

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white button-down shirt and white shorts, is shown from the chest down. She is looking slightly to the right. The background is a solid teal color. Overlaid on the image is the text 'Take My Pants Off' in a vibrant pink, brushstroke-style font. The text is arranged in three lines: 'Take' on the top line, 'My PANTS' on the middle line, and 'Off' on the bottom line. The woman's hands are near her neck, and her legs are visible at the bottom of the frame.

Take  
My PANTS  
Off

PIPPA  
SPARKS

# **FAKE MY PANTS OFF**

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A FAKE DATING BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

PIPPA SPARKS

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# PROLOGUE

ADRIAN

*FIVE MONTHS, TWENTY-SEVEN DAYS AGO...*

“IT WAS LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT,” Max tells me.

My jaw tics as I grab my glass of bourbon and take a sip. Notes of vanilla and clove linger on my tongue as I savor the burn.

“That doesn’t exist,” I tell him, sighing as I set my glass down. My finger swirls softly around the rim as his words circle in my head. I’m more annoyed at my brother for believing in love at first sight than the news he’s engaged to my ex-girlfriend.

Love at first sight? The next thing he’s going to tell me is that unicorns exist and he and Sariah plan to gallop off into the sunset on a road built from rainbows and children’s dreams after their wedding.

I take another sip of my drink as I survey the sleek, modern interior of Figaro, as my mind inevitably wanders back to work. BlackThorne Entertainment’s next merger is nearing its final stages and I have a full slate of meetings for the rest of the day. I’m more uncomfortable being away from my desk than I am listening to my brother describe how he met, fell in love, and decided to marry my ex.

“You haven’t met the right person,” Max says, a ridiculous grin on his face. “Your soulmate.”

I'm struggling not to cringe. I love my brother, but sometimes I feel like he's a Golden Retriever in human form.

Much like love at first sight, there's no such thing as the right person. There's no such thing as soulmates. There are thousands of people in this world that are "right" for each other, but they'll never meet or they'll cross paths at the wrong time.

I meet Max's watery blue gaze. He has my mother's eyes, while I have my father's—a gray so dark it borders on charcoal. "Sorry, Max but I don't buy it. I'm happy for you, though."

Although it's not exactly pleasant knowing an ex will be in my life forever, I know Max will give Sariah everything I couldn't. She was smart to leave me—I'm married to my work and there's no room for much else, especially a relationship. Once that realization set in, she was out. I'm happy for her, truly. It was a failed experiment that I have no intention to repeat any time soon.

"I know I've asked you this, but I want to make sure that you're—" he starts, but I wave him off.

I know where he's going with this. We danced around the subject multiple times throughout lunch. I'm not mad at him for falling for her. The truth of the matter is that he never met Sariah when we were together. He hardly knew anything about her apart from her name. For the last two years, Max has been out of the country with Doctors Without Borders—more than the entirety of my relationship with Sariah. And when they met for the first time at a conference in London, neither of them had a clue. It wasn't until he brought her to meet our mother that the shoe dropped.

But Max's insistence is foreshadowing an annoying question that won't go away: How can you be fine with Max marrying your ex?

To the outside world, I should be hurt. I should be frothing at the mouth at the gall of my brother and my ex for even considering it. Six months from meeting to engagement? People will be confused that the only thing I'm wearing on my

sleeve is indifference. But the truth is simple: I have no feelings for Sariah. Our relationship peaked in the first few months and we never recovered. To be honest, I never cared enough to try. If anyone should be angry it's Sariah because I wasted her time. She was perfectly pleasant, and that should be explanation enough.

The most annoying part of this situation is the insistence that I should feel differently about it. But if I want to dodge the incessant questioning I have ahead of me at their wedding, I need a more satisfying answer. A white lie is all I need, and fortunately, the answer is simple.

"I'm seeing someone," I say before taking a long swig of my bourbon. "And it wasn't love at first sight," I add with a half-smile.

Max gobbles my little white lie greedily. He falls back into his chair and lets out a relieved sigh as he looks back at me. "You could've told me earlier. It all makes sense now."

"It's new," I say. "And I like to keep some cards close to my chest." Especially when they involve details about a non-existent girlfriend.

"This is great," Max says, grinning again. "I can't wait to meet her."

Fuck. That's a slight wrinkle I didn't think through. I take another sip of my bourbon to hide the momentary nerves rising, but I recover by the time it reaches my stomach.

People break up all the time. It won't be odd that I show up stag to the wedding six months from now. By then, everyone should understand that I'm over my breakup with Sariah, moved on to other women, and there's no bad blood between me and Max.

"Me too," I say, my empty glass clinking against the table.

Max reaches into his pocket and pulls out an envelope.

"I held on to this, just in case," he says, handing it to me. "I wasn't sure..." he pauses for a brief moment, shrugs, and says, "How you'd react."



My lips quirk for a moment as I take the wedding invitation from Max.

“You really don’t have to come, by the way,” he says, taking a sip from his gin and tonic. “I know it has to be difficult, even if you won’t admit it. I mean, I can’t help but think I’m a huge fucking asshole and Sariah’s been stressing about telling you for months.”

I raise a brow. “A curse from your lips? I thought I’d never see the day.”

Max shrugs, taking another sip before turning his gaze to the room.

I clear my throat. “We broke up a long time ago for many reasons. It was never going to work between us, and I’m happy that you two found each other. Truly. No need to worry.”

I open the envelope, sliding out the invitation with Max and Sariah’s names written in modern, elegant cursive. “I’m not missing out on my baby brother marrying the woman of his dreams.” I raise my gaze from the invitation for a moment and look at Max, a smile forming on my lips. “Even if that woman is my ex.”

He cringes.

“I’d be neglecting my brotherly duties if I didn’t tease you at least once.”

It draws a short laugh from him. “I suppose so.”

I retrieve a pen from my suit pocket, RSVP with a plus one, and select the entrees. My fake girlfriend is a vegetarian, apparently. When I finish, I hand the invitation back to Max.

“Here you go.” I check my phone. There’s a slew of texts from my assistant, reminding me of the long list of appointments I have today.

Max holds it in front of him, his gaze bouncing back and forth between it and me.

“Thank you,” he says. “And I’m sorry about this whole thing. We had no idea. And no clue how we were going to

break it to you when we found out.”

“Don’t be,” I say, shaking my head as I pull out my money clip from my suit pocket. I set down a crisp hundred-dollar bill and then return the clip to my pocket. “Congrats. I know you and Sariah will be happy together.”

I stand up and Max follows suit. “Leaving already?”

I’ve given him nearly half an hour—a lifetime in my world—but he doesn’t seem to understand that. “I have a meeting scheduled in fifteen minutes.”

He pulls me into a hug suddenly. It catches me off guard. I can’t remember the last time I’ve hugged anyone, let alone my brother. “It was great seeing you again.”

“You too,” I say, awkwardly patting his back before breaking away.

“Mom was so cut up about telling you,” Max calls after me. “She’s going to be ecstatic knowing that you’ve found someone.”

I pause—a sharp pain in my chest. This lie might be a little more complicated than I anticipated, but I can’t think about it now. There are more pressing issues at work, and besides, I have six months to figure things out.

“Adrian,” Max calls out before I have the chance to leave.

I turn around and find him scanning the RSVP. “You left her name blank.”

And so is my mind. Not good...

“What’s her name?” Max asks, holding out a pen. “I can write it for you.”

“It will be easier if I do it,” I say, buying myself some time as I walk slowly over to him.

Why the fuck can’t I think of a name? I glance around the room, at the tables, the people around—anything at all that could help me. Who’d have thought something this simple could be so hard?

*Bourbon. Branzino. Neapolitan. Jane. Jen. Sally. Sue.*

Fuck. This is the first time I've broken a non-workout-induced sweat. The only names that are coming to mind are so generic and obviously fake when combined with surnames that are straight off a list titled "Top 100 Most Common Surnames in the United States." And nothing I see on tables as I frantically scan them on my way to Max is helping me unless, of course, I want to scrawl out Samantha Sea Bass, Tiramisu Thomas, or Barbara Branzino on the dotted line. Why not Betty Spaghetti while I'm listing love interests in some B-movie mafia flick from the 40s?

My fake girlfriend lived and died within the span of a few minutes. Must be a new record.

I grab the pen and invitation from Max and head back to our table, hoping for a miracle to drag me out of this before I put down the name of my assistant because it's the only plausible one that comes to mind. I'm not sure how well that will go over, given that she's twenty years my senior and married.

All I hear is the blood rushing to my head, thrumming incessantly as I hold the tip of the pen over the line. The nib connects but I can't bring myself to commit. It's taking me so long that my brother is now looming over me.

"My head's killing me," I mutter, setting the pen down as I rub my temples. "Must have been the bourbon."

"Gabriella," a man a few tables over says. My ears perk up as I focus on the voice over the din of the room. "What—suggest to pair with the—" The conversation fades in and out, but at least it gave me a first name.

I scrawl Gabriella out slowly on the card, hoping that Max is more focused on me than the conversations around us. But when it comes to the last name, I'm again drawing a blank. I nearly write Thorne, but my lie is already spinning out of control. A secret wife? Yeah, that's the opposite of simple.

"The Barbera sounds—thank—" The conversation at the other table continues, and I have my name.

Gabriella Barbera.

I have to admit it has somewhat of a nice ring to it as I hand the card back to my brother. He glances at it. “Gabriella Barbera,” he says, as though feeling out the name. “Italian?”

I’ve fabricated enough today. Keep things simple. I need to remind myself of those words like a mantra. “Somewhere in her family history I’m sure,” I say. “We’ve never really discussed it.”

“Well, I look forward to meeting her.”

Me too.

I flash a forced smile at him before patting him on the shoulder, wishing him well, and finally leaving the most exhausting lunch meeting in recent memory. Thankfully, my driver is already waiting for me. When I collapse into the back seat, I breathe a huge sigh of relief. I’ve leaped over the first hurdle unscathed, and now I have six months to figure out the details.

But as I make it to my office, my phone buzzing with texts and missed calls from my mother and sister, I have a feeling this won’t be as simple as I thought. The last text from my mother flashes across the screen.

**Mom: When can I meet her?**

I set my phone down as I recline in my chair. The leather creaks as I swivel and gaze lazily out at the New York City skyline.

*As soon as I find her.*

# ELLA

## *PRESENT DAY*

“I’M GOING to make you a star,” my interviewer says with a smile that’s more like a snarl.

Chills. Down my spine. And also vomit. Rising in my throat.

I’ve heard horror stories about these kinds of people in the movie industry, but I’ve never come face to face with a living, breathing, monstrosity of a human being. Everything about this man makes my skin crawl. With a bulbous nose and bloated face and a beard as patchy as the top of his head, this man looks more orc than human. And the more I look at him and—*gag*—smell him, the more I’m convinced that he lead the charge for the forces of Mordor in Lord of the Rings.

Newsflash: I’m not your “Precious,” and if “making me a star” includes you putting one of your slimy fingers on me, then I DON’T WANT TO BE A STAR.

Jesus, are there rotting cabbages in his desk drawer?!

I should’ve turned around when I saw the young woman rush out of his office, red-cheeked and furious. I should’ve kept on walking when I saw the orc in an ill-fitting suit appear in the doorway after her, eyeing my body like it was his next meal as he sucked in labored breaths and dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. I should’ve said ‘Nope,’ turned around, and walked back to the elevator, leaving BlackThorne

Entertainment behind when he said ‘Morning, Sweets. You next?’

There was a string of red flags waving wildly in the wind but I plucked each one out of the air and banished them to the darkest corners of my mind because I needed this job.

And I needed it badly.

I’ve spent the last few months failing horribly at getting my acting career off the ground. I’ve had audition after audition. Some with callbacks, some without. But each time I was about to cross the finish line, no matter how minor the role, someone swooped in at the last minute and beat me for the spot.

A friend of the director. A girlfriend of a producer. A gaffer’s maid’s daughter’s friend who once looked after a cat that brushed against the leg of the barista that served the executive producer their latte each morning. Okay, that last one might be a *slight* exaggeration but my point stands: Connections, no matter how tenuous, get you roles. And after eight months in New York, I had neither connections nor roles. Time, along with my money, was running out.

That’s where this interview from hell comes in—a production assistant job. It’s supposed to get me out of two binds: The money I sorely needed to continue chasing my dream and most importantly, connections. But as much as I need them, I’m not sure they’re worth enduring another minute—scratch that—*second* with this man.

I don’t respond to his comment about making me a star. Instead, I sigh, slouching in my chair as I try my best to make myself smaller and less noticeable. Can an orc see its prey if it doesn’t move or is that a T. Rex? Unfortunately, I have my answer a few moments later.

“You’ve got the look,” he says, eyes scanning me up and down. “If only you smiled a little more,” he adds with a wink.

Kill. Me. Now. I no longer want to live in a world where this man breathes.

“But do you have the temperament?” he says after a few moments of me refusing to smile on command.

I gag a little in my mouth. “Temperament?” Does this man think I’m a stray dog being put up for adoption?

“I’m sorry, but I thought I was applying for a production assistant job. What does looks or temperament have to do with anything? Have you read my resume?”

*Is this real life?* I have no idea what’s going on.

“Of course, but we both know the real reason you’re applying.” He waves my resume in the air. “You’re a theater major fresh out of college. And you have a string of waitressing jobs, multiple at the same time.” He tsks. “New York isn’t cheap and I’m sure rent is eating up all of your money and whatever savings you have at an alarming rate.”

I hate how much this man understands my predicament, but it’s not surprising. You can’t rise to this level at BlackThorne without understanding the business.

“And a quick scan shows that you haven’t landed a single acting job. Time’s running out, darling. Tick tock. Tick Tock.”

Darling. Hearing that word roll across this man’s swollen lips and slug-like tongue makes me want to crawl out of my skin. I’m going to burn these clothes and scrub my body from head to toe for a week straight to cleanse this creep from my pores.

“Forget the production assistant job,” he continues. “What you’re after are connections. Become my *personal* assistant and I can offer that and so much more.” He emphasizes the word *personal* in a way that makes me even more uncomfortable than I already am. He takes in a deep, labored breath. “I can make you a star.”

*What... The what?*

“I don’t want to be a star. I want the production assistant job. If we could get back to the interview...”

My attempt to redirect the conversation back to somewhat safer grounds is useless. I thought I might be able to reason

with him, but he has only one thing on his mind and I want no part of it.

