't, following me inside.

"I need to talk to you," she said.

"About the Martinez case?" I asked, and she bit her lip.

"No."

"Then I don't have time. I'm busy trying to win custody for Mrs. Martinez, who doesn't deserve it."

"You don't know that," Magda shot back, and I closed my eyes in exasperation.

"Because women don't lie," I said harshly. "Even though my ex-wife cheated on me and my..." I paused, not knowing what Magda was to me. She hadn't been just my employee and she hadn't quite been my girlfriend but something in between. "And you lied to me."

"I didn't lie, I just didn't tell you."

I scoffed. "Lies by omissions are still lies. Didn't you go to law school?"

Magda groaned. "I'm *sorry*, Roarke. You were right."

“Right about what?” I said, but then checked my watch. It was almost time for the hearing and I grabbed my briefcase. “We have to go.”

“Am I riding with you?” she asked, her voice meeker than usual.

“No,” I said flatly and walked ahead of her out to my car. She followed me to the courthouse and when we arrived, I had a feeling about how the case would go.

We argued that Mrs. Martinez was the children’s mother and they deserved to be with her. We argued that joint custody would uproot the children’s lives. I had to admit I didn’t do the best job. I usually employed everything I had in cases, but this one was...a little too personal. I had done a similar case for my brother, after all, and I myself had been cheated on by two wives.

Not to mention how emotional I was feeling about everything going on with Magda.

For her part, Magda’s arguments were passionate, and she said no matter what happened between the parents, the kids should take priority. The judge seemed to agree, but he also agreed with Mr. Martinez in that the children needed both parents. Joint custody was awarded.

Sandra Martinez stalked over toward Magda and I after the case was over.

“Now what do I get? Nothing?” she seethed.

“You’ll get your trust fund back,” I said easily, and Magda just remained silent, her eyes cast down.

“I’m missing out on thousands of dollars a month without primary custody,” she continued, her pretty face screwed up with anger. Magda just stared at her, shocked, but I wasn’t surprised.

“See you at the divorce mediation, Mrs. Martinez,” I said simply, and took Magda’s hand to drag her out of the courtroom.

We watched as Sandra got into a sports car with a man probably ten years her junior. She leaned over and kissed him before they peeled out of the parking lot.

“You were right all along,” Magda said slowly. “She was cheating on him.”

“She was,” I agree.

“She doesn’t deserve a dime,” Magda continued.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I said. “By the law, she’s owed her trust fund back, and we’re going to get it for her.”

“We lost the case,” she said, as if she couldn’t believe it. “I’m sorry that I believed her. I’m sorry that we lost. I’m sorry that—”

“We didn’t lose,” I said simply. “We got her the money she was owed. You did your job. I’m recommending you for partner.”

“Roarke—” she started, but I just walked off toward my car. She followed me. “Roarke, please, I need to talk to you.”

“We’ll talk tomorrow. I have other cases, you know?” I snapped, and Magda froze, biting at her bottom lip.

“But...” she trailed off.

“Maybe you should go talk to Mark about it,” I said harshly, unable to help myself as cold as I had wanted to appear. “He can talk to you all about lying and losing cases.”

I drove off while she stood there, staring at me. This was Magda’s first loss, but it wasn’t mine. I’d lost some cases before, when I was younger. The first one was always the hardest. Usually, I’d comfort a junior associate, spend some time assuring them they were still good lawyers.

But Magda had lied to me. Betrayed me. Just like Grace. Just like my second wife, Tiana. There was nothing more to say to her. She was an employee and I was her boss.

That was it.

MAGDA



ROARKE WAS SO *ANGRY* WITH ME. I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO GET him to talk to me, but I had to. I would stake out his office if I had to. When I returned to the building, however, it was my father who greeted me at my office door, not Roarke.

“Hi, Dad,” I said under my breath since the rest of the office didn't know that he was my father.

“Hey, Magpie,” he said easily, following me into my office when I unlocked the door. I don't know why, but the pet name made me tear up. I guessed I had been through a lot recently. I needed to talk to him about Mark, about Roarke.... about everything.

“Dad, I need to talk to you—” I started, but he cut me off. People had been doing that to me a lot lately.

“I know about Mark Windham. How he disrespected you,” he said.

“You do?” I went pale. Had Mark told him how Roarke and I had been having sex in his office?

“I just wanted to let you know he won't be a problem to you here much longer. I found out he's been skimming money from the firm for a year,” my father said, and I sighed out a relieved breath.

I didn't think my father would take it well that I'd been sleeping with his best friend, so I was grateful he didn't know. At least not yet. I guessed I would have to tell him, if Roarke ever decided to forgive me.

I'd realized over the past few days what was important to me, and for once, it wasn't my career—it was Roarke. I'd fallen in love with him, and I needed to find a way to tell him. On top of all the apologies I owed him.

“Are you going to fire him, then?”

“I'm having him arrested,” my father said. “The cops will be here any minute.”

I sighed in relief. “That's good. I'll feel safer.”

“What do you mean, safer? Did he do something to you?” His face was angry now. I knew it wasn't at me, but it was still something to behold.

Tears started streaming down my eyes. “I think he's been stalking me for the past few days,” I admitted. “Coming to my office at all times of day, texting me all the time. And his texts were getting more and more forceful. And then...”

His face was red now and his fists were closed by his side. “What happened, Mags? What did he do to you?”

“I thought it was harmless, dad, I really did, but after he was hit, he followed me outside and started blackmailing me into having sex with him. Said I owed it to him because he took me out to dinner that one time and I refused to kiss him.”

My father was fuming. “That son of a bitch. I should have hit him myself,” he muttered.

I bit my lip, wanting to say more. I wanted advice from my dad, the closest person in my life, the one who knew me the most. But this was a lot for him, and I didn't want to broach the subject just yet.

“I was so scared, Daddy.”

My father walked toward me and enveloped me in his arms. “I'm sorry that I allowed a man like that to work here, darling. Forgive me?”

I pressed my face into my father's shoulder, tears running down my face. “It's not your fault, Daddy. He had us all fooled. But it's over now.” And I could no longer hold in the

sobs. Relief that I would be free from Mark and guilt from hiding the truth from my dad were battling inside of me.

“I love you, Magda,” he said warmly, and then when he pulled away, he frowned. “It’s okay, baby. Don’t cry. Everything will be alright soon.”

I wiped my face. “Just a little emotional with everything going on,” I said, and that wasn’t exactly a lie.

My father nodded. “I understand. Take some time to yourself. Take the day off.”

“But the Martinez case—”

“Roarke says you two have it handled.” My father smiled widely. “He’s officially recommending you for partner when the case is done.”

I gave him a wan smile.

“Congratulations, Magpie,” my father said, and then his phone began to ring. He held out a finger to tell me to pause the conversation and answered it.

“The cops are here,” he told me, putting a hand over the phone, and I nodded.

He left my office and I locked the door, feeling fearful about what Mark might say when the cops showed up to arrest him. I heard yelling and a scuffle but I just peeked through the blinds. Mark was resisting arrest. His previously handsome face was screwed up in rage. I couldn’t believe that I had believed him. I had thought him such a nice guy, thought that he actually *liked* me. What a joke.

When things calmed down a bit, I opened the door and Mark saw me and started struggling all over again.

“You! This was you, wasn’t it,” he spat at me. Anger clear on his now distorted face. Then to the room, he yelled, “She’s fucking a partner! Roarke, and maybe Webster too, who knows?”

I felt all the blood drain from my face. My father growled and took Mark by the collar even though he was being cuffed by a police officer.

“I knew Roarke was right about you. I’ve had my eye on you ever since you started here. You’re a liar and a thief.”

Mark had an evil smirk on his face. “You keep telling yourself that while she fucks other guys on your back. You thought you were the only one?” He laughed like a mad man.

“That’s my daughter you’re talking about,” my father hissed.

I thought my father might have hit him if he kept talking but the police dragged him away.

The whole office was staring at the display, and I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing everyone would be talking about how I’d gotten the job through my daddy.

“I’m sorry, darling,” my father said, huffing out a breath. “I was just so angry.”

“It’s okay, Daddy. I’m sorry too.” I said, quietly enough that only my father could hear me, and I glanced over at Roarke, who was standing stiffly in the doorway of his office.

“What would you ever be sorry for?”

“He wasn’t lying, Daddy,” I whispered, and my father’s face immediately turned to Roarke.

“Richard,” Roarke started, and my father scoffed, looking away from him, and just walked back toward his office. I had no way of knowing how angry he was or what he was going to do. I could get fired, for all I knew, but at this point, I didn’t care. I was putting my feelings over my work for the first time in my life.

I needed to talk to Roarke. I walked toward his office and he just stood there, frozen, his chest heaving.

I passed by him, keeping eye contact with him for a couple of seconds, then walked out the back toward the bridge, hoping that Roarke would follow me.

He did, about fifteen minutes after I made it to the open air, taking in deep breaths. I expected him to stop but he kept walking toward the parking lot. I followed him to his car and bit my lip, looking up at him.

“Well?” he said. “Are we going back to my place or yours? A hotel? How do you want to do this?”

