



*Knocked Up*  
BY A

**BILLIONAIRE**

PAIGE DAWSON

# KNOCKED UP BY A BILLIONAIRE



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Epilogue

Also by Paige Dawson

## FOREST



I was in my office when the missing drone returned to me looking like it had been in a war.

I'd been taking a break from focused work to check my emails and hydrate. Around me, my office was lit up with computer monitors of varying sizes. An array of lights blinked on and off on the walls, ceilings, floor. Some I'd forgotten the purpose of.

Most CEO's offices were not like this, I gathered. I'd seen the comparatively stylish offices of my brothers. But this suited me well. The only downside of the room's intensive setup was that it was easy to forget to drink water, eat, even breathe, when I became too focused. And these days I was more focused than ever.

I put my water bottle down, pushed up my glasses, deactivated the drone, and caught it out of the air to examine it.

A message was tied to it, as if to a carrier pigeon. It read: "*You're next. Apollo :)*"

Shit. I'd been found out.

Drones weren't exactly subtle spies, but I thought I'd managed to programme them to stay entirely out of sight based on Apollo's specific mannerisms, body language, speech patterns. Every piece of information I had on my half-brother I'd poured into the software so that it could learn and adapt, so that the drone would know when to hide and when it could

peek out and gather intel for me. For example, when he was sleeping.

Now, I might sound like a maniac based on what you've just read. Bear with me while I fill you in on exactly who Apollo is.

Apollo and I, we're technically brothers – biologically half-brothers, in fact – but I'd never claim him as family. We've never been on friendly terms due to his megalomaniacal streak. And then, last year he declared war on my brother Jude. In the process Apollo almost destroyed Jude's public reputation, his relationship, and the reputation of a worthwhile charity.

Mess with me, and I might let it slide. But mess with my brothers and you deserve what's coming for you. Apollo had basically declared all-out war on all four of us.

'War' in this case being the kind of war that billionaires could fight secretly, as opposed to more traditional warfare. The drones were strictly espionage, not weapons. For now, anyway.

I took a deep breath and a quick photo of the note, then sent the image into the group chat with my brothers Jude, Sylvester and Winston. They were supportive and I loved them dearly, even if they were major dickheads sometimes. Replies came in quickly, as they always did for any updates on Apollo's activities.

**Sylvester: @Forest... what did you do?**

**Forest: Not much**

**Sylvester: @Forest...**

**Forest: A bit of espionage**

**Winston: He must have been in one of his more irritable moods**

**Winston: Reckon the smiley face means he's joking?**

**Sylvester: Oh, sweet Winston. I love your entirely undeserved optimism**

**Winston:** *I just want a quiet life*

**Jude:** *First I'm hearing of it @Winston*

**Jude:** *@Forest, are you safe?*

**Forest:** *Yeah, he attached it to one of my drones. No biggie*

**Sylvester:** *I swear to god you're a menace with those drones*

**Forest:** *You never wanted to be a hundred places at once?*

**Winston:** *Shut up everyone, I'm trying to concentrate. Save it for later*

**Sylvester:** *Mute your notifications then you technophobe*

**Winston:** *And have 9999+ unread emails like you?*

**Sylvester:** *You wish you were that popular*

Sensing the conversation was going nowhere productive, I slid my phone into my pocket. We did have a meeting later, which Winston referred to with 'save it for later'. It was much harder for the conversation to get derailed when I could glare at my brothers in person. Emojis didn't quite have the same effect.

I needed to compartmentalize, to not let Apollo's threat get to me. It changed nothing. I'd been preparing for this for a while now.

And what I needed at this moment was a break. Though it almost physically hurt to take a break from work when I was in full flow, I knew in the long term it was better if I was well rested and, well, sane.

Plus, it gave the employees a boost when I did one of my tours. The company was big, and these weren't our only offices, but they were our biggest, and they were where I, the CEO, was based. I couldn't tour the whole place in an hour, or even a whole day, so I made sure to give each department and project team their turn.

Today, it was the main cafeteria's turn to receive a visit from me and my Chief Operating Officer. Perked up by this thought, I set my worries aside as best I could and departed my office.

This floor of the building was cool, calm serenity. I'd have preferred to be in the thick of it a bit more, with the teams downstairs, but Mandy, the COO, maintained that we needed a place to get away from the hustle and bustle. I was sometimes grateful for her ruthlessness.

I skipped over to the window to her office, pressed my face up against the glass and gave her the creepiest little wave possible until she noticed me. She'd had extra soundproof glass installed in her office, so I couldn't technically hear the groan she made upon seeing me. But her despair was so palpable it was as if I could.

She looked up from her hands, where she'd put her head upon seeing me. "Is it that time already?"

I couldn't hear her, of course, but I'd gotten good at lip-reading. I nodded gloatingly and beckoned her with a single finger.

She looked with further despair around her office than stood up resignedly and opened the door. "You do this just to punish me." Her voice was deep and stern in the silence of the corridor, tinged with the German accent that remained despite decades in the US.

I beamed in a way that would have charmed most people. Whenever I beamed at Mandy like this, I knew it was because there was no hope of ever charming her. "No, I do it because it's good for the morale of the company. It's nice to be checked in with by the big bosses."

She practically rolled her eyes. No one else at the company could get away with this attitude towards me. "I check in with them all the time. All of them. Constantly."

"Yes, but your definition of 'check in' is a bit more... leering... than mine is. If you turn up, they assume someone's getting reprimanded or fired."



That made her smile off into the middle distance, as if she was fondly imagining getting to reprimand or fire someone. “They usually are.”

“But we need to check in on their welfare. Morale. Make sure the teams are happy and working well together.”

She scoffed. “Happy.”

I gave her a look.

She swatted me away with her big hand and led the way to the elevator. “Don’t look at me like you’re the saint. You hired me to be your bad cop, remember that.”

“And you’re very good at it.”

“Which floor?”

“To the cafeteria.”

“Thank heavens. At least I can pick up a sandwich.”

*Brock Technology* was the one-fifth of my departed father’s businesses that had ended up in my hands after his timely death. I’d worked hard since then to turn it around from a cold, unfeeling and frankly frightening place to work into one of the highest-voted ‘best tech jobs’ around.

I’d have found it harder to convince the higher-ups to let me bring in a more comfortable workplace upon assuming the CEO position if it wasn’t for the fact that happy workers were more productive and more likely to stay in their jobs. Funny.

As Mandy and I made our way through the cafeteria I was greeted with happy but respectful ‘hello’s from most of the employees we passed by. It was amusing to watch their expression fade upon realizing they also had to greet Mandy.

I didn’t enjoy firing people or disciplining them. My background, even before assuming the company, was computer science. I liked the work, and I liked rewarding people for good work. That’s what I was good at. Mandy was good at, and took specific enjoyment in, the parts of our shared role that I considered most unpleasant.

She was the best bad cop there was to my good cop. Even if sometimes I too fell afoul of her wrath.

After shaking hands with members of the cafeteria staff, giving Mandy permission for an extended lunch break to recover, and returning to my own work for a few hours, it was time to head over to Jude's for the Brock brothers meeting (sans Apollo, who was estranged from all of us).

I hadn't done enough at work to be satisfied. But I never was. I resignedly shut down my computer and gathered my things.

Since Sylvester had revealed to the other brothers last week that I had something 'up my sleeve', I'd been pushing hard to get somewhere with my Apollo campaign in time to reveal it to them all tonight. But all I'd really earned, besides a sophisticated algorithm that could analyze Apollo's moods and tell whether he was sleeping, was Apollo's wrath and a promise that I was 'next'.

I rode the elevator down all the way to the first floor and stepped swiftly into the car I'd pre-arranged. The driver already knew the destination.

Meeting at Jude's used to mean clustering into his cold, generic luxury apartment. It now meant having a cozy evening at a family home.

He'd swapped his penthouse apartment for a cozy little – I say little, but you must remember we're billionaires – suburban house in the Heights, easily commutable to his and his wife's respective companies.

It was nice, but I was too much in a business mindset today to feel particularly relaxed in the way one should be ahead of visiting a cute young family's home. I did bring a gift for Olivia though. I intended to be the favorite uncle, and I knew Sylvester had already begun digging his claws into her. Metaphorically.

By the time my car pulled up at Jude's there were already two cars outside that didn't belong to the house. I'd been beaten here, then. I climbed the stairs, hoping to say hi to Elsie

and Olivia, but the meeting had already begun. Presumably Elsie had escaped with the baby of her own free will to avoid being drawn into our schemes. A shame, because she was quite sharp-minded herself.

Jude, looking stately in his armchair, folded his arms together. “What’s this grand scheme Sylvester hinted at, then?”

I realized he was looking at me. “Ah. Hello. Yes.”

Some greeting. It was time to admit that my efforts had come up with nothing. And to ask for the help of my brothers, in the hope one of them had more of an inkling of what to do about Apollo than I.

I glared briefly at Sylvester. “Rumors of my grand scheme may have been over exaggerated. I did have a scheme. Several schemes in fact. Unfortunately, since I gave an indication to Sylvester that I was crafting them, they have all turned up nought.”

Winston looked surprised. It was rare for anything to surprise him, so this cut my pride particularly deep. “Nought?”

I nodded, my mouth a grim line.

Sylvester was exaggeratedly shocked. “But I thought you had aces up your sleeves! You’re our genius child!”

I was getting a bit agitated. “Well, has any other genius managed to turn anything up we can use?”

“We appreciate all your efforts, Forest. Always.” Jude was straight-faced and serious as usual.

Sylvester even had the grace to pale slightly. “Yeah, sorry, Forest.”

Somehow, Sylvester’s rare apology stung even more. It wasn’t that I felt slighted by my brothers. I knew they appreciated me enough to rely upon me being able to find us a way out of situations nine out of ten times, and that any jesting was just that: in jest.

But I was disappointed in myself. And the fact that they could see that was... humiliating.

I was grateful when Winston broke the uncomfortable silence. “I didn’t get anywhere either.”

The others mumbled similarly. It didn’t make me feel any better. I’d rather one of us had something to use as collateral against Apollo than for us to have collectively... nothing.

It seemed Apollo hadn’t started a war unprepared. He’d sealed all lines of communication to his workers, whether with bribery or threats we did not know. He must have paid a small (or large) fortune to make every part of his businesses unbreakably secure, and to have every inscrutable happening covered-up. Because each time one of us had gotten a hint, a clue, or gotten close to discovering something, we’d all found ourselves at a dead end.

The conversation progressed. I faded out of it, uninterested in mulling over what-to-dos if we had no concrete ideas.

I texted my driver.

**Forest: *From Jude’s to office, please. 5 mins.***

“I need an early night, actually, everyone. Got a big networking event in the office tomorrow. Need my sleep.”

I said my goodbyes, got into the car, and made my way back to work.

I wasn’t quite sure why I’d lied to my family. Possibly I felt disappointed in myself for not having a better solution to our problem. They relied on me to know what to do on occasions like this. And on my skills, which were usually helpful in solving issues.

It would also have rung alarm bells regarding my mental health if I were to let them know I was headed back to the office, and I didn’t like to worry anyone. There was no need.

The only issue, really, was that I was finding it increasingly difficult to sleep. The thought of my half-brother out there, succeeding despite his unethical workplace tactics and generally unpleasant personality, tended to boil my blood.

And unless I was tired enough to crash into a desperate, dreamless sleep, it was usual that Apollo’s stupid face or voice

would swim into my head just before I was about to drift off, and jolt me awake into a furious sweat.

Out of all my brothers, I think I was the one who hated Apollo the most, and I wasn't sure anyone quite knew why.

The thing was, Apollo and I had a strong similarity. We were hard workers.

The others worked hard in their own way, don't get me wrong. Winston's medicine, Sylvester's music career, all of these took hard work. And all that's before we'd been handed the keys to massive international businesses and told to get on with it. Jude had been a Navy SEAL, for god's sake!

But for Apollo and I, 'work' was an obsession in itself, rather than a means to an end. We both shared a drive of self-improvement, of achieving higher... deep down, of trying to prove something. To who, I was not sure, in either my own case or Apollo's.

But I did know one thing.

This town wasn't big enough for the both of us.

One of us would have to go.

## RIA



*I* growled into the mirror. As if my mirror-self, and not I, was responsible for my current lateness.

My mirror self was a grown woman struggling, spray bottle in one hand and hairdryer in the other, to straighten out a crease in her blazer. I sighed. Would the fancy businesspeople at today's event be able to tell it was a knock off? Surely, rich people couldn't care about brands as much as poor people did. They were supposed to have better things to do with their time.

Luckily, my potential clients would never see my bedroom décor, which was more suited for a teenager, though it had been ample years since I'd left teenagerhood behind. Six, to be precise.

I gave up and chucked some final water on the crease with the hope that it'd fall out en route to my destination. Everything else was just about ready to go. My banners, flyers and props were already packed up in a large hiking backpack that was more likely to cause further creases to my blazer than not.

But it couldn't be helped. Times were hard, and without a car or much money, I'd be taking a variety of public transport to reach my destination.

As if to make me feel even more like I was back in my adolescence, I planned to exit my mother's second floor apartment via the window. This was to avoid a prolonged conversation with my grandmother as I departed. She may be a

psychic, but I'd never heard her renowned as a hypnotist. Yet somehow she had a way of drawing me into her conversations so that I lost track of time: usually debating whatever ridiculous thing she'd concocted that day.

I grabbed my phone and keys, shoved them into the pockets of my pants, and slid the window upwards so there was space to exit by, but not so much that an almighty gust of wind would cause my door to bang in its frame and alert my mom and nana to my secret departure.

But, as I set one foot on the windowsill, there came a noise from behind me. A pungent waft of the distinct scent of incense and tobacco followed.

Grandmother was here.

I froze, one heel locked onto the window's edge, wondering if I never turned around if she would simply back away, close the door behind her and vanish.

But it was in vain.

"My child. Are you robbing us blind and planning to keep the profits? Or simply trying to leave without a trace, never to be seen by us again, no matter how many tears we cry?"

I exhaled lengthily. "Neither, Grandmother." I turned around and unwedged my foot from the window frame. "I was just hoping to leave without being quizzed."

"Maria, you're twenty-five years of age. Are we not beyond such behavior?"

"You would think so."

"It is fortuitous that I stopped you in time. Because, my darling girl, I've received a prophecy that pertains to you. From the beyond."

I screwed up my face. "I have an important event to go to, gran."

She never looked so indignant as when she was called gran. And she looked indignant quite often, so it really was a feat. "Grandmother to you, young lady!"

“Sorry, Grandmother. It’s important. It might get us money. Money, remember when we had that? Any of that? And now we need more of it?”

“You always were so materialistic.” She sighed dramatically. “Luckily for you, the prophecy mentions wealth. A wealthy man, in fact.”

My mind skipped uncomfortably to my meeting with a wealthy man the prior week. A certain infamous multi-billionaire called Apollo Brock, who seemed to have dealings with half the businesses in America. I wasn’t feeling great about accepting his money, as a matter of fact, and I didn’t want to be reminded about what a potential mistake I’d made in a prophecy by my mad old gran.

“I don’t need prophecies, gran. I’ve got work! And wealthy men are useful... if they plan to pay me for my services.”

My grandmother raised her eyebrow.

“Business services. From the business. The business I started.” I studied her blank stare. “Remember any of that? You told me it was a ‘fool’s errand’? And I said that ‘The Fool’ is actually a card of optimism and new starts? Then we had that hour-long argument about our interpretation of the tarot?”

She nodded sagely, but I could tell she wasn’t listening. She began to wave her arms around, humming in a low resonance.

I sighed. When she reached the arm-waving stage, you weren’t going to get any sense out of her until she’d imparted whatever it was she wanted to impart. Unless I decided to dart out of the window, at which point she would surely snap out of her ‘trance’ and snatch my ankles with her unearthly strength to prevent me from leaving.

I leaned against the windowsill, the backpack weighing very heavily on my shoulders and twinging my lower-back, and waited. I was half convinced she used her arm-waving time to quickly make up whatever she was going to say next.



I'd save that particular theory to posit when I really wanted to piss her off.

Eventually, she stopped totally still, and began to slowly intone in a deep, raspy voice. "The rich man, broken spirit. The broke girl, rich in heart. An angry, red, setting sun. A barren, scorched land that could have been fertile. But – oh – look. Shepherd's delight. Pink skies, with perfect clouds in perfect pink lines. Two pink lines to bring growth to the land. Trees, an abundance of roots, some twisted, some straight. Cherry blossom in spring. But in winter, the branches gnarl."

I stared at her as her breathing slowed and her eyes fluttered closed and then open again, looking more tired than possessed.

Then I put my foot back on the windowsill. "Good one, gran." And I climbed out.