Gri'zi'ok, Orc Destroyer of Worlds, stands up and stumbles around his desk, repositioning himself in front of me. I don't know much longer I can take of this man and his putrid stench—a mixture of ground beef, sprouted mung beans, boiled cabbage, and stale sweat. How can someone worth so much money smell so bad? Deodorant costs what, a few bucks? And a shower? Jeeeeeesuuuuus take the wheel and steer this man to the nearest bathtub.

He reaches for his coffee mug, brings it to his lips, and takes one long slurp as he stares directly at my tits. There's not a single thing about this interview that could make it any worse. Except that.

And by *that* I mean the coffee he sprays out of his mouth following a sneeze, landing on my forehead, cheek, and lips. Dear lord, it's on my lips. I don't think there are antibiotics strong enough to kill whatever disease I was just inoculated with. I'm so stunned that I can't bring myself to wipe it off.

He wipes his nose on his sleeve and sets down his mug, turning his head toward the door. "Ashley!" Brown spittle foams at the corner of his lips. "Ashley, get in here."

He turns to me as Ashley opens the door and walks into the office. "Is it so hard to get a hot cup of coffee? You could do that for me, couldn't you, Sweets?"

He slides the cup across his desk towards the woman who just entered. I glance at her, but she's in another world based on the dazed expression plastered on her face.

This is not what I expected. BlackThorne Entertainment is supposed to be a market disruptor—a shiny new star in the movie industry—but right now it's not living up to the image in my head.

Maybe my parents were right. I'm not cut out for this business. The thought makes me sick. This job was supposed to help me, not kill my dreams of becoming an actress.



He rests his sausage-link fingers on his beachball of a belly as he leans back against the desk which is moaning under the weight of him. “As I was saying, we’re family at BlackThorne. We treat each other with respect. Dignity.”

I blink at him. Is that supposed to be some kind of sick joke? Respect? Dignity? There wasn’t a shred of humanity in his words or actions. And what sick, twisted family treats a member like that? Yeah, no. I no longer care if I get this job or not. And if this is what I have to look forward to, then bye-bye acting dreams—it’s not worth it.

“That was horrible,” I say, finally. “Respect? If you call that respect I’d hate to see what disrespect looks like around here. And family? I’m sorry. No scratch that. I’m not sorry. I want nothing to do with the BlackThorne family.”

I’m almost surprised when the words come out of my mouth. I’m not usually combative but right now, I have nothing to lose. I’m pretty sure this man doesn’t even remember my name—hell the only way he’d only be able to identify me out of a lineup would be by staring at my tits.

I’m done with this interview. I’m done with this company. I. Am. Done.

“Temperament,” he says, *tsking* me again. “It’s a real shame you don’t have it. But I’m willing to forget what you said. I’m willing to give you the job. On one condition.”

Nope. Not doing this. I stand up, flattening out my skirt with my palms. “Consider this my withdrawal.”

I turn to walk out the door but he grabs my arm. “You’re making a mistake, Sweetheart.”

I shake free from his grasp and head for the door. The only mistake I made was waiting this long to leave. This was not at all what I signed up for when I moved here, and I’m not selling myself to make it work.

“You’ll never work in this town again,” he calls after me.

“I never worked in this town to begin with,” I snap back. That should... teach him?

When I round the corner out of his office, the only thing I want to do is scrub my body clean from this encounter, crawl into bed with Coconut, my cat, and watch a Harry Potter movie with a mug of hot chocolate. There's nothing else in this world that could possibly turn this horrific day around.

Until I crash into something hard. Something that smells like heaven. But as I look up, all I see is an impending sin in a three-piece suit.

He has a hold of me, and I'm not going anywhere.

## ADRIAN

I'M FUCKED.

There are only three days until my brother's wedding, and I haven't found my date. It turns out that finding a convincing fake girlfriend is harder than I expected. Then again, I haven't made a real effort to find one. Work has taken all of my attention in the intervening months. And the six-month buffer I had has vanished.

It's looking more and more likely that I'll have to show up without a date and break the news to my mother that I'm single again. It wouldn't be so bad if the little white lie I spread six months ago hadn't blossomed into something bigger. Lies fly while the truth limps, and this lie has crossed the globe five times over.

"What's her name again?" Asher, my business partner asks.

I cough. "Gabriella."

Asher laughs. "Gabriella?"

I give a tight shrug and then glance at my computer monitor. The little white lie has an entire backstory that I've fed piecemeal to my family. She loves hiking and kayaking. Eats a vegetarian diet, dabbling in veganism now and then. Loves Star Trek and Harry Potter and has a dog named Scout.

I don't know where it came from, but one lie spun into another and the more enthralled my mother became with my fake girlfriend, the more I became obsessed with creating her

out of thin air. It was addicting until it wasn't—when reality set in a few days ago.

I feel like a middle school kid trying to impress his friends with an imaginary girlfriend: *You wouldn't know her—she goes to a different school.*

But I have only myself to blame for this predicament. I'll find a way out of it—I always do, but this situation is proving more and more difficult. And now that I have three days left it's nearing impossible.

That's where Asher comes in. We've spent the last fifteen minutes brainstorming a way to get me out of this mess.

"I could give Sofia a call," Asher says. "She's in town for a few weeks and I'm sure she'd be game."

"No one would buy that I'm dating your little sister. She's a decade younger than me and lives in Italy ninety percent of the time. And you're forgetting a key part of this. My family knows Sofia. Her name isn't Gabriella and she's nothing like her."

"Nothing like her? For someone who doesn't believe in love, you seem to know exactly what you want in a woman."

Fuck, why didn't I keep it simple? No concrete details. Just a girlfriend and nothing more. But that wasn't a possibility with my mother. Once she learned I had a new girlfriend she dug in her claws—wanting to know every last detail about her since I told her she couldn't meet her. She's filming on location and wouldn't be back in the states until just before the wedding.

My fake girlfriend is a movie star—what was I thinking?

I sigh, focusing on my computer monitor. This is pointless. I need to face the uncomfortable reality that I'm going to have to break the news to my mom and deal with the fallout.

I scan my email and see another forwarded complaint from HR about Eugene. Nothing pisses me off more than letting something this big slip under my radar. It's enough to burn down everything Asher and I built. I only found out about the complaints against him this past week—he'd been shuffling

them around, sweeping them under the proverbial rug, and it was dumb luck that they were found in a routine audit. Thank fuck for Melvin, HR Manager extraordinaire.

I should've known about Eugene. The dude had the vibe of a predator, but he performed. He got things done, and I didn't think twice about his methods or the fact that every single one of his assistants left within a week. That's on me. It's a mistake I'm not going to repeat, and I plan to put in frameworks so it never happens again.

Never.

“Forget the wedding. We have more pressing issues to deal with,” I tell Asher. He's playing with his phone and judging from the big grin on his face, he's texting his wife. Sexting, actually—based on their whirlwind romance. It's a struggle for those two to keep their hands off each other. I never know what I'm going to walk into when Asher's doors are closed and Lilah's not at her desk.

Asher pockets his phone, his smile disappearing from his face. “Eugene?”

I nod. “He needs to go. His last interview should be over soon. I finally have a break and can watch the videos. If I find anything remotely skeezy, I'm going to kick him the fuck out myself. I might do it anyway,” I add with a shrug.

When I found out the reports, I had maintenance install cameras in his office so there wasn't a single inch of that office that wasn't monitored. Although he looks like a fucking ogre, Eugene was smart, and I wasn't going to risk anything. I wanted all the evidence I could find at my disposal to ensure this asshole never worked in the industry again.

“Tell me how it goes,” Asher says.

“You're not going to review the tapes with me?”

He shakes his head. “I trust that you'll take care of it. Besides,” he says, patting his phone in his pocket. “I have some unfinished business to attend to at home.”

I shake my head. “Give Lilah my best. I'm glad that her morning sickness passed.”

“Me too,” Asher says with a wink before leaving my office.

I turn back to my monitor and open the live feed to Eugene’s office. He’s perched on the edge of his desk, intruding on the space of the woman in front of him. The default camera doesn’t provide the best angle to see her, but her body language weaves the entire story. Tension spreads in my jaw as every muscle in my body clenches.

“Temperament,” Eugene says, his voice somewhat muffled.

What the fuck was he talking about? Who the fuck does he think he is? I’ve only seen a few seconds of the feed but what I’ve heard and seen makes me fucking rage. I should’ve monitored every interview—reviewed them at the very least before now. I should’ve made this a priority. I make no excuses—this is on me. But I’m going to make this right. I’m going to ensure he doesn’t work in this fucking city—*this country*—ever again.

When I change the camera to see the woman, my heart stops. My head fucking pounds when I see her face and I can hardly breathe. She’s gorgeous—absolutely stunning—but the expression on her face guts me. She’s disgusted and dejected and it’s my fucking fault.

I dial security. “Eugene’s office. Now,” I growl, hanging up without an answer. I don’t know if I’m calling them to escort Eugene out of the building or prevent me from going to jail. The idea of Eugene putting a hand on this angel has me seeing red and frothing at the mouth. There’s no telling what will happen when I see him.

I take one last look at the beauty on my screen, dragging my fingertip across her face before I’m on my feet and sprinting out of my office.

Everything’s a blur around me as I race through the office. No sounds, no surroundings—nothing breaks through my conscious awareness except for her face. I can’t shake it. I can’t shake the primal animal clawing its way out of me when

I saw her and it's hijacking my body. Fuck, this is crazy. I've never felt so drawn to another person like this before.

It's not until someone crashes into me that I finally snap back to reality.

It's her. My angel. My fucking girl. The thoughts that are flying through my head are crazy. I don't even know her name and I want to claim her as mine. But who could blame me?

Her scent. Her lips. Fucking hell, those curves and that face. I've never felt this before. I don't know what this feeling is. It's all-consuming. It's...

"I—I'm sorry," she whimpers against me.

That voice. It's sweet like honey and just as smooth and I can feel it wrapping itself around me, around my fucking cock. Christ, two fucking words out of that sweet mouth and I'm harder than I've ever been in my entire life. I've never heard something so perfect, and I swear if she speaks again I'm going to lose the tenuous grasp I have on my self-control.

"Never," I say, resisting the urge to kiss those lips. "Apologize."

She looks up at me with a dazed expression, blue eyes glassy as she wets her lips absently. My jaw clenches as I fight the urge yet again. I'm about to fire a predator, but here I am acting out the role myself. The thoughts running through my head are sinful, fucking filthy. And no matter how hard I try, I can't stop them.

Fuck, this is not like me. There's hardly a single thing in this world that could shake me. Except her. She's rocking my world and she doesn't even know it. She has no fucking clue what's going on inside me. The fucking battle. She's drawing out a part of me I never knew existed. A fucking monster. There's not a single thing I'd rather do than shred those fucking clothes and claim her.

But when Eugene speaks I regain my composure. The blood in my veins ices over as flames rise behind my eyes. The security team better show up soon or not even the jaws of life will be able to pry me from Eugene.

“Adrian,” he says. “A pleasure to—“

“Don’t say another word,” I say in a low, tempered voice that belies the rage coursing through me. The only thing keeping me from knocking him out is gripping my suit like a life preserver. As much as it pains me, I remove her hands from me and slide between her and Eugene.

“You have two options. Leave now and save what little dignity you have left or go back into your office and wait for security. As of this moment, you’re no longer employed at BlackThorne.” His mouth bobs open, but I cut in. “And if you fucking say another word I’ll ensure that you never work in this industry again.”

Even if he doesn’t say another word I’ll guarantee it anyway.

There’s a soft giggle behind me. So. Fucking. Beautiful. I’ve never heard such an angelic noise. I’d give an arm and a leg to hear it again. Hell, I’d rip all my limbs off if it meant I could listen to that sexy sound on repeat.

A grin flashes on Eugene’s face, ripping me out of my crazy thoughts. He’s looking at me as though he thinks I’m joking. He’s lucky I’ve tabled option three: Throw him the fuck out myself.

“You don’t want to test me,” I warn.

He raises his hand and jabs a finger at me as his lips move. He’s lucky that I don’t snap it off, and even luckier that he doesn’t say anything—the best decision he’s made. Eugene turns around, grabs a few things from his office, and then leaves.

I turn around, finally having a chance to look at the beauty in front of me. She’s tiny. So fucking petite in her petal pink blouse and charcoal skirt. I grit my teeth, ignoring the need building in me when I catch a glimpse of the lacy bra underneath the silk. Those soft cherry lips, plump and pouty and perfect as her dark doe-eyes drink me in—she has no idea of the need building inside me. I’ve never felt such a strong



magnetic attraction to someone before. It's unlike anything and so fucking hard to unravel.

How could something so small and innocent have this much power?

"Are you okay?" I ask, resisting the urge to brush my fingertips across that soft cheek.

She shifts in front of me, arms around her waist as she says, "Kind of. I'm better now that he's gone." She nods toward Eugene as he waddles down the corridor. "Thanks," she says softly.

I extend my hand to her as an excuse to touch her. "Adrian Thorne."

Her eyes widen momentarily before she extends her hand. When I take it in mine, it's like there's an electric current sparking through me, jabbing me straight in my chest.

Her hand is so soft. So fucking delicate. And as much as I try to fight it, all I can think about is how it would look wrapped around my cock.

"Ella," she says in that sinfully sweet voice. "Ella Bridges."

This has to be some joke. It's too perfect to be real. How is it that my Gabriella—Ella—walked into my life at the right moment? I don't believe in signs. In miracles. But the one looking up at me with plump lips and a button nose is hard to ignore.

Now all I need to do is convince her.

And no matter how much it pains me, I swallow every emotion I feel toward her, ice returning to my veins. I can't explore the feelings coursing inside me—not now. I can't scare her away.

I have to put as much space between me and Eugene as possible. I can't risk losing this... this... I don't even know what to call this.

I can't let her think BlackThorne is filled with people like Eugene. That *I'm* like Eugene. I take in a deep breath, calming

my heart, and then squeeze her hand one last time before letting it go.

“Follow me,” I say. “I have a proposal for you.”

**ELLA**

I DON'T KNOW where we're going but I'm following Mr. Thorne like a lost puppy, nipping at his heels as he strides ahead of me at a pace I can't match. For every step he takes, I need two to keep up.

I hardly notice the rest of the office space as we breeze through corridors, navigate the mazes of cubicles, and jockey around the streams of people rushing by us. But I can't ignore the heads turning our way or the hushed conversations directed at us.

I don't know what kind of proposal he's offering. That's the last thing he told me before he turned on his heel and started walking, expecting me to follow him without question. I have no doubt he's used to people complying with his demands, kneeling before him like he's some god. And it seems as though I'm no different.