I blinked. Roarke had gotten his wires crossed somewhere. “What are you talking about?”

“That’s what you want, right? Sex? Release? We’re stressed out and we fuck and we feel better. That’s how this goes.”

I swallowed hard. “Is it?”

Is that all it was? Is that all Roarke thought of our relationship?

“You don’t want me. You want the orgasms I can give you, right?”

“Roarke, that’s not—”

“Get in the car,” he demanded, sliding into the driver’s seat, and I followed. Part of me was heartbroken but the rest of me thought if this was all I got...

“The cat’s out of the bag,” I said.

“Yeah, because you let it out,” Roarke said in a rush of breath. “You told your father everything.”

“Not everything,” I mumbled, but Roarke didn’t seem to hear me, speeding toward his place. When we arrived, he didn’t speak in the elevator.

When the door shut behind us, he kissed my throat, my neck, but not my lips. It was like he was avoiding them.

“Roarke,” I moaned when he put his hand on my lower back and pushed me closer to him.

Roarke grunted in response and picked me up and planted my back against the far wall of his apartment. My legs wrapped around him almost automatically. I loved the way he touched me. I wanted more, but I wanted more from him emotionally, too.

“Roarke, do you even like me?” I asked softly, and Roarke lifted his head, something intense in his green eyes.

“Do you really want to talk right now?” he grumbled, and I shut my mouth and shook my head. All I wanted was for him to make love to me. But I didn’t think this time would be about making love. It would be about sex, stress relief, and if I could get that from Roarke, maybe I could get more. Eventually.

It sounded pathetic even in my own head but I wanted him physically, too, and part of our dynamic was fighting and then fucking, so maybe that was how I had to do this.

I finally took his face in my hands and forced him up to kiss his mouth, delving my tongue inside, and Roarke moaned into my mouth, hard against me.

“Do you think we can do this standing up?” I asked breathlessly when he pulled away, and Roarke smirked at me. It was a ghost of his old smile and it made my heart ache.

“We’ll make it work,” he said, and shifted to move up my skirt, shoving my panties aside and dipping his fingers into me to test my wetness. When he slid them further into me, I gasped, pleasure humming through my body.

“You’re always ready for me, aren’t you?” he whispered, and I bit my lip, nodding eagerly. I was. I always wanted Roarke, and I’d never known that sex could be this good.

“I want you,” I said hoarsely, and Roarke didn’t waste any time pushing down his pants and pressing inside me, rocking me up the wall as he held on to my hips. I cried out and bit down on my lip too hard, tasting blood.

“You feel so good,” Roarke grunted, fucking me harder, and I clawed into his shoulders. This was going to be too quick. I was already close and I didn’t want it to be over. I wanted him inside of me for longer.

“Take me to the bed?” I asked, pitching my words up in a question.

He stopped his thrusts, breathing hard, and looked at me. There was something in his green eyes I couldn’t define. “Why?”

I pressed my lips together. “More room,” I lied, and he carried me to his bedroom, finally kissing me the way I wanted him to, deep and thorough instead of fast and sloppy. So many times we’d hooked up in his office, on lunch breaks, and I wanted more time. I wanted it to be like that night I’d stayed at his place.

I wanted it to be really making love, not just sex.

Roarke slid out of me while we walked and so he laid me down on the bed.

“Wait,” I said when he placed his hands on my thighs to spread them. “Take your shirt off.”

Roarke raised an eyebrow. “Thought you were the one that liked being bossed around, not me.”

It was close enough to a joke that I smiled. “It’s not about that. I just want to take care of you,” I said softly.

Roarke’s eyes flashed but then his expression shuttered and he removed his clothes, getting up on the bed with me on his knees.

I sat up and took off my top, leaving on my blouse, and leaned down to put the head of his cock in my mouth. Roarke let out a shuddering breath and put his hand on the top of my head.

I started to bob my head, taking more of him in, liking the way he felt heavy on my tongue. I hummed around him and Roarke choked out a moan.

“You’re too good at this, sweetheart,” he said in an almost accusatory way, and took my ponytail in hand, tugging gently to get me to move faster. I went along with what he wanted, happy to be giving him pleasure, but just as he began to pulse in my mouth, he tugged hard and I popped off him.

“Roarke,” I whined, and he shook his head.

“Want to finish inside you,” he murmured, and my belly tightened with pleasure. I felt myself dampening my panties and wiggled out of them and my skirt, lying bare beneath him. Roarke covered my body with his own, sliding into me in one

smooth movement, and I moaned so loud I was sure his neighbors could hear me.

Roarke's breathing was fast and I knew that he was near the edge, so I tightened my inner muscles around him, wrapping my legs around his waist. Roarke let out a sound like a growl.

"Tell me you want me," he demanded.

"I already—"

"Tell me you want only me," he cut me off, and his eyes were full of something intense like anger or pain or both.

"Only you," I said earnestly. "You're the only one I want, Roarke."

I couldn't think now about how he might still be jealous over Mark even though nothing had happened, how I wanted to confess everything, because I was approaching my peak and I breathed out his name over and over when I came.

Roarke released soon after with a shout and collapsed on top of me, panting into my neck. I put my hand in his hair, smoothing it down. It was getting longer and longer.

I knew that this couldn't last forever, this intimate moment between us, but I wanted it to.

ROARKE



I KNEW THAT IT WAS A STUPID IDEA, HAVING SEX WITH MAGDA, but the even stupider idea was taking her to my bed. This was where we had the most intimate night we'd had thus far, the one that had scared me. It was the night that had convinced me we needed to break it off.

Magda was running her fingers through my hair and it felt nice, I had to admit, after the day I'd had. I wanted to hate her, but it was so much easier to just lie here and catch my breath.

"Roarke, I really think we need to talk," she said, and I groaned.

"No talking," I said. "Talking is what gets us into trouble."

Magda laughed and the sound warmed my heart, I had to admit. I was still angry with her, but the endorphins after my orgasm were making it hard to stay that way.

"That's our whole job, talking," she said.

"We're off work," I grunted, and Magda hummed.

"I guess so."

I just laid there, still in her arms, until she began to breathe more easily and her hand fell from my hair. I slowly moved off her and laid beside her, watching her sleep.

Her mouth was slightly open and she'd start snoring soon, but I couldn't help finding her beautiful anyway. I rolled onto my back and sighed.

What the fuck was I going to do?

My phone buzzed, and when I picked it up, there was a text from Richard: *My office. Now.*

Fuck.

He knew about Magda and was about to tear me a new one. I groaned and got up out of bed as quietly as I could, not wanting to wake Magda up now. I didn't know what to say to her. I just left after getting dressed in casual clothes, this time without even leaving a note.

Richard's door was shut for the first time ever, so I knocked timidly instead of bursting in like I normally would. I wasn't exactly afraid of my best friend, but I knew from experience in playing hockey with him that he had a great left hook.

"Come in," he called, and I slowly opened the door.

Richard was sitting behind the desk with a dark expression on his face.

"Richard," I started, and he held up a hand.

"Don't start that with me," he barked, and I shut my mouth. I didn't want to get into a fight with my best friend. Especially since I was definitely in the wrong. "You've been sleeping with my daughter."

"In my defense, I didn't know she was your daughter—"

"Oh, is that why you left with her?" Richard snarked, and then he did something I wouldn't have imagined. He smiled. "I was hoping this would happen."

"What?" I asked, shocked.

"I thought you needed someone to ground you, help you settle down again. I've been setting you up left and right and nothing. You needed someone who was more of a shark than you were."

"You set me up with your daughter?" I asked incredulously, shaking my head. Richard *had* been trying to set me up, but I didn't know that he was that serious about it.

“Magda is old enough to make her own decisions,” he said. “But I knew that you two would be good for each other. I just wanted to touch base with you and make sure your intentions are pure.”

I snorted. My intentions had not at all been pure when I started sleeping with Magda, but I supposed that things had changed...

It didn't matter. She'd betrayed me.

“She lied to me,” I said simply, and Richard scoffed.

“So? People lie all the time. We're *lawyers*, you should know that.”

“I don't lie to the people I care about,” I said staunchly, and Richard looked me up and down.

“So you care about her?”

“I didn't say that,” I said, flustered, but Richard was grinning.

“You *do* care about her.”

I looked away from him. “It doesn't matter.”

“Do you know how hard it is to be a woman in her early twenties at a law firm?” Richard asked, and I looked up at him, surprised.

“Sure, but—”

“By now the whole office is buzzing about how Magda is sleeping with a partner, how I'm her father and she got this job because of me. Do you know what that's going to do to her? To her self-esteem, her mood?”

I ran a hand through my hair, sighing. “I guess you're right. But I'm not like that. She could have told me.”

“Told you when?”

When we first hooked up was what I wanted to say, but I didn't want to give Richard too much detail. Magda was his daughter, after all.

“She could have told me,” I repeated, but it sounded lame to my own ears.

“Is your pride worth losing her?” Richard asked, and his words shook me.

Was my pride worth losing how I felt when I was with Magda? I felt like she knew me, inside and out, and that wasn’t something I got often. Maybe Richard was right and I needed to talk to her. She was at home naked in my bed, but he didn’t need to know that.