Now that she'd delayed me more than I'd already delayed myself fussing over my appearance, I needed to get a move on. I would pay as much mind as I usually did to her prophecies. So, zero.

Putting the 'prophecy' firmly out of mind, I lugged my backpack, back already aching more than I'd like, two blocks down to the bus stop and waited.

It took two buses and the subway to get to the event. For all the help I'd received in attending the event today – the marketing help, the payment, the admission and table price covered – I'd not been sent transportation by my benefactor.

The changeover of buses was blessedly brief. I was making up some of the lost time.

I lugged my backpack onto the second bus and slumped into a seat near the front, staring out at the moving landscape as we made our way further into the center of the city.

These kinds of events weren't totally new to me. But they had been last week, when I'd attended my first.

That's where Apollo Brock had approached me with a very generous offer.

I'd known of the Brock family, of course, prior to meeting him. But only vaguely. I didn't follow celebrities much. That included celebrities of the business and entrepreneur worlds – until recently, when I'd started my own, *Tarot for Success*.

But since the Brocks had inherited their wealth from the infamous Emory Brock, I'd not focused on them during my studies. Inherited wealth was something I could never amass no matter how hard I tried. Instead, I'd been studying up on people more like me, or more like I wished to be – people who came from nothing and then, with incredible motivation, managed to build a business.

I had strong motivation, even if I had little else.

So, at the event last week, when Apollo had paid my standard fee for a five-minute quick, one card reading, I'd thought nothing of it. Then I'd taken him into the small but beautiful pop-up tent I had for these sorts of events, and he'd told me of his plan.

“My brother Forest, that dear boy, is having some problems with a business rival. He's really at a dead end with it, you see. I think he could do with some counsel of the... spiritual kind, but he's quite resistant to that sort of thing. He works in technology. He's very logical and science-minded. Now, you don't need to explain to me the benefits of taking a more spiritual angle on things. Did you know, my mother was a fortune teller?”

I had shaken my head. No, I didn't know that. Wasn't he the son of one of the world's most infamous multibillionaires? Had Emory Brock really been married to a fortune teller?

“I can see you're confused. You may not know this – you are quite young, aren't you? – but my brothers and I are actually half-brothers. We all have different mothers. And, excitingly, we all grew up not knowing who our biological father was. So really, I can empathize with your position. Your mother. You need the money for her treatments, don't you?”

I nodded, a little warily. “How did you know that?”

“It’s very easy to know things when you have money. But since I like you, I’ll let you know it was very easy. Your business was only registered last month. You hired the suit you’re wearing today, and not exactly from an up-market hire facility, either. And you’re already in debt from your mother’s treatments so far, to the extent she’s considering stopping them if you don’t find a way of raising the money. It’s not so difficult to put together.”

I stared at him.

“Money has lots of wonderful benefits. Such as healthcare. I have a proposition for you. Please read my brother Forest’s fortune for him. I worry about him. All I ask is that you let me know how it went, afterwards.”

“Readings are strictly confidential.”

“Oh, I know. But I think this cheque should clear things up. And you can impart the information to me in whatever way makes you feel less... morally challenged, bending your confidentiality rule. Mime – even interpretive dance, if you really wish.”

He’d slid a cheque onto the small plastic fold-out table in the middle of the tent. I’d hesitated before picking it up, but once my fingers touched the paper, they’d snatched it and held it up to my face so fast the words blurred and my hands shook. When my vision settled, I wasn’t quite sure I was seeing correctly. It wouldn’t pay for everything I owed, which was already an astronomical amount, but it would be enough to convince my mother I’d one day be able to work us out of the debt we were getting ourselves into. Essentially, this money could give my mother back the will to live.

And from then there was no doubt in her mind about what I should do. There was no real choice here. I had to do it.

Apollo had seemed delighted. “Thank you. This will give me *great* peace of mind, Miss Moon. Now, you’re going to have to convince my brother to accept your reading. Let him pay, if it makes him feel better – he must absolutely not know you’ve been sent by me, or he won’t trust a word you say. Even though I’ve in no way told you to say anything.”

I was clutching the cheque with both hands like I was afraid I'd drop it and a rogue breeze inside the conference center would sweep it far, far away. "How will I convince him? How do I find him?"

"He's having a networking event at his company headquarters next week, similar to this one, in fact. I'll get my marketing team to send you some materials – based on your pre-existing ones – to tailor your pitch slightly better to his clientele. And who knows, you might pick up other work – while you're there, and also from me, if you do a good job with this."

I nodded, blankly. It was a lot to take in.

"I'll get the information sent to you. Don't worry about anything at all." He stood up, turned around, and started to leave. "I'll be seeing you soon, Miss Moon."

And then he was gone, and I was alone in the tent, contemplating whether or not I should be feeling guilty about all of this. In the end, I decided I would not and could not feel guilty for agreeing to breach confidentiality. My mother's life was at stake. No one could make me feel bad for putting family first.

A week later, my bus was pulling into its destination. Just one leg of the journey left, on the subway, and then I'd just have to convince a billionaire to receive an unwanted tarot card reading.

I'd done a little bit of reading on Forest Brock since being given my assignment, but there wasn't much information out there on him. In terms of personality, anyway. He seemed to resist the culture nowadays where the heads of large tech companies were figures of personality and celebrity as much as they were business leaders.

In the end, I'd resorted to staring at pictures of him, squinting slightly in a my-Grandmother-esque way, hoping to ascertain something of his personality from photos. As if I were psychic or something.

He was much more good-looking than your average tech entrepreneur. In fact, besides the glasses, which were stereotypical for the role, I'd not have pinned him as a tech guy. A model, maybe. An older model, for distinguished late-thirties rich-man clothes.

Interviews with him, which were rare, oscillated between describing him as 'mild-mannered' and as 'commanding and formidable'. They were absolutely no help. And neither were the photos, in which, besides looking quite smoldering, he looked decidedly neutral.

I was sweating profusely by the time I finally hauled my rucksack off the Subway and walked the few blocks to the company headquarters of Brock Technology. The building itself was certainly not 'mild-mannered' – it was a 'formidable' looking darkened glass ensemble that looked both modern and futuristic. The signs outside indicated the Community Technology Fair, the event I was attending today. I, a small business owner – tiny, really – was the 'community'.

Inside, it wasn't like any 'community' event that I'd seen. The community of the rich, maybe. Even with my finally crease-free blazer, and Apollo-improved marketing materials, I was definitely the table there with the least technological marvels. Most of the other displays had huge monitors, projectors. I had zero, unless you counted the small device I used to take card payments.

You see, my business wasn't a service that anyone else was providing. Not in the same way I was, anyway. 'Tarot for Success' was my attempt to bring the psychological and symbolic principles of tarot cards, and tarot reading, to business leaders of all industries to help them succeed in areas where they were most stuck.

The ideas behind it were strong. Creativity was where real success – big league success – came in business. New approaches, new ways of thinking. Innovation. But the everyday mundanities of running a business – balancing books, hiring and firing, allocating budgets and resources – tended to easily drain leaders of their creative energies. Other types of leaders were very adept at running a business but less

adept at coming up with new ideas – so if they hit upon a good idea once, they would then be unable to easily meet pressure to keep coming up with more.

That was where tarot came in, and where I came in as a facilitator of such a relationship. In the right hands – mine, my pitch went – tarot could be a powerful tool for taking business leaders out of their constrictive box and opening their minds to new ideas, all by harnessing the creative potential that was already in their minds, but which was so often stifled. By drawing patterns and meaning out of the symbols of the card, they could unlock the key to their own success.

Now, I was born into a family of psychics, but I've always been on the fence between believing and skeptical. In debate, I'd argue the opposite of the position that the other side took. I made compelling arguments both for and against the spiritual and magical realm's existence.

But I did believe in the power of the human mind. I'd been a psychology major before I'd had to drop out of college when my mom got sick and my gran needed looking after. For reasons that I'm sure anyone would understand, knowing my family, I'd always been interested in the idea of 'magical thinking' in psychology. The idea that, by believing in something magical, human minds created their own magic.

That was how I'd settled my faith in regard to my tarot hobby, how I created a truce between my rational and spiritual sides. The cards did have meaning, but not because they could tell the future. Instead, because we could reasonably predict our *own* future – if we could abstract the ideas from cards, pictures and symbols.

I was a big believer in free will.

That's why it rankled somewhat that I was here only under Apollo Brock's beck and call. But I intended to make the most of this event, even if part of it was going to leave a sour taste in my mouth.

The PA system announced that the event had officially begun. Somewhere out there was my mark, Forest Brock. Somehow, I had to lure him in.

## FOREST



Normally, I'd put on a big show for the employees, but not for Mandy, as she wasn't into being "with people".

They were often a nice change of pace. Computer programmers and tech workers often remained in their little bubbles, but that did not make for a happy, healthy or productive worker. They needed to be reminded sometimes that companies existed outside of ours, and that industries existed outside of tech. At least we weren't based in Silicon Valley, though we did have offices there, as was basically a requirement in the tech industry, even these days.

But today I was tired. As I was most days recently, admittedly. And I'd predicted this the night before, after the depressing meeting with my brothers where I'd had to admit I had no plans to counter Apollo's attacks. I'd stayed up in my office until around three in the morning, when my eyes had started to feel heavy enough that I decided I may be able to pass out and get a few hours of sleep. I'd decided to do that at my desk, and had woken at five with a twinge in my back and a desperate need to go home and shower before heading straight back.

I'd received a direct message from Jude. Sometimes he appreciated that the group chat wasn't the place for sensitive conversations, an opinion I shared.

**Jude: Are you doing alright? You went quiet last night, then left abruptly.**

**Jude: I don't know if the Apollo thing has you shaken, but we'll work on it together.**

Despite my doubts about the whole situation, I sent back a perfunctory message.

**Forest: Yeah, I'm okay, just tired. The Apollo thing is nothing new really. We'll figure it out.**

And then:

**Forest: Besides, what have I got to lose? You had Elsie. He'd have to matchmake me with someone first.**

**Jude: I wish him the best of luck, but it'd be far easier to try Winston or Sylvester first if that's his plan.**

**Jude: Glad you're okay. Talk later.**

Mandy sensed my tiredness, and to her credit was doing some of the work of filling in for my usual positivity. It wasn't her fault that she wasn't very good at it.

"Can't wait to meet all the wonderful community businesses here today!" She was saying this loudly but without any convincing enthusiasm as we made our way down from the top floor to the first floor where the conference halls were. "What is it you normally say... Let's open our doors wide and let our workers breathe in the fresh air of diversity!"

That remark deserved a smirk at least, and indeed it produced one. "I have never in my life said that."

She resumed her usual quiet monotone. "Everything you say to me sounds like that." She held the elevator door for me as I slunk in. "Are you hungover, Forest? I've not seen you drunk since the Christmas party."

I hit the button for the first floor a little aggressively. "No. Just tired."

I could sense her giving me the side-eye as the doors closed. She was subtle, but not that subtle.

She leaned against the metal wall. "Is this anything to do with the bits of broken drone I found in the hallway yesterday?"



I instinctively reached out for the grab rail as the elevator started moving. Was I a bit dizzy? Maybe I was a bit dizzy. “Something to do with that.”

“Say no more.” Mandy pressed her lips closed.

She sensed what the problem was, and she preferred to stay firmly out of Brock family politics. It was refreshing. When one of my brothers, even Jude, visited the offices, she always made an excuse to me in advance of them arriving that she had elsewhere to be. I’d suspect she was monitoring my communications if I didn’t have the world’s best external cyber security force working constantly to keep mine secured.

As we reached our destination, I straightened myself up. I was happy to show weakness around Mandy. She was the one who knew me best at the company. Maybe the only one who knew me personally. We’d had drinks together, and occasional outings.

But to everyone else, I had to project a strong image of leadership. It could be taxing. You see, in some aspects, I was a natural leader. I considered myself fair, compassionate, flexible. Other aspects I’d had to learn. This particular one – being a powerful-seeming figurehead – was the hardest. I’d always had a quiet confidence. But I required a loud one for the role. Thus was the difficulty of most quiet tech-bros who had accidentally become CEOs of successful companies, I suspected. That’s why they had teams of yes-men propping them up, something that I had so far tried to avoid.

I just had my no-woman, Mandy, to preserve my sanity by telling me how it was.

Our security pushed open the grand doors to the main conference hall and ushered us in.

Mandy signed off with a nod and made her way into the crowds. We socialized separately at these things. She’d show her face here and there then make an exit out of one of the side doors while I wasn’t looking.

I, however, was duty bound to make an appearance at every table here. The duty was self-decided, but it was duty

nonetheless.

I liked to start at the quieter booths. These ones took more effort. They were generally more star-struck to meet me and had more to prove. And without much in the way of crowds gathered around their stalls, I would have their full attention. Then, as I was getting socially depleted, I'd show my face and give a wave at the popular booths before making my eventual exit.

I scanned around. My eyes strayed to the booth on the far left of the entrance. Normally this would be a hotspot for visitors, and as such the table fee was significantly higher. It was normally the location of the bigger, flashier displays. But this booth had no one around it. Curiously, they had little in the way of props – the robot arms, VR headsets and interactive tech favored by the showier of our guests – besides a purple tent that was erected in the free space behind the booth, embellished with colorful silks and tiny mirror jewels.

I can't say what drove me to that booth first. Maybe working in tech drives you to a magpie-like instinct to gravitate towards shiny things. Or maybe working in tech had become so mundane to me that something tech-lite appealed.

But a large factor could have been that, after appraising the booth, I happened to lock eyes onto the proprietor. A young woman with olive skin, pulled-back raven hair (forgive the poetry), long dangling earrings and ample curves that filled out her moss green suit in a way that pinged straight to the pleasure centers of my brain.

Now, I'm not like Sylvester and Winston. Notorious playboys, they served the helpful function of drawing press attention away from Jude and me, who were in general far more content with a quiet life. It wasn't that I'd never had entanglements. But my work gave me tunnel vision. I wasn't particularly trying to deny myself pleasure or romance, it was just that, when I was focused on my job, which I usually was, I just didn't see opportunities arise when they did. Oftentimes it was only after an interaction, when it was too late, that I'd realize I'd been being flirted with – or even that I'd been attracted to the person at all.

But something about this woman... well, it managed to break through my tunnel vision with the color clarity of a bulldozer driving through the wall of the tunnel and sending the entire thing falling to the ground. Which is really quite a feat, considering that now was the height of my tunnel vision, so consumed in work I had been.

Anyway, I was helpless. In the fashion of a dog following the scent of sausages, I floated over to the booth, only remembering when I had nearly arrived that I had to say something upon my arrival.

My eyes flicked between the woman and the title of her business, which I was now close enough to read.

And it was: *Tarot for Success*.

I usually thought before I spoke. But on this occasion, the malfunctioning of my brain bypassed such filters. And I couldn't stop the scorn, that was forged of disappointment, entering my voice. "How did *Tarot for Success* get approved for our technology fair?"

The proprietor's voice was light and silky smooth. "You're welcome to laugh. But only if you listen to my pitch and try an introductory session. Then, you can mock all you want."

I met her eyes, in further shock at the fact she, unfazed, had gone straight in with the sales pitch. And then my stomach fluttered. Her gaze was soft but lively. She hadn't been at all fazed by the CEO of the company whose networking event she was attending coming up and openly scorning her business. Maybe she didn't even know who I was.

I nodded approvingly. "You'll go far with that attitude."

She smiled sweetly. "Only if men like you would listen to what I had to say rather than laughing off the premise before they've even considered it."

Ouch. Butter me up, then in for the attack. Was that a sales tactic? It didn't seem like a successful one. "You have to admit, it's quite a ridiculous combination. Technology and... tarot cards?"

She folded her arms. “Well, maybe that exact attitude is why you need this.” She was still smiling, but her eyes were sharp and narrowed. “The tech industry used to be full of innovators. Now you’re all clones of each other, in your shared ivory tower, following the same paths to the top, hoping for the same success.” Her gaze was intense, her eye contact an unrelenting pull. “Do you never think outside the box?”

She wasn’t wrong there. Computers used to be exciting. The Internet used to be exciting. Now everything was the same.

I didn’t tend to be a ‘metaphor’ kind of man. I thought about it. “In your tower analogy, you reading tarot cards for me will bring me, what? A rope ladder to ascend it from the outside?”

“Maybe. Are you stuck on a problem you can’t find a solution for? Do you need a way out? A way up?” She held my gaze long enough that I didn’t say ‘no’, which seemed to affirm her suggestion. “In the analogy... the capacity to build a rope ladder is in your hands. But since you don’t have the blueprints in the exact format you require, you think it to be impossible.”