But why wouldn't I want a meeting with one part of the BlackThorne namesake? And after touching him, feeling the tenderness of his gaze, and the comfort of his words, it felt right. I hardly had a chance to look at him, but what I saw made butterflies flutter everywhere.

Now I'm not so sure about my choice. All the warmth I felt back there is icing over. He hasn't so much as looked back to see if I'm still following. There's a part of me that wants to test the theory, break off and see if he notices, but I'm sure he will. You don't reach such great heights without an eye for

detail. And something about him tells me I'm a detail he won't overlook.

"Push my meeting with Reid back a half-hour," Mr. Thorne says without breaking his stride as we approach a woman standing next to a desk a few feet from a towering set of mahogany doors.

I wasn't expecting Mr. Thorne to have an assistant a few decades his senior, but when she opens her mouth, it makes sense.

"Your funeral," she says flatly, handing him a stack of papers.

I like her. And when she smiles at me and rolls her eyes at him, I love her. "Can I get you anything," she asks me.

"I'm—I'm... no thank you," I respond as the doors to Mr. Thorne's office swing open and he marches through them.

I pause, mouth agog as I peer into the space in front of me. His office looks straight out of a movie. It's so cavernous that I'm afraid I'll get lost if I don't follow him inside right now. Is there a map somewhere? Headphones for a guided audio tour? This wasn't what I expected when I walked into BlackThorne Entertainment this morning, but then again, neither was that horrible interview.

I take a few tentative steps inside as nerves swell in my belly. My heart is hammering so hard and fast that I'm surprised it's not echoing off the walls.

"Should I shut the doors?" I ask weakly as Mr. Thorne slides into the chair behind his desk. He doesn't respond. He sits, staring at me with those dark eyes that cut through me like a warm knife through butter.

"Good luck," his assistant whispers, closing the door behind me.

Thanks. I guess.

"Sit," Mr. Thorne says.

The god deigns to speak to a mere mortal.

I try to ignore the heaviness in my limbs as I walk toward the chair in front of his desk. I've never felt so self-conscious walking before, so vulnerable to someone's gaze. Although the room is cavernous, I feel claustrophobic with him. His presence is imposing, looming over me like an impending thunderstorm. It's in the air, thick and heavy. Tension that refuses to release.

The leather of the chair is as cold against my skin as his gaze. I fold my hands in my lap, as I meet his eyes. I've seen pictures of him in magazine profiles and online, but they hardly hold a candle to the real thing. Dark eyes stare at me from under a darker brow ridge. His lips soften the brutal edge of his jawline. It's hard to pretend his face isn't igniting a fire in me. And I can't ignore the addictive scent of sandalwood and spice and man that permeates the air in front of me. He could bottle it and sell it as the world's most potent aphrodisiac.

"Why are you here?" His voice slices through the air and I feel my nipples pebble under my bra.

I'm not sure what happened to the man who saved me mere minutes ago, but I can't help but feel like I walked into the wolf's den, trading one predator for another. Although this predator is of a different variety. He's not trying to rip my clothes off. He's dissecting me, wondering if I'm worthy to grace his presence.

"Why am I here? You invited me. You had a *proposal*. You're the only one who can answer that question."

He leans forward and I lean backward, but it does nothing. His presence surrounds me and every breath I take has a bit of him in it.

"We'll get to that. Why are you at BlackThorne? What do you want, Ella?"

There's not a shred of emotion in his voice. It's flat, cold, and commanding.

"I was interviewing for a Production Assistant job. That's what I want."

At least, I did. My mind returns to the uncomfortable interview, and I make a pact with myself that I'm not leaving here without addressing it with Mr. Thorne.

"Production Assistant," he repeats. There's a hint of amusement in his voice as he leans back and raises a brow. He seems to be mulling something over, tapping his fingertips together as his eyes refocus on me.

"You seem surprised."

There's a hint of a smile, but it falls away. "There's very little that surprises me," he says, leaning forward again.

I lean back again, dragging my hands along the armrest, cooling my warm skin.

"The job's yours," he says. "But I can't help but wonder if there's something else you're after. You don't seem like the type to settle for something so... unambitious."

I can't help but feel the not-so-subtle dig in my chest. The rumors about him are true—his name isn't the only prickly thing about him. He's right—partly. I do want something more than this job, but I'm not going to give him the satisfaction of being half-right.

"Not all of us have the same privilege as you," I bite back. "Sometimes we peasants have to take on roles we don't want in order to make progress on our *unambitious* dreams."

I throw his word back at him, and when I see his jaw tic, I can't help but feel some satisfaction. I'm not about to lie down and take what he's dishing, even if it comes from lips as enticing as his.

"And what makes you think I want the job after today?" I say, plowing on. "If my interview with that mountain troll was any indication of how you run BlackThorne, then I want no part of it."

His hands tighten around his armrest, leather moaning under his grip. Thoughts of those hands all over me spring to mind, but I swallow them down. Never going to happen.

He releases his grip and repositions himself on his chair. “Eugene has been dealt with, and in a few days, he will no longer be employable.”

“But what’s to prevent someone else from taking his place?”

It makes me uneasy knowing that I probably wasn’t the first woman Eugene preyed on. He was practiced. I’m sure he had an entire routine he ran through until someone took the bait.

“It’s in the works,” he says simply as he reaches his hand into his pocket. “And I assure you, nothing like that will happen again.”

There’s something in his eyes that makes me believe him. In his voice. But it could be that gorgeous face of his or his self-assured demeanor that’s lowering my defenses. It’s hard not to get caught up in a man as confident and composed as him. He has the look of a movie star and the composure of a surgeon. And when I look at his hands again, I can’t help but have those same thoughts, the ones that add kindling to the fire building in my lower belly.

“And what is this job offer? A way to keep me quiet?”

He shakes his head as he toys with a large silver coin he retrieved from his pocket, rolling it over his knuckles back and forth. Dextrous fingers, too. I can’t help but wonder what other talents he might possess.

“Not at all,” he says as he flicks the coin, snatching it out of the air before it hits the desk. “I have no desire for you to be quiet.” Something dark and sensuous flashes in his eyes and I feel it all over me. My skin prickles at the sound of his words as though they skim across my skin.

“However, the offer is contingent on one condition.”

I laugh, releasing some of the tension building inside me. “I don’t think you’re in the position to make demands.”

His lips form a devastating smile that sucks the air right out of my lungs. The tension comes back tighter than ever, pooling in my lower belly as I watch the muscles in his jaw

tighten. It's not fair that someone can be so effortlessly handsome that a single smile could turn the tables on any encounter.

"Tell me what you want," he says, rolling the coin over his knuckles again. I can't stop looking at it. Back and forth. Over and over. Why is he—

"Is that one of your Horcruxes?" I blurt out without thinking. It's the only explanation I can muster for how a man like this could exist—so sinfully sexy and ridiculously wealthy. He's sold his soul, bit by bit.

He stares at me, a mix of confusion and amusement on his face.

"Nevermind," I say, shaking my head. "What do you mean by 'What do I want?'"

"I'm offering you whatever you want," he says. "It's simple."

"But I'm not willing to bargain if I don't know the condition."

He lets out a short sigh that makes it clear he's bored with this conversation. "Don't worry about it. It's only a few days, maybe a week, of your time. You won't find a better return on investment, I guarantee you. Just name your price."

I'm more confused now than I was ten minutes ago, but I'll play along for now. If he's offering me anything I want *carte blanche*, then I seem to be the one who holds the winning hand.

"Anything?" I ask, testing the waters. I lick my lips absently as I hold his gaze.

"Anything," he says, flames licking behind his eyes as his gaze drops to my lips. He stands up abruptly, removing his jacket and laying it neatly on the back of his chair.

It's hard not to stare at the hard muscles rippling underneath his white-collared shirt. "I'll let you think about it," he says, walking over to the wall of windows to my right.



He presses his forearm against the glass, resting his head as he looks out on the city below. I don't know what to think as I study his outline, every ruthless edge contrasting with the soft curve of his muscles pressing against his shirt.

There's something weird about this entire situation. Why is he offering me not only the job but anything else I want? He's holding the condition close to his chest, so it must be a big ask. So I don't see why mine shouldn't be just as large.

"Okay," I say after a few minutes. "I know what I want."

He turns around and walks toward me, taking a seat in the chair next to me. If I thought his presence was imposing before, it's downright suffocating right now. I can hardly take a breath as every muscle in my body clenches.

"And?" He asks, his voice raspy, rattling in my chest.

I swallow as I spot the smattering of hairs peeking from under his collar. The way his chest presses against the buttons of his shirt. The bob of his Adam's apple as he swallows.

My eyes flit to his lips and then to his eyes as every nerve ending inside me fires. "My entire year's salary as a bonus. Upfront. Meetings with all of your directors. Casting agents. Everything. Auditions, too."

I'm going for broke, but I have a feeling it's hardly a drop in the bucket. A superficial glance around his office speaks to the surfeit of wealth this man and company possesses. I'd bet his outfit costs more than my asking price.

He laughs—a deep rumbling noise that ignites a mixture of annoyance and need inside me. I love the sound of him, but hate that it's directed at me. When he finally stops laughing, and that cool demeanor returns, he says, "Consider it done."

Apparently, my demands, like his appraisal of me, is *unambitious*.

I cross my arms over my chest. "Not until you tell me the condition."

"My plus one to my brother's wedding. My fake girlfriend."

The tension snaps, and I feel weightless.

Now it's my turn to laugh.

It rumbles out of me so hard and fast that it's difficult to breathe.

And the expression on his face? I wish I could frame it and hang it above my nonexistent mantel.

## ADRIAN

THAT SOUND. It's so delicate. So infuriatingly sexy.

And with those flushed cheeks of hers? She has no idea how fucking attractive she is to me right now. The things I want to do to her. The things I *can't* do to her. I'd rather die than be seen by her as another predator. Another Eugene.

"I'll draw up the paperwork," I say, loosening my tie as I lean back. Now that Ella is within arm's reach from me, my body temperature has risen to feverish levels.

She stops laughing for a moment, tears rolling down those rose-tinted cheeks as her watery eyes focus on me. Her tongue slides across those cherry lips before retreating, drawing out a low moan from me. If she accepts—no, when she accepts—this wedding will be the ultimate test of my restraint.

She closes her eyes and slides back into her chair, laughter restarting. I could listen to this all day. And with her eyes closed, I have free rein to explore every delicious inch of her.

Her curves are torturous. Her scent is intoxicating. And the fabric of my pants is at its limits as it tries to suppress the erection battering it. Those lips. Those fucking lips.

She opens her eyes, and I draw my gaze back up. There's a flash of surprise in her expression but it fades.

"I haven't accepted," she says after taking a breath.

"Yet," I say, wetting my lips.

She shakes her head, dropping her gaze to the floor beside us. A few moments later she looks at me again, her eyebrows pressed together into a thin line. “You’re telling me you can’t find a single woman dying to be your plus one?”

“No,” I say, repositioning myself. “Of course, I could find a woman, but I don’t want any woman. I want someone convincing. Someone I could see...” I let the sentence hang because I’m not ready to admit where it was leading. Before I met Ella, I’d assumed this would be nothing more than a business transaction.

But everything about Ella is making me reconsider.

I clear my throat. “This has to be convincing.”

She snorts. “I don’t see how I can help you there. How do you expect this to be convincing when you’re colder than ice? You’ve been nothing but thorny and prickly from the moment I met you.”

“I can be convincing,” I say.

“I can be convincing,” she repeats, mimicking my voice as she rocks side to side.

I can’t help but let the laugh tumble out of me. She has no idea how convincing I can be. I’ll claim those sweet lips of hers and steal every ounce of breath inside those lungs. She needs only to say the word. Give me the green light and I’ll make sure she never wants to taste another man’s lips again.

I move toward her, but she pulls away. It’s the same back-and-forth that’s been going on throughout the meeting. She might think I haven’t noticed, the way she pulls back when I move forward. The way she shifts in her seat when I let my gaze linger just a little too long.

“I promise you that after the wedding, there won’t be a single person in my family that won’t believe in true love.”

She smiles hesitantly. “Wouldn’t that be a problem for you? You need a fake girlfriend for the wedding. Making your family believe you’re going to marry me.” She pauses. “Marry your fake girlfriend,” she corrects, “will only force you to prolong the lie longer.”

That's true. It would complicate things. But now that Ella's in the mix, the idea of her leaving after the wedding—a fake breakup—is not something I'm interested in. "I suppose we could restrain ourselves."

Another short laugh. "Yeah."

She takes a few moments and then asks, "Why do you need a fake date anyway? Why would your brother or family care if you showed up without one?"

"It's complicated," I say, drawing out the last word. "My brother is marrying my ex."

Ella's eyes widen as her mouth hangs open, and all I can think about are those lips. How they'd taste. How'd they feel. How'd they'd look wrapped around my cock.

"That is complicated," she says after a few moments. "How'd..."

"It happen?"

She nods.

Ella repositions herself, crossing her legs as I begin my story. I swallow hard, and my eyes linger a beat too long on their delicate curve. Her eyes narrow as a ghost of a smile graces her lips for a brief moment. She caught me, but she doesn't seem to mind.

I clear my throat and restart my story, focusing on her eyes, ignoring the fire they ignite inside me. She seems receptive, nodding along as I let the strands of the story unfurl.

Until I reach the part about me fabricating little lies about my non-existent girlfriend.

"Gabriella..." she says, tilting her head towards me. "Gabriella Barbera. Seriously?"

I nod, my jaw clenching.

She shakes her head as her gaze flits to the door. For a moment, I think she's going to get right up and leave. But when she looks back at me, her lips spreading into a perfect

smile, she proves me wrong. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to live up to *Ms. Gabriella Barbera*.”

This woman is even more interesting than I imagined. And that mouth of hers...

“I’m sure you can give a good performance,” I say. “You’re an actress after all.”

Her teeth tug at her bottom lip as her nose scrunches adorably as she considers it. “I’ll need to think about it.”

I swallow, my eyes drifting toward that neckline, sliding along that collarbone. I never realized how sexy a collarbone could be until I saw Ella’s peeking out from beneath that blouse.

“Don’t think too long,” I say, drawing my eyes back to hers. “We leave tomorrow.”

She snorts a laugh. “You’re crazy. How can you expect me or anyone else to... to convince anyone that we’re together. We literally just met.”

“As I said. I can be very convincing.” And when it comes to Ella and me, there won’t be a single question in anyone’s mind about our status. Ella included. “You have my offer. Now I need your response by tonight.”

I stand, making my way behind my desk again. Another second that close to Ella and every restraint caging the animal inside of me will snap.

She stares at me for a long, agonizing beat from the other side of the desk.