“I should go,” I said, and Richard nodded.

“Only if you’re going to talk to my daughter. Tell her I said hello,” he said with a grin, and I laughed and walked out, heading straight back to my place.

When I opened the door, Magda was sitting up, surrounded by blankets and crying her eyes out.

“Magda—” I started, and she stood up, naked and unashamed.

“You left me. Again,” she said, and I hated that she was right.

“Listen, I wanted to talk to you—”

“I know you’re pissed off that I lied to you,” she started. “I know that you’re pissed off about Mark, too, but he never touched me. I never would have let him. He’s been stalking me, tried blackmailing me into having sex with him.”

Rage rose in me. “He did what?” I asked quietly, and Magda just shook her head.

“He’s in jail so it doesn’t matter. None of it matters. All that matters is that I’m trying to fix things and you just *left*.”

She started to get dressed and I just stood there, shell-shocked, watching her. There was so much I needed to say. I needed to tell her how I felt, needed to say I was sorry, but I was still angry. Still holding on to that pride Richard had warned me about.

“You don’t care. You never did,” she spat at me.

I slammed my hand into my own wall, punching through the sheet rock and bloodying my knuckles, suddenly so angry I couldn't stand it. Magda jumped and I hated myself for scaring her after she'd just gone through that with Mark.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Just don't tell me how I feel."

"Why not? It's not like you're going to tell me," she shot back and grabbed her purse, leaving my apartment. She let the door close behind her and I squeezed my eyes shut, frustrated.

She drove me *crazy*. Which was precisely why I was in love with her.

I poured myself a stiff drink and sat on my couch, watching television but not really watching it. I hadn't even bandaged my hand and blood trickled down my arm. I was a mess. Magda was a mess. She'd lied to me, betrayed me, but what if Richard was right?

What if losing her was the worst thing that ever happened to me?

MAGDA



I THREW MYSELF BACK INTO WORK THE REST OF THE WEEK, and Roarke took a sabbatical. I couldn't say I missed him around the office, exactly, but I kept looking for him, glancing over at his closed and locked office.

I hated not seeing him, not talking to him. He hadn't called or texted me, and I had ignored him, too. We were both proud, which I guessed was our downfall. I was a little depressed when I thought about it, but I just focused on work.

I had a new case and a new partner, Marie, who was a new and bright junior associate to replace Mark. She was nice enough, but she wasn't a shark like Roarke. Our case was complicated, a couple with four kids who weren't sure who was going to take which kid, and she was slow about picking things up.

Fine. I missed Roarke, and not just because we worked so well together. I missed him because I loved him, and I couldn't deny that fact anymore. Not even to myself. I wished I could make myself call him, text him, go over to his house.

I couldn't. He'd left me alone in his apartment again, and I couldn't handle that. I felt pathetic for even thinking about it. There was no way that he would understand what I'd been through. I was a young woman in a man's field, and it was hard enough on me without the whole office knowing that one partner was my father and the other my lover.

The water cooler was all abuzz with the news and everyone hushed when I walked by.

It was a Friday, right after I'd returned from a deposition, when Roarke dropped by the office. He was inside for a long time, and finally, after a couple of hours, I went over and knocked on his door, knowing everyone was watching.

As I watched, he packed up his things. I saw that he had come in wearing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, but I'd thought he was just picking something up.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my breath short from seeing him.

"Leaving," he replied, and I gaped at him in shock.

"You're partner. You helped create this firm. What do you mean, you're leaving?"

"I can't work with you," he said simply and kept packing up the box on his desk.

"You can't do this," I told him, striding over to the desk and taking the box from him.

"Don't tell me what to do," he snapped, but I just kept eye contact with him.

"This is stupid, Roarke. Neither of us has to leave our jobs because we had a stupid fling—"

"A stupid fling? Is that what it was to you?" he asked, coming around from behind his desk to stand close to me.

I stood my ground. "Isn't that what it was?"

Roarke set his jaw and looked away from me. "I guess."

"I just came here to tell you that I'm sorry," I said finally. "I'm sorry that I lied to you about my father."

"It doesn't matter," he muttered. "None of it matters."

"It matters to me!" I said passionately, staring up at him. I wanted to lean up and kiss him but that would just lead to more sex and that wasn't what we needed right now. "What you say and what you do matters to me, Roarke."

He looked up at me. "Why?"

I bit my lip. I didn't want to say it. I couldn't say it. I was embarrassed that I'd lied, embarrassed that I'd said yes to a date with Mark Windham, embarrassed that I'd fallen in love with Roarke Brentwood, my father's best friend and my boss.

I put the box down on his desk. "Don't leave," I told him. "I'll quit."

"Riley—" he started, but I just turned around and left his office.

He didn't catch up to me until I was already packing up my desk.

"This is stupid," he hissed, shutting my door and drawing the blinds. "We can't both leave."

"Exactly. Which is why I'm leaving," I said.

"You're leaving because you and I had sex?" he asked.

"Isn't that why you're leaving?" I shot back, and he groaned.

"You drive me crazy," he said, taking a few predatory steps toward me.

I didn't back down. He came around to the inside of my desk and swept the paperwork aside.

I didn't answer him, not quite knowing what to say. He grabbed me around the waist and lifted me onto the desk, leaning down to kiss me hard, and I kissed him back with fervor.

This was what I was trying to avoid, but fuck it. Enough damage had been done already.

He unbuttoned my blouse and kissing along my cleavage, between my breasts. My skin felt like it was on fire I wanted him so much.

"I can't stand you," he murmured. "I want you all the time."

"I can't stand you either," I said softly, tugging at his longish hair. "I want you all the time, too."

“What are we going to do about it?” he asked before taking one of my nipples into his mouth through the fabric of my bra and I moaned and arched my back.

“I don’t know,” I said honestly.

He kept me on the desk, teasing me, kissing along my neck, my breasts, toying my nipples between his teeth, until I was holding a hand over my mouth to keep from yelling.

When he finally shoved his hand down my slacks and pressed his thumb against my clit, I was wet and quivering.

“Magda,” he said, his green eyes dark with lust when he looked up at me, and I locked eyes with him.

“Roarke,” I responded, and then he fumbled with his pants and he was pushing into me before I knew it.

“This is all we have,” he said, almost mournfully, and something dropped inside me. Maybe my heart dropped into my stomach.

“Does it have to be?” I asked, and Roarke just kept thrusting into me, over and over, moaning softly against my neck so no one in the office could hear us.

He didn’t answer my question, and when he released inside of me and pulled out of me right away, I clutched at him.

“Roarke,” I whispered. “Did you ever care?”

I had to know. I *needed* to know.

“It doesn’t matter now,” he said after a long moment of looking at me with those intense green eyes, and I choked out a sob. I slid down to plant my feet on the floor and he left my office.

I kept the door shut and the blinds closed the rest of the day, even when Marie knocked. I just ignored her.

I didn’t know what to do. Maybe I *should* leave. Even if Roarke was staying, everyone knew now that Richard was my father and assumed that I got the job due to nepotism. It was everything I had never wanted.

There was another knock at my door, and it was insistent. I knew my father's knock and I got up to unlock the door. When he walked inside, I shut it behind him.

"What's going on with Roarke?" he asked. "I saw him lock himself into his office. He never does that."

I burst into tears. I couldn't help it. It might be a childish thing to do, but my emotions were all over the place. My father wrapped his arms around me and I cried into his chest.

"I don't know what to do," I whimpered.

"You love him," my father said, and I slowly pulled back from him, sniffing, so I could look at him.

"What if I do?" I asked.

My father shrugged. "If you do, you do."

My eyes widened. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm not stupid, darling. When I assigned you to the Martinez case with Roarke, I thought something like this would happen."

I frowned at him. "I thought you assigned the case to us so that he would recommend me for partner."

He nodded. "I did, but I also knew that you and Roarke are a lot alike, especially when it comes to work ethic."

I bit my lip. "Are you trying to say that you did this on purpose?"

He grinned. "Call me Cupid."

I stared at him. "So, you pitted me against the biggest shark in the firm all because you thought we'd look good as a couple?"

My father barked out a laugh. "I guess you could say that. It was more that I want my little girl happy, and my best friend seemed like a good match."

"I do love him," I admitted, and it was the first time I'd said it out loud.

“I think he loves you too,” my father said, and my heart skipped about nine beats.

“You don’t know that,” I whispered.

“I know my best friend. I know you. And I know that you both threatened to quit today just because you were afraid to be around each other.”

“That just happened? How do you—”

“I have eyes everywhere,” he said mysteriously, and I choked out a laugh, shaking my head and wiping tears from my eyes.

“I can’t believe you,” I accused.

“Was I wrong? You and Roarke work well together. You could be a team.”

“He doesn’t want that,” I said.

“Oh, so I don’t know but you do?” he asked. “Talk to him. He’s still in his office, likely brooding about you.”

I sighed. “I can’t.”

My father shook his head. “Too proud. Just like your mother.”

“Just like you, too,” I warned, and my father smiled.