Not for the first time in the past five minutes, I was stunned. Stunned to find myself actually considering what she was saying. I didn’t consider myself a snob, but tarot cards – and crystals and astrology and all of that nonsense – was a realm I very much considered total crap. Entertaining, if you liked that kind of thing, sure. I didn’t begrudge people their hobbies. But the way people put their faith in these things that they couldn’t prove or control struck me as ultimate foolishness.

Was I slightly convinced because her sales pitch was good, or because I kind of enjoyed the dressing-down I’d just gotten? Well... both.

I held up my hands in defeat. “You’re good. Give me your pitch, then.”

Then she smiled, a wide-mouthed beam that made me feel just a little weak. Or maybe that was the tiredness. Most likely,

both.

“Excellent.” She clapped her hands together, then got to work. “Let me first say that I can understand your skepticism. I don’t go in for believing that tarot cards can tell the future. I don’t claim to have psychic abilities. What I am good at is understanding how people tick – on a deeper level than likes, dislikes, history. And what the tarot cards unlock is a way of understanding yourself, your decisions, your life, through symbols. Images.”

She spread some cards out across the table for me to look at as she spoke. I glanced between the images – lions, stars, swords. According to the woman before me, these things were supposed to offer me some clue. But I wasn’t seeing it yet.

“We all have more understanding of the world than we can consciously unlock. All of those areas of our brains that lie dormant, such as the subconscious. Your subconscious knows more about ‘you’ than you ever will. Tarot cards allow us to connect to the subconscious – to what’s already there. It’s like dreams, but in our waking life, so we can more rationally process what we find there.”

My dreams were haunted by Apollo, and so was my waking life. It didn’t seem so different to me.

“Say you have a problem you can’t find a solution for. After a certain point, continuing to wrack your brain in the same way you always do will get you nowhere. And your industry, technology, is very focused on the rational brain. The creative brain, the intuitive brain, gets little look in. We need both halves of the brain to work together in harmony to achieve success, and so many people rely on just one.”

I nodded, following her line of thought.

She continued. “But by connecting the cards – the images – of the tarot in ways that relate to you and your personal circumstances, you can bring your rationality together with your intuition to see your circumstances in a new light.” She held out her two hands separately, then clasped them together in front of her. She had nice hands. A graceful amount of rings. “New angles. New insights. New solutions. And me?”

My name is Ria Moon. I'm simply a facilitator. In general, you already know the answer to your problems. Deep down."

It was an appealing idea. But I didn't really have anything to add to her pitch. I didn't know enough about tarot, if I was honest, so I changed the topic. "Ria Moon? Is that your birth name, or a stage name?"

She shrugged. "Both."

I thought about it. Honestly, the idea of sitting in a darkened tent while a very attractive woman called Ria Moon showed me pictures of lions was sounding like the level of thing I needed right now. My body, temporarily buoyed by the adrenaline of walking over here in the first place, was beginning to feel its deep tiredness again.

"You win. Well, for now, I'll take an introductory reading. Then, you said if I'm not convinced I can mock all you want?"

"You can mock to your heart's desire. So long as I can argue to my heart's content, too." Her smile was wicked, in a way that made me think I'd be biting off more than I could chew arguing with her. "In fact, I'd welcome it."

A shiver ran up my spine. I fumbled my words. "Well, let's go."

"Not so fast. I take payment upfront. No bailing if you don't like what you find."

"I bet that happens a lot."

"It does. And if I take payment upfront, you know I'm not going to sugar coat things."

"Oh, I don't get the feeling you're the type to sugar coat *anything*."

She raised an eyebrow at me, and pouted in mockery. "Scared?"

I didn't answer. My libido was spinning in circles, freed after all these years, taking up every available space in my brain. It was a little intoxicating. Maybe I had a fetish for being belittled by impossibly beautiful tarot card readers. Or perhaps I'd finally gone mad.

I paid the fee, hovering my phone over her card reader until it gave the satisfying ‘beep’ that meant I was throwing money down the drain.

The grumpy old man in my brain grumbled at the fact that this was surely ten times the price I’d have to pay if I went to one of those backdoor tarot places advertised on the back of flyers. I could see why she’d chosen her market to be successful business leaders.

But the grumpy old man in my brain was considerably overpowered by the horny teenager in my brain right now. At my current state of dangerously-close-to-becoming-aroused, I’d have paid any sum she’d asked. Besides, I was wealthier than most people could hope to be in their lives. Somehow, I managed to forget that I could spare it, and more.

I followed her into the tent. Inside, there were artificial candles dotted around, as well as more hanging silks, creating a cozy glow. My body felt suddenly loose, as if all the knots in my muscles had suddenly started to unwind. Yes, I had needed some respite. I wasn’t yet sure whether a tarot card reading would count as respite, but I hoped so.

“Take a seat.” She gestured at the small fold-out chair.

I sat. She sat opposite to me, browsing through a small selection of card decks. Her perfume floated over to me, and I slightly adjusted my sitting position in case my body were to have a sudden reaction, much like a pubescent teenager.

I stared at the tarot card decks, trying to turn myself off by reminding myself I was about to have a card reading, but all I could see were her nimble fingers. I cleared my throat. “Those are all different?”

She nodded. “I’m choosing the best one for this reading. I think I’ll use a classic for you.” She selected one and held it up so I could see. “This is one of the most recognisable decks, you might have seen it before. The Rider Waite, it’s called.”

“Mmm.” I nodded, not really taking it in.

“Can I have your name?”

I couldn't tell if she was feigning it or if she really didn't know who I was. "Forest."

"You sound like you could be a distant cousin." She winked at me. "Forest Moon. Has a ring to it."

That was just disgusting enough to snap me out of the reverie that her wink would have caused me. "It's Forest Brock, so thankfully not."

The 'thankfully' sounded like I was scorning her family or family name. In fact, I was thankful we weren't related because to be attracted to my cousin would not be a desirable event.

She looked up from her deck with a glimmer of recognition. Likely she was just now realizing she had the CEO of the company at her table – and that she'd argued him down. To her credit, she didn't say anything or change her mannerism.

As she shuffled the deck, she spoke, glancing up at me occasionally. "This problem that you have. You need to picture it as strongly as you can. You're welcome to speak about it aloud, but you don't have to. I don't need to know the specifics to be able to help you. A tarot reading is a collaboration between the two of us, but only you need the final result."

I nodded. "I'll keep it to myself."

Then I frowned. That meant I actually had to picture Apollo, which I detested doing. And yet, since his image came unbidden, tauntingly to me so often anyway, I may as well, if this had even a glimmer of a chance of helping me out of my conundrum.

She held out the deck in one hand, and her other hand empty. "I need you to split the deck for me, while thinking about the problem. Pick a chunk of cards off the top, as many as you want. Put it into my other hand."

I complied: held the image of Apollo's stupid smug face in mind while I picked up half the deck and plonked it unceremoniously in her palm.



She retrieved the two stacks of cards, placed the top section underneath the bottom section, then swiftly dealt three of the large cards out onto the table, face down. “These represent the past, present, and future of your problem. I’ll overturn them one at a time, and we will discuss them before forming an opinion. Ready to proceed?”

I nodded, feeling slightly daunted.

She turned over the first card. I leaned over slightly to see it in detail. It was named *The Tower*.

“This is your past. The Tower. Look at the card, the symbols. Tell me what you see. Be as literal as you want. A meaning doesn’t always come to us immediately.”

I squinted at the card, feeling a little foolish. “Well, it’s a tower. There’s a crown being knocked off the top of it... it’s been struck by lightning, and now it’s on fire. And there’s two people jumping down, or, falling, through the clouds...”

She nodded encouragingly. “The Tower is generally a card of upheaval, or revelation. That can be good or bad. No card is negative by default, but the Tower is certainly a dramatic card. The symbolism is quite destructive. This indicates the origin of your problem may have been during a large upheaval, or destructive event, somehow.”

I stared at the crown, and thought of my biological father, Emory. It was his death that had meant his five biological children had had to come together to decide what to do with his estate and businesses. That was certainly an upheaval. I wasn’t sure about a revelation. But the crown had been struck off the tower by a lightning bolt – Emory had died – and the tower was on fire, and all the occupants were jumping ship.

I kept staring at that crown. “Do you know my family history, Ria Moon?”

She shook her head.

I smiled up at her a little bitterly. “Well, if you did, with your intuition, you’d know immediately what this card represented.”

She nodded, looking thoughtful. “I’ll take your word for it. It’s your insights that matter. If this means something to you, then tell me what it means... without specifics. Unless you want to share.”

“What it means to me...” I stared at the tower, the lightning, the fires. “Upheaval is correct. Things being on fire. A crown being knocked off the top of a tower. Destruction.”

Ria nodded. “There was a large upheaval in your past that prompted the beginning of your problem. The roots may have been growing before this dramatic event, but this event was what sealed the deal, and caused the final destruction. You wanted to run, but there was nowhere to run to. All you could do was jump out the window, hope you didn’t get dashed on the rocks below.”

I swallowed. And nodded. I hadn’t had a choice, not in my mind, anyway. Responsibility had been thrust upon me. A responsibility that still haunted me today, had become my whole existence. And it had all started with Emory Brock. My father. Whatever life I had wanted pre-Emory had no longer been relevant. Its relevance had been shattered immediately upon learning the news, like the people exiting the tower may be about to be dashed upon the rocks below.

After a moment in which she had let me contemplate this, she started up again. “Are you ready for the next card? This next one will represent the current state of the problem you face.”

I didn’t feel particularly ready. “I’m ready.”

She turned over the next card. It was upside down, but I could make out the lettering. *The Hanged Man*. Wonderful.

But Ria seemed somewhat excited. “This one might be trickier for you to relate to. When a card is upside down like that, it’s called ‘reversed’. That means that some of the meanings of the symbols must be looked at in reverse. They may have a more negative meaning. And they require extra attention. So let’s spend some time on this one.”

I looked at the card. From my position, The Hanged Man was just a man standing up on one leg, like a flamingo. “The Hanged Man’ sounds quite negative. Should I be glad it’s reversed?”

“There are cards in the deck like this... ‘The Devil’, for example. But you must look past your immediate associations and, guided by my pointers, find something deeper. So, The Hanged Man would usually indicate sacrifice, surrender, a noble kind of sacrifice, for something that you care about deeply. Reversed... it means you might be putting off your problem, distracting yourself from it. You might be waiting for something that will never come. You may be out of sync with your intuition. You might be going too fast, or too slow.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Too fast *or* too slow?”

She was quite patient. It must be important to be impatient when your job was telling fortunes to skeptics. “It’s not precise. You must guide the meaning. Do you think you’re going too fast, or too slow?”

I was tight-lipped for a moment. Then I begrudgingly came out with it. “Too fast.”

Ria smiled. “That seemed hard for you to admit. I can see this card is quite accurate for your present state. It may be suggesting that you ought to take a pause, or slow down a little, so that you can get a more accurate perspective on your problem.”

I rarely spoke in metaphors, but I was maybe getting the hang of it. “If I slow down, my problem will overtake me.”

“Not necessarily. Need I remind you of the tortoise and the hare?”

I leaned back in my chair. “I already feel like the tortoise. Slow.”

She smiled, not unkindly. “Well, you just told me you’re too fast.”

I shrugged. “That’s what my brothers would say.”

“You think you’re going too slow. Your brothers think you’re going too fast.” She leaned in. “You trust your brothers? You listen to them?”

I looked away. That perfume, which had been intoxicating at first, now made me feel slightly claustrophobic. But in both scenarios, it sent a warmth to my crotch that I didn’t want to cultivate right now. “I trust them. I don’t always listen to them.”

She leaned back, sensing my discomfort. “Well, perhaps you ought to share with them a little more. They might not have the solution for you, but they possibly know you well enough to let you know when you’re going too fast. Keep you balanced, so you don’t rush ahead and miss a solution staring you in the face.”

“Hmm.”

“You don’t need to agree with me. But go away and think about it. If you think the card accurately reflects where you are now – and I have to say, it seems it does – it might offer you some insight over the coming days.”

“And the last card?”

She wordlessly flipped over the last card. ‘The Sun’, reversed. A smug, large-faced sun presiding over almost half of the card. Beneath it, a naked boy rides a horse, looking... carefree. Vulnerable. The horse looked grim, looking down at the ground.

She glanced up at me. “Wow, three cards from the Major Arcana. Those are the named cards that aren’t from one of the suits: wands, cups, swords and pentacles. You lead a dramatic life. Or maybe you have a profound depth of feeling.”

But I was staring at the upside-down face of the sun. Apollo, in Greek mythology, was the god of the sun. My future contained Apollo. I’d already known that. But was the fact that The Sun was reversed mean that I would defeat Apollo? Or did it mean that I was to be defeated by Apollo?

This was stupid. I’d fallen into the trap of thinking the cards would predict my future. I was supposed to be making

my own connections, coming up with plans. This was supposed to unlock something new that I could use to defeat him.

Instead, it had just focused me back on my original turmoil. Was Apollo going to emerge victorious? Would he crush me and my brothers? And how could I stop him?

“Forest, care to share your thoughts? This card seems to have stirred something up for you. This card represents the future of your problem. A possible solution, maybe.”

Oddly, I felt disappointed in myself for not seeing anything more interesting in the card. “This card... has just told me what I already know.”

“Well, let’s talk through it, maybe you’re missing some deeper meanings.”

“No deeper meaning here.” I forced myself to look up, away from the cursed card. “Look, thank you for the session, Ria. You’ve earned my lack of mockery. But I’m done here. Good luck with the rest of your day.”

I saw just a glimmer of confusion in her eyes before I stood up, almost knocking the chair out from underneath my feet, stuck my hand through the doorway of the tent to push it to one side, and exited.

Then, sighting one of Mandy’s renowned sneak-exit doorways up ahead, I stumbled in the direction of it and pushed my way out, not looking back to see if anyone had spotted my departure.

## RIA



I'd had clients walk out before a session was over before. That's why I took the payment in advance. But I hadn't expected it from Forest, and I hadn't expected it to be for that reason. He seemed to have been disturbed by something he'd seen in that final card. For a self-professed tarot skeptic, it seemed he'd been in the right mindset to be drawn in by the cards – but not the right mindset to accept what they had to say.

I was stumped. Had I pushed him too hard? After all, some people weren't ready to know what their subconscious had to say to them. I might normally have handled such an interaction differently. Despite my sales pitch, I might not have considered taking him into the tent. I may have looked for signs he wasn't ready for it. I'd been irresponsible by my own standards.

There had been something about Forest... besides my initial attraction, when he'd walked over and my heart had sped up in my chest. Each time we'd argued, I'd gotten a little more light-headed with a feeling similar to... anticipation.

And then, when he'd accepted my offer and sat down to let me read his cards, I'd felt something further. A pull to him. A connection, oddly enough.

Though we had nothing in common, I'd felt myself growing annoyed he wouldn't share more about himself in the session, that I was being teased by the little hints he gave about his past, his relationship with his brothers, his work. I'd wanted to know more. And then he'd left.

But... I'd fulfilled Apollo's criteria. I'd gotten his brother to agree to a tarot card reading. I just had to share my findings with Apollo and I'd earned myself that large sum of money promised by the cheque. And, I'd technically had my first sale of the day. Hopefully, some of the other employees and attendees here had seen Forest Brock purchasing my services and would emulate his example. He was the boss of many of them, after all. Probably their bosses' bosses' boss.

As the day went on, my hopes were fulfilled. Over the course of the day, my little stand had become something of a novelty of the event, with people sending their friends and colleagues over, sometimes in jest and sometimes full sincerity.

At one point I had a line of people, happy to stand around and chat while waiting for the opportunity to consult the cards about their business and employment problems. One by one, I put my little '*Reading in progress, wait here for service*' sign up on the front of the booth and led the semi-skeptics into the little tent to read their cards.

I was pleasantly surprised – the most snobbish person I encountered was Forest, and in the end, he'd not been so bad.

There were all sorts of problems the patrons had, from tech start-ups who needed an initial surge of energy and creativity to try and sell their product before they ran out of money, to long-time employees of Brock Technology who were stuck on mind-bendingly specific code problems that had stumped them and their colleagues for years.

Almost unfailingly they were won over by my psychological, scientific approach to tarot. Whether or not they left with a solution to the problem at hand, they all certainly had an interesting experience. And there was not one walk-out besides Forest.

All in all, an incredible day of sales. Many of them had taken my business card. It was only a small number who would eventually translate into long-term clients, but I hoped that some would go away and realize their interests had been piqued. Maybe as they started seeing the effects on their life of

looking at their problems in a new way, they'd remember where they learned that technique, and seek my services then.

Either way, I was happy. Besides my niggling guilt about Forest, my finances following the day's work were looking *very* healthy. It was, to be honest, more than I'd hoped for starting my business. If things continued like this, I would be able to stop worrying about my mom. Or, at least, I'd still worry about my mom's treatments, but not her lack of ability to afford them.