“Production Assistant job,” she says finally. “Full year’s salary upfront as a bonus. Meetings. Auditions...”

I nod along as she lists everything she wants. I’d be lying if I said I’m listening intently. I’m wondering what she’d look like underneath me. How she’d feel bent over my desk. The way her ass would light up from the palm of my hand.

There’s not a single thing she could list that I wouldn’t rubber stamp.

“Put it in writing,” I tell her. “And I’ll sign off on it tonight.”

She sucks in her lips and then lets out a soft sigh. “One more thing.”

“Anything.”

“I want you to make good on your promise.”

I raise a brow. “My promise?” I don’t recall making a promise but whatever Ella wants, she can have.

“I want to see your plan. I want to see what you have in place to prevent another Eugene.”

“You have my word.”

“I want it by tonight or else my answer’s no.”

She holds my gaze. I have to admit the shift in Ella’s demeanor, demanding and assertive, is sexy. I like a woman who doesn’t back down without a fight.

“I need more time.” I check my watch. It’s just past noon, so less than twelve hours to go. It’s not impossible, but it doesn’t leave much breathing room, especially when I have multiple essential meetings today.

She stands up, and my heart leaps into my throat.

“Then I suggest you start immediately,” she says, turning on her heel.

I watch as her hips sway with each step. So. Fucking. Sexy. Before she has the chance to leave my office, I’m on the phone with Melvin.

“Good afternoon, Mr.—”

“My office. Now.”

I hang up my phone and rise just before Ella opens the door to my office. “Pack your bags, Ella. We’re leaving tomorrow.”



MY PHONE RINGS just as Melvin closes the door to my office. I let it go to voicemail as I finish crafting my email to Ella, attaching all of the requisite documents for my proposal. My entire day had to be rescheduled in order to focus on Ella's demands. Asher was furious when I told him he'd have to step in for me. He had the day off with his wife, Lilah, but I offered both of them a favor any time they needed it in return.

Hopefully, they don't cash it in for babysitting anytime soon.

I let out a deep breath as I click send, and then lean back in my chair at my inbox. My end of the bargain is done, and now I just have to wait for Ella to sign on the dotted line.

During the few breaks I've had since Ella left, I'd been stalking her online. I wanted to know everything the internet had to offer me about her. Unfortunately, there's not much for me to go off of. All of her social media profiles are private, and every profile picture is grainy. The only background information I could find on her was a sparse bio on her IMDB.

She's from the midwest. Acted in a few short internet films and commercials. She's a fan of Harry Potter and has a cat named Coconut. Even though it's not much, I devour every bit of information I can find about her like a fiend.

An addict.

I want more, and if I don't see an email from her by midnight tonight, I'll drive myself over to the address on her resume and make her sign on the dotted line. I only sent the email a few moments ago but every second that passes without a response from her is an eternity.

I sigh, minimizing my inbox and gaze at my desktop. There she is. It's the only picture I could find of her on the internet that wasn't grainy. She's wearing a billowy white romper on the beach, her perfect ass facing the camera as she smolders at the camera over her shoulder. Those. Fucking. Lips.

I pound the table as the urge rises inside me again. With the contract done and Ella's demands met, there's nothing left



to distract me. I slide my hand down toward my cock as I look at those lips. That face.

Fucking hell.

I kick my desk and glide backward in my chair. This lack of control is unnerving, no woman—*no one*—has ever had this much power over me. It's unreal.

I stand up and move toward the wall of windows to my right. It's almost midnight, but it looks like the city's just woken up. Lights. Cars. People. Energy. But even with a view like this, all I can think of is Ella.

She has my attention—captured it completely, and for the first time in my life, I can feel a part of me surrender to it.

I can't help but smile when I hear my email chime. The smile deepens when I see it's from her—a list of all the rules she has for our fake relationship. And at the top in bright, bold letters:

**RULE #1: NO SLEEPING TOGETHER**

I peruse the rest of the list with amusement. Looks like this fake relationship has finally come together.

We'll negotiate the rules later.

**ELLA**

“A LITTLE LIGHT, don’t you think?” Olivia says, collapsing onto my bed. I turn away from the mirror, my lips painted a deep shade of red, and glance at my suitcase. She’s not wrong. For an international trip—one that includes a wedding—my packing job would make the most fanatic minimalist proud. It looks like I’m preparing for a weekend trip—a few outfits, a couple of books, snacks, and toiletries.

“Adrian told me to pack light. *Everything is taken care of,*” I say in an affected masculine voice, as I add the finishing touches to my makeup.

Olivia giggles. “I bet it’s *all-inclusive.*”

I sigh, shaking my head as I glance at Olivia’s reflection in the mirror as she waggles her eyebrows.

“That is not going to happen.”

“The lady doth protest too much, methinks,” she says, opening up her laptop.

And so it goes. The more I deny it, the more Olivia’s convinced. Although we’ve only known each other for a short time, I’ve learned that once Olivia gets onto a track, it’s best to let her stay the course until it plays out. She’s hard-headed and opinionated but also fiercely loyal, kind, and empathetic. What more could I ask for from a roommate who’s quickly becoming my best friend?

“You know, when you told me you accepted his wild offer, I thought you were crazy.” Olivia peeks at me from over her

laptop.

“And now?” I ask, placing everything neatly back into my makeup bag.

“I think you’re insane.”

When I look up at her, she flashes a cheesy grin at me and I laugh.

“For not accepting on the spot.” She pats the open spot on my bed next to her as she focuses on her laptop “He. Is. Beeeeeeautiful.”

I don’t have to look at the screen to know the images she wants to show me—the ones from his profiles in Forbes or GQ. They’re the only high-resolution images I could find on him—the only images, really. He’s a ghost online.

Not that I was stalking him. It was for research purposes only. I’m not going into a business deal with someone blindly. And that’s all this is.

A deal.

A contract.

One party fulfilling their promise to the other and nothing more.

I slide in next to Olivia and glance at the screen. There he is—Adrian Thorne in his natural habitat. He’s seated on a dark leather couch—the same one I passed in his office yesterday—wearing a charcoal suit a shade lighter than his eyes. His legs are spread wide, elbows resting on his thighs as he knits his fingers together in front of him. Dark hair tousled, eyes ablaze as he stares directly at the lens in front of him.

“Just look at that smolder,” she says, fanning herself.

I have. Many, many times. Every time I close my eyes I can see it, etched in my mind. Dark eyes under darker brows, narrowed as they dissect me inch by inch. The sharp edge of his cheekbones. The sharper edge of his jawline. I know the smolder. I know the face. But what Olivia doesn’t understand is how it feels when it’s directed at you.

In person.

“What about it?” I ask in a tone that affects nonchalance but is a pitch too high.

Her mouth hangs open for a beat as she stares at me. I ignore the look and the heat rising in my cheeks and neck. Then, she gives a knowing smile. “You know, for an actress, you could do better.”

I laugh, swatting her with a pillow.

“It’s the truth, and you know it. But...” she says, her gaze drifting lazily as she scrolls through more and more pictures of Adrian. “If you’re not interested, sign me up.”

Just wait until she scrolls far enough to see him working out in his home gym. Research. Pure research and nothing more.

“I’m *very* interested. Just not in the same way you are.”

The look she gives me cuts through my bullshit.

“Okay. I’m *kinda* interested in the same you are.”

She hums. “Uh-huh.”

“But this isn’t a real relationship. It’s purely transactional. Nothing more.”

“For now,” she says, smiling at me. “We’ll see how those rules hold up when this guy walks out of the shower with just a towel on.”

She spins the laptop around and there it is—the single shirtless picture of Adrian Thorne as he’s working out. Sweaty. Hot. Muscles galore. The man is Adonis incarnate and I’m supposed to pretend to be his girlfriend? I swallow as the realization sets in that this may not be as straightforward as I thought.

“I’ll make sure we have separate rooms.”

Olivia laughs, spinning the laptop back around to continue her cyberstalking.

“If I were you, I’d burn the list you sent him. No kissing? What were you thinking?”

My skin flushes as I mentally scan the list in my head. I thought it was a good idea to lay out a few ground rules to make sure we were on the same page with this agreement. Keep things purely platonic. Businesslike. But when I read the email he sent in response, I knew that was going to be difficult.

*We’ll negotiate your list on the plane and draw up a refined contract.*

Gulp.

“I don’t know,” I tell Olivia. “It’s not like I had a lot of time to think this over. I’ve never been in a fake relationship before.”

“Fake or not—you should be taking advantage of *everything* this man has to offer.” She taps the computer screen. “Do I have to show you this picture again?”

I sigh. “No need.” It’s imprinted in my mind’s eye. Every muscle. Every curve. Every—

There’s a forceful knock on the door, and my heart leaps into my throat, tingles spreading from my core.

“He’s here,” Olivia whispers, eyes wide.

“I know,” I whisper back.

“Why are we whispering?”

I shake my head as I mouth, “I don’t know. You started it.”

“Go,” Olivia says, shooing me away as he knocks again. It’s like I’m having an out-of-body experience as I walk to the front door. I can’t believe what’s waiting for me on the other side—looming, broody, and no doubt dressed in another suit. I pause in front of the mirror, checking myself one last time before I brave the storm I’m no doubt about to be swept into.

“You look *ah-mazing*,” Olivia says, leaning against the doorway to my bedroom.

“Thanks,” I whisper.

“And stop whispering, he can’t hear us.”

There’s a throat clearing behind the door, followed by that crisp voice that sends tingles across my skin. “I can. I can also smell the cookies burning in your oven.”

“Oh no no no,” Olivia squeals, heading for the kitchen.

I head for the door, trying my best to mask my embarrassment, but when I open the door and see Adrian Thorne, my red cheeks grow a darker shade of pink.

Hot. Throbbing. Dear lord.

I’ve never seen a T-shirt and jeans look so sexy before. The slate gray shirt clings to the wide planes of his chest. The veins on his taut forearms meander up the length of his arms, disappearing under his sleeves as they stretch over his biceps. It’s hard not to think about how those arms would feel wrapped around me. Those hands. His touch.

And it’s clear from the smirk growing on his lips that my face is doing nothing to mask the thoughts racing through me.

I suck in a breath and exhale, attempting to calm my nerves.

“You’re... punctual,” I say, after mentally crossing out all the other adjectives that flooded into my mind to describe the man in front of me.

“Time is a person’s most valuable resource,” he says in a low voice that rumbles through my chest.

“And I’d never waste another person’s.” There’s a sincerity in his voice and gaze that I find comforting as the words tumble out of his mouth. A warmth that was missing in his office.

“Good to know,” I say.

“We have a tight schedule,” he says, grabbing my suitcase. His hand brushes against mine and I feel its heat radiate up my arm and then erupt in my core. His eyes meet mine for a brief moment, riveting me in place. I can hardly breathe. It’s ridiculous how he’s affecting me.

His eyes narrow and then the moment's lost as he turns on his heel and heads for the elevator. "I'll fill you in once we're in the air."

I pause in the doorway, watching as he walks down the hallway, my suitcase swinging beside him like a child's toy. "Come," he says over his shoulder.

"So demanding," I say.

"You have no idea."

Olivia moans beside me and I nearly jump out of my skin. And when I look at her I'm not sure if she's moaning from the cookie she's munching on or from admiring Adrian.

"Good luck," Olivia says, taking another bite out of her cookie as she admires Adrian from a distance.

"Thanks."

I can feel Adrian's eyes on my skin as I walk to the elevator to meet him. He's hardly touched me and he's making me feel more butterflies than any ex-boyfriend.

*This is fake. This is fake. This. Is. Fake.*

I repeat the words like a mantra, but my body contradicts my thoughts as soon as Adrian places his hand on my lower back and guides me into the elevator.

A single touch has never felt so sensual, and if the effect of his touch is any indication of what's to come, it will be a miracle if any of my rules remain standing at the end of the week.

And a part of me doesn't think that would be so bad.



"I'M IMPRESSED," I say, leaning back in my seat as I scan the sexual harassment and workplace conduct manual for BlackThorne Enterprises displayed on my laptop screen. When he sent it over last night I'd only glanced at it. "I didn't think you could do it."

Adrian laughs—a deep rumble. “I’m glad you approve. And that you hold such a high opinion of me,” he adds, leaning forward in the seat across from mine. Thankfully there’s a table serving as a barrier between us.

“I haven’t known you long enough to form an opinion.” At least, not one that I’d like to share. He’s detail oriented. Intense. Driven. No one could build what he has without a unique skill set. Talents. And with a body that rivals any professional athlete, it’s clear he approaches all aspects of life with the same discipline that launched him into the rarified air of the one percent of the one percent.

Which makes me wonder—why me? Why out of anyone in the world did he choose a complete stranger to pretend to be his girlfriend?

“We have a long flight ahead of us. Plenty of time to... acquaint ourselves.”

I snort a laugh. “Acquaint ourselves? I’m sorry but I’m not sure you realize how difficult it is going to be to sell this.” I motion between us.

The unperturbed expression on Adrian’s face tells a different story.

“I disagree,” he says as he stands up, sliding around the table and sitting in the seat next to mine. His scent is overwhelmingly masculine. Spicy. Woodsy. Warm as his gaze as it skims across my neckline. “I think you’ll find I can be quite persuasive.”

I swallow as I glance at his lips and then up to his eyes, ablaze as they bore into me. “I don’t doubt it. But it doesn’t change the fact that we know nothing about each other. And that you’ve spun an entire story about me and this relationship to your family that I haven’t had a chance to unwind let alone memorize.”

“That’s why I emailed it to you. So you’d have time to go over the details,” he says, tapping my laptop.

“Yeah, let me pull that up.” I saved it onto my desktop after copying it into a two-page word document. I don’t know



how a man like Adrian had the time to create such a detailed backstory about a non-existent girlfriend, and I'm not sure whether I should be impressed or embarrassed for him.

I minimize the manual and holy shit. No. Nononononono. I can feel my soul being sucked out of my body as I look at my desktop background: Adrian's shirtless image, muscles flexing as he stares at the camera.

I'm going to kill Olivia when I get back.

I shut my laptop as fast as humanly possible, but not in time.

"If you want to see me shirtless, Ella, all you need to do is ask."

"I can explain," I say, following it up with nothing.

Adrian looks at me expectantly as the embarrassment spiraling in me reaches a fever pitch. Fortunately, there's a rough bout of turbulence that breaks the tension. Unfortunately, the turbulence causes my motion sickness to kick in, and I have to race to the bathroom before spewing all over Adrian.