“Maybe. But I let go of my pride to get your mother, and look what we created.”

He put one hand on my face and tears sprang to my eyes again.

“Don’t make me cry anymore, Dad,” I said in a liquid voice, and he laughed.

“Chin up, darling. It’ll all work out.”

He left my office quietly, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I paced around my office, trying to figure out what to do, but I got no closer to an answer after half an hour of exercise and my feet just hurt from my heels.

Could I let go of my pride and tell Roarke how I really felt?

ROARKE



I SAT IN THE DARK IN MY HALF EMPTY OFFICE, THINKING. Could I really give up all I had worked for just because of a woman? Magda Riley was one hell of a woman.

She was going to make partner because she deserved it, but at the same time, I couldn't see myself working as closely with her as I worked with Richard. Not without wanting her. Not without watching her and seeing how she talked to other male associates or clients... I could admit to being a jealous man, and especially when I had feelings for someone.

I certainly had feelings for Magda. I was in love, whether I liked it or not, and now I didn't know what to do about it. She clearly didn't feel the same way... did she?

Richard was right. The only way that I would find out was by talking to her, actually telling her how I felt—but that thought made my stomach feel sick. What if she didn't feel the same way? What if she hated me for being upset with her about everything?

I'd never been the type of person to sit back and let things happen. I'd always made my own way, ever since I was a teenager, and that wasn't about to change now. I had to put everything out there, lie my heart on the line.

I got up and walked to my office door, nearly opening it before I chickened out. I knew that I should tell Richard, first, and that this was an impulse decision, but I couldn't face a future of being around Magda Riley but not being able to have her.

I walked to her office and opened the door, not bothering to knock.

She startled at her desk, standing behind it.

“Roarke? What are you doing here?”

“I’m leaving the firm,” I said confidently, even though I didn’t feel very confident about it at all.

Magda set her jaw, tilting her chin up. Looked like she was ready for a fight, but I wasn’t going to give it to her.

“This again? Why?”

I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck with one hand. “It’s just not working out. I’m going to open my own firm, hire some people, get off the ground.”

Magda looked away. “I wish you luck.”

I blinked. What, no fight? No pushing back like before? I felt like I had rocks in my stomach. This couldn’t be how it ended.

“Is that all you have to say to me?”

Magda looked at me and I realized for the first time that she looked tired, bags under her eyes like she hadn’t been sleeping.

“What else is there to say, Roarke?”

I set my jaw. “Nothing, I guess,” I muttered, and started to walk out, but I paused right at the doorway, shutting the door and the blinds.

“What are you doing?” Magda asked, but there was no hint of panic in her voice, just exhaustion.

“Kissing you goodbye,” I murmured, and Magda made a surprised sound in the back of her throat when I walked quickly toward her, grabbing her around the waist to pull her to me and leaning my head down to press my mouth against hers.

I couldn’t leave without a kiss, a good one, and I kissed her deep and thoroughly, my tongue sliding across hers,

nipping her bottom lip when I pulled away. My heart ached knowing this would probably be the last time I saw her.

“Goodbye, Magda Riley,” I said softly, and Magda clutched onto my shirt, looking up at me with wet blue eyes.

“Roarke,” she whispered. “Wait.”

But it was too late. I was going to lose it, tell her everything, if I spoke now, and I had to get out of there.

I left immediately, going directly to the bathroom and splashing water on my face, looking at myself in the mirror.

What the hell was I doing? I was really giving up a chance at love, and for what? Because Magda was my best friend’s daughter? Because we worked together? Because she told me one little lie? Was this really worth all that?

What it all boiled down to was that I had three divorces worth of baggage and Magda was young and pretty. As much as it pained me, she could find someone better, someone with less damage. She deserved happiness, and I clearly couldn’t give that to her.

WE HAD TO MEET UP ONE LAST TIME AT THE COURTHOUSE FOR the final hearing, and Magda was there early while I ran a few minutes late. I didn’t want to be there, didn’t want to see her.

She looked serious, her face blank, and she didn’t so much as glance at me as we worked. It was easy enough, just reading from the prenup to explain that Mrs. Martinez was entitled to her trust fund back.

We decided to change the ruling about custody one last time and try for full custody for Mrs. Martinez. Magda argued that as the children’s mother, she should have custody, and she argued passionately, but I could tell that her heart wasn’t in it. The way Sandra Martinez had acted at the last hearing meant that Magda wasn’t sure she did deserve custody of her children.

The judge, who had first ruled for shared custody, changed his ruling based on new evidence that turned up and the

testimony of the children who told the court her mother brought younger men home all the time. So, primary custody was awarded to the father, and the judge told Sandra she had to pay alimony and child support. It definitely wasn't what our client had wanted, and she cursed and stormed out of the courtroom.

However, we'd technically won the case. Magda packed up her things and I swallowed hard as she walked past me, hoping she would say something, hoping that she'd at least look at me.

The case was over. I was officially recommending her for partner and probably leaving the firm. It was final in a way that made my heart sink to my toes.

Magda didn't say a word to me, just walked out of the courtroom.

It was for the best.

So why did it hurt so fucking much?

MY BROTHERS LIAM AND ELIJAH ARE BOTH MARRIED AND busy, and I know that. So when I text both of them, telling them I needed to talk and then falling asleep in my office chair, I didn't expect to get a phone call from Liam.

"Where are you? We're at your apartment," he said.

I sat up straight in my desk chair. "Wait, what? Who's we?"

"Me and Elijah. We came to see you. You've clearly been going through something given all your texts and phone calls, so now it's our time to help you."

My heart swelled with fondness for my older brother. "You guys didn't have to come all the way here." I knew that it was a long drive for both of them, but since we all lived in the same state, I guessed they decided to do a road trip.

“Well, we did, so are you coming to meet us, or what?” Liam asked with a laugh.

“I’ll be home in ten,” I said, and headed out of there. I was supposed to talk to Richard, tell him that I was leaving, but I couldn’t quite bear to do it yet. Spending some time with my brothers would help matters, certainly.

When I arrived at the penthouse, my brothers were standing outside the gate. Liam was holding a bottle of expensive tequila.

“From the missus,” he said with a laugh, and I chuckled. I liked Jasmine quite a lot. She kept my quiet, introverted brother on his toes.

“Where are your families? You didn’t bring the kids?” I asked.

“At home,” Elijah answered. “Jo said we needed some brother time.”

“We’re just missing Carter,” Liam said softly, and I sighed.

Of course we were missing Carter. I knew that Liam, as the oldest, wanted us all to be together again, but with what happened with Carter...I didn’t know if that was possible.

“We’ll still have fun,” Elijah insisted, motioning for me to open the gate. When I did, they hopped into my little sportscar, Liam in the back. I laughed at his long legs pushing up the driver’s seat.

We drove into the parking lot and went inside the house, Elijah immediately started looking for shot glasses.

“In the top cabinet,” I called, and he returned after going into my fridge for limes, with six shots.

“Double shots?” Liam asked incredulously.

“Don’t be a pussy,” Elijah taunted, and Liam sighed and shot them both back, sucking on the lime that Liam had cut.

I took my shots too, clinking my first shot glass with Elijah.

I grimaced as the burn went down my throat.

“So, what’s up with you?” Liam asked. “Clearly something’s wrong.”

“Yeah, you never call us unless you need something,” Elijah accused and I snorted out a laugh, my head feeling a little fuzzy already from the two shots. I hadn’t eaten today. Did I eat yesterday? I was kind of a mess.

“It’s a girl,” I said flatly.

“Obviously, it’s a girl,” Liam drawled.

Elijah nodded. “Exactly, tell us something we don’t know.”

I sighed. “She’s Richard’s daughter.”

Liam raised an eyebrow. “Oh, so you’re in the same situation I was in.”

“Yeah, but it’s *different*, Liam.”

“How the hell is it different?” Elijah asked. “You’re dating your best friend’s daughter. It’s the same thing.”

“Liam doesn’t work with his best friend,” I pointed out, and Elijah rolled his eyes.

“Oh, so different. Much more dramatic,” he joked.

“So, what happened? I thought you were taking a break after what happened with Grace,” Liam asked, still sucking on the lime. He wasn’t much of a drinker, not like the rest of us.

I told them the whole story from start to finish as we had a couple more shots, and by the end of it, I was pretty drunk and hungry.

Liam ordered food for all of us.

“Well, it’s simple,” Elijah said. “You have to tell her how you feel.”

Liam made a noise of agreement, filling up my shot glass again.

“No more,” I groaned. “I need to get some food in me first.”

Elijah tsked. “You haven’t been taking care of yourself because you’re messed up about Magda, huh?”

“Shut up,” I muttered. Elijah was younger than me but he had big brother energy just like Liam did.

I was the second oldest, and I took the brunt of the punishment from our dad when Liam left, to keep Elijah and Carter safe.

I didn’t want to think about our father or Carter, though. That led nowhere good and I’d already been in a mood.

“So, just tell her,” Liam urged.

“What, now?” I asked incredulously.

“Sure, a good drunk dial never hurt anybody,” Elijah said, laughing. His face was flushed and I could tell he was a bit drunk, too. He was more outgoing than Liam and he grabbed for my phone. “Hell, I’ll tell her.”