The event officially ended, and the booth-holders packed up our stalls. I had a cheerier reception from my neighboring booths than I had at the start of the day. They'd all seen how well I'd done, and some of them had even gotten their stalls covered or temporarily closed so they could come and see for themselves. Hands were shook, business cards were exchanged, and before I knew it, the day was over and I was on the subway headed home.

As I was lugging my suitcase up the stairs of the subway on my way to the bus stop, a woman in a black suit and sunglasses stepped out in front of me. I tried to step around her.

But the woman held out a hand to stop me. "Ria Moon?"

I halted. "That's me." I sounded tired, because I was tired.

"You've been offered a lift home. Join me."

And, because I was exhausted and she was already loosening the backpack from around my shoulders, I did. I watched as she secured my possessions in the trunk of the black Cadillac, unable to see through the windows due to the dark tint.

When she opened the door, and I complied and climbed in, I saw my fellow passenger was none other than Apollo Brock. I shouldn't have been surprised, except I'd not expected him to show up in the wild. I thought it'd be a phone call and then done.

"A productive day, Ms Moon?"

"Yes, thankyou." I sounded quite stiff.



I needed to relax. But I'd not noticed last time how on-edge Apollo Brock had made me feel. Possibly because I'd been blinded by the large sum written on that cheque.

And then, glancing sideways into his slightly smug, appraising expression, something struck me. Apollo. The Sun card. The overbearing Sun, shining oppressively down on the vulnerable young boy... That's what Forest had seen, I was almost certain.

It was a horrible revelation: Forest and Apollo Brock were enemies, and I'd been sent as a secret agent to gather intel on Forest, for whatever reason.

I knew it in my gut, an intuition almost as powerful as my grandmother's proclaimed prophecies.

And, since something already didn't sit right with me about today's reading, and Forest's rapid departure, I was now feeling deeply, deeply uneasy.

"I'm glad." As we moved through the traffic, Apollo twisted his body around so he could give me his full attention. He moved fluidly, like a predator. "Now, all I need you to do is to share with me the... insights my dear brother gained from your reading. Of which I am sure there were many, you being very skilled."

I nodded. "We did a three-card reading. I asked him to focus on a problem he was having at the moment. He didn't share specifics, but he did share his feelings about the situation, if that's what you want to know?"

Apollo nodded hungrily.

Oh god. Was I selling Forest down the river? I don't know why I felt loyalty to Forest, who I knew nothing of and had only spent ten minutes together in a tent mulling over cards. Perhaps it was because I sensed something more genuine in him than his brother, who I now deeply suspected to be a villain.

But I was locked in now. I began. "The three cards would represent the past, present and future of his situation. The first card he drew was 'The Tower'. He mentioned this would

represent an upheaval in his past, where expectations had been thrust upon him, his whole life had been profoundly changed.”

“That checks out.” Apollo stroked his chin.

“Then I drew ‘The Hanged Man’ for the present day. This card was reversed, though, which flips some of the meanings, makes it more negative. The card would normally represent martyrdom, self-sacrifice... In this case, it would be more about struggling blindly in the wrong direction against a problem, or not looking in the right direction. I said it could mean that he was going too fast as a distraction. He said that his brothers would agree with that. And that he trusted them.”

Across from me, Apollo was looking slightly angry, a small furrow about his brow. “Very interesting, Ms Moon. And the last card, the future? That is the one that interests me most... as someone who cares about him.”

My heart was pounding. I didn’t want to tell him. It felt cruel to betray Forest’s reaction to the card he’d drawn, ‘The Sun’. But if I was going to make something up, it would have to be quick.

I thought of my grandmother’s prophecy. The wealthy man, the two pink lines... I had it.

“The last card he drew was the Ace of Cups. It generally symbolizes love, new relationships, even conception and birth. He suggested to me that he’s been...” I took a breath before spinning the lies as convincingly as I could. “...lonely. That he wants a partner and a family. He thinks that it might be the solution to his problems.”

I’d not seen a ring on his finger or read anything about a wife, husband or partner online, so I was hedging my bets that he was indeed single.

And why had I been looking at his ring finger? For no reason at all.

Apollo was still frowning, deep in thought. “Anything else?”

I shook my head. “I paraphrased, but that was the gist.”

He was a little disappointed, maybe. Then he lit up for a moment. “And, you and Forest, did you... get along?”

I shrugged. “He came over and laughed at the idea of my business. I had to persuade him to give it a go. Luckily, I’m a good salesperson.”

“Hmm. Okay. Well, thank you, Ria Moon, you have earned your price. Tell you what... let me know if he gets back in touch with you for any reason. More information, more money. However insignificant it seems.”

“Thank you, Mr Brock. I will do. I really appreciate the opportunity you gave me today.”

“Don’t you forget it. Well, look, we’re home. A lot quicker than two buses, I should think? I’ll be keeping an eye on your success, Ms Moon. Best of luck.”

Outside, the driver handed me my luggage, then got back into the car and drove off again, the setting sun glinting off the rear window. I watched until it was gone, and then entered my house through the front door with the key.

My grandmother and mother were waiting for me.

My mother was in her favorite armchair, her arms folded pleasantly over her waist. “Who was that, Ria?”

I was glad she was well enough to keep my Grandmother company today, though I was sure spending copious amounts of time with Grandmother was enough to drain anyone of energy.

“A client from today. He offered me a lift home so I didn’t have to get the buses.”

“Oh, your second business fair, Ria! How did it go?”

I grinned. “It went well, mom. Really well. In fact... I’ve got enough to pay off some of our debts. Quite a chunk, in fact.”

“Oh, darling. Thank you. But do we have enough to keep amassing them?”

“Don’t you worry about that, mom. I’ve got this in hand. They were lining up for my services today. And I’m sure some of them will become long term clients.”

It was time for Grandmother to interject with her opinions. She could only be silent for so long. “So business-minded, Ria. Do these rich young men and women realize they could get the same thing in a back-alley parlor for a fifth of the price?”

“I hope not.” I grinned again. “Just call me Robin Hood. Robbing from the rich to give to the poor.”

My grandmother gave me a little smirk in return. “Well, as long as we’re the poor you’re giving to. And as long as you don’t forget where you came from.”

“How could I? I’d never forget you, no matter how hard I tried.” I gave her a little hug, and she swatted me playfully. Then, more gently, I hugged my mom too. I knew she wasn’t as fragile as I made her out to be, but I couldn’t help treating her carefully at the moment.

Then I yawned. “I’m absolutely beat. I need to go straight to bed if I’m honest. Give me a prod if there’s dinner, though? I had to eat conference food today.” I pulled a face. “I missed your cooking, gran.”

“That’s Grandmother to you.”

I skipped away to my room, where I closed the door as firmly as the faltering door frame would allow and stripped myself of my uncomfortable knock-off clothing. Then, naked, I sunk into my bed.

A day of tarot always did something to my brain. Awash with images, it struggled to get to sleep. And then, asleep, the images continued. Endless pictures and symbols of whose meanings alluded me. A red orb hovering ominously over ancient trees. The orb knocked out of orbit. The trees stretching out their canopy, growing thick and casting shadows over the land below even as the light of the orb grew and grew. Would they collide? How big was the orb really? Would it fall, miniscule as an asteroid, through the canopy of the trees to rot

in the earth? Or, big as a sun, would it collide and wipe out all life?

Eventually, the images faded, and I fell into a finally peaceful sleep.

\* \* \*

MOST OF THE week following my second event appearance was spent resting and slowly coming back to earth. The high of my success wore off, and I began to worry about securing further success. I needed to secure more events like that one, draw in more clients, improve my website, and put in place the new and improved marketing materials that Apollo had had his team draw up for me.

I worked all week. My office was my bedroom, hunched up in the covers, but clients need not know that. When I was more secure in my financial position, I could hire an office, and eventually staff... pipe dreams that were seeming more likely. It also felt like I could put a foot wrong and ruin everything for myself. Hope was a terrifying prospect.

Thankfully, I had my grandmother to keep me grounded. Or whatever the opposite of grounded was. Every few hours, it seemed, she would float past my room, intoning a line from her 'prophecy' in a different sing-song voice. Sometimes she'd bring me a cup of coffee, and that was helpful, even if her coffee was bitingly strong and bitter. Smoking had ruined her taste buds, and therefore she could only taste the strongest of flavors.

I was stirring my secret 'office' supply of sugar and cream into the latest offering of my grandmother's when I received the text from an unknown number.

**Forest: *Hi, Forest here. Is this the right number for Ria Moon? I smudged your business card with a cup of coffee and had to 'divine' the missing digit.***

**Ria: *This is Ria Moon. Well done on the divination. It seems you did learn something at my session.***

Then my phone started ringing. Who called mid-text conversation? He was older, I supposed. This was probably normal to him.

I scrambled to pull a shirt on, which didn't make any sense, since it was a phone call, not a video call. But there was something that felt deeply unprofessional about answering calls in my underwear. I had to feel professional in order to be professional.

I managed to take a deep breath and pick up the phone before it went to voicemail. "Hi."

"Hi, Ria. Hope the call didn't alarm you. I just find it quicker than texting."

"You're a busy man."

"That I am." He sounded slightly pained at that. Perhaps he remembered the cards' interpretation that he was 'too fast'. "I wanted to apologize for walking out on the session earlier this week. That was unprofessional of me. I admit, tarot is quite out of my usual comfort zone."

"I understand." I was a bit nervous that he knew, somehow, that I was in league with Apollo. Or that he was going to accuse me of something. I needed him to cut to the chase. "But that's not the only reason you called, is it?"

"Are you sure you aren't psychic?" He said this semi-ironically, in the same way I imagined he'd delivered the 'divine' pun in his first message. "You are correct. I also must admit that I'm intrigued by the potential of your business. Far more than I 'predicted' I would be."

"You have to stop with the puns. Believe me, I've heard them all before."

A dark chuckle, just audible on the other end. "My apologies. Anyway, I'd like to hire you for another session. A proper one. Potentially recurring, depending on how the first one goes."

I was surprised. But enjoyably so. Something about the idea of spending more time with Forest gave me a pleasant

tingle in my spine. “Of course. When is best for you? I can attend at your office, or a location of your choice.”

“My office would be great. How about Monday?”

Monday was soon. For a busy man, he sure was keen. I wasn't complaining. “Perfect. I'll email you my list of fees. Reply with your selection and a time, and I'll bill you for the session in advance. Do you have a personal assistant I should contact to arrange this?”

He was silent for a moment. “No, you can email me directly for now. I'll text you my address.”

He was probably embarrassed to be contracting a tarot reader to help with his business. I wasn't offended. One of my strengths was being able to see things from both sides.

“Well, thanks for getting back in touch with me. I look forward to our first official session.”

“Thanks, Ria. Bye!”

\* \* \*

MONDAY CAME AROUND TOO SOON. I was looking forward to it, but I also had a lot of tasks I'd hoped to accomplish over the weekend that would have made me feel less like an imposter and more like an official businesswoman.

Alas, my website went untended. I doubted Forest would be checking up on it. His business was technology – maybe he could suggest a web developer I might hire when I was making consistent money.

But I was getting ahead of myself, already imagining a long and illustrious client relationship. When in fact, I still had to win him over. I could tell. He was open-minded, sure, but I knew from experience that one wrong move and an open mind could snap shut.

So it was, feeling nervously excited but hideously underprepared, that I made my way back to the head offices of Brock Technology. I resented the three legs of the journey.

Once again, a billionaire client had made no attempt to see that I arrived in comfort. And I'd thought these billionaires were all about their comfort.

I checked my hair in my reflection on the building exterior before I entered. Instead of my standard issue ponytail, I'd wasted my prep time that morning trying to tame my thick dark locks into double French braids. They didn't look too bad, though I wasn't sure they were worth the effort.

Inside, the receptionist gave me a smile. "Your hair looks nice."

I realized she'd been able to see me checking myself out through the glass, which was tinted only one-way, but was glad she was offering me solidarity rather than snobbishness. "Thanks. I've got a meeting with Forest, the name's Ria Moon."

She nodded. "One moment, I'll just find you on our system."

Everyone knew that tech was still a male-dominated business, even though times were changing. It was silly, but I'd have felt much more comfortable entering the building if I knew it was full of women.

What was a female-dominated industry – hairdressing? If I could enter a building that I knew was guaranteed to be full of hairdressers, I'd be comfortable. Except for the judgment my own hair would surely receive. But at least I'd leave with good tips and maybe a free cut and de-volume.

Here, I had no clue. My knowledge of technology was stuck in the mid noughties, and limited to my smartphone and the HTML basics book I'd used to construct my shoddily built temporary website with.

"Found you. Have you got identification?"

I slid her my driver's license. Currently unused, because surprise surprise, I couldn't afford a car. Maybe that would change soon.

She scanned the driver's license briefly before locking it into a safe under her desk. "I'll return this when you hand your



visitor's pass back in. Here it is. It only gives you access to the top floor. Mind you, that's our highest security floor, so don't be surprised if you get quizzed by security a few times on your way up."

Highest security. Forest had enemies, then. It shouldn't have surprised me. I frequently forgot that he was of the same Brock family that got mentioned casually in conversation as an example of wealth, industry, and inequality. And, of course, I'd been initially sent to meet him as a spy for his half-brother.

She suddenly frowned. "You aren't carrying any weapons, are you? Guns, knives, mace?"

I laughed, but she wasn't joking. "No, no weapons today." I hung the pass around my neck. "Best way to the top floor?"

"Elevator. Just around the corner." She pointed me in the direction and smiled, clearly relieved to not have to lock away weapons, too.

I took the elevator all the way up. It was exciting. I rarely had occasion, in my lifestyle and career, which had primarily been cashier and waitressing work, to attend big corporate buildings like this. And though they were a prime symbol of the evils of capitalism, or whatever, I still enjoyed them. Big shiny buildings full of people with lots and lots of money.

The receptionist was right – on the top floor, I was quizzed as soon as I stepped out of the elevator. They had my name already, so I didn't need to explain why I was there, just that I really was who I said I was, etcetera. It seemed they'd done some digging to ask the questions they were asking – when my business was registered, my mother's name, etcetera.

At the last door, and the last security officer, after I passed his checks, he paused and looked at me strangely before allowing me in. "He doesn't normally have visitors sent directly up here. I'm not sure what the procedure is. I suppose just go in and knock. His office is at the end."

"Sure. Thanks." I nodded, and made my way through the held-open door, which was shut firmly behind me.

The corridor was eerily quiet. There were only a few rooms, and I tried not to look into them, as if the thought police could find out I'd been snooping, somehow.

At the end of the corridor, I stood in front of the door marked *Forest Brock, CEO* and knocked.

And there was silence.

I knocked again, to more silence.

After a few cycles of knocking and waiting, a woman stepped out of the nearest office and appraised me with her arms folded. She was tall and broad, and distinctly unhappy looking. Her door read *Mandy Weber, Chief Operations Officer (COO)*.

“What exactly are you doing?”

“I have an appointment with... Mr Brock.” It felt weird, up here, using his first name.

“You got past security?”

“Yes. Like I said, I have an appointment. I was told to come straight up.”

She scowled. “Well, he's not here. Someone's made a mistake.”

“No one has made a mistake. I confirmed this with him on the phone. Including that I was to come directly up to his office.”

She continued to stare.

“Call reception, if you like, to confirm.”

Mandy stalked wordlessly into her office and shut the door. I didn't see her again, so I presumed she'd gotten confirmation that I was in fact not an intruder.

In fact, I didn't see anyone again. Though I waited and waited – I'd been paid to be here, after all – no one came. And knocking on the office door seemed futile, since it would only draw the attention of stern Mandy. I called the number I had for him several times to no avail, and sent a text message for good measure.

Eventually, I departed, going back through security. “Has anyone seen Mr Brock? I had an appointment with him. He wasn’t in.”

The security would only repeat the same line, no matter who I asked. “We cannot disclose the location of Mr Brock.”

Frustrated, and more than a little disappointed, I made my way back down in the elevator to reception.

“Hi. Mr Brock never showed up for his appointment. Can you get in touch with him for me?”

The receptionist smiled apologetically. “Unfortunately not.”

“No?”

“Sorry. It’s policy.”

“Right. And you can’t disclose the location of Mr Brock, is that right?”

She nodded, apologetically again.

I was about to say something else when there was suddenly a bustle of movement on the other side of the entrance hall. A tall man in glasses and a dark suit burst out of one door, flanked by between five and ten junior-seeming members of staff. Was that...?

I took a step towards them, opening my mouth but not sure what to say.

Then the man in charge led the group through another door, and the door slammed shut behind them.

I looked at the receptionist. “Was that...?”