I lock myself inside and collapse onto the ground. I'd forgotten to take my medicine in the rush to the airport. Luckily, the bout is dissipating quickly. I can't remember the last time I'd been sick like this, but then again, I steer clear of planes, cars, boats, and anything else that causes it.

"Ella!" Adrian's voice is frantic as he hammers at the door. "Ella are you okay? Let me in." The door handle jiggles as he fumbles with it.

"I'm fine," I say. "A little motion sick."

"Please tell me what I can do. What do you need?"

I can't help but smile at his kind offer. It seems out of character for him, but then again, I hardly know him.

"There's a pill bottle in my purse. I forgot to take one before I boarded."

I hear his thunderous footfalls as he rushes towards our seats, and within moments, he's back. I unlock the door. There's a pained expression on Adrian's face.

"Are you sure you're okay?" He asks me, handing me the bottle.

"I'll be fine," I say. "I just need some water."

"Come," Adrian says, grabbing my hand. That familiar feeling rises inside me as he places his hand on the small of my back and carefully guides me out of the bathroom and back to my seat, treating me as though I'm some priceless possession.

"Stay here," he says, retreating to the back of the cabin, returning moments later with a bottle of water and some food.

"You should eat something too."

I take the banana from the table, peeling it as I wonder how many layers there are to Adrian and whether I'll see more of them before our "relationship" reaches the expiration date.

We've hardly been together for an hour and I'm already considering bending one of my personal rules:

Don't fall for your fake boyfriend.

**ADRIAN**

“WHAT HAPPENED TO SEPARATE BEDROOMS?” Ella sets her purse down on the couch and then takes slow, methodical steps around the suite.

I’m not sure what happened. Everything about this reservation has been mishandled, which is unlike my assistant. She’s far more detail-oriented than me, so an oversight like this is unlikely.

“That’s a good question,” I say.

“It’s in the contract,” she says, peering at me over her shoulder. “I thought after our discussion on the plane I wouldn’t have to remind you of my first rule.”

“How could I forget?”

Ella made it clear where she stood in this relationship. *Fake* relationship as she referred to it. But I know the truth. It hit me the moment I saw her on the video feed, struck me when she ran into me outside Eugene’s office, and has been reinforced every single moment I spend with her: there’s no other woman in this world that I want more than Ella.

*My*. Ella.

She may not see that now, but there will be no question about this relationship by the end of this wedding. As much as it pains me, my brother might have been on to something. I can’t ignore it every time I look at Ella—even now when she’s deservedly annoyed at this mixup.

She's so sexy with her skin flushed, shades of pink that are a stark contrast to her bleached white romper.

The fucking romper.

When I opened the door to her apartment to find her wearing the outfit I'd been fantasizing about—about tearing off with my fucking teeth—I damn near lost it. And watching her as she walks around our suite... there's only so much self-restraint left in the tank after a red-eye flight.

I walk over to her as she takes in the view from the wall of windows. The back of her neck is the same shade of pink as her cheeks and there's nothing more I'd rather do right now than kiss her that delicate curve. Trace it with my tongue. This is torturous.

Her muscles tense for a moment, but then relax as she sinks into my palm, resting on the nape of her neck. Her skin's so smooth. So perfect. The more I touch her, the more I torture myself, toying with something I can't have.

Shouldn't have.

“We're not sleeping in the same bed.”

She's not wrong. If Ella and I slept in the same bed? In the same room? There are limits to my self-restraint and being that close to Ella with nothing but a layer of thin fabric between us... Every single line item on that contract would be smashed to pieces.

“I'll fix this,” I tell her. “I told Veronica and it's not like her to miss a detail like this. I'll head to the front desk and figure it out.”

Anything for her.

She sighs and it's the sweetest sound in the world. So delicate.

“Thanks,” she says, turning around. “I don't mean to be difficult, but...”

I brush her cheek with the back of my hand, resisting the urge to claim those sweet lips. “You're not. It was part of our contract, and I have no intention of renegeing.”

Ella's lips part for a brief moment as though to say something, but then she turns and walks away, leaving nothing to grasp but her scent in front of me. I'll never get enough of it. It's unreal how much I crave it. Need it.

"I'm going to rest for a little bit before getting ready," she says, pausing. "Maybe in an hour we can go over our backstory again?"

"You're not still nervous are you?"

She turns around, her fingers toying with the fabric cinched in a bow around her waist. "Aren't you?"

"Not at all."

She laughs and that sweet noise envelops me. There's nothing better than that sound. She has no clue how powerless I am to it.

"You're not the one who has to memorize a long list of fake attributes. Names. Fake dates and vacations that we've been on but somehow have no pictures of. How am I supposed to explain why we don't have any pictures of each other?" She groans. "And why did you have to tell them I'm vegetarian? And opera? What world do you think I live in? And another thing—"

The sound of Ella's voice dissipates into the background as my vision narrows into a spotlight, directed at her. Those sweet lips open and close as words—most likely a laundry list of complaints—are formed and lobbed in my direction. How her chest rises and falls beneath that thin fabric I want to strip from her like I'm opening a present. Every motion she makes with her delicate arms. All I see in front of me is perfection and I can't help but stare, smiling at her as her rant crescendos.

"What?" she asks after finally taking a breath as she stands with arms akimbo.

"You have no idea what you're doing to me, do you?"

Her eyes widen as her mouth bobs. "Dressing you down?" She says, finally.

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to redirect my attention away from thoughts of undressing her.

“One hour,” she says.

“One hour,” I repeat, watching her as she turns on her heel, hips swaying as she walks to the bedroom. She closes the door and I can finally breathe again. This woman.

My. Woman.

My phone buzzes, and I pull my phone out of my pocket.

**Mom: I hope you like your room! There must have been a mix-up. Two bedrooms? You two need something cozier. I made sure to have everything sent over. See you soon!**

Well, that settles it. You’d think after I’d made my first billion my mother would look at me as an adult and not some clueless kid. Apparently, not. At least there’s a silver lining: I have proof for Ella to see that I had nothing to do with this.

As annoying as this is, it shouldn’t be difficult to fix. I’ll head down to the front desk and have our rooms switched back in no time. Nothing could be easier.



“WHAT DO you mean everything is booked? Check again.”

“Okay,” the attendant chirps, turning to his monitor as he begins hammering away on his keyboard.

After what feels like minutes, he looks at me and repeats the same spiel.

“I’m sorry sir, but everything is booked. We have multiple wedding blocks this weekend and a few conferences. There’s nothing I can do to help.”

“I’ll pay ten times the amount for a double room.”

He shakes his head. “There’s nothing I can—actually,” he says as he starts typing again. “I can have a cot sent up.”

“A cot?”

He nods. “Yes, it folds out. It will be just like camping,” he adds giddily.

I sigh. “Fine.”

This is unbelievable, but not as unbelievable as what I’m looking at now: Max and Sariah, hand-in-hand, walking directly for me. It’s surreal. I haven’t seen Sariah since we broke up. And seeing her with Max? I don’t know what to think.

“Adrian,” Max says, pulling me into a hug. “How was the flight? The room? Is everything good?”

I’m assaulted by a rapid fire of questions, each one requiring a different answer, so I simply disregard all of them.

“Everything’s fine, Max.”

I can feel Sariah’s eyes burning a hole in the side of my head. “Good to see you, Adrian,” she says.

I turn, giving her a hug and a quick peck on her cheek. “You too,” I say before pulling away.

“Congrats to you both,” I say. “You two make a wonderful couple.”

It’s hard to gauge the reaction on Sariah’s face, so I turn to Max. “Thanks,” he says. “And when will we be seeing Gabriella? She’s here right?” He looks around me and then fingers my shirt sleeve as though she’s hiding inside.

“Of course,” I say. “She’s resting right now. Long flight.”

“Good,” Max says before glancing awkwardly at Sariah who then shakes her head, giving him a look that’s bringing back some memories. Tread lightly, it says.

“What?”

“It’s nothing,” Max says with a laugh. “It’s just—okay, a few of us—well, Lillian thought Gabriella was made up.”

I laugh, hoping it masks the panic rising in me. “Why would she think that?”

I hardly knew Lillian, Sariah's little sister. She'd always hang around when I'd visit, but our interactions were limited. So I'm not sure why she'd think something like that.

"It's not like you've been very open with your relationship. I haven't so much as seen a picture of her."

"Well, you'll see her soon enough."

"And so will Lillian," Sariah says. "We just ran into her. She's on her way up to your room. She's taking Gabriella with her to get her hair and makeup done with the bridal party. Her treat!"

My stomach drops. Fuck. This is not good. Not fucking good at all.

"Great," I say through gritted teeth. "Ella will love that."

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and when I see the message on the screen, I can feel the color drain from my skin.

**Ella: HELP. ME. NOW.**

"If you'll excuse me," I say, backing away. "Something came up."

"Work?" Sariah asks and I can't help but feel the barb.

"Something like that," I say.

I'm halfway down the hall to our room when I hear it: an aria like none I've ever heard. It's nothing less than high-pitched screeching. It's as though someone picked the most obnoxious opera music and cranked it to one hundred.

*Oh no no no.*

When I open Ella immediately locks eyes with me. If looks could kill, I'd be dead ten times over. My entire unborn bloodline for generations would be crushed. She's sitting on the couch amid chaos. Women in various states of undress weave around each other, oblivious to me as they try on the dresses and outfits I had my stylist pick out for Ella.

"Adrian," a soft voice coos at me as I feel two arms wrap around me. I look down to find Lillian blinking up at me. Although I hardly interacted with her, I recognize those



expressive green eyes and a smattering of freckles in a line under her eyes and across the bridge of her nose.

“Lillian,” I offer in a way of a greeting.

“I was hoping to see you before whisking off your wonderful woman. I hope you don’t mind,” she adds, smiling up at me.

“No.” I sigh, trying to catch Ella’s eyes again. “Not at all.”

Fuck. We’ve hardly been here twenty minutes and already things are falling apart. We were supposed to be inseparable—a united front. We haven’t had the chance to solidify our backstory and now Ella’s going to be interrogated by my ex’s entire bridal party.

“I wanted to make Gabby feel welcome, so I played some of her favorite music. Strange taste, but that’s fine,” she says as she drags a finger down my bicep.

I raise a brow. “Gabby? She prefers Ella.”

“I had no idea,” she says, her voice saccharine. “I just don’t know a whole lot about her. And everything I do know seems to be wrong. She doesn’t like the opera music I picked for her and she hasn’t even touched her eggplant burger.”

“We had a long flight. Now, if you’d excuse me,” I say, removing myself from Lillian’s grip as I stride toward Ella. She’s not on the couch anymore but it’s not exactly difficult to find her. Her eyes are burning a hole in my skin and her scent, even in a room filled with women, is overwhelming my senses.

She’s talking with a woman I vaguely recognize as one of Sariah’s friends, arms folded, eyes on me as I close the gap between us.

“Adrian,” the woman says as I approach. “So good to see you again.” She rocks onto the balls of her feet and kisses both of my cheeks.

“You too,” I say, ignoring the fact that I have no clue who she is.

“We were just talking about your cat,” the woman says.

“My cat?”

I glance at Ella who's sucking in her bottom lip, attempting to hold back laughter.

“Snickerdoodle!” She says. “It's such a wonderful name and Ella was telling me the story about how you nursed the poor little thing back to health. All those fleas. The mange. How she slept in the crook of your neck and wouldn't leave your side so you had to bring her to work with you in a little carrying case.” The woman cups her hands in front of her, nearly swooning as she recounts the story of my nonexistent cat. I can't take my eyes off Ella, who's now facing the wall as she attempts to recompose herself.

Well played, Ella. But two can play this game. And when I play, I never lose.

“And you did it all for Ella, even though you were allergic.”

“All of it true,” I say as Ella turns around, her cheeks ruddy and bottom lip swollen. There's not a more perfect sight or perfect opportunity.

I step forward, grabbing Ella by the wrist and pulling her into me. Her body tenses for a moment as she looks up at me. I slide my hand under her arm, resting it on the small of her back while I brush stray curls away from her face. I can feel her chest heaving against my body.

And her scent. Fuck. I'm a goner.

“Anything for love,” I say before pressing my lips against hers.

The squeal behind me falls away as every bit of my being is focused on Ella and the sweet taste of her lips. Their softness. The way her body melts moment by moment as she relents. Nothing has tasted sweeter. Nothing has felt more perfect than her lips on mine. I know I'm breaking one of her rules, but I don't care. And from the way Ella's kissing me back, her hands gripping the back of my skull, she doesn't care either.

When our lips finally break their seal and I see Ella staring back at me, there's no question in my mind that she feels the same as me. My body is fucking electric with her in my arms.

"Consider my price doubled, Sweetie," she whispers against my lips.

"Anything for you, Babe."

Before I have the chance to claim her lips again, Lillian squeals behind us. "Time to go ladies! Gabs get your butt over here. You're riding with me."

"Lucky me," Ella says.

"Lucky you."

I can't keep my eyes off her. I don't want to keep my eyes off her. Every time I open my eyes I want to see her. But she dips under my arm, sneaking by me. I snatch her hand, pulling her back into me.

"We'll finish this later," I say.

Ella smiles. "So long as I haven't been arrested for murder."

I raise a brow.

"Look, anything's possible if Lillian keeps calling me Gabs."

I laugh. I fucking love this woman. I press a kiss against her hand and she rolls away.

"And don't forget to feed Snickerdoodle," she calls back over her shoulder.

How could I forget?

**ELLA**

MIRACULOUSLY, I make it back to the hotel without a murder charge, even though Lillian made it incredibly tempting.

Gabs. Gab Gab. Gabberino. Gabster. G-Unit.

It's not my real name but my heart goes out to anyone named Gabriella who had to endure this sick form of torture. Seriously though, how did Ella not make the list of nicknames but Gabba-dabba-doo did?

Because she's in love with Adrian and hates that he's off the market, so she's throwing not-so-subtle jabs my way.

Holy shit.

Yeah, she wasn't remotely attempting to hide it. She dove straight into the interrogation the moment we left the room and did not let up the entire time we were gone. I couldn't go to the bathroom without her latching onto my arm and following me like we're besties, all the while droning on and on about some random time Adrian was nice to her when he was visiting during Thanksgiving years ago.

Does Adrian not know the minefield he's about to walk into? The minefield he chucked me into bound, gagged, and blindfolded? He must have no clue because he never told me Sariah had a sister.

"Gigi!" Lillian chirps in her now quite familiar voice that I'll have nightmares about.

Ugh. I thought I'd managed to escape from the crowd outside without her noticing me.

I turn, flashing the best fake smile I can muster. “Yes?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“Please give Adrian a kiss for me.”