“Stop it,” I groaned, taking my phone back and holding it to my chest. “I can’t tell her. What good would it do? It’s not like relationships ever work out for me.”

“This one might,” Elijah said. “After Suzanne, I didn’t think anyone would work out, but I met Jo and look at what happened.”

“We’re both divorced and got our second chances.”

I scoffed. “What about fourth chances?”

“You never know, fourth time could be the charm,” Liam joked.

I grumbled out something in response that was nearly unintelligible, but after eating, tequila told me it was a good idea to head over to Magda’s place.

“Take an Uber,” Liam slurred, taking my keys, and I nodded.

Elijah looked over at Liam with glassy eyes. “Do you think this is a good idea?” he asked.

“Nope,” Liam said, and I barked out a slow laugh, seeing double.

It probably wasn't the best idea, but I needed to see her right now.

I blacked out as soon as I was in the Uber.

MAGDA



I WAS DEAD ASLEEP WHEN I HEARD THE POUNDING ON MY door. It sounded like the police, they were knocking so hard, so my heart began to beat faster as I went to the door and looked through the peephole. For one terrified second, I thought it would be Mark, furious from being fired and arrested and coming to take revenge.

I looked out of the peephole to see one green eye staring at me – Roarke Brentwood’s particular shade of green. I groaned and opened the door and he nearly fell inside. He stumbled inside going to grab at the kitchen countertop to steady himself.

“Magda,” he said, too slowly, and he smelled like he’d taken a bath in tequila. “I need to talk to you.”

“About what?” I asked, exasperated. “You’re drunk.”

“Little,” he said, holding up his hand to show me what a little was and then stumbling back against the fridge. “Maybe a lot.”

He slowly slid down to sit on the floor and I tsked and quickly prepared him a glass of water, making sure that the door had locked behind him. I crouched down and handed him the water and he drank it greedily.

“What the hell are you doing here instead of passed out somewhere?” I asked.

“My brothers said I should come,” he said. “Said I should talk to you.”

He looked up at me with dazed green eyes, his hair mussed, and it felt like an arrow in my heart was twisting around. He looked so cute like this, so boyish.

“What are we going to talk about? I thought we had said our goodbyes,” I said softly.

“Don’t want it to be goodbye,” he mumbled, and reached for me, missing once before he grabbed me around the waist and pulled me into his lap. I made an “oof” sound and my legs instantly straddled his hips.

He sighed out a breath and put his arms tightly around me, pressing his face into my neck. “I love the way you smell,” he muttered, and I pulled back from him just slightly.

“Roarke, you don’t want to do this. You’re just drunk,” I said hesitantly. So much of me wanted this to be real, wanted him to really want to come and see me instead of being talked into it by his brothers.

“I always want to do this,” he insisted, planting sloppy kisses on my mouth and throat.

“You should drink some more water,” I said, handing him the glass and he pouted but dutifully drank the rest of it, one arm still loose around my waist. When I tried to get up, it tightened.

“We can’t sleep here on the floor,” I argued.

“Don’t want to sleep,” he slurred. “Just want to be with you.”

Fuck. My heart ached. It physically hurt to not be near him, and I knew that was a problem. I’d been crying all afternoon, and I was glad he was too drunk to notice. I didn’t know what to do with Roarke Brentwood. He always seemed to have it together, but lately, what with him punching Mark and throwing a fit in his office and now showing up shitfaced at my door...it made me wonder if all of this was bad for him.

It was like we were toxic together, and maybe it was for the best we couldn’t make it work.

“Let’s go to bed,” I cajoled him and stood up, pulling him with me.

Roarke whined but stumbled up, holding on to the wall until I led him to my bedroom, his arm heavy across my shoulders. He fell down on the bed but he tugged me with him and I squeaked as I landed on top of him.

He smiled up at me, cupping my face with his hands. “You’re so beautiful, Magda,” he said earnestly, and the look in his eyes made me want to look away. I couldn’t do this. My heart hurt too much.

“Thank you,” I said haltingly. “Now what was it you wanted to talk about?”

Roarke frowned. “I don’t want to tell you,” he said petulantly, and it surprised me into a laugh.

“No?”

“Absolutely not,” he said firmly. “I don’t want you to know you have the upper hand.”

“What do you mean, the upper hand? This isn’t poker.”

“Yeah, it is,” he said solemnly, nodding his head. “All of life is a game, you know, and I was winning. Until you.”

I laughed, looking at his glazed eyes. “You’re a funny drunk, Roarke.”

He frowned. “I’m serious. I was winning. I had everything, and now look. I don’t even have the firm anymore.”

I frowned back. “That wasn’t because of me, you said.”

“Of course it’s because of you,” he said, his eyes fluttering closed. “Everything is because of you.”

“Roarke,” I said softly, but his eyes didn’t open again and he was asleep with me held loosely in his arms.

I took in a deep, shaking breath. What the hell had that been about?

I wasn’t looking forward to the next morning, where he would surely call coming over a total mistake and hurt my

feelings. Instead, when I finally made it to sleep a few hours later, I was woken up by Roarke's erection pressing insistently up against my ass.

"Roarke?" I asked, disoriented.

Roarke just grunted, moving his arms around to cup my breasts. "Don't talk; I'm violently hungover," he groaned, palming across my nipples.

"You're hungover but you still want to hook up?" I asked in wonder, not quite opposed to the idea. I wanted to be with Roarke any way I could get him.

"I always want to hook up with you. We need a good last time," he murmured close to my ear, rocking against me.

I moaned and pulled up the T-shirt I was wearing as Roarke tugged down my panties, throwing them onto the end of the bed.

Instead of sliding into me from behind like I expected, he flipped me over onto my back, spreading my thighs and settling between them to press his face against my sex, his nose bumping against my clit.

"Oh, fuck," I cursed, putting my fingers in his long hair and grinding my pelvis against his face. Roarke moaned against me and slid a finger inside me, and then two.

"So wet already," he said.

"Only for you," I commented, my head feeling light from lust as if I was the one drinking last night, not him.

Roarke lifted his head to look at me, still pumping his fingers in and out of me.

"Do you mean that?" he asked softly.

"I told you, Roarke. There's no one else. There hasn't been anyone else since the first time you kissed me," I insisted, and Roarke made a sound like a growl in the back of his throat and kissed my thigh, leaving a nip from his teeth there. It would make a bruise, and I wasn't worried. I wanted to be marked by him, wanted that mark to never fade. If he was going to leave the firm, I wanted some piece of him to stay behind with me.

“I can’t stand thinking of you with someone else,” he admitted, pressing his thumb against my clit, talking to me like he wasn’t hurtling me toward orgasm with his fingers.

I gasped out a moan. “I can’t stand thinking of you with someone else, either,” I confessed. “I thought you were getting back together with Grace, and it killed me.”

Roarke scoffed. “Grace? She cheated on me.”

I inwardly groaned. I’d thought that Grace was the one that just hadn’t worked out, not one of the ones that cheated. If I had known that, I could have saved myself a lot of grief. I didn’t think cheating was something that Roarke could forgive, given how he felt about lying.

“I’m sorry,” I said suddenly, rocking my hips forward as I got closer, my impending orgasm loosening my tongue.

“For what?” he murmured, watching his fingers move in and out of me.

“For lying to you,” I said, and then I was crying out his name, coming, tears rolling down the sides of my face.

“It doesn’t matter,” he murmured. “Just let go,” he said, shifting to unbutton his slacks and lining up.

When he slid inside me, the aftershocks made it feel like I was about to come again and I whined, digging my nails into his shoulders.

He hissed. “Harder,” he ordered, and I had just a moment to think that maybe he wanted a mark from me, too, as I raked my nails down his back and he thrust hard into me, groaning low in his chest. He fucked me harder but steady, not letting up when I cried out.

“I’m coming again,” I gasped, and Roarke nodded.

“Come for me, sweetheart,” he crooned, and I did, as if by his cue, gasping and arching my back.

I went limp like a ragdoll from the pleasure and Roarke kept fucking me, slower and steadier now, dropping down on his forearms to cup my face with his hands.

“Is this really the last time?” I asked, my eyes filling with tears again. I felt all full of emotions and I didn’t know what to do with them.

Roarke’s hips stuttered as he looked into my eyes, as if searching them for something.

“I don’t know,” he said hoarsely, and ducked his head to hide in my neck, kissing me there as he reached his climax. He was breathing hard, his chest pressing against mine, but he stayed inside me for a long moment before pulling out and plopping down on his back on the bed.

“Are you going to leave now?” I asked in a small voice, and Roarke took in a deep breath through his nostrils.

“I should probably wait until the room stops spinning,” he said with a laugh, and I bit my lip, wanting to cuddle up next to him but not knowing how he would take it.

In the end, it was Roarke who pulled me into his arms, dragging me across the bed closer to him. I tucked my face into his neck, nuzzling him there.

“I’m sorry too,” Roarke said suddenly.

I lifted my head, frowning. “Sorry for what?”