And then, knowing I wouldn’t get a straight answer, I ran to the door they’d departed through. “Mr Brock!”

The receptionist called out to me. “Excuse me, ma’am, you do not have access to that area. If you persist, I’ll have to get security to show you out of the building.”

“Mr Brock! It’s Ria Moon, for our appointment!”

She sounded like she was struggling to raise her voice – she didn't do it often. "I assure you, the doors here are very soundproof. Please desist."

I sighed, and held up my hands, returning to the reception desk. "It's okay. You don't need to get me thrown out."

She settled back into her quiet politeness. "Neither of us would have found that pleasant, be assured, Ms Moon."

It was a gesture of friendship, and I appreciated it. But I was still frustrated. I looked at her. "What do I do now? What would you do? Hang around all day? Or... just leave?"

The receptionist considered this, as if deciding what would be a helpful answer whilst remaining professional. "Mr Brock tends to be timely with his appointments. If he wasn't there, I would suggest he has been tied up in another area of the business. I'm afraid you must have been deprioritised, ma'am. I don't think waiting around tends to help in these circumstances."

Deprioritised. It wasn't a kind way of putting it, but it seemed accurate. He was a busy man, he'd said. But he'd been the one keen to see me so soon. "He's already paid for my services."

"If I might suggest it, I don't think Mr Brock has to worry particularly about money. I'm sure he'll be happy for you to keep the sum in lieu of a cancellation fee."

I exhaled. "Thanks for your help. Honestly. What's your name?"

"Jenni."

"Thanks. Call me Ria, if I ever get brought back again. See you."

"Goodbye, Ria."

I left feeling largely deflated.

The feeling hung around like a bad smell. I expected to hear back from Forest, some kind of apology or explanation. But there was nothing. Not that evening, and not the next day. I bundled up into my duvet and sulked. Even professional

businesswomen such as I were not exempt from the healing powers of a good sulk.

## FOREST



Mandy came to visit me in my office. It usually spelled an inquisition. “What power play were you using on that girl earlier?”

“Power play? Girl?”

“The one you sent up for an appointment with you, then never showed.”

“Oh. I don’t think you can call adult women girls anymore, Mandy.”

Mandy rolled her eyes. “She was a girl.”

“There was no power play, anyway. I had to deal with something else. She’ll understand. She’ll have to.”

“Only, that was a matter I could have dealt with. I had no appointments. You specifically took it on. If you weren’t using some kind of power-play on her, then you were avoiding her. I wasn’t aware you were a coward, Forest Brock.”

Mandy had a specific superpower of being able to rile me. It was one of the reasons I’d hired her as my COO.

“Go back to your office and play your little solitaire game, Mandy.”

She did. But her words stuck in my head over the coming days. I had avoided Ria. In truth, the day had come around and I’d not been ready for introspection. But I had wanted to see Ria again. Except the potential that I’d make myself vulnerable again and come undone was unthinkable. I had

work to do, and it had taken me some time to gather myself after the previous encounter.

I'd struggled with this internally up until ten minutes before the time of the appointment, when I'd deliberately taken on an 'important' task to avoid having to make a decision. I'd ghosted her, basically. Yes, out of cowardice. Mandy was rarely wrong.

She'd still been paid for the session, hadn't she? What was so wrong? She was just starting out in business, she couldn't afford to blacklist me for ghosting her. I knew I should feel okay with it, because I was rich and could do what I like, just as I knew that I didn't feel okay about having done it. Screw Forest Brock and his stupid, unhelpful conscience. This job would be a lot easier if I didn't have one. And yet.

A few days later I texted her – like a coward.

**Forest: Sorry about the other day. Something important came up. Can we reschedule for Monday?**

**Ria: My rate's gone up to account for being ghosted.**

**Forest: Why? You still get paid the same whether I'm there or not, don't you?**

**Ria: Yes, but I'm not in this work solely for the money. I get fulfillment out of it. I don't get fulfillment from turning up and waiting outside an empty office for an hour.**

I was stunned. I hadn't expected this from her.

**Ria: By the way, your receptionist Jenni is very nice. She deserves a raise.**

**Forest: She gets paid well.**

**Ria: Not enough.**

Not enough to deal with the likes of me, I presumed.

**Forest: Fine. I'll pay whatever it is you ask.**

**Ria: Excellent :) Name your time and date.**

**Forest: Let's try Monday again. Same time. Invoice me and I'll get it paid today.**

I received her invoice five minutes later. She'd *tripled* her rate. The absolute cheek of it! Nevertheless, I couldn't help but applaud her audacity. And find it slightly attractive. No, very attractive. By all accounts she should be begging for my custom and here she was, doing everything to put me off. Just out of... spite?

I did everything but chain myself to my office chair on Monday to make sure I didn't chicken out of the appointment. I canceled everything else I had on that day, set my out of office auto-responder and voicemail, and informed Mandy to take care of any business that arose. I sensed that Ria's services were something that I needed, that I was lacking any introspection in my life. I also desperately wanted to see her.

Why was I so scared? Well, it had been a long time until anyone had had the effect on me that Ria had had. And not just that – I was dimly aware that I feared what lay beneath if I dared to scratch the surface of my family history, and my feelings pertaining to it. But my motto was generally – if it scared me, that meant I had to do it.

When we were both learning the ropes of our Brock careers, my brother Jude had told me about how he used fear to his advantage during his time as a Navy SEAL. As someone who had once considered myself a shy, retiring type, stuck behind a computer screen, his words had transformed how I felt about the role I was forced to inhabit. Truly, fear was a weapon as much as it was a freeze-ray. It just depended on how you handled it.

A knock came at the door. I took off the imaginary chains tying me to my office chair and rose to open the door.

There was Ria Moon, resplendent in an orange suit with a mustard weave shirt, her hair tied into two long braids that hung over her shoulders. Her style today reminded me that we were from two different generations. I was, by general metrics, old. And she was in the prime of her youth, glowing and vivacious. Our difference gave me comfort, somehow. We



were from different worlds. Worlds that could only meet in a setting such as this – professional. We were professionals, having a professional appointment. All was well. She certainly didn't make all the hairs on my neck and arms stand up just to look at her. Because I was a professional.

“Come in, Ria.” I stepped back and gestured to the chair that faced mine, across the desk.

She stepped in and looked around the room. “There are a lot of computers.”

“You do know what industry I work in, yes?”

She smiled. “I'm vaguely aware. You use this thing called a mouse...”

“Take a seat.”

Ria sat, but she was still looking around at all of the screens. “Do you ever turn these off?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, can you for our session? If we're going to move your brain from its rational side into a more intuitive mode, a change of scenery might be nice.”

For some reason, the thought of turning them off scared me. Luckily, I had an idea. “I've got something better. One second.”

I switched open the master software that controlled the screens, scrolled through some options and found what I was looking for. I clicked, and all of the screens were replaced by a realistic night sky.

“A screensaver?”

“A bit more elaborate than that. I'd have called it video artistry. But sure, a screensaver. Sets the mood, doesn't it?”

“Sure.” She smiled. “Music?”

“I take it we aren't talking heavy metal?”

“No. I'm not sure that's your genre, either.”

“You really do have perceptive abilities.”

“Is there any music that makes you feel relaxed?”

“Actually, yeah. Sylvester – that’s one of my brothers, since you seem to not know much about my family – had an acoustic project for a while. He was going through a folk phase. It didn’t stick, but it’s my favorite of his. If you ever meet him, you’d better not let on, though.”

“He’s not a fan?”

“It wasn’t what made him successful, so of course, he shuns it.”

“You love your brothers, yet you’re critical of them.”

“Isn’t that how siblings are?” I realized I’d been sharing quite a lot with her, for a stranger. Maybe this was what therapy was like. Maybe I’d accidentally gotten therapy after all. I cleared my throat. “Last session... I have an admission. Something important did come up. But also... I was relieved.”

“Relieved that you had to miss our session? Why?”

“This is new to me. And I don’t like doing things that I’m bad at.”

She nodded, as if that answered a lot. “You’re used to being the smartest in the room at your chosen skills.”

I nodded, tight-lipped.

“Well, tarot is creativity. It’s intuition. You can’t be good or bad at it – well, you can, but it’s not like learning a skill like playing an instrument, or a language. It’s more like learning a way of being. Like learning to be brave, or to look on the bright side of life.”

“So it’s harder?”

“It can be, if it doesn’t come natural to you. Did you ever give something up because it was too hard?”

“Not that I can recall.”

“I didn’t think so. Thanks for your admission, anyway. It’s helpful for me to get to know you for these sessions. If, of course, you don’t ghost me next time.”

“I am sorry. About that.”

“We’ll see.” She winked. “Let’s start off slow. I’m going to draw one card for you. It can mean whatever you want it to. Let’s not go in for asking questions of the cards or discussing problems just yet. I just want to see how you respond.”

I couldn’t help but frown in anticipation. Why was I doing this, again? “Sure.”

She took a deck out of her bag.

I could see it was the same one as before. “You decided I’m the ‘classic’ type, then?”

She smirked, shuffling the cards. “We can progress to one of the jazzier decks when I think you’re there. Split the deck for me, will you?” She held out her hands, one empty, one with the deck perched atop.

I reached for the deck and fumbled a little, brushing her fingers as I did. Electricity snapped between us quite literally – I jolted backwards in surprise, and she let out a soft moan.

I looked up at her.

She laughed somewhat shakily. “All those computers you work with.”

I smiled sheepishly. “I’m not a robot, honest.”

“Do you promise?”

I reached over to split the deck, this time without surprise. “You have my word.”

She turned over a card onto the table.

‘The Devil’.

Ria opened her mouth to speak, but I quickly interrupted. “Don’t tell me. I remember. It doesn’t mean ‘bad’, is that right?”

She closed her mouth, looking pleased. Then she spoke again. “Tell me what you see.”

“Okay, well there’s this guy. The Devil. He’s, y’know, quite devilish looking. Horns. Holding a flaming torch.

Etcetera. And there's these two naked people..." I squinted at the card. "A man and a woman. They're chained together. She's got a tail... with some kind of... strawberry on the end? And the Devil is igniting the man's tail with his flaming torch, but he seems okay with that."

Ria was nodding, close-lipped.

I frowned at the card. "The man is horny. The woman is... fruit? Is it corny if I say that seems sexist? Oh, and the Devil has bat wings, too!"

She was still nodding, but I could see she was trying not to laugh. I couldn't help but smile too.

"I mean, I think the card means horniness. Does the card mean horniness?"

"If that's what you see in it, maybe."

"Hey, don't put this on me. Have you *seen* the card?"

She did laugh now. "It's a good reading. Let me talk through the other symbols and meanings. This is more for practice than anything, honestly."

"Go on."

"Well, the Devil can represent a kind of hedonism – or repression. It can also be a representation of one's shadow self – that's a tarot term that kind of means the parts of yourself that you aren't exploring or dealing with. These two naked guys... they seem like they're chained up, but the chains are loose. They could probably slip out of them if they wanted to. So it can mean making the wrong choice – a choice that gives short-term pleasure rather than long-term gain. The card often wants you to examine your negative influences. Then sometimes, it can mean just what you said – a strong attachment, a strong desire, or... 'horniness'."

I nodded. So many different meanings for one image. In code, it either worked or it didn't. But, I supposed, there were lots of different ways of writing code that had the same end result. Maybe this was more like that.

“Do you want to suggest how you might relate The Devil to your life or situation?”

I stared at the card. The card was accusing me, accurately, of my less-than-pure thoughts towards Ria, I supposed. At least, that’s where my mind had gone, and that’s what I was now feeling guilty for. But I couldn’t say that. I didn’t want to cross any professional boundaries. I had to think up something else.

Eventually, I shrugged. “I think the card is telling me I’m too repressed.”

Ria laughed. “You think you’re repressed?”

It was reassuring that we could laugh together at this – that she wasn’t so serious about it that she expected me to be totally serious about it, either. Her manner had a way of getting me to relax. I couldn’t tell anymore why I’d been so nervous.

Then I glanced up from the card to look at her, and I remembered why. She was annoyingly beautiful. Sigh. “My brothers would probably say so.”

“You say that a lot. Is that how you define yourself – by what your brothers say about you?”

“Not in a bad way. We have our differences. We had different upbringings. You read about us, between sessions, I presume?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I did.”

“I find it useful to draw contrast between us, I suppose. Jude is the practical one, the strong one. Sylvester is the clown, the flamboyant one, the creative one. Winston’s the cool one. And the playboy.”

“And you’re...?”

“I think they actually consider me the nice one.”

“Is that all?”

“Well, it’s not so bad, is it?”

She laughed. “No. I suppose they mean *kind*. Being kind is a rare gift. You don’t strike me as nice in the polite, inoffensive way.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s a compliment, believe me. So, if your outward self is, in your words, ‘repressed’-“

“My brothers’ words. They’d probably say I was the protective one, too.”

“Same thing, considering you internalize your brothers’ opinions of you. Your outward self is ‘repressed’, ‘the nice one’, ‘the protective one’... then what’s your shadow self?”

I looked between Ria and The Devil card. I supposed my shadow self was horny. I wasn’t going to say that. I shrugged. “Maybe my shadow self is not so nice.”

She nodded, and swept away the card into her deck. “I’ve got an idea. It can build on this idea, this ‘shadow self’ idea, and it’ll help me know more about you, if that’s alright? There’s a twelve-card spread, the astrological spread, that would be perfect here.”

I winced. “Not astrology, too.”

“We’re using it in the same way as we use the cards. Just symbols. Are you daunted by it?”

“A little. Why don’t I get to learn more about you?”

“You’re right. It shouldn’t all be one way. Why don’t I give you a demonstration of the astrological spread by pulling some cards for myself?”

I liked the sound of that. “Yes. Perfect.”

She shuffled the deck. “I’m not going to do a full reading. I’ll just kind of breeze through it.” Then she dealt twelve cards out face down onto the table in a circle formation. “Each of these twelve cards represents one of the astrological houses of the zodiac. For our purposes, they represent a different realm of our lives – work, family, and so on.”

“So we don’t need to talk about astrology?”

“No. So the first card represents my identity.” She flipped it over, and smiled. “Okay, the Queen of Wands. I mean, this one fits quite well. Confidence, independence, determination...”

“Her robe is almost the same color as your shirt. But you don’t walk around carrying a sunflower, presumably. Do you have a black cat?”

“Unfortunately no. But, interestingly, that black cat represents the Queen’s shadow self. It can mean that she’s in touch with her shadow self. I’d say that holds true for me. I’m not, er, ‘repressed’.” She grinned sheepishly. “Let’s move on. The second card represents ‘resources’ – so finances, wealth, ownership, etcetera. And... the Five of Pentacles. Of course.”

She looked uneasy, and I felt the need to prompt her like she prompted me each time I was stumped by a card. “Why ‘of course’?”

She sighed. “I mean, what do you see? Look at these two figures.”

“One’s on crutches, and they’re walking through snow without shoes. Money troubles?”

“Money troubles.”

“At your rates?”

“Why do you think they’re so high?” She shook her head as if shaking off any further questioning. “Third card represents my environment – that’s extended family, siblings, grandparents, neighbors, friends, and my home. It doesn’t include parents or children, immediate family.” She turned it over. ‘Four of Swords’.

“I can’t tell if this guy is dead or sleeping. And if those swords are going to fall on him.”

She grinned. “I’m glad you’re getting into it. Well, it usually symbolizes a kind of reprieve. He might have been in a war once, hence those swords, but now he’s sleeping. And my home is a place of relaxation for me, in general, so I’d say that’s true. The fourth card is a bit confusing, as it’s ‘home and family’, but this is more about your parents, children, domestic

life and emotional security.” She turned over the card. “Ah. The Three of Swords.”

It was an image of a heart pierced by three swords. “That one looks dramatic.”

“Yeah, moving swiftly on... card five represents your creativity. And I draw...” She flipped it over, and her eyes brightened. “The High Priestess!”

“One of those major cards, right? And look, fruit again.”

“Yes, fruit.” Ria nodded at me approvingly, and I felt a little warm glow, like a teacher’s pet. Idiot. “The High Priestess represents, to me, being creative through intuition, the subconscious, uncovering mysteries...”

“That sounds a lot like your pitch for your business.”

“Yes, exactly. This is how I feel most creative, as The High Priestess.”

“If you swapped your pantsuit for a robe, you’d be there.”

“Yes. But I’m not sure I’d command much respect in a robe.”

“Oh, I don’t know...” Images were coming unbidden into my mind. Had to shut them off.