More gritted teeth. “Uh-huh.”

It’s taking everything in my power to restrain myself as I nod slowly and then turn around and head for the elevator.

Kiss Adrian for her? He’s not even my real boyfriend but I’m pissed off anyway. Who does she think she is? I’m not sure what I signed up for, but this was not it. I should’ve added some contingency to the contract. And after that kiss?

That. *Kiss.*

I lean back against the cool, polished metal interior of the elevator remembering the feel of Adrian’s lips on mine. The way he gripped me—riveting me in place as he... *devoured me.* I’ve never been kissed like that before, yet somehow a few minutes with Lillian was enough to make me forget all about it.

Until now. The closer the elevator gets to my floor the more my mind brings it into focus. Every detail—from his taste to how it made me melt is flooding back to me in high definition. The ding of the elevator tugs me back to reality.

I can’t let Adrian know how much it affected me. He was only kissing me to make our relationship seem more realistic. A show for one of the bridesmaids. I’d just recounted a—uh—cute story about him, and he was returning the favor in kind.

And then some.

I try to fan the redness out of my cheeks as I walk to our room—which still has one bed—telling myself that the kiss wasn’t real. It was all part of the deal and nothing more. But as soon as I open the door and see Adrian, there’s nothing fake about the sensations skating over me.

*Dear lord, this man is unreal.*

Adrian’s half-dressed as he stands in front of a mirror. His crisp white shirt is all the way unbuttoned, and when he turns to greet me, I don’t even hear him. The only thing I can focus

on is his torso. Rows of abs stacked like slabs of granite. Thankfully, his pants are on.

“Hi,” I say, keeping it simple because I don’t trust myself to formulate a coherent sentence right now.

Adrian walks over to me slowly as he begins buttoning up his shirt. I want to reach out and stop him but that would go against the whole “these feelings aren’t real” so instead I do nothing.

“You look...”

He doesn’t complete his sentence, but the expression on his face tells me all I need to know. Although I don’t need Adrian’s approval, it’s hard not to admit that I like his attention. I like feeling the warmth of his dark gaze on me. Fiery. Fierce. Primal. It’s been a long time since I’ve had someone look at me like that. I don’t even know if anyone has ever looked at me the way he is. I guess the complete makeover at a glitzy salon wasn’t such a bad idea after all, even if I did have to endure Lillian.

“You look...” he begins again, this time less than a foot in front of me. He’s so close that his scent is beginning to wind its way around me again. I’m having flashbacks from his office, his all-consuming presence surrounding me.

“Hungry,” I say, moving toward the couch to get some space.

“That’s not exactly the word I was looking for.”

“Oh yeah? What then?”

His smile hits me square in the chest, stunning me in place as he closes the gap between us again. He drags the tips of his fingers across my cheek and I feel tingles erupt all over. I haven’t seen this side of Adrian. It’s overwhelming, to say the least, and making me reconsider whether that kiss was fake. That cold, businesslike demeanor is gone and all I feel is warmth and heat as he encircles me.

“It’s indescribable,” he says. “You’re indescribable. There’s not a single word that could capture how stunning you are.”

Gulp.

“Oh?” Is the only thing I can muster as my throat begins to seal up, emotions bubbling up in my chest.

“You look how I feel watching moonlight shimmering on the Mediterranean Sea at midnight from the beach in Cinque Terre.”

I snort. It’s hard not to. I have no idea what I’m feeling at this moment because it’s so surreal.

“I—I’m not sure what that means but it doesn’t sound like something a fake boyfriend would tell his fake girlfriend.”

This is all part of the game. Right? But where’s the audience? Where’s the part where we’re acting—putting on a show for everyone else?

“You’re right,” he says, letting his words fill the air around us, thick and heavy.

His thumb brushes my bottom lip as his eyes dart between my eyes and mouth.

“I’m going to kiss you again, Ella.”

“Real or fake?” I mutter, my breath hitching in my chest.

“I’ll let you be the judge.”

His lips crash into mine and every cell in my body screams the answer in unison. There’s nothing fake about this kiss. There’s nothing about it that’s for show. It’s perfect—somehow better than the first.

I moan into his lips as I grip the hard planes of his back, digging, clawing, pleading for him not to stop. Never stop.

“You’re so sweet,” Adrian moans, pulling back for a brief moment before our lips meet again.

Our tongues swirl hungrily, tasting each other. Kissing Adrian is better than any sex I’ve had, and I don’t know what that says about my sex life or Adrian’s skillful lips.

He grips my ass and pulls me off the ground as I wrap my legs around his torso, grinding against him. My breath comes

to me in fits and bursts as I grip his hair, tugging, urging him as our kiss deepens.

I don't care whether this is fake or not. Whatever is happening between us—I don't want it to stop. Please don't let it stop.

It hardly registers that Adrian's moved me to the couch until my back hits the cushions and our kiss breaks. I bite lightly on my lower lip, looking up at Adrian as he looms over me, eyes ablaze and hair disheveled. His mouth bobs open for a brief moment as though he's going to say something, but he holds back and then leans forward to kiss me again.

But right before he kisses me, there's a knock at the door.

"Fuck," he says, breathily.

"Fuck," I murmur, grinding against his hard cock as it presses against my dress.

He lets out a rumbling laugh before his fiery gaze turns back to mine. "You have no idea..."

There's a knock again.

*Please don't let it be Lillian. ANYONE but Lillian.*

I moan.

Adrian draws a line from my lips, down my throat, pausing on my sternum.

"It's just room service," he says, finally. "I figured you'd be hungry after—"

I don't let him finish his sentence. Sexier words have never been said, and I'm letting him know that. I break our kiss and I kiss him all over his face.

"I love you, Adrian. You have no idea what I had to endure. I had to force down a kale smoothie while everyone else scarfed down pizza. Literal torture."

"Oh, you wanted something with meat?"

I can feel my soul leave my body. He's the only person here who knows I'm not vegetarian or anything close to it and



if he—

“Kidding. I got you a bacon cheeseburger, fries, and a chocolate shake.”

I lightly punch his shoulder.

“Don’t you dare do that again.”

That smile. Dear lord...

There’s another knock at the door and I scramble to my feet and head for the door. It takes only a matter of moments for me to spread out the food on the table and dig in.

I take a single bite. One single bite before there’s another knock on the door.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Adrian shrugs and heads for the door. I take another bite, but nearly choke when I hear a woman’s voice. It’s chirpy and airy and thankfully not Lillian’s.

“I told you about the pictures, Adrian,” she says as the sound of her heels striking the ground grows louder.

I swallow the bite of my burger as quickly as possible, but it gets lodged in my throat. *Shit. Shitshitshitshit.* I choke-cough, sputtering as I rush to the bathroom, tripping over a chair on my way. After crashing onto the floor, I’m not sure whether to shout for joy or cry as the burger flies from my throat and lands in front of the woman who’s looking at me as though I’ve just clubbed a baby seal.

“Oh dear,” the woman says.

I try to respond but it comes out less like English and more like the sound of a wounded animal.

Adrian rushes over to me and helps me to my feet. “Are you okay?” He asks with the same concerned look on his face that he had on the plane. He holds my face in his hands, his thumbs strumming my cheek.

“I’d like to curl up in a ball and die,” I whisper.

He presses a kiss into my lips and then my forehead and my embarrassment melt away. Well, until I realize the woman who just witnessed me hacking up a half-eaten burger is Adrian's mother. And she is stunning for her age. Far more elegant than me, even with my makeover.

"Gabriella," she coos. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," I say, brushing myself off as Adrian helps me to my feet.

Thankfully, we don't linger on my near-suffocation and Trudy steers the conversation toward safer waters.

"I've so wanted to meet you sooner, but you've been so busy it seems. How's the film? It's all wrapped up now I suppose."

I try hard not to sputter as quickly side eye Adrian before giving Trudy a noncommittal. "Yes. It's been a hectic time for me. But I'm glad we're finally able to meet. Adrian's told me so much about you."

"He has?" Trudy asks.

"Oh, of course," I say, leaning into Adrian. "What was that story you were telling me earlier?"

"I don't recall," Adrian says.

Trudy beams at us. "I'm so happy for you two," she says. "When I found out about Max and..." she pauses. "Well, it's no matter now." She pats Adrian on the arm. "Now finish getting ready, we have pictures to take in fifteen minutes."

"Pictures?" Adrian asks.

"It's in the schedule I sent you weeks ago." She sighs, looking at me. "He's always been forgetful."

I can feel Adrian tense for a moment. "Forgetful?" I say. "I can't say I've noticed my—Hon—Adrian forget anything." I almost call him Honey Buns but stop myself. I need to *sell* this, not make Adrian squirm.

Adrian relaxes as he draws his hand down to my waist. I love the feel of his body against me. His touch. I could get

used to this... even though I shouldn't. This isn't going to last and I need to remind myself of that.

"Fifteen minutes," Adrian says. "We'll meet you down there."

Trudy smiles at us. "Great."

"How many more surprises are in store for me tonight?" I ask Adrian when Trudy leaves.

Adrian pulls me into him, one hand pressing on my lower back as the other tilts my chin toward him. I can feel his bulge against my stomach, and I can't help but rub lightly against it.

"I wish I knew," he says. "But I promise you that we'll face each one together. I won't leave your side."

"Promise?"

"Promise," he says, sealing it with a kiss.

If there's one thing that will get me through this—it's his lips.

"And I'm afraid you might have to deal with me kissing you."

I smile. "I think I'll manage."

## ADRIAN

“I CAN’T BELIEVE how well this has gone,” I whisper to Ella as I take my seat next to her.

Although we had a rough start, we’ve had mostly smooth sailing since.

I expected some sort of challenge, but Ella and I have made quite the pair. She’s fended off all questions with finesse, so much so that I’m finding it hard to discern between what’s real and fake. Of course, we’ve never vacationed in the Philippines or hiked the Inca trail, but the way Ella weaves a story has had me falling for it all hook, line, and sinker.

And I’m not the only one. She had both Max and Sariah on the hook for nearly ten minutes before a somewhat annoyed wedding planner had to spirit them away. Not before Sariah and Ella traded numbers.

There might be a few more complications in the future, but for now, I’m focused on Ella in that tight dress of hers. I haven’t taken my eyes off of her the entire evening, exploiting every opportunity to touch her. An arm around the waist. A hand on the small of her back. Taking her hand in mine. I know she’s noticed. She’s started taking the initiative, grabbing my hand unprompted, hugging me, and even giving me a kiss on my cheek before heading to the bathroom.

There’s been a clear shift between us, and I’m not sure she’s acting anymore.

“Going well?” Ella whispers harshly as her food is placed in front of her. “If I don’t eat something other than grass and

leaves and fruit, I am going *to die*. Then you'll have to fake mourn your girlfriend's death. ”

I swallow hard as I glance at the pickled grape and fig salad in front of her. “I’m so sorry.”

“Who willingly eats this stuff?” Ella asks as she pokes at a grape.

“Isn’t this salad delightful?” My mother says, glancing toward Ella from across the table.

Ella doesn’t skip a beat. “It’s so flavorful,” she says, stabbing a bit of fig before taking it into her mouth.

My mother smiles and turns to discuss something with my father as Ella has a death grip on my thigh.

“That bad?” I ask, turning to Ella as she tries to swallow without choking.

“Would it kill them to put more than a teaspoon of dressing on it?”

I laugh but stop when I see the glare on her face.

“Enjoy your steak, *Honey*,” she whispers in a saccharine tone, laced with poison.

“I’ll make it up to you,” I say, reaching into my jacket pocket to retrieve a few chocolates.

“It’s a start,” she says, snatching them out of my hand, “but unless there’s a few bacon-wrapped scallops to go—”

She stops, jaw dropping as she watches my hand retreat into my jacket again. I feel the napkins I wrapped around the hors d’oeuvres I’d snagged on my way back to the table and slide them to her under the table.

She bites her lip, barely holding back the glee bubbling up, and I can’t imagine a sight more beautiful. I’d give anything to see her like this all the time.

“You’re full of surprises,” she says before surreptitiously popping one into her mouth and then checking out the rest of the table to see if they noticed. All clear. She visibly melts into her chair as she holds back a moan.

*Damn.*

My mind wanders to forbidden places. Thoughts I shouldn't be having. But seeing Ella consumed with pleasure is stripping every barrier I've set up. What I wouldn't do to taste those lips. Feel her soft skin as her body arches under mine.

"That good?" I rasp, staring at those lips.

After she swallows, she opens her eyes and looks at me. "That, Adrian, was better than sex."

"Great sex is hard to beat."

"So is a bacon-wrapped scallop after eating nothing but leafy greens for a day and a half."

Sounds like a challenge, and there's no doubt that the last thing on her mind would be food. But according to our contract, that's off the table.

"I'm not sure I want to know what's going on in your head right now," she says, a playful smile on her lips.

"I think you know."

Her lips part, as her pink tongue wets her lips. What I wouldn't give to taste her right now. Fuck.

"Do I?"

I lean in, brushing her hair away from her ear. Her scent is fucking intoxicating. "Because you're thinking the same thing."

"And what's that?" Her voice is as soft as her hair.

"If there's a chance," I say, reaching into my pocket, "I have something else in store for you tonight."

I set another chocolate on the table, and Ella laughs—the sweetest sound in the world.

She grabs the chocolate. "I'm glad we're on the same wavelength."

I drag the back of my hand along her bare arm as I turn to the plate in front of me.

“Me too.”



I SIP my drink as I watch Ella navigate her way through the crowd of people between us. She's all I can see. All I can focus on. Everything else is a blur. Not even the persistent, heavy thump of music coming from the dance floor registers as anything more than a weak tapping. She disappears behind another group of people, but I know instinctively where she'll re-emerge. There's a connection between us that can't be severed.

But with the night coming to the end, so is our arrangement.

*You knew the stakes. You knew what you were getting into.*

I never expected Ella to be so fucking perfect. This was supposed to be a simple business arrangement, but it's become something else. Something I've never experienced. I've never felt this out of control before.

I sigh, setting my drink down on the high-top next to me. When Ella finally re-enters my field of view, it feels as though I'm seeing her for the first time. My body reacts in a way I've never felt. No one has affected me like this and I don't know how to feel about it.

She pauses for a brief moment, sharing a few words with someone but her eyes remain fixed on mine. Her lips curl into a smile that knocks the breath out of me as she starts walking toward me. Stunning. Gorgeous. Perfect. There's not a single word that captures her beauty. And when she finally reaches the table, I can't help but stare.

“I'm surprised Lillian hasn't latched onto you while I was gone,” she says, setting her drink down on the table next to mine.