He shook his head, laughing. “Everything. Being jealous and stupid. Coming over to your house drunk and upset.”

“I didn’t mind that last part,” I pointed out.

“I promise not to interfere in your life anymore,” he said, looking at me intently.

I didn’t say what I wanted to. *I want you to interfere in my life, Roarke. Fuck me up. I want you to mess it all up, because I don’t know how to live this life without you.*

I couldn’t say it, though, even in my post-orgasmic bliss. I was too afraid.

Instead, I just snuggled against him, closing my eyes tight and hoping that when I woke up again, things would be clearer.

ROARKE



WHAT THE HELL HAD I BEEN DOING, LETTING MY BROTHERS talk me into going to see Magda? From what little I remembered, I thought it had been my idea, but they certainly should have stopped me.

I walked into my apartment and when the door closed, Elijah whined.

“Too loud. Shh, Roarke,” he said, and I stared at him.

“Are you still drunk?”

“Maybe,” he said with a slow laugh. “Liam and I don’t get out much, so we drank a little more after you left.”

Liam groaned, having fallen asleep on the floor. “Fuck, my back,” he whined.

“You could have taken the bed, idiot,” I said.

“The room was spinning,” he complained. “This is why I don’t drink like you assholes.”

Elijah snorted. “Sure, we’re the assholes because you can’t hold your liquor. Are you even a Brentwood?”

“Shut up,” Liam grumbled, and I couldn’t help but laugh, plopping down on the couch.

“Should we order something truly disgusting?” I asked.

It was a tradition harkening back to our teenage years. We’d go out and drink and then go to the worst fast-food place in town and order a ridiculous amount of food.

“Absofuckinglutely,” Elijah said easily and Liam sighed.

“I guess I can have my cheat day today after all those alcohol calories.”

“You’re not even fighting anymore. Live a little,” I said, and Liam smirked.

“Have to keep in shape. Jasmine keeps me busy.”

“Oh, don’t rub it in,” I grumbled.

Elijah raised an eyebrow. “So, how did it go? Last night, I mean.”

I looked up from my phone where I was ordering chili cheese fries from a local, terrible restaurant. It was cheap, and that was the important thing. We might all have plenty of money now, but we still had the taste of poor kids from Georgia sometimes.

“I don’t remember,” I admitted, and Liam laughed, doubling over and holding his stomach. Elijah joined and I found even myself smiling.

“Tequila will do that to you,” Liam agreed. “I’m always telling Jasmine that it’s the blackout liquor.”

“I hope I didn’t say anything embarrassing,” I groaned.

“Even if you did, at least you got some closure,” Liam said.

Elijah looked over at me but didn’t say anything, looking a little green around the gills. It was only a few moments before he ran to the bathroom to throw up loudly.

“Who can’t hold their liquor again?” Liam called out, and we laughed at our little brother.

We spent the rest of the morning eating and chatting about the kids and their wives, and I couldn’t help feeling a little lonely. Did I want all of that with Magda? If I did, didn’t I have to tell her?

I couldn’t imagine telling her and being rejected, but how was that worse than what was happening now? How could that be worse than losing her forever and *not* saying it?

“I have to go tell Richard that I’m quitting the firm,” I said, and Liam nodded.

“I know you have a lot to take care of. But think it through, little brother,” he told me, throwing an arm around my shoulders. “We’ll get out of your hair in a bit, after Elijah sobers up.”

Elijah was lying on the couch, looking pale. He gave me a thumbs up.

“Thank you both for coming,” I said warmly. “I really can’t tell you how much it helped.”

Liam grinned at me. “I told you I’d always be here for you, didn’t I? It sucked to go through those years without you guys.”

My heart swelled with love for them both. We’d had our ups and downs, but in the end, we stuck together, and I hoped at some point maybe we could bring Carter back to the fold, as well. The Brentwood brothers needed each other, after all.

I felt better than I had in weeks as I walked out of my apartment, but all the weight on my shoulders came back as I got into the car and headed to the office. I didn’t want to do this. I didn’t want to give up on this firm, to give up on Webster. Hell, I didn’t want to give up on Magda, but I didn’t know what else to do.

Richard’s office was empty so I waited until he came back, jumping as he saw me in the chair across from his desk.

“Jesus, Roarke, you almost gave me a heart attack,” he muttered.

“I really need to talk to you,” I said.

“If it’s about Magda, you know what I’m going to tell you. You need to talk to her, not me.”

“It’s not about Magda,” I lied. “I’m leaving the firm.”

Richard blinked at me and closed his door, going to sit behind his desk. “What? Roarke, you and I built this place from the ground up. You created half of this firm. What do you mean, you’re leaving?”

“Gonna go out on my own,” I said firmly. “Make my own firm.”

Richard looked at me for a long moment and sighed. “I mean, if that’s really what you want to do, I’ll buy you out. But I wish you’d reconsider. We work well together, don’t we?”

“We do,” I agreed, feeling guilty. Richard had been my best friend ever since I moved to Florida, and it was wrong of me to drop a bomb like this on him so suddenly. I just didn’t know how I could work with Magda.

“And you said this *isn’t* about Magda?” he asked curiously.

I groaned. “Maybe it’s a little about Magda. I don’t think I can work with her.”

“You have been working with her.”

“Yeah, and you see how well that went,” I said dryly.

“You just need to talk to her, Roarke. Listen, if you go and talk to Magda for a full half an hour, lay everything out on the table, I’ll buy you out without a peep.”

“And if I refuse?” I asked, and Richard gave me a withering look.

“I’ll hold you up in court for months.”

“You wouldn’t do that,” I said incredulously.

“Try me. I want my little girl happy.”

“And you think I can do that? Make her happy?” I asked, feeling the need for some reassurance.

“I think you might be the only man who can. Don’t waste that,” Richard warned.

I tilted my head, wondering if he was trying to matchmake me with his daughter, but at this point, it didn’t matter.

I had to tell Magda how I felt. It was the only way to get closure on this whole thing. I was almost completely sure she didn’t feel the same way and she would reject me outright, but

I had to tell her anyway. It would weigh on me forever if I didn't.

I took in a deep breath and went toward Magda's office.

MAGDA



I SAT IN MY OFFICE, STARING BLANKLY AT THE WALL, wondering what I ever did in here before I started working with Roarke. All my court cases were a few weeks out, and now that we'd wrapped up the Martinez case, I didn't have anything to work on, really. There was always paperwork to fill out, but I'd already finished everything.

I didn't even know what to do, and I wished that I was the one leaving instead of Roarke. How was I supposed to stay here, knowing that we'd made love all over this building, and not remember him? Not ache for him?

I had breakfast with my father and came to work late, and all I could do the whole time we talked was cry. I usually didn't let my dad in on my love life, but given that it was his best friend, I'd asked for advice.

"Don't worry your pretty little head, Magpie. I'll get him to talk to you."

I tilted my head. "How are you going to do that?"

My father smiled. "I have my ways," he said mysteriously.

I guessed he must have, because a couple of hours after arriving at the office, Roarke knocked on my door.

"Come in," I called from behind the desk, and he walked in and shut the door.

"Listen, Magda, about this morning—"

"I know. It was a mistake. The last time. It won't happen again," I said quickly, not wanting to hear him say it.

Roarke set his jaw. “Is that how you feel?”

“How do *you* feel, Roarke? That’s what I need to know.”

He sighed, searching my face.

“I don’t know how to tell you,” he said softly.

“Just... just say *something*, Roarke. Tell me it was all a fling. Tell me it was all in my head, that how I feel is one-sided.”

Roarke’s eyes settled on mine. “What do you mean, what you feel?”

“I’m in *love* with you, Roarke,” I whispered defeated, and Roarke jumped as if I had yelled it.

“No, you’re not,” he said incredulously, and I laughed bitterly.

“Oh, so you get to tell me how to feel, now?”

“Magda,” he started, and I held up a hand.

“I know you don’t love me, so just go. You can leave now, because I don’t want to hear how big a mistake you made with me—”

“You got it all wrong, Magda. Because I love you, too,” he said flatly, and I paused, looking down at my desk instead of at him.

“What?” I asked softly.

“I love you, too,” he said earnestly, walking toward me. “That’s what I wanted to tell you last night but I was drunk and stupid and—”

I cut him off, holding up my hand.

“Wait just a damn minute,” I said. “You love me too?” I looked up at him and Roarke smiled, walking toward me.

“So, if you feel the same way, we can be together. Right?” I asked almost cockily.

I bit my lip. This was what I wanted. This was *exactly* what I wanted but I didn’t know if I could trust it.

“You want me to be the next ex-Mrs. Brentwood?” I asked, joking slightly but not really.

Roarke shook his head. “No. I’m not getting married again until I know it’s real.”

I huffed out a breath. It stung a little that he didn’t know if what he had with me was for real, but I understood.

“So, we’re going to try this? For real?” I asked, and Roarke frowned.

“Not if you don’t come over here and give me a kiss,” he said, pouting at me. It reminded me of the night before when he was sitting on my kitchen floor.

I still felt hesitant somehow. It seemed like this was a dream, like it wasn’t real, but it was. Roarke really loved me. He really said it.