“I’m taking too long over this. I’m going to get through the rest fairly quickly. Card six – my daily work – Ace of Pentacles – new beginnings – true, my business is fledgling. Number seven – my partnerships, romantic and non-romantic – Five of Wands – conflict and disagreement – okay, yes, so I enjoy a good debate, that’s fair. Number eight – my secrets – Two of Pentacles. Erm, having multiple priorities, trying to prioritize... Number nine – my dreams and capacity for growth – ah, the Nine of Pentacles! – financial independence and self-worth. Card ten – career – Four of Pentacles – erm, saving money, scarcity.”

“There’s a lot of pentacles and swords so far.”

“Yes, nice observation.”

“What do they mean?”



“Pentacles represents the physical realm, and swords represents intellect.” She flipped over the second-to-last card. “Eleven is community. ‘Strength’ represents a kind of determination and passion. And twelve, the thing that prompted me to do this particular spread, is my shadow self.” She flipped over the card. ‘Death’.

“Oh dear.”

“It’s not as bad as it sounds. I’m not quite sure what it means in this context though. Not immediately, anyway. It generally means new opportunities, unexpected change... as for my shadow-self, it could mean I’m clinging onto the past? Or... resisting a personal transformation? I don’t know. It’s an odd one. I’m going to puzzle over that in my own time, if that’s alright with you.” She began to sweep up the cards. “I’m sure you don’t want – oops!”

She’d accidentally brushed the Death card off the table in her haste to pack up the spread. It fluttered to the ground underneath the table, between our legs. She bent forwards to start picking it up, then quickly retracted and held her hand up to her chest with a soft noise of alarm. I glanced at her chest for long enough to see her embarrassing predicament. Her shirt wasn’t a business shirt by any standards – it didn’t button all the way up. And though she was well-covered, I could see that the shirt was quite floaty and loose. If she were to lean fully over in front of me, she’d be exposed.

Now we were both thinking about her chest, and I was profoundly uncomfortable. “Let me get it.” Before she could answer, I pushed back my office chair and went on my knees to find it.

I allowed myself a small breather under the desk to stop thinking about that moment before coming up for air, brandishing the card. “Here.”

“Thanks.” She grinned sheepishly my way. “Shall we read your cards?”

“Yes, absolutely.” I’d never have said that with such keenness if I wasn’t desperately trying to move on from the awkwardness of that moment. This spread seemed highly

personal, and I was nervous as to what I'd reveal under the encouraging and relaxing guidance of Ria Moon.

Thankfully, she too was keen to move on. "Okay, let me just refresh the deck." She shuffled the deck, still slightly flustered. "Split it for me, will you? Without electrocution, this time."

I concentrated hard on stilling my hand this time, so as not to fumble. I breathed a sigh of relief when it was done.

"Excellent. Okay, twelve cards, for the twelve astrological houses." She dealt them out in a neat circle across the desk, facing me rather than herself this time. "Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

"Don't sound so hard done by. You paid for this, you know."

"I know. Go on."

"Okay, so the first house represents your identity. And we've got... King of Cups. Okay."

"He doesn't look too awful. He's sitting on a throne floating in the sea. Holding a big cup, obviously. There's a fish and a boat there. And he's just kind of... chilling. What did you say Cups meant, again?"

"I didn't. Cups represents the emotional realm. The King of Cups is often seen as a kind of... compassionate diplomat. Maybe amongst his brothers – The Kings of Pentacles, Swords and Wands – he's the 'nice one'. From the sounds of it, if I was going to name your brothers... I'd call Sylvester the King of Wands, obviously. Winston the King of Swords. And Jude the King of Pentacles."

I smirked. "They'd get a kick out of that."

"Do they know you're doing this?"

"No, they don't."

"Why not?"

"Well, that problem I focused on in our previous reading... I feel like I let them down at our previous meeting. They

thought I'd have a solution by now. And so, since I'm trying alternative methods now, I don't want to get their hopes up before I have something concrete."

"And a sudden interest in tarot wouldn't be believable on its own?"

She had me pegged. "Absolutely not." I looked back at the card. "I like the King of Cups for my identity."

"Interesting. Okay, the second house represents your resources. Money and self-worth." She turned over the card and laughed. "Ha, Nine of Pentacles. This is the same card I got for the 'dreams' house."

"Card of being wealthy?"

"Yeah, basically. Let's try the third house, your environment. This would include your brothers, your home and commute, and your communication." She flipped it over. "Three of Cups. What do you see?"

"I mean, it looks nice. And Cups seems like a pleasant suit. Three women holding up cups in celebration. Various... plants around them. They seem happy. Does it mean... partying? No. It's a bit muted for that. Cooperation?"

Ria looked delighted. "You're getting better at this. All of those were good. Celebration, friendship, collaboration, cooperation... Mutual respect and joy. I'd say this is very close to your relationship with your brothers, no?"

It did give me a warm glow, I must admit. "You're right. I don't spend much time at my actual home, and most of my communication outside work is with my brothers."

"They're your environment. Nice. Okay, house four. A bit confusingly, this one is 'home and family'. But it's more about your parents and your roots. And we have... Three of Swords. Oh. That's the same as what I got."

The heart with three swords stabbed through it. Subtle. "You never did say what it meant. And it still looks like a bad card."

"Well, yes. It's not hard to decode. Heartbreak, hurt..."

“It looks like we have something in common.”

“Hah. Maybe. You don’t need to go in depth for this one. I didn’t, after all. But if you do have any thoughts, feel free to discuss.” She glanced at me, and I remained silent. “Okay, moving swiftly onto house five, creativity. You’ve got... Page of Cups. Reversed.”

“Okay. Can I swivel it around to look? Thanks. He’s holding a cup, obviously, with a fish in it. His turban thing looks kind of like a big fish, stylish. He’s on the beach. He’s a bit flamboyant, if we’re looking at creativity. I could see Sylvester wearing this tunic. If it’s reversed... the opposite of flamboyance? Not being creative at all?”

“Reversed cards aren’t exactly opposite. They’re just a bit... obscure. So if we think of it in terms of creativity, it could be that your creativity is... ‘repressed’.”

“Ah, I’m not going to live that down, am I?”

“You did say you were struggling with a solution to a problem. That can lead to a repression of creativity. Let’s check out house six. This is your daily routine, self-care, physical health. And we’ve got... Ten of Wands.”

The card pictured a man struggling to carry ten large wooden sticks. “Oh dear.”

Ria laughed. “I can see what you’re thinking. He’s carrying a heavy burden, for sure. But if you can see in the background, he’s almost reaching civilization after walking across what looks like a desert. So he’s worked hard, he’s very tired, but he’s almost there.”

“That sounds better. Thanks.”

“Have you been looking after yourself?”

Such a direct question. “My sleep routine hasn’t been the best. To be honest, I’m semi-living out of this office.”

Ria pointed in the direction of my makeshift wardrobe. “You did forget to close your clothes cupboard. I thought maybe a girlfriend had thrown you out.”

I was briefly embarrassed, but laughed at the idea I might have a girlfriend. “No. No girlfriend. I’ve thrown myself out, if anything.”

“I have to say, you’re dispelling some stereotypes about lazy billionaires with inherited wealth here. Is that why you work so hard? You need to feel like you’ve earned it?”

I blinked. She was getting quite close to a lot of things I’d never talked about aloud before. “Yes. In part. I suppose so.”

She nodded, and, sensing I wished to move on, flipped over the next card. “Eight of Cups. This represents your partnerships. You said you don’t have a girlfriend, and I’m presuming not a boyfriend, though correct me now before I make a fool of myself... Okay. So this would represent any close partnerships you have, colleagues, possibly your brothers again. Maybe even this partnership with me.”

I looked at the card. “A guy with a stick walking away from a stack of eight cups and towards the mountains. I’m getting a kind of hermit vibe here. There’s the sea again, because cups, I guess. And a lot of jagged rocks to his side. Those cups are stacked very neatly on the beach. I wonder why he’s leaving them behind? Is there one missing?”

“Hmm. It is odd that he’d leave them behind. But then, why did you ghost me last week?”

I looked at her to see if she was still annoyed. But something wicked glittered in her eyes, and I settled back into my seat. “Touché. So I’m avoidant in my partnerships? I prefer to work alone?”

“Possibly. Why did you get avoidance from the card?”

“Hmm. He’s leaving at night-time. A coward’s move.”

“It’s not necessarily cowardly. Sometimes withdrawal can be a necessary refuge. And leaving in the dead of night can be to spare feelings.”

“So you forgive me for ghosting you?”

“For now. House eight, card eight. This one is going to represent your secrets. Are you ready?”

This one sounded intense. I nodded, and Ria flipped over the card. The ‘Nine of Swords’, which looked terrible.

“Someone despairing in bed, unable to sleep. There’s ten swords above him... or her. The background is jet black. Bad dreams?”

She nodded. “Bad dreams, turmoil, worry, depression... You said your sleep routine isn’t the best. Is there something keeping you up at night?”

This was hitting a bit too close. I had that urge again, the one to end the session and swiftly depart. Except this was my office. I could invent an emergency. Except it would be stupid to pretend to pick up a fake call. And Ria would know, of course, because we’d discussed me ghosting her, and I’d just had that card, that cowardly Eight of Cups.

My spiral was interrupted by a sudden scuffle and a flutter. I looked up.

“Whoops.” Ria had knocked the card onto the floor. She didn’t look ashamed this time, though. “Can you get that for me?”

I furrowed my brow. “Sure.”

Under the table, I wondered what game she was playing. It almost seemed like she’d done it on purpose, but she had enough plausible deniability that it would be weird for me to question her. When I retrieved the card from where it had fallen – underneath her chair almost, and the warmth of her thighs that I could almost feel radiating to me, which would have made me blush if I were so inclined – I climbed back up onto my chair and handed it to her.

She was glowing with a strange energy. “Thanks.” Without another word, she put it back into its place. “The next card represents your dreams, and potential for growth. Let’s see. Ah. The Fool.”

“The *Fool*?” I craned to look at the card. I was also dimly realizing that she’d maybe sensed I needed a break from the cards and that’s why she’d dropped one. I was grateful – I was less tense now. Or at least, I was a little more *sexually* tense

from being close to her thighs. I was less emotionally tense. “Let me guess, this one doesn’t mean I’m a total fool, somehow? Or is this a trick card, and it does mean I’m a fool?”

“Hmm. Tell me what you see.”

“Well, he’s not wearing a jester’s hat. Nice tunic, some kind of staff. Oh and there’s a weird little ferret rearing onto its hind legs next to him. It’s sunny. Oh... but he’s about to step off a cliff. That does seem quite foolish.”

“Is he foolish, or is he brave?”

“Well, it depends what’s at the bottom of the cliff, I suppose.”

She smiled. “Exactly. The Fool speaks to new beginnings, potential, opportunity, the start of a new journey, being open-minded. It might be bold of me to suggest that your new beginning starts here, with your new partnership with me... but... it’s a possibility.”

“You sell your services well. Did you cheat, count the cards?”

“If I could do that, I wouldn’t be here. I’d be at the casino, or home with all my riches.”

“Fair enough. Well, I don’t know what kind of new beginning I’m supposed to be dreaming of, but it doesn’t sound so bad. Even if it could be foolish.”

Ria winked across the table at me. “A few cards left. Tenth house, your career. We’ve got... Seven of Swords.”

“A lot of swords, isn’t there? Well, this one looks bad, too. This guy is carrying five swords. There’s still two on the ground. He might be struggling to hold them all, so he has to leave two behind. Except he looks kind of smug and sneaky, he doesn’t look unhappy. Is he... stealing someone else’s swords? Sneaking off into... the desert?”

“He is, most likely, yes.”

“So does that mean that I’m sneaky in my career? Or it’s a tricky career?”

“It can mean a betrayal.” Ria had gone a little serious in her expression. “By you, or by someone else.”





A betrayal. And we'd been getting on so well. I tried to push Apollo out of my mind, but all of the guilt I already felt for the way Forest and I had met rose to the surface. Maybe now was the time to come clean. If we were to have a trusting relationship, I'd need to. But...

"Next card?" Forest was looking at me expectantly. He didn't seem too worried about the betrayal card. Maybe he was planning to betray someone and so it didn't faze him. But he didn't seem the type.

Either way, I was happy to move on. "Okay, card eleven represents your community. This is how you interact with people around you, like colleagues and acquaintances." I turned over the card. "Eight of Swords." He was getting a lot of swords.

"A lot of these are quite damning, aren't they?"

"They are a bit."

I watched as Forest contemplated the card. His brow furrowed softly in concentration, his eyelashes fluttering behind his thin, fashionable glasses frames as he scanned the card for images and meanings. The way the muscles in his strong shoulders tensed when he thought. The way he was quite tense in general, actually, like he could do with a massage.

In a way, this was a mental massage. I really enjoyed getting him to open up, pushing gently through his reticence to both the tarot and his disinclination to talk about himself. I

was starting to see more of the Forest his brothers saw, as opposed to whatever image was necessary for him to project outwards.

And now I was thinking about unbuttoning the top buttons of his shirt, massaging his tense shoulders as we completed the reading, getting him to relax not just mentally, but physically, too...

Dirty, bad thoughts. Shut up, I chastised myself internally.

I glanced over at Forest in time to see something dark pass over his expression. He hadn't said anything yet about the card. We were getting into 'The Sun' territory here – when he had fixated on the card, become overwhelmed, and left. I wanted him to go a bit deeper than he usually did, but I didn't want to sink him into the abyss.

I picked up the Eight of Swords and dropped it onto the floor, more pointedly than I had last time. He looked up, and I grinned at him wickedly across the table.

The first time I'd dropped the card had been an accident. It had stirred something in me that I couldn't quite explain, but was certainly a bit dirty, too, Forest kneeling by my thighs to find the missing card, presenting it to me dutifully at the table. The second time, it had been to break him out of dark speculation. But I'd also been testing him, not quite realizing what I was doing – seeing if he was feeling the same things I was. It was unprofessional, and I shouldn't tease. But feeling his breathing quicken under the table last time, I'd grown wet and warm.

This time I also wanted to break him out of dark thoughts. But I also wanted to up the game. Something very unprofessional within me wanted to test him, see how far I could push the tension between us.

“Could you get that for me, please?”

There was a hint of a smile about his eyes, and something that was still dark, but more lustful. I thought of the naked man and the woman on 'The Devil' card he'd drawn first,

standing apart but chained together. The space in between them, perhaps, an office desk.

When he wordlessly got to his knees, I pushed back my chair too and knelt down to watch him. I knew my shirt was somewhat loosened about my chest. Forest looked up in confusion, his fingertips on the fallen card. I held out my palm. He placed the card there, and his fingertips lingered for a moment, more confidently than when he had fumbled before. There was no physical electric shock this time, but a different kind of jolt, that felt like I was suddenly waking up.

And then, before anything more could happen, I withdrew. “Thank you.”

We resumed our positions. He was watching me silently – hungrily, now.

I resumed my professional manner. “The last house is the one I’m most interested in. That’s your shadow self.”

He nodded. He still hadn’t spoken since the last card was revealed. I got the feeling he was more confident in his silence than in his speech, which was refreshing and different in a world where so many men were all talk. He had a quiet power that I did not yet quite understand.

I turned over the last card. “Five of Swords. Interesting.”

It *was* interesting. Five of Swords usually represented a conflict or competition, one that was not entirely just or noble, or one that had spiralled out of control and had either gone too far or had consumed someone entirely, so that they were losing themselves along the way.

I wasn’t going to tell this to Forest, of course. He had to make up his own mind about what his cards meant. With some prompting. “What do you see?”

He was frowning. He still hadn’t spoken. When he did, it was slow and ponderous. “This is an odd one. This guy in the foreground is holding two swords and picking up another, and there’s two lying on the ground. He’s looking quite smugly over his shoulder at two quite bedraggled people who seem to be headed for the sea.”

I nodded. “And?”

“If there’s swords lying on the ground, there’s been some kind of battle. With quite a few losses, if their swords haven’t been claimed. This guy doesn’t exactly look dressed for combat, I don’t know if he was in the battle or what... or he’s just profiting from it.”

“Who or what does it make you think of, relating to you?”

“Hmm. I have another brother – half-brother – I don’t speak of much. But you must know of him. Apollo Brock. Anyone that smug-looking on these cards reminds me of him.”

An admission I hadn’t expected to come from Forest. That guilty feeling rotted in the pit of my stomach. Unfortunately, it was overridden by my continuing urge – to lean across the table, to kiss Forest, to take off his shirt, and my shirt, and to let our bodies meet. The guilt, in this moment, only served to increase my desire. I wanted to forget it, leave it behind in the wake of something more primal.

I didn’t act on it. “But this card represents your shadow self. If it reminds you of Apollo...”

I didn’t need to finish my sentence. He clicked before I did. The shift in his expression was very obvious. From a quiet concentration to a horrified disgust. A spark of anger lit somewhere in him. Whether to me, or to his brother, I wasn’t sure. He had reason to be angry at both of us, though he didn’t know it.