“She was circling,” I say, “but it's fairly easy to disappear into the crowd when necessary.”

She sets down her clutch on the table and leans against the wall next to me. “You seem capable of following me pretty well.”

“You’re hard to miss, Ella.”

I can see the blush creeping on her cheeks as she looks away for a brief moment. And when her eyes meet mine again, that smile of hers hits me in the chest.

“I’m not sure you should be talking to your fake girlfriend like that,” she says, smiling.

“And why’s that?”

She shrugs. “Things might get complicated.”

“I’m not afraid of complicated, Ella.”

Ella lazily drags her finger around the rim of her glass as she focuses on it. She brings the glass to her lips, takes a sip, and then shivers.

I laugh. “Too strong?”

She coughs and sputters. “I have no idea what Lillian brought me, but it’s what I’d imagine diesel fuel tastes like.”

“You’d drink something Lillian gave you?”

“It’s the only way I’ve been able to get rid of her,” she says, setting the drink down. “She has this crazy skill of intercepting me every time I go to the bathroom. The other drinks were fine but this one is awful.”

I slide a glass of water toward her. “Maybe try this instead.”

“Thanks,” she says, sipping the water.

“How about we—”

“Adrian!” My brother claps me on my back. “Why aren’t you guys dancing? Are you having a good time? Do you need another—”

“We’re great, Max,” I say, deflecting him before he goes into full caretaker mode. I don’t recall the last time I’ve seen my brother drunk, but I have to say it’s somewhat amusing.



“Great,” he says, clapping my back one more time before turning to Ella. “I’m so glad you’re here and it’s not awkward at all,” he says.

“Not awkward at all,” Ella responds with a snorted laugh.

“I still can’t believe this guy is actually in a relationship after everything Sariah’s told me.”

I grit my teeth, the muscles in my jaw cinched tight as I see Ella’s demeanor shift.

“Oh?” Ella asks.

“I can’t believe I said that.” Max pauses and then laughs. “I’m drunk and I don’t know what I’m saying. Forget what I said. It’s nothing. You two are great together.”

“So are you and Sariah,” Ella says, ignoring Max’s comment. “Adrian and I are so happy for you two. Sariah is such a wonderful person.”

“So wonderful,” Max says, slightly unsteady on his feet.

Beyonce’s Single Ladies starts blaring and immediately Max sobers up. “This is my song,” he blurts out.

“It is?” I ask.

“Inside joke with Sariah. I have to find her,” he says, as he spins around. He spins back around and says, “Oh and Lillian wanted me to let you know she’s ready for that dance you promised her.”

“That doesn’t sound like something I’d promise because I don’t dance.”

Max shrugs and then heads for the dance floor, walking into a table before readjusting course.

“That was... different,” Ella says.

“One word for it, I guess.”

I have no idea what Max was talking about. *What Sariah told me.* There isn’t some secret in that relationship, at least, not that I know of. But I hate how such an offhand comment

through a wrench in Ella's mood. It's clear she's trying to shake it off, but there's a distinct change in her demeanor.

"I have no idea what he meant by that," I say.

"By what?" She asks before taking a sip of water.

"That weird comment about— never mind, it doesn't matter."

I slide in next to her, wrapping my arm around her. She melts into me, head on my chest, her warmth spreading over me. It's taking every ounce of restraint to hold myself back from hosting her over my shoulder and taking her back to our hotel room.

"It's a real shame though," she says after a little while.

"What?"

"That you don't dance."

"I'm always willing to re-negotiate."

She smiles.

"I'm glad," she says.

I take her hand and guide her to the dance floor. I'm not going to decline a chance to hold her in my arms.

**ELLA**

“I’VE NEVER SEEN Adrian dance like that before,” Sariah says, equal parts impressed and surprised. “Now that I think about it,” she says as we make our way outside for some fresh air, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him dance before.”

“Really?” I ask, unsure how I feel about that. Sariah was the one in a real relationship with Adrian.

We find two Adirondack chairs that overlook the bay. The water’s a deep slate, stippled white from the moonlight, and there’s a light breeze that feels amazing after dancing with Adrian.

“Really,” she says, letting out a satisfied moan as she slips out of her shoes.

“He’s full of surprises.”

She laughs, turning to me. “Adrian? Full of surprises? Are we talking about the same man?”

I bite my lip because I don’t know what to say. My neck and face radiate heat as nerves flutter in my chest. Thankfully it’s dark out here so she can’t see my transformation into a ripe tomato. I have no idea if we’re talking about the same man because *I don’t know Adrian*. Not in the same way Sariah does. I can fake it with everyone else, but Sariah can cut through my bullshit. She lived with him. I think? I don’t even know if they moved in together. Hell, I hardly know anything about their relationship other than the little bit that Adrian told me.

Sariah sighs. "I guess you're right," she says after a while and I can feel the tension begin to drain from me.

"There is something different about him. When he's around you, he seems nothing like the man I remember." She leans her shoulder into mine. "He never looked at me the way he looks at you, that's for sure."

"No," I say. "I doubt that."

She shakes her head, turning her attention to me. Her eyes are bright and clear and I can feel her sincerity. "He loves you, Gabriella. There's no question about it. When I was with Adrian, it always felt like he was somewhere else. Only party present." She laughs as she toys with her dress. "Work captivated him, not me."

She places her hand on mine and says, "You captivate him."

I'm at a loss for words. I want to tell myself that she's only saying this because she thinks we're in a relationship. It's a nice thing to say. It would be easier if that were the case because then I don't have to deal with the reality of what seems to be happening between Adrian and me. Real feelings.

"It's true," she says after a few moments. "And I'm happy for you. It took me a while to realize that Adrian and I just weren't compatible and I was trying to force a square peg into a round hole. Not everything is easy in relationships, but the difficult part shouldn't be getting the other person to spend time with you." She sighs. "His priority was work, not our relationship, and I ignored that for too long."

"I'm sorry," I say.

She laughs. "Don't be. I learned my lesson, and I found the love of my life."

She's thinking about Max. It's painted all over her face, and I can't help but smile at how much she loves him.

"I was wondering where you were hiding," Max says, placing a hand on Sariah's shoulder.

“My voice needed a break,” she says, nuzzling against his hand.

Max smiles at me. “You and Adrian had some moves on the dance floor.”

I laugh. “Apparently.”

“They’re about to play our song again, and I thought you might want another dance.”

Sariah slips on her shoes and grabs Max’s hand. “I do,” she says, leaning in to kiss him.

“It was lovely chatting with you,” Sariah says before heading back inside. “And I’m sure we’ll spend more time together after the wedding.”

*Maybe.*

I lean back in the chair, watching the rippling water as I mull over our conversation. It’s hard to deny what she said because I’ve felt the way Adrian’s looked at me. It’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced. It’s caring and kind and loving. And carnal. Primal and animalistic. And I’ve been loving every second I have his attention, which has been unyielding tonight. He hardly ever let go of my hand, and when he did it was only because he was touching another part of me. We’ve been nearly inseparable the entire night and I’m having difficulty believing that we’re not a couple.

And a part of me wants us to be a couple. It’s screaming it because I’ve never felt this way with anyone before. I like Adrian. A lot. And if Sariah thinks he’s captivated by me, I have no reason not to believe her. But it complicates everything, and I don’t know how to broach the subject with Adrian.

**Ella: I think I like him.**

**Olivia: YOU SLEPT WITH HIM?!?!?**

**Ella: What? No.**

**Ella: How...**

**Ella: Nevermind. What do I do?**

**Olivia: You sleep with him.**

**Ella: ...thanks**

**Ella: Snuggle Coconut extra hard for me tonight**

I don't know what I expected from Olivia. I'd like to say she's usually more helpful, but I'd be lying. Looks like I'm going to have to navigate this on my own.

After a few more minutes, I head back inside to find Adrian, which is easier said than done with this many people. I snag a few desserts because I'm still starving and unfortunately there isn't anything more substantial.

“Gabs!”

Great. Just the person I wanted to see. I turn my head, trying to smile in a way that looks natural and not like I'm painfully constipated. “Lills,” I say through gritted teeth. The longer I hold this, the higher the chance of me cracking a filling.

“I brought you something,” she says, offering me a plate with two sliders.

“I can't eat those,” I say, even though every ounce of my being wants to snatch them off the plate. I have to keep up appearances.

She raises a brow. “Are you sure about that?” She asks in a tone that makes it clear she's about to throw down some gauntlets. “I checked out your IMDB. At least I tried to. There's not a single entry for Gabriella Barbera or anyone close to that name. It's made up. I wonder what else is,” she adds, eyeing my chest.

I shake my head as I try to calm my nerves. What the hell is happening? And where's Adrian? He promised we'd barely be out of each other's sight tonight. He said he was going to meet up with Sariah and me after he went to the bathroom.

I breathe in and out. “Gabriella Barbera is my real name. I use a stage name for acting.”

She laughs. “That makes more sense. You're a porn star. And clearly, you eat meat,” she says, thrusting the plate to me.

“Excuse me?”

“Oh come on. Enough with this charade. I know there’s something off between you and Adrian. You’re not his type. You two are terrible actors, and you’re not in the same league. Just look around, *Gabriella*. You don’t belong.”

“You’re...” I can’t even think of a word to describe her. I don’t want to. She’s not worth the effort. The whole time I’ve been here she’s been nothing but prickly and annoying and I don’t want to deal with her shit anymore. Or anyone else’s for that matter. I’m exhausted after a night of lying to people I don’t even know.

I thought this was going to be easy, but it’s been anything but easy.

“You’re sad,” I say finally. “You’re stalking your unrequited love’s girlfriend at your sister’s wedding.”

“At least I’m not a liar,” she says.

I shake my head, turn around, and head for the exit. Adrian can pay me or not. I don’t care anymore. I played my part, but I didn’t sign up to be abused by Lillian.

Thankfully the venue isn’t far from the hotel, so I can walk back. I need the fresh air. Halfway to the hotel, I grab my phone to text Adrian. There’s already a slew of texts from him, asking about where I am and what’s going on. I feel bad about leaving, but I’m so mentally drained from faking the role of Adrian’s girlfriend and dealing with Lillian’s harassment that I need a break. The wedding was winding down anyways, and I’d made all of my last rounds. Half the people I talked to were so drunk they didn’t even remember who I was.

**Ella: I’m heading back to the hotel**

**Ella: I had a run-in with Lillian**

**Adrian: I’m on my way.**

**Ella: No, stay as long as you want. I’m fine.**

I make it back to the hotel not long after I send my last text. When the doors of the elevator open to our floor, Adrian’s waiting for me. His hair’s beautifully disheveled. His

bow tie is askew around his neck and his jacket is nowhere to be seen, giving me a mouth-watering view of the muscles rippling under his crisp white shirt.

“Ella,” he rasps, walking into the elevator.

His scent fills the small space, and when I look up at him, he’s looking at me like a man lost at sea spotting land for the first time.

“Are you okay?” he asks, cupping my face with his hand.

“I’m fine,” I say, sliding my arms around him as he pulls me into a hug. I’m better now that Adrian’s here.

“I shouldn’t have left you,” he says. “I promised you and —”

“It’s fine,” I repeat, as I breathe him in.

The elevator doors slide shut, and I explain to him what Lillian said and how she suspects our relationship isn’t real.

“Forget about Lillian,” he says. “Forget about everyone. The only person that matters to me is you, Ella.”

Adrian pulls back, brushing the hair away from my face.

“This isn’t fake for me, Ella. It never has been. From the moment I laid eyes on you I fucking knew you were the one for me.”

His words squeeze every bit of air out of my lungs. I can’t even begin to unravel what he’s saying. It feels like I’m in some fever dream and none of this is real.

“It’s been torture, Ella. Fighting every urge. Forcing myself to ignore what every ounce of my being is screaming for. I never believed in love at first sight until I met you.”

My mouth bobs open. I don’t know what to say. It feels like I’m floating and at any moment I’m going to fall to the ground in a heap.

“If you don’t feel the same, tell me, Ella. I’ll honor our contract and I’ll let you go in peace.” Adrian swallows hard, wincing at the idea of leaving me. “But if you feel the same way...” He lets the words hang in the air as my body ignites.



Every nerve ending in my body is singing, screaming for me to open my damn mouth and tell him.

He tilts my head up and says, “Tell me, Ella. Do you feel the same way?”

“I do,” I say.

The last word hardly leaves my lips before his crash against mine. Oh fuck. His lips are sealed to mine as he wraps his hands around my skull pulling me into him. Our bodies meld together as we crash against the back of the elevator.

This isn’t a kiss like any I’ve had before. My body is on fire and there’s a kaleidoscope of color in my head as his tongue swirls against mine.

“You have no idea how long I’ve waited for this, Ella. How long I’ve wanted to claim these sweet lips of yours.” Adrian says, pulling back.

“Are my lips the only thing of mine you wanted to claim?” I’m not even sure where the words come from. The way Adrian’s looking at me—like I’m a present he wants to unwrap—is making do and say things I wouldn’t normally. And with his arms around me, those lips on mine I want to explore every bit of this new me. Well, I’ll leave the exploring to Adrian.

Adrian lets out an animalistic growl as he lifts me and throws me over his shoulder.

“Jesus,” I say, as he spins me around and takes me out of the elevator.

“Not even he can save you now,” Adrian says as he carries me to our room. I guess the one-bed situation resolved itself in the best way possible.

“What about holy water?” I ask.

“You’ll need it in buckets after I’m through with you.”

Oh my... is all I can think as he damn near kicks the door off the hinges and whisks me into the room. And then all thought is obliterated when his lips land on mine again.



# ADRIAN

THE DOOR SLAMS behind me as I carry Ella in my arms. My lips have hardly left hers from the moment she gave me the green light, and I have no intention of breaking the seal unless it's to explore the rest of her body. She's so fucking sweet. So fucking perfect.

So. Fucking. Mine.

A vase, metal bowl, and mirror crash to the marble floor as I make room for Ella on the landing table. She giggles against my lips as I step past the shattered mess on the ground. Her laugh is swallowed by a moan when her ass lands on the wood, and I deepen our kiss. My hands roam all over her body, cupping, squeezing, feeling every delicious inch of her. I need her—crave her more than anything.

It's been nothing short of tortuous swallowing these urges from the moment I laid eyes on her. I've never felt utterly consumed by another person. And now that Ella opened the floodgates, there's no going back. There's no way to bottle this up again.

Her fingers dig into my back as she wraps her legs around my waist. I could kiss Ella forever and never tire of it. Her lips are so soft, and that fucking tongue.