I walked into his arms and he kissed me immediately, but it wasn’t rough and passionate like all the other kisses before. It was soft, sweet, like a first kiss, and I moaned into his mouth.

“Don’t make that sound or we’ll never make it out of the office,” he murmured.

“We’re leaving the office?” I asked.

“Hell yes. We’re going on a real date, you and I,” he said.

“What about work?” I asked.

“Since your father is playing Cupid for us, I don’t think he’ll mind covering for us for a bit. We’re taking a few days off.”

I grinned, slowly starting to believe it. “Really?”

“Really,” he said, and cleared his throat. “I just have something to do first.”

I stared at him, shocked. “What do you mean, you have something to do?”

“I mean I have something to do, Magda, don’t nag me already,” he teased, still loosely holding me in his arms.

I pulled away, frowning. “Okay, fine, but be back in an hour.”

“I’ll do my best,” he said, and he hurried out of there like the office was on fire.

What the hell was he up to? And how was I supposed to just wait around now that I knew that Roarke Brentwood loved me? I rubbed my hands over my hot face.

IT TOOK *TWO* HOURS, BUT ROARKE FINALLY RETURNED, AND this time, he was dressed differently, wearing a new suit. I frowned, confused, as he called me out to the water cooler.

“What is all this?” I asked, and he handed me a bouquet of spring flowers. I sniffed them, smiling slightly. This was cute, but I wasn’t sure where it was going. Then I saw my father standing at the back of the building, smiling at us. Everyone came out of the woodwork, watching and smiling, as if Roarke had told them to watch.

“Roarke, what are you doing?” I asked as he stepped forward, and then he got down on one knee, holding out a small box. “Oh my God.” I held a hand over my mouth. This couldn’t be happening.

Not right now. He just told me he loved me, for god’s sake.

“Hear me out,” he said. “I know that it’s early, but I’m a big believer of ‘when you know, you know’ and I need to tell you that I know, Magda. I know that you’re the one. I’ve done this before.”

“Three times,” Richard called out from the back and Roarke shook his head, laughing.

“Exactly. I’ve done it three times, but my brother told me that maybe fourth time is the charm, and I know that it is. You’re my charm, Magda. You make everything brighter. You make me feel young again and you drive me *crazy* but in the best way. And I can’t wait to see what life is like with you now that we can be free to just be ourselves and not hide. I love you more than I thought possible and I don’t want to waste another

minute without you. I already wasted too many being a stubborn ass.” I couldn’t help but laugh at that, and his face softened. “So, what do you say, sweetheart? Will you marry me?”

He opened the ring box and inside was a *huge* diamond, set inside a princess cut with rubies all around it.

“How did you know I love rubies?” I breathed, and Roarke chuckled.

“Your old man told me,” he said quietly, but I didn’t care if the whole office heard it. I loved Roarke and I loved my father, and I was glad that we had his blessing.

I didn’t care anymore what the rest of the office thought.

“You’re killing me, sweetheart. You gonna tell me yes or no?” Roarke pleaded, looking up at me with stricken green eyes.

“Yes! Of course, yes!” I cried, and he stood up and swept me into a big bear hug, kissing along the side of my face.

The office started to applaud and I whispered in Roarke’s ear.

“You still owe me a date,” I said.

“As many as you can stand, Riley,” he answered, and then he kissed me.

He led me out to his car to the sound of the applause, and opened the door for me.

“Oh, *now* you’re a gentleman,” I giggle, giddy.

“Because you’re such a lady,” he teased back.

I grinned at him. I wanted this to last forever, and all I could hope was that it did.

“So, you were never getting back together with Grace?” I asked.

“Never,” he answered. “Did you ever really consider seeing Mark?”

“Never,” I repeated his word back to him. “I could only think of you.”

Roarke sighed in relief. “Thank God.”

“You’re the jealous type,” I accused.

“Damn straight,” he answered. “So are you.”

“I am,” I agreed. “That’s one more thing we have in common.”

Roarke barked out a laugh as he put the car in gear and I looked down at my clothes, frowning.

“I want to change into something nice,” I said, and Roarke groaned.

“Here I am, trying to take you out and you keep being difficult,” he accused.

“I’m not being difficult. I just want to dress up for you. Is that so wrong?” I pouted.

Roarke grinned at me at the red light. “We’re arguing again.”

“I think that’s kind of our dynamic, Roarke.”

“You’re right.”

He leaned over and kissed me before the light changed. “I want to fight with you forever.”

“Forever is a long time,” I warned.

Roarke laughed. “That it is. And I want to spend all of it with you.”

It was all I could hope for.

It took me an hour to change and I made Roarke wait in the apartment lobby no matter how much he pouted. He’d never really seen me dressed up, and I wanted to wow him. I put on a blue dress that emphasized my eyes and a pair of black heels, doing a smoky eye and a red lip.

I pulled out all the stops, curling my hair at the ends even though I knew by the end of the night it would fall, and when I

walked down to the lobby, Roarke was standing by the elevators, waiting for it to come down.

“Were you coming up to get me?” I asked, and Roarke turned around. He might as well have been like one of those wolf cartoons, his eyes bugging out, and I laughed, covering my mouth with my hand. “You like it?”

“I was about to come bang on your door and tell you to hurry up, but it was worth the wait. Goddamn.”

He whistled low and walked toward me, grabbing me around my waist. “Maybe we should stay in.”

“Absolutely not. And waste me looking like this?”

“I don’t want anyone else to look at you,” Roarke said low in his throat, and that was it.

I didn’t end up going out at all. We ordered in, Chinese food, and it was all Roarke could do to keep his hands off me before the delivery driver got there. I ended up with my curls falling out and my dress ripped, but with a big grin on my face.

Best date ever.

ROARKE



THREE MONTHS LATER, I WAS WEARING A NEW TUXEDO AND Liam, Elijah, and Richard were my groomsmen. Richard had been present for the last two weddings, but this would be my brothers' first one. Jo and Jasmine were in the crowd with the kids, and I waved at them. They waved back excitedly. I chuckled.

I thought I'd talk to Magda about maybe having a brood of our own. I was ready. I didn't know about her, though. Her career had been taking off ever since she made partner, and she was popular enough and with enough clients now that she could have gone off on her own if she'd wanted to.

She didn't. She was happy with the family business, and I knew that Richard wanted her to take over when he retired. I stayed on as partner, too, although I didn't work as much anymore. I let Magda take all the cases, and just jumped in on a few of them. I was thinking more and more like if we had a family, I'd want to mostly stay home with the kids.

Magda had stayed with Jo and Jasmine all night at a hotel room, having a mini-bachelorette party, and Jo and Jasmine looked hungover. I laughed, wondering if Magda was, too.

My own bachelor party consisted of drinking more tequila with my brothers and we all drunk-dialed our significant others. It had been what most people might consider a bust, but we had a great time and a big, disgusting fast-food meal the next morning, Brentwood style.

I stood impatiently up at the altar, waiting for my bride to walk down the aisle, and suddenly I was beset with nerves. What if she'd gotten cold feet? I hadn't talked to her since yesterday morning, and I was going crazy. I kept trying to text and call her but she'd respond by telling me it was a tradition not to see the bride on the wedding day.

Since when had she cared about tradition? We got together by hooking up in our office, for god's sake. When I heard the music start and could see a hint of her veil through the double doors of the church, I was infinitely relieved. I grinned. Everything was okay. Magda loved me.

She looked incredible in an off-the-shoulder red and white dress. Nothing traditional for her. She'd wanted to stand out, and I was more than happy to oblige, wearing a red silk shirt under my tuxedo instead of a white one so that we would match.

I couldn't help it, as she walked down the aisle I started to tear up, wiping at my face. She just looked so beautiful, and we had fought so hard to get here. She looked a little pale, likely from the hangover, but gorgeous as usual, her hair loose down her back.

The wedding went by in what seemed like a flash, with Magda's hand shaking as she put on my ring, tears streaming from her blue eyes. I just couldn't wait for the priest to say, "You may kiss the bride," and I kissed her halfway through his sentence, and the crowd laughed.

At the reception, champagne flowed freely but I noticed Magda wasn't drinking any of it.

I frowned. "Are you sick or just hungover?"

"Neither," she commented, looking away from me.

I took her chin in my hand, forcing her to look at me.

"What's wrong, Riley?" I demanded to know.

Magda took my hands in hers, dropping them from her face and squeezing them with a smile. "Nothing, baby. Don't worry."

I *did* worry, though. I had a big surprise honeymoon in Hawaii planned, and if she wasn't well, we couldn't go. I tried to sneak around and ask Jasmine and Jo what had happened the night before, but they zipped up their lips as if it was some big secret.

By the time we started to open wedding gifts, I was incensed.

"You're hiding something from me," I said, and Magda sighed, exasperated.

"Fine. I got you a wedding present and I've been hiding it," she said.

I raised an eyebrow. "Usually, we don't get each other presents, Magda. They come from the guests."

She rolled her eyes. "I guess you'd know since you've done this so much already." She was teasing, though, no bite in her words.