There was only one thing to do.

I swept my entire forearm across the table, brushing all twelve cards and the deck that had been resting nearby onto the floor.

Forest’s dark mood broke like a crack in the clouds as he looked up at me in alarm. I met his eyes. Then his expression resolved into something dark once more, but more desirous than furious.

He knew my game. Now to see if he wanted to play. I held his gaze. I was done teasing.

He rose sleekly out of his chair and perched on the desk next to my chair. His index finger reached out to hold my chin.

He slowly pushed my face up and moved in closer until our lips were close but not quite meeting. “Is this what you wanted?” His voice was a low rumble.

I nodded slowly, entranced. The tension – which I’d created – was killing me by now. I leaned in for a kiss, and he pulled his head back. My mouth fell open in surprise.

He smirked. “Are you used to getting what you want?”

I licked my lips. “I very much like it when I get what I want.”

“So?”

“So. Give it to me.”

His expression was more serious, like he was concentrating hard, except his pupils were dilated and he was staring at my lips like they were a puzzle he had to solve. He leaned in, and pressed his lips against mine tantalizingly softly.

I stood up, pressing back against his lips with my own, the wild animal raging against his restraint. Our lips parted; our tongues met. Slowly, I lured out his lust from its covered hiding place.

I pushed him slightly back on the desk with one hand on his chest. The other arm I threw over his shoulder, so I could climb onto the desk, one leg on either side of his hips, my crotch against his stomach.

His hands came around to hold me by my ass cheeks, and I pushed my braids back over my shoulders so there would be no interruptions as I leaned in to taste his lips once more, feel the brush of his five-o-clock-shadow stubble against my smooth skin, let our tongues meet and then part.

My head started to swim with the rush of it. I pulled away, breathing heavily.

He squeezed the plentiful flesh at my hips, the love handles some men would try to shame me for. Then he moved one hand to my chest, where the shirt was askew and revealing

of more cleavage than was professional, and stroked the exposed flesh just lightly with his precise fingers. “Sit back in your chair.”

I was confused. “You want to – continue the reading?”

He shook his head. “In the chair. Please.”

So polite even when he was commanding. Somehow, the tone of his politeness drove me wild. I longed to undo his veneer of manners and see him wild, spent. I saw it there, lurking beneath the surface.

I complied. What else could I do? I sat in my chair as if I were about to resume our meeting. Forest climbed under the desk as if he were about to begin gathering up the fallen cards.

Then I felt it. The warm shuddering of his breath on my thighs. Like before, but closer this time. Then his hands slid up my outer thighs and paused.

I waited, gasping. I was sure I’d soaked through my panties and my suit pants by now. I was going to have to dry my clothes off under a hand dryer before I could return home to my family –

Ohmygod.

One of his hands started working open the zip on my pants while the other teased my pussy through the layers of fabric. I was unable to hold in my moans, and I didn’t want to, either.

“Fuck.” Forest’s voice had gone raspy as he pulled my pants down to my knees. “You smell incredible.”

“I taste even better.” I threaded my hand under the desk and into his hair, which was ruffled from our kiss. It was soft and thick.

He released me from my pants, continuing to tease me through the lace of my dripping panties. Then he discarded those, too, and I pulled him in lightly by his hair. He was all too keen to be drawn in.

The tip of his tongue traced my innermost thighs. I gasped and shook. Every second felt like the most exquisite torture, waiting for the moment he would –

Ohgod ohmyfuckinggodd –

His *tongue* on my lips and my clit, lightly at first and then faster and harder, lapping at my core.

He groaned into my pussy. The air whistled across my tender skin, causing an intense flutter of sensation. I pushed my back against the back of the chair and moaned. I could barely see him underneath the table, but I knew he must be rock hard. I unbuttoned my shirt and placed a hand against my chest, to try and hold in the loudest of my moans, which were threatening to become untamed.

Then, there was a knock at the door. Three short sharp raps. We froze. I pushed my palms into my chest as if I could shock myself into silence. I glanced down.

Under the desk, Forest withdrew and held a finger up to his lips, grinning impishly. We waited in complete stillness and silence, but no more signs of anyone came from outside the door.

Then Forest snatched my ankles and I fully shrieked. I giggled as he wrestled me under the desk, and he put his hand over my mouth as if we were being pursued and I needed to stay silent to avoid detection.

He looked over me in satisfaction, his hand clamped over my mouth. Tarot cards were everywhere. There was something unholy about it – I'd need to cleanse my deck afterwards. And something about that felt very, very naughty. My spine felt like jelly. My shirt was fully open, revealing the vulnerable soft flesh of my abdomen. The laughter from our hiding drained out of me.

When he released my mouth, I leaned into him, and placed my hand on his chest, fiddling with the buttons on his shirt. "Fuck me."

He nodded, serious and focused again now, too. The interruption was forgotten. I finished unbuttoning his shirt and pulled it open. Though he hid it well with his sensible work suits – that I'm sure cost a million dollars each – he had a fine, chiseled body underneath. I hadn't expected it to be quite so

godly. For a moment, I almost found it hard to breathe, it was like looking upon perfection.

And he was looking at me like the feeling was mutual. “Take yours off, too.”

I complied, while he fumbled in a drawer. His hand came out clutching a condom.

I threw my blazer to one side and stopped his wrist with my hand. “I’m on birth control. And a clean bill of health.”

He smiled coyly. “Very practical. For a tarot card reader.”

“Shut up. I want to feel you inside me.”

“I’m clean too. You’d better not get a premonition. From my... Ace of Wands.”

“Oh my god, please be quiet.”

“Are you comfortable?”

“Your carpet is very luxurious. And I have... padding.”

He growled in appreciation. “You do.”

Our banter faded once again as our mutual desire grew. I was fully exposed. I helped him out of his pants and boxers, which had been straining against his large, solid member.

I wrapped my legs around his lower back and guided him inside. But he didn’t need much guidance, and I was in no position to provide any instruction. As soon as the tip of his cock touched my slit, I shuddered and almost hit my head on the leg of the table. He caught me and guided me into a comfortable position, as he thrust in deep, and I moaned.

One strong arm held me in place while the other explored my torso, his hand wandering deftly over my chest and flicking my right nipple until I cried out. The feeling was already so intense.

Then the sensation exploded in all parts of me, rippling out from my core. I cried out in ecstasy, holding onto his shoulders, nails digging into the back of his neck. He watched with dark satisfaction as my thighs spasmed with orgasmic



bliss that didn't fade after the peak but continued to ebb and flow like a tide.

He thrust his pelvis back and forth, almost intuitively knowing the speed and strength I needed to keep me continually cumming, I wasn't sure how many times by now, as they all blended into one incredible stream of pleasure.

He was getting out of breath now, too. "Look at you." His voice was appreciative, and hungry. "Oh, fuck. You look so good, Ria."

Hearing him say my name made the feeling somehow intensify. I called out his in response. "Forest – Forest..."

"Fuck. I'm about to – oh, fuck." He groaned a long, animalistic moan as he emptied himself inside me.

His final strong thrusts pushed me over an edge I didn't know I could be pushed over, and I cried out again in surprise and joy, as if I didn't even know before that bodies could feel like this. The room spun around me. I could only see his body, and my body, joined in total delight.

Forest groaned one final time, satiated, and slowed. My pleasure continued to throb, even as he pulled slowly out, and replaced his cock with his hand, where he gently stroked until I too was finally satiated. Then he climbed off, breathily heavily, and rested next to me on the office's carpeted floor.

I waited until the room stopped spinning and I was no longer spasming in ecstasy to gather my thoughts. But my thoughts were jumbled in an intense and happy way.

Next to me, Forest Brock was laughing, his back against his filing cabinet and one hand resting on his abdomen. I prepared to be offended, then realized this was a joyful, giddy laugh, the kind of emotion I'd never seen him express before, even muted.

Even still, I shot him a playful look. "What exactly are you laughing at?" My heavy breathing and subsequent difficulty speaking undermined the possibility of threat in my tone.

"I don't really know." He looked around at me gleefully, cupped my face with his hand and stared into my eyes. "You

are quite something, Ria. I don't get you at all." His eyes were curious, bright.

In a way that made something flip excitedly in my stomach.

Melting into his hand, I could only murmur. "I don't quite get you either."

"Hmm. Am I such a mystery to the clairvoyant?"

I smacked his hand away from my cheek. By now, I knew he was teasing me by insisting I had psychic powers, since I made it constantly clear that I was not a believer. "That's Miss Clairvoyant to you."

As my breathing slowed, unfortunate and sensible thoughts began to enter my mind. Like, who was going to pick up my Rider Waite deck now? How were we going to go back to the tarot reading after just having mind-blowing sex under Forest's desk? And... when was I going to tell Forest that his malicious half-brother had sent me the first time we'd met?

Oh god. Apollo. Why did I have to think about him now?

Because I had to admit to Forest that he'd sent me for our first meeting. If I didn't admit it soon, it'd build up inside of me and I'd never get over it. And he'd never trust me again, if he would at all, anyway.

I couldn't do it now, though. I needed time to figure out how best to do it. For now, I had to get out of here.

I pretended to look at the time. "Shit! Sorry, I've got another appointment to make. I'm obviously not going to charge you for the time, we, er... You know. But can I make it up to you – finish the session next time?"

He nodded, a smile still about his lips, even as a little disappointment entered his expression that I had to run off so soon. Oh god, he was handsome. And I'd managed to make him laugh. And he'd managed to make me feel... something quite – and I hated to say it – magical.

I scrambled out from under the desk before he could kiss me again. He slowly raised himself up into his office chair,

still fully undressed.

I started pulling my clothes back on, trying not to admire his well-sculpted form. “You aren’t going to get in trouble for not answering your door before?”

He leaned back lazily in his chair, hands behind his head, and fixed me with a look, one eyebrow raised. “You do remember I’m the CEO, yes?”

Sometimes, I actually did forget. He was so personable when it was just me and him. Almost like a real human being and not some robotic billionaire tech whiz. “Oops. Of course.”

He watched me as I finished dressing, snatched up my handbag and made for the door.

I glanced at his chest for just one last peek before my guilty retreat. “Be a darling, would you, and pick up the deck for me.” I winked. “Keep it for my next visit.”

\* \* \*

TWO BUSES and the subway were enough to put lustful thoughts straight out of my head in the short term.

But, lying in bed in the safety of my home, snapshots of memory kept rising up and coming back to me. A remembrance that none of my vibrators could truly satisfy, no matter how hard I tried.

While I was preoccupied with arousal I couldn’t be consumed by guilt about Apollo. I could even tell myself I wasn’t really guilty after all.

Forest couldn’t make it next Monday, so I had two weeks to figure out how to break the news to him. It wasn’t like me to run from a confrontation or a hard conversation, but this one was already layered with so many levels of complication.

And another level of complication was about to arise.

A few days after our meeting, I got the phone reminder telling me that my period was due. The day passed. I attributed

it to stress, but my grandmother's prophecy kept coming back into my mind. *Two pink lines...*

A week after my missed period, I took the pregnancy tests in a public bathroom. I sure as hell wasn't taking them at home, where my supposedly-psycho grandmother watched my every move.

And there we were. Two pink lines. Just as Grandmother had predicted.

I didn't know what was worse. That my birth control had failed, or that my Grandmother might actually be psycho.

## FOREST



**S**ylvester: @Forest, have your eyes gone square from so long staring at computer screens?

**Forest:** I have no idea what you're talking about

**Sylvester:** Is that why we've not heard from you in days? Are you in hospital getting your eyes rounded back out?

**Forest:** I don't know, I think square eyes would rather suit me

**Winston:** Forest Four-eyes. Hahaha

**Forest:** Highschool flashbacks, thanks @Winston

**Winston:** As if. You were never bullied. Weren't you a popular jock at high school?

**Forest:** [Screenshot of Winston's message: 'Forest Four-eyes. Hahaha']

**Sylvester:** Touché

**Sylvester:** I love the jock-Forest photos. What happened to your illustrious football career, @Forest?

**Forest:** Oh, I don't know

**Forest:** A little-known man named Emory

**Winston:** Ugh

**Jude:** Leave off him @Winston @Sylvester

**Jude:** We do miss you though, Forest

**Jude: I think that's what these meatheads are trying to say**

**Forest: Appreciated**

It was true I'd been more absent than usual. Any time that wasn't spent at work was spent thinking about what I needed to do about Apollo, or mentally revisiting my recent encounter with Ria. It was a much nicer preoccupation than Apollo, but it made my wish to be rid of Apollo stress be even stronger.

I wanted to focus all of my attention on Ria. By now, she had entirely captivated me.

But there were other things to be done.

The time came for Ria's next appointment. I was still daunted, but more excited. I'd wanted to cancel my plans last Monday to see her again, but I knew it was a slippery slope, canceling my plans for an attractive woman. I needed to keep my head in the game – the game being success, and warding off Apollo.

But she didn't show. I was angrier than it was fair to be. I'd ghosted her, I suppose that made ghosting fair game. Except it didn't, really. I'd explained to her why I'd been feeling reluctant to undergo the sessions, despite my keenness. And then we'd slept together. I felt like that warranted a text message, at least.

I wasn't used to being angry about anything but Apollo. Amongst my brothers I was considered the measured, least hot-headed one of the four of us. But I was just more restrained. Inside, I had the same burning core of anger as we all did. And now it flared.

When I was angry, I got paranoid.

Wasn't it an odd happenstance that a young, attractive tarot card reader had showed up unexpectedly at my networking event, lured me into a tarot card reading that had hinted at Apollo – *The Sun* – then slept with me at our first subsequent session? This was so out of the ordinary that I became convinced that some evil force had to be at work here.

Blood boiling, unjustifiably for now since my suspicions were just that, suspicions, I did some digging. Firstly I checked to see how Ria paid her table fee. I knew that she wasn't rich, and that the fee hadn't been cheap, especially not for the prime position her booth had been in. She'd done well out of it, sure, but that was due to my interest in her business, not because she had a particularly solid business plan from what I could tell.

Interestingly, the fee wasn't paid by her company, or by a bank account in her name or the name of any of her relatives. It came from a shell corporation. I made some calls. My people traced the flow of the money through a number of shell corporations.

Surprise, surprise. They led back to Apollo.

Fuck. Fuck! I'd let myself be ambushed by Apollo in the weirdest possible way. He was just... sending tarot card readers in to try and have sex with me, now? What was his tactic there? Maybe it was a numbers game – he'd just keep throwing weird curveballs at me to see what really got under my skin, and take it from there. Unfortunately he was quite good at getting under my skin.

Maybe Ria – and Apollo – had gotten all they needed from me now. Maybe Ria had been lying about birth control, and maybe she was now pregnant with my child, through which Apollo would use to extort me of everything I owned, to use my company for his own gain.

My brain was swirling with crazy theories. I was possessed of a chaotic energy that I rarely let myself become possessed by. But if the tarot readings had affected me so deeply as to open up my emotional self, or whatever garbage Ria would have said to sell me on the idea of being so vulnerable around a stranger, then the floodgates were open. My wrath was spilling out.

It didn't take long to find Ria's address. I called a car immediately to take me there, no idea what I would say.

The next thing I knew I was hammering on the door. There was a scuffling sound on the other side, and Ria opened the

door, looking shocked. She was dressed in loungewear, with mussed up hair and smudged make-up that seemed to be from the day before.

“What are you doing here? I know I missed our appointment, but it’s highly unprofessional to turn up at my family home...”

A voice called out from somewhere in the flat behind her. “Who is it, Maria?”

“No one, Grandmother. Go back to your talismans.”

Despite the background of family chaos and Ria’s rumpled appearance, I couldn’t stop myself blurting it out. “Apollo sent you to me. Why?”

She stared at me. Her voice was flat. “We are not having this discussion here.”

“Fine.” My mouth was a tight line. “I’ve got a car. We can have this discussion in a secure location.”

“Are you going to kidnap me?”

I realized I was probably exuding the energy of a kidnapper. I relented. “No. I just want to ask you some questions.”

“What will happen if I don’t comply?” She raised an eyebrow.

I was stuck. I couldn’t really threaten her, nor did I want to, I now realized. This had been stupid, unplanned. If Apollo was tracking my every movement, then he’d be laughing at how badly I’d handled this situation.

“Fine. I’ll come.”

“Okay. Get in the car.”

She didn’t look happy. “Get in the car, *please*.”

I sniffed indignantly. “You’re not in a position to be correcting me.”

“No, but I’m in a position to go and get changed. Unless you want to transport me in my pyjamas through the traffic



jams of New York City.”

Once again I was forced to relent. “You have five minutes.”

“Ten. Minimum. Get in your car, I’ll meet you there.”