She gasps when I finally break our seal. I pull away slightly, as much as she'll let me with her hands tight around my waist, so I can get a better look at the beautiful angel in front of me. Her cheeks are rosy as she breathes deeply.

I swipe a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Ella."

It's all I can muster. Her name.

"I like how my name sounds on your lips," she says after a few beats.

"I like how you taste on mine."

She smiles. "I like that too."

"I think our contract is null and void."

She laughs. It's the most beautiful sound. There's not a single thing about her that I can't get enough of.

"Does your mind always drift to business?"

"Only when it involves my girlfriend."

Ella's expressions run the gamut of emotions over a few seconds. "You forgot to add fake."

I shake my head. "No, I didn't."

I kiss her neck, below her jaw, trailing my lips downward. She smells like a tropical paradise. "There's nothing fake about this," I whisper against her skin.

Ella writhes against me as I continue to kiss her.

"I want you." Kiss. Nip. "I need you." Lick.

She grabs a fistful of my hair as I continue to kiss her body, lowering myself ever closer to her center.

"I..." she begins, moaning as I slide my hands along her thighs, so silky smooth.

"Do you think this is fake?" I ask, tilting my head to see her face. "If you want me to stop, I—"

She leans into me, kissing me harshly, her tongue swirling against mine, pulling away for a brief moment to say, "It's real."

When that word crosses her lips, a switch inside me is flipped. I slide to my knees and push her dress up her waist. I kiss her inner thighs as I slide a hand beneath her black panties, tearing them off her like paper.

“You’re so fucking wet,” I moan as I slip a finger into her slick pussy. “And tight.”

She grinds against my hand, moaning as she holds onto me. My cock is begging to be inside her. Fuck I’m so hard it’s painful.

Not yet.

I’m going to savor every bit of her.

I slide another finger inside of her as she grinds against my hand. She’s biting down on her lip when I look up to meet her gaze. Her head rocks back against the wall as her hand slides to her throat, moaning as she rocks harder against me.

“I need you,” she says, collapsing into me, still grinding as she wraps her arms around me. “Inside me, now.”

“I’m the demanding one,” I growl, removing my fingers. “And I want to taste that sweet pussy of yours.”

I throw her over my shoulder, carry her to the bed, and set her down. She exhales loudly as she falls backward, her dress bunched at her waist.

“Take it off. I need to see you.”

“Only if you do,” she says, tracing a lazy circle in the air.

I nod, unbuttoning my shirt as she begins to remove her dress. I’m moving onto my belt when she tosses the dress to the ground.

“Look at you, Ella. So perfect.” I can’t take my eyes off her.

She attempts to cover her breasts with her arms as she clears her throat. “Keep going,” she says.

I unbuckle my belt and then remove everything except for my boxers, tented by my cock. Ella’s mouth drops, but she closes it a few moments later. “I said...” she begins, trying to act unperturbed, “keep going.”

I shake my head. “Take them off yourself.”

She does, and when my cock flips up right next to her face, she grabs it. “Ella,” I moan. Just seeing her hand wrapped around my cock is making me go insane.

“Lie down,” I growl through gritted teeth.

She pauses, brushing her thumb against my tip, already leaking pre-come, and then lets go. Ella crawls backward on the bed, and I follow, gripping her thighs and then pulling her toward me. She gasps when my lips brush against her center, collapsing on her back when I draw a line down her slit.

“Oh fuck,” are the last coherent words to cross her lips as I devour her.



## ELLA

ADRIAN’S BETWEEN MY LEGS, his shoulders pushing against the back of my thighs as he presses his firm, strong hands against me. I squirm and twist and arch my back off the mattress but there’s no escape from his mouth. That tongue. His lips. I’m under his control as he presses every single button I never knew I had.

I’ve hardly had the moment to process this situation. He called me his *girlfriend*. He... *fuck!*

“Just like—” the rest of my words are swallowed up as my orgasm crests. He’s so good that I swear his tongue is vibrating. How the hell did he do that?

“That was nothing,” he says, looking up at me. “A warmup.”

I laugh. “Nothing?”

If that was nothing, then *something* will obliterate me.

I’m already breathless, and my body has never felt so alive. Looking down at Adrian, I’m trying to think of a sexier view than this, but I’m coming up short. Adrian’s looking up

at me from between my legs with that smolder and perfectly disheveled hair, his lips slick with me.

He moves slowly over me, his hands skimming my sensitive skin as kisses me. His lips are soft and feel like heaven against my skin. I moan when he cups my breast with one hand, taking the other in his mouth. My hands glide over his muscles. I've never been with anyone this athletic, and with the weight of his body on mine, I'm at his mercy.

But with the way he uses his tongue. His hands. His mouth. I can't think of a better person to take the reins.

He pulls away but then kisses me. It's harsh and greedy and charged and my legs wrap around him instinctively in an attempt to take him deeper. I'm beginning to realize that I've never been kissed before. No kiss has ever felt like this. This is on an entirely different level.

"You taste so good," Adrian growls against my lips. "So fucking good."

I gasp as I feel his cock press against me.

"I need you, Ella."

"Then take me," I moan.

Adrian's cock slides into me and it feels as though I'm melting into the bed. He's hardly inside me and I feel like I'm about to come.

I bite down on my lip as I look up and see Adrian. His face is twisted with a mix of pleasure and pain, as though he's fighting hard against something.

"You feel so fucking good." He moans, and it's turning me on even more seeing him this way.

I dig my heels into him, urging him deeper inside as I hold onto his arms. Those biceps. Those abs. That chest. The man is chiseled from marble.

It doesn't take long for us to find our rhythm. We're completely in sync. I've never felt more connected with someone, and it's as though he can read my mind, knowing exactly what my body's craving.

I gasp when he pulls out, flipping me onto my stomach. I push myself onto my hands and knees and slide backward, begging him to fill the void he left. I don't like the feeling of him not inside me, filling me up.

"You can't stop," I say, begging him as I rub my ass against his cock.

"You're greedy, Ella. I love that." Adrian drags his palms along my back, sending a shiver across my body.

"Fuck me," I say, turning my head so I can look at him over my shoulder.

What a sight—all hard edges and rippling muscles. Abs on abs on abs. It does something to me, unlocking a part of me I didn't know existed before. Before I even have the chance to think, the words come out of my mouth and in a voice I hardly recognize.

"I want you to fuck me so hard I feel you in my throat."

There's a brief moment of silence where not a single sound but our labored breathing can be heard. If I could frame the expression on Adrian's face, I would. It's as though I short-circuited him as he tries to compute if he heard what I said correctly.

I nod, wiggling my ass against him, and it seems to wake him up.

"Ow," I shout as his palm comes down hard on my ass.

"That's my fucking girl," he growls as he slides his cock inside me.

My head falls to the mattress as I grip the covers, holding on to dear life as I wonder if I made a mistake. His hand finds my ass again as he fucks me harder, thrusts harder. The headboard pounds against the wall, making the sconces shake and flicker. If someone were to walk by our door right now they'd think someone was performing an exorcism, especially with the mixture of moans, screams, and unintelligible words coming out of my mouth as we both orgasm makes it sound like I'm speaking in tongues.



Adrian was right. I'm going to need a few gallons of holy water after this.

"Holy crap," I mutter as I roll onto my back, Adrian collapsing next to me. I never knew my entire body could throb, a delicious ache that I want to savor.

"There was nothing holy about that," he says into the pillow.

I laugh. "Probably."

Adrian wraps his arm around me and I nuzzle into him. I love his scent, and I can't stop breathing him in.

"Did you feel it?"

"What?"

"In your throat?" He says.

Oh lord. I forgot about that. "I'm not sure," I say.

"I guess we'll have to try again later. I can't let you leave unsatisfied."

I snuggle closer to him. "I'm more than satisfied."

But even with that, there's a speck of uneasiness that's growing inside of me. I like Adrian. A lot. But our arrangement makes everything feel so much more complicated.

"Is something wrong?" Adrian asks.

I snort lightly. I don't know what to say. I guess I shouldn't be surprised that he can sense the faintest of changes in me.

"What are we doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"The arrangement," I say. "Did you mean..." I don't know how to formulate my thoughts into words. It's as though my emotions are jumbling every coherent thought in my head. I know how I feel—I want Adrian to tell me that he meant it when he sees me as his girlfriend and not his fake girlfriend. I want him to tell him that every touch and every kiss was real.

That every emotion we felt through this entire situation wasn't acting.

Adrian takes my chin between his thumb and index finger and tilts my head toward him.

"Ella," he says, his eyes searing into mine. "I'll say this every day until you believe me. From the moment I laid eyes on you, I knew you were the one. I don't care how fast this is happening. All I care about is you and how you've made me feel the moment you walked into my life." He pauses, drawing a line with his thumb on my lips.

"You're my world, Ella. And I'm going to spend every moment of my life proving that to you."

I swallow as emotions flutter in my chest and bubble in my throat.

"I don't care about the contract. Fuck the contract. I want you and only you. Always and fucking forever."

"What about Lillian?" I ask, remembering our confrontation that seems like a figment of a dream at this point.

"What about her? There's not a single thing in this world that can get between me and you."

He presses a kiss on my forehead and then on my lips.

"I love you, Ella."

I feel it. It's in his eyes. In the way he's looking at me, holding me, touching me. His love for me from every inch of him, enveloping me and removing any doubt I have in my head. I've never felt a connection like this before, but I've never met anyone like Adrian before. This may be an unconventional start to a relationship but I don't care. All I care about is how I feel about Adrian and how he feels about me.

"I love you too," I say, kissing him.

We kiss and kiss and kiss. I could kiss him forever and it wouldn't be enough. The only thought I have in my head as

we finally drift to sleep in each other's arms is how lucky I am to find a man like Adrian.

# EPILOGUE

*A FEW YEARS LATER...*

LIFE IS STRANGE... but so wonderful.

If I were to tell myself five years ago, or even a few years ago, that I'd be riding a private elevator to a penthouse to meet my *billionaire husband*, I'd laugh in my face and question my sanity. And thinking back on how it all began makes it even more unlikely.

When Adrian and I broke the news to his family after Lillian tried to out us, they took it in stride. It didn't matter to them. They thought it was amusing, if a bit confusing, but it didn't change how they felt about us as a couple.

We clicked and it was clear to them that all that mattered was that we were happy.

I thought the dynamic between Adrian and me would change after his brother's wedding, and I was right. I fell completely head over heels for him and that feeling deepened every day since. I can't stand being away from him any more than I have to, and it's always clear when we come together again that he feels the same way.

I love Adrian dearly, and when the elevator doors open, he's already waiting for me. I don't even have the chance to drop my purse before he pounces on me.

"Easy, Tiger," I say through a fit of giggles.

“Never,” he growls before kissing me, his hands roaming all over my body. “I haven’t seen you all day.”

I laugh. “We spent the entire day together. Don’t you remember?”

“It feels like an eternity since I’ve seen you, Mrs. Thorne.”

A frisson of excitement runs along my spine as my skin erupts in goosebumps. We’ve been married for two years, but hearing him call me Mrs. Thorne or his wife never fails to bring a huge smile to my face.

“I’ve only been gone for an hour, Mr. Thorne.”

“And?” He asks, pulling away as he looks at me with concern.

There are only a few times in my life that I’ve felt this happy before: the day Adrian proposed, the first time I snagged a leading role in a movie, and that time Lillian was thrown out of our wedding after showing up unannounced, belligerently drunk, and in a wedding dress.

But there’s something different about this moment.

We’ve been trying for a baby for a while now. Both of us were beginning to think it wasn’t in the cards for us, even though our doctors found nothing that seemed to prevent us from having a child.

I hold my hand over my belly. “This is as small as my belly is going to be for a while, Mr. Thorne. And it’s all because of you. And you,” I say, pointing to the bulge in his pants.

Adrian pounces on me again, kissing me everywhere until he finally kneels and kisses my belly.

“I love you,” he says. “Both of you.”

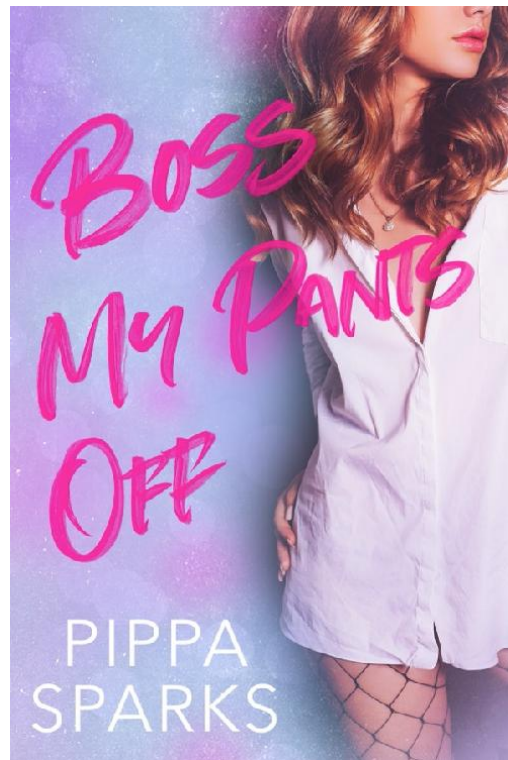
I hold Adrian’s head against my belly, drinking in the moment. I’m so happy and thankful for how everything turned out. I never thought my first and only fake relationship would turn into something so earth-shattering and real.

“And we love you,” I whisper, stroking Adrian’s head.  
“Always and forever.”



THANKS FOR READING! You can read Lilah and Asher’s story  
[Boss My Pants Off](#). Free in KU!

**Instalove. One-night stand turned new boss. OTT alpha  
male billionaire. HEA guaranteed.**



**My one-night stand turned out to be my new boss.  
I’m screwed—in more ways than one.**

**Lilah**

He left my body reeling, aching for more.

I left with his watch.

It was so wrong. So bad. And so out of character.

But with an eviction looming and crushing student loan debt, I figured the handsome devil in a bespoke suit could spare a few bucks.

It's not until I lock eyes with him on my first day on the job that I realize how wrong I am.

He's not the type to let things go.

And I'm about to find out how devilish my new boss can be.

### **ASHER**

There she is.

The angel who stole my breath, my heart, and my f\*cking watch.

I should be furious—have her fired and escorted out of my building.

But with lips so kissable, the only place this little thief will be escorted is straight to my penthouse.

And she won't leave until I make her mine.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** If you're hungry for an obsessive billionaire who is so over-the-top in love with his woman that there's absolutely NOTHING that will stop him from giving her the world, then you've come to the right place. Over the top and unapologetic about it. For real.



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