"Exactly," I said, but she handed me a small jewelry box anyway. It was a long one, like it might contain a necklace or a bracelet.

"Open it," she said, and I frowned, looking around at how everyone was watching when I lifted the top of the box.

Inside was a pregnancy test that clearly said positively on the indicator window.

I gasped and looked up at her, my eyes welling with tears. "Don't tease me, Magda," I said hoarsely, not wanting this to be a joke or a prank.

Magda smiled and sat down on my lap. "No teasing, Brentwood. I'm having your baby."

I hugged her tightly and kissed her passionately in front of everyone while everyone cheered at the news.

My life was now perfect, and it all started because I couldn't stand Magda Riley – now Magda Brentwood.

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CHAPTER 1

Josephine

Although South Beach provided a breeze now and again, the temperature still rose to nearly ninety degrees by the afternoon, so sweat was dripping down my skin as I worked in the small kitchen of the auditorium.

The air conditioner whirred as it tried to kick back on, and a burst of cool air flowed by me. Facing the artificial breeze, I chopped off a sliver of the vegan meatloaf I would be serving as a meatless version of the main dish for this charity dinner.

I loved cooking and had been working as a chef for a while now. And though business was doing okay, it wasn't where it could be. There were household names already established, so I was struggling to find my place in the market, but there was no way I was giving up my dream for anything, which meant taking on every gig that came my way, including this one.

Okay, so I didn't quite remember what this specific dinner was *for*, exactly, only that the price point for this four-course dinner had four digits, and that everything must be perfect because this dinner was being hosted by the CEO of Ironman Titanium, the largest manufacturer of titanium in the United States.

I also didn't quite remember the man's *name* because I had been working on the menu for this dinner for a solid month in between catering gigs, but had no interaction with the man himself.

My best friend and personal assistant came around the side of the steel workstation I had set up yelling, "Corner!" at the top of her lungs, just like I taught her. Gretchen didn't have the experience that I did working in kitchens, but she picked it up fast, just like everything else. She'd been my right hand since I began my catering business, and I'd loved her like a sister. We met at thirteen and were living in a trailer park in Valdosta, Georgia. It was easy to forget that she was my employee at all.

The sight of her holding a huge metal fan above her head so as to not elbow or bump into any of the staff brought actual tears to my eyes.

"Angel. Godsend. Light of my life." Her setting up the fan on a crate in the corner, angling it up so the air blew into my face, might have been the most religious experience I'd ever had. Nearly sensual in how amazing it made me feel after hours of working in a hot, cramped kitchen with a spotty AC.

It was also probably the most sensual experience I've felt in years, but I couldn't think about that too much without getting a headache.

Speaking of headaches, Dominic Richards, my dearly beloved older brother, entered the kitchen, *not* yelling "corner" or "behind" the way I told him he had to, and nearly knocking over a server who was simply trying to set out a series of plates for me to prepare.

Narrowing my eyes at him had him holding his arms out as if in apology. Unfortunately for him, I *knew* he wasn't sorry.

"The vegans are rioting," he said, nonchalantly, as if that was a common and totally normal thing to say.

"The vegans are going to get the best dish of their lives, so tell them five minutes," I snapped, and Dominic rolled his eyes.

“Watch your tone,” he warned me, but I was twenty-six, not six, despite what my brother might think, so I didn’t bother to respond.

“Elijah will be livid if you fuck this up, Jo. Seriously.”

“Jo knows what she’s doing, Dom. Chill out,” Gretchen said, using a clean fork to taste the sliver of meatloaf I’d cut off. Her eyes rolled back into her head and I found another grin spreading across my face. I loved watching people eat the dishes I created. My one passion in life was to make food that evoked feelings, and Gretchen was getting all the feels.

“It tastes just like meat, Jo-Jo, honestly. I would have thought it was the lamb loaf.”

I knew that I was beaming because even Dominic smiled a little, although lately, smiles had been rare coming from him. It wasn’t that I felt like he disliked my cooking. In fact, I knew he adored it, I’d been cooking for him since we were teenagers. He had just been crazy about this charity dinner. The CEO of Ironman Titanium was apparently some old friend of his, and Dominic wanted everything to go smoothly, so I cut him some slack and sliced him a tiny sliver so he could try it, too.

When he tried to go in for a second bite, I slapped his hand.

“Time to get out of my kitchen,” I warned, and Dominic groaned but made himself scarce, thank God.

“Your brother is lucky he’s so cute,” Gretchen began, and I made a gagging sound in the back of my throat.

“Gretch, I love you, but if you talk about how hot my brother is one more time, I’m going to fire you.”

“You can’t fire me,” Gretchen shot back cheerfully, and she was right. I couldn’t. She was definitely irreplaceable and invaluable.

And Dominic *was* objectively attractive, I guessed, in his own way. I got a lot of my looks from him, especially the dirty blond curls that I was trying desperately to tame in this humidity. But he *was* my brother, for god’s sake. Who wants to think of their brother as hot? Gag!

Anyway...

I didn’t have time to be too mad at Gretchen for salivating for my brother, though, because the servers came in and it was time to plate, something I had to focus on with everything I got, especially because there were a ton of potential clients at this charity dinner.

When it was all over, and the MushLoaf (not the greatest title, but I could change it as soon as my brain started working again. Which roughly translating into me getting a shower and somewhere to cool off) was being devoured by a group of extremely rich vegans, I stood in front of the fan after taking off my chef’s apron, breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth to calm myself.

I nearly knocked over the crate with the fan on it when a booming voice came from just behind me, seeming to reverberate in the mostly steel kitchen.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

I whirled around to the loud voice, and was surprised to see a tall figure in what appeared to be a very expensive suit. He wasn’t wearing a tie or a jacket, but that wasn’t unusual, since the temperature in Miami made men shed jackets and ties almost immediately when the sun rose in the month of August.

“Where’s the chef?” he demanded, and I opened my mouth to speak, but he took a few steps toward me. I straightened up, rising my chin in defiance.

“I—”

“Tell your chef, whoever they are, that I’ll make sure they never work in this city again. I’ve got a dozen people who have donated tens of thousands of dollars trying to get the taste of that *meatloaf*,” he made the word *meat* sound like something disgusting as he spoke, “out of their mouths.”

The man had a slight accent, Southern, possibly, but that wasn’t uncommon either. Neither was his entitled attitude. Some rich people thought that just because they had money they could just act anyway they wanted and everyone would cower before them. Well, not me. This was my lifelong dream, and I was fighting for it until my dying breath. And if this ‘person’ thought he could just threaten my future without a fight, he was sorely mistaken.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” I asked, looking up at him.

Despite his truly awful attitude, I had to admit that the man was good-looking. The undercut on the right side of his head was buzz cut, with the rest of his dark hair a bit longer, parted to the side, and his pale blue eyes were striking.

The man looked at me as if I was an alien. “Who the hell do I think *I am*?”

His voice grew louder but I didn’t flinch. Growing up with a stern brother like Dominic, I was used to that kind of tone from a big man.

“I’m Elijah Brentwood,” he said, as if that was supposed to mean something to me.

It *did* sound vaguely familiar, but it wasn’t like Brentwood was a particularly uncommon name in this area, and I didn’t care if he was Jesus Christ himself, he had no right to speak to me this way.

“Well, I’m Josephine,” I shot back, “and that vegan meatloaf was *divine*. And if the rich jerks who donate here think that it isn’t, then they have the taste of a—” I didn’t get to finish my sentence, because despite his surprise, Elijah Brentwood (whoever that was) slammed his hand down hard on the metal of my workstation. This time, I did jump.

“There was *nothing* vegan about that meatloaf.”

I finally realized what was going on and started to laugh.

This ‘Elijah’ looked at me as if I’d grown a second head, and it only made me laugh harder.

When I composed myself, he’d crossed his arms over his chest.

“You’re complaining because the *fully organic, fully vegan ‘meatloaf’* that I provided tastes too much like meat?”

He didn’t uncross his arms, but confusion flashed across his face.

“You’re an idiot,” I said, unfazed even as anger rolled through me, and I grabbed my chef’s apron and left the room through the back. My work here was done, at least until the last course. I had too much to think about and I still had a couple of things to do before this dinner was done with, so there was no way I was going to stand here and listen to this jerk venting just because I had done my job right. I took pride in what I did. I wanted people to enjoy my food, to have it be a full experience of the senses and bring out feelings and memories from them that would last for a long time. I was already worried my dream might be over sooner than I had planned, because the market was already established before I came, so I felt I had to claw my way in.

This was my first big break at a society dinner. A chance to showcase my talent to the high and mighty. How ironic would it be that I could be about to lose it all because I had done an amazing job...

Dominic rushed toward me when I got into the back alley, and I held up a hand to stop him from saying whatever he was going to say.

“Not now, Dom.”

“Listen, Jo, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Mikey—”

I opened my mouth to tell him to fuck off, but then it hit me.

Tall. Blue eyes. Grumpy attitude. Staring down at me as if I was nothing.
Brentwood.

“That was *Mikey Brentwood?*” I screeched.

“Mikey’s the CEO of Ironman Titanium.”

I blinked up at him.

Fuck.

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