The door closed. Just before it shut completely, I caught a glimpse of an elderly woman approaching, draped in fabrics and jewels. I was already getting the feeling I didn’t want to trifle with Ria’s grandmother. I backed off and sat sullenly in the back of my car.

It was fifteen minutes until Ria joined me. She’d realized my threats were empty, of course. That’s what being a deep-down nice guy got you – lack of respect. That was one of my problems.

She had managed to transform herself in those fifteen minutes into the Ria I’d met. Business Ria, with her suit and tamed hair. It was reassuring. This Ria was easier to resent than the pyjama-clad young woman being called by her grandmother.

I looked her over pointedly. “I’m not taking you for an interview, you know.” I waved to the driver to start moving. He knew where we were going.

“Yeah, well, you aren’t taking me for hangover brunch, either.”

Apparently that would have been an outing that elicited pyjamas. I briefly did wish we were going for brunch, instead. Then I remembered my fury and betrayal and put all thoughts of brunch out of my mind.

We pulled up at a secret building I had rented and secured on the outskirts of the city. It would operate as a safehouse if I ever needed one. Except now it had been breached, since I had necessitated privacy for my interrogation of Apollo’s spy. Never mind, I had plenty of other safe houses.

“We aren’t at your office, are we?” Ria’s voice was flat and unimpressed.

A pang of hurt struck my chest, then morphed to anger. I don't know how she could be so flippant with me after she'd betrayed my trust. "Like I said, I'm not taking you for a job interview."

"I've left a note under my pillow for if I go missing. You definitely don't want the wrath of my Grandmother to fall on your head. She'll put a curse on you."

"She can go ahead. I'm sure I've got a fair few curses on me already."

"Oh, boo hoo. The billionaire is sad sometimes. Truly, his life is tragic."

"Why are you being so unpleasant?"

"Why are you?"

"Because you – *you* –" I stopped myself. I was about to lose it, to shout accusations. But we were still in the car, and could be seen by anyone passing. I'd wait until we were inside, and try to stay calm.

I leaned forward to the driver. "Help me bring her inside and make sure things are secure."

My driver nodded. She got out of the car and walked around to Ria's side as Ria stepped out.

"No need to jostle me." Ria was still indignant.

Shania quit her jostling, but Ria remained indignant for the rest of our journey into the former safe house.

It didn't look great inside. It definitely looked like a place I was taking her to kill her. It was an empty barren ex-warehouse made out of mainly concrete. Security staff were mulling about here and there. When we reached the final destination, a room containing only a table and two chairs, I nodded at my security for them to back off and leave us in peace.

"Take a seat." I gestured to one of the chairs.

Ria stared at me, then complied. "This is ridiculous. You know that right?"

In truth I was starting to feel a bit ridiculous. But when you felt ridiculous you had to either back off or double down. And nothing about my mood was indicating that I was going to back off.

I slammed my hand on the table. “You were sent by Apollo. Why?”

“All of this! Over a tarot card reading!”

“So you admit it.”

“Yes. Your brother paid me to give you a tarot card reading.”

“Why on earth would he do that?”

She threw her hands up. “I don’t know! I don’t question the motives of billionaires who want to pay me to do stupid, insignificant seeming shit. I take the money, I give my tarot card reading. It seemed harmless.”

“Harmless.” I paced, then sat down opposite her. “You betrayed my trust. I thought you cared about your job? More than just money?”

“I do. But I also needed the money.”

“For what?”

Ria sighed, and looked off into the corner of the room. “My mother is sick. I’m in massive debt from funding her treatments. She was going to quit going to them, because she was scared I’d never get free of the debt. Apollo’s paycheck meant she’s continuing treatment. I didn’t know I was getting involved in some weird warfare between you and your brother-”

I corrected her automatically. “Half-brother.”

It was a compelling story, if it were true. But it was also the kind of story that Apollo would concoct to tug at my stupid heartstrings. I’d need evidence before I really believed her. But you didn’t just demand evidence that someone’s mother was really dying. No, I’d get my people on it behind the scenes.

Ria rolled her eyes. “Half-brother. He said that he was worried about you, and thought you might need some spiritual guidance.”

“And that’s all? He just wanted to send me some spiritual guidance. He didn’t want to, oh, I don’t know, hear everything I told you in my sessions? Plant ideas in my head? He didn’t want you to sleep with me? Worm your way into my life? Twist information out of me with your tarot card bullshit, information he could use to his advantage?”

Ria shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

I stood up abruptly and paced the room again. I didn’t like being angry. I would prefer that no one ever had cause to make me angry. Unfortunately, you could buy a lot of things with billions, but not that. Trying was a useless game.

Then Ria softened. “I was going to tell you. I felt guilty. I didn’t have any choice about taking the money but I didn’t like it. I felt like I was betraying your trust, too.”

“There are plenty of ways to earn money that don’t involve spycraft.”

“Maybe for you. Not for me.”

I was silent. She was right. She lived in a poverty-stricken part of town, and seemed to be depended on by both her mother and grandmother. My brief research had told me she was a college drop-out. Her CV was a chaotic combination of gas station night-shifts and waitressing shifts.

I changed the subject. “Why did he want you to sleep with me? To form a relationship, find out more about my weak spots that way? Or were you lying about your birth control, and he hoped you’d fall pregnant, then use the child as leverage against me?”

Ria was unusually quiet. When I looked over at her, her expression was a contusion of hurt and rage.

Then she stood up, walked over to me and jabbed me in the chest. “I don’t do that for money.” Her voice was a hiss. “Are you so blind to your own intuition, so jaded by your incredibly fortunate lifestyle, that you don’t know when sex

means something? Didn't you feel what I felt? And if not, was it not you that was using me? I don't sleep with my clients. I have sex when it means something. Maybe we weren't on the same page, then."

I was stunned. I had felt something, but I'd thought it was a trick, a deception. I was on the fence about whether I believed her story. I had a right to be paranoid, but there were admittedly times when I was too highly strung.

"I don't know how to answer that."

"You don't have to. I have my answer." She retreated, and went to sit back in her seat, arms folded.

"Look, I don't just sleep with anyone, either. Yes, I felt something. You can tell that to Apollo if you want. I presume you will, anyway. But you said you were good at finding out what made people tick. You could easily have opened me up, prodded my vulnerabilities, and..."

"You're saying I took advantage of you?"

"No. I'm saying my half-brother may have done."

Ria scoffed. "I told you, I don't do that for money. I don't have a problem if other people do. It's just not my business. I wouldn't need to read cards if I did."

I looked her in the eyes. Beyond her defensiveness and her scorn, I almost believed she was telling the truth. I looked away. Now I was feeling guilty for making those accusations. This wasn't how I thought the interaction would go.

I stood in the corner, wrestling with my feelings and deciding what exactly I intended to do here.

Ria's voice interrupted my thoughts. "I didn't tell him, you know."

My head snapped around. "Didn't tell him what?"

"It was only the first session that he paid me for. At the networking event. He wanted to know what cards you'd gotten, how you'd reacted to them."

It stung remembering it. That event had been a combination of a pleasant meeting and an unpleasant jolt to my nerves.

“I told him the first two, the past and the present. I didn’t think there was anything there he’d be able to use against you. But when I was staring him in his smug face... I realized that he’s who you saw in ‘The Sun’ card. Am I wrong?”

I stared at her, then slowly shook my head. “You aren’t wrong.”

“I told him you pulled the Ace of Cups. A card symbolizing new relationships, births, that sort of thing. I wanted to throw him off course. You may not trust your intuition, but I trust mine. I may have been blinded by money the first time I met him, but at our second meeting, I saw him for who he really was.”

“Why the Ace of Cups?”

Then, amazingly, she smiled. “My grandmother had told me a stupid prophecy earlier that day. I used it for inspiration.”

As I watched her, her smile dropped and was replaced by something like worry. She wasn’t responding to me – she was thinking about something else. Her family, maybe.

Then I surprised both of us. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

I spoke measuredly. “For not telling him about ‘The Sun’. You were putting yourself in a lot of potential danger lying to my brother. I’m sure you didn’t realize how much, but thank you, anyway.”

“You believe me?”

I groaned. “I think so. I need to think on it. Today has been a head fuck. Why didn’t you turn up?”

“I wasn’t feeling well. Just a sickness thing. It had passed by the time you got to mine. I was going to message, but, well, I had my head in the toilet.”

I considered this. After a pause: “I overreacted.”

Ria burst out into laughter. “You think?”

Oh god. “I’m a monster.”

She shook her head.

“In my defense, you were certainly acting like someone in the employ of my villainous half-brother.” I was trying to justify my actions to myself, but it was only semi-convincing.

She had a comeback, as always. “Any chance that’s because you were acting like someone who was going to kidnap, torture and murder me?”

Yes. She was right. I’d somehow expected her to beg for forgiveness, or offer immediate apologies. I’d forgotten who I was dealing with. She had a tremendous amount of strength... and a tremendous amount of pride. That warm feeling that I didn’t quite understand was rising up in my chest again. Too many mixed emotions.

I had to call an end to this. “My driver will see you home.”

“And what are you going to do? Sit here in this interrogation room and... ponder?”

“I have more than one driver, Ms Moon.”

She looked at me curiously, and a brief shadow passed over her expression. What had I said that had caused her to look like that? Never mind. I needed to be done with this.

I pushed open the door to the room and beckoned the nearest member of my security detail over. “She’s good to go. See her home safely, please. See to her every need, etcetera.”

I didn’t look at Ria as she left. And then she was gone.

## RIA



I was driven home by Forest's staff feeling mainly relief. The interaction, as my interactions with Apollo had done, had left a bad taste in my mouth. It was an ugly situation. But at least it was all out in the open now.

Apart from those two pink lines...

Ugh. I'd somehow been able to mostly forget about that uncomfortable revelation. 'The Tower' indeed. I'd remembered it briefly when Forest had accused me of trying to get pregnant so Apollo could use the child against him. My anger had flared when I'd remembered it. I'd barely had time to process the news myself, and I felt conflicted.

And that moment that Forest had called me 'Ms Moon'... It was so like his brother that it sent a shiver up my spine. What had I really gotten myself into?

When I arrived back, Grandmother was full of questions for me. But I batted them all off and retired to my room, feeling miserable.

A few days later, I got a letter from the hospital 'confirming' that the outstanding invoices for my mother's medical treatment had been paid in full, as well as in advance for all future treatments, from a new account.

I stared at it in total bafflement.

I called for my mom out of habit. "Mom, do you know anything about this?"



Then, so she didn't have to make an unnecessary trip, I went through to her room.

She craned up at me from bed. "What was that, Ria?"

"Do you know anything about your medical bills being paid off?"

She stared at me blankly. I handed her the letter. I watched as her eyes grew wide and round.

"No, child. I have no idea."

Grandmother, sensing drama, swept through into the room with her eerie grace. "What's happening here?"

My mom handed her the letter. I scowled, knowing what was coming.

My grandmother scanned the letter and fell to her knees. "A miracle!"

I rolled my eyes. "It's not a miracle, gran. Some anonymous weirdo has decided to gift us money. I want to find out why."

"Maria! Did your mother not teach you to never look a gift horse in the mouth?"

"A bad lesson, if I had. What if the gift horse is Trojan?"

Grandmother started up in her croaky singing voice. "*Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?*"

I glowered at her. My grandmother favored the nursery rhyme since I was a stubborn child, and had kept it up into my stubborn adulthood. "It grows quite well, thank you very much."

She returned my glare. She wouldn't relent until I did. Who was the contrary one, really?

I sighed. "*With silver bells, and cockle shells, and pretty maids all in a row.*"

Grandmother nodded, satisfied.

My mom surprised me by speaking up. "I'm with your Grandmother, Ria. Don't go prodding around with something

like this. Let's count our blessings and get on with our lives.”

I was silent. It was my mom's bills, so she really had the final say. But, unlike my mother and grandmother, it would take a tremendous force of effort.

“Come here, daughter.” My mom held her arms open wide and beckoned me over to her bedside, and I allowed myself to be wrapped up in her embrace. “This is good news for all of us. Now you can relax.”

Unfortunately, I could not. Over the next few days, similar letters started arriving from my various credit card companies, loans, even my student loans. I didn't even know it was legal to pay off someone else's debt without permission – in fact, I doubted it was.

Now that all the debts were linked back to me, I knew it was personal. And I knew one of the Brock brothers was the culprit. It was the motive here I was unsure about – whether this was Apollo or Forest. I was a bit tired of being caught in the middle of their drama, actually.

And now Forest had shown me his nasty side. I'd vowed over the days following my interrogation to never trust a billionaire, despite any good intentions they may have, or how handsome they may be, or how suddenly vulnerable their eyes look during a tarot card reading. Or how undone they came when they fucked me. Or how they looked at me like I was something precious, dangerous, holy.

Shit.

Despite not wanting to get involved, when a letter turned up notifying me that a phone contract payment I'd missed five years ago and had been in collection since had been paid off, I decided it was the final straw.

I took the two buses and Subway ride to Forest's offices, fuming and muttering fake curses under my breath all the way.

I paused briefly when I arrived at the front desk and saw my new friend Jenni was there. “Oh hi, Jenni!”

“Ria. Your hair looks great as always.” She smiled.

I smiled back. Then I dropped my smile and pounded my hand on the desk. “I demand to speak to your employer.”

“To... Mr Brock?”

“Yes. To Mr Brock.”

“I’m afraid he doesn’t take walk-up appointments...”

“Oh, Jenni. You’re too good at your job. Does Forest ever monitor the CCTV from the top of his ivory tower?”

It wasn’t as if I was asking her to betray company secrets, but she spoke in a hushed voice anyway. “Mr Brock certainly has the capability of doing so. The system is centralized.”

I had no idea what the last sentence meant, but it was good enough for me. I looked up at the high walls and ceiling and searched around for the nearest camera, sliding my phone out of my pocket. I dialed Forest’s number.

When it started ringing, I stuck my middle finger up at the camera and stood there resolutely as the dialing tone eventually switched to voicemail.

But I didn’t move. I was going to wait as long as it took. I called again. And again, and again.

Jenni was looking nervously over at me from her desk. I gave her a quick wink then resumed my scowling at the camera. At some point I knew she’d have to throw me out of the building. I appreciated that she was giving me a bit of time before doing so.

Eventually, the phone on Jenni’s desk rang. I glanced over.

Jenni had gone pale. “Y-yes. Yes, of course, sir. No problem at all.”

When she put the phone down she sat there for a moment, blinking.

I lowered my middle finger, suspecting she’d heard from *Mr Brock*. “Don’t often get called directly by the Big Boss?”

“Never.” She blinked again, then shook her head and met my eyes. “You can go up. Let me just sort your visitor’s pass.”

Access only to the top floor, again. He said he'll be in his office."

I beamed at her. "Thanks, Jenni."

"You've got balls." She was speaking admirably, but so quietly I could barely hear her. "Or whatever the feminist equivalent of that saying is... you've got... pussy?"

I burst out laughing.

She grinned into her keyboard. "Sorry."

I already liked Jenni. Finding out she was secretly weird despite her demure receptionist persona was the icing on the cake. Jenni and I were to be best friends somehow, I decided.

She handed me the visitor's pass and I made my way up in the elevator. Each of the security guards had somehow been already informed of my 'appointment'. Regathering my fury, I marched down the final corridor and pounded on Forest's door.

"Come in."

I stalked in, closing the door a bit heavily behind me. "Was it you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Was it you? Who paid off all my debts? And my mother's medical debts?"

"Oh. Yes."

"Why?"

We stared at each other. I pettily decided we were in a staring contest and refused to blink.

He blinked first. "I can't see why you'd be angry."

"Oh, you can't? You've seen my face, have you not?" I made sure to deepen my scowl.

"You do look rather furious."

"Why did you do it?"

He sighed. He did look tired. “You said your mother was considering giving up her treatments because of the amount of debt you were in.”

“Yes, but I solved that. Myself.”

“Forever?”

“For now. And my business is doing well.”

“That’s not stable, though, is it?”

“The point is, I could have done it myself. And now I’ll never know, because you waved your magic wealth wand and it’s all just... solved.”

“I can understand why it’d be a shock to you.”

“A shock? No! It’s an intrusion. I didn’t consent to any of this. You could have asked me, and I’d probably have said yes. But you didn’t ask. So it’s a power play, that’s what it is. You showing off how much money you have...”

“Absolutely not.” Forest was gripping his desk so tightly that his hands had gone pale.

“If you’re so generous, why aren’t you paying off people’s medical bills all the time? Or is it only if they fuck you?”

“The company donates a large sum-“

“Oh, spare me.”

He sighed a sigh that was almost a growl. “Look, would it make you feel any better if I said it was self-serving? That I paid off your debts so that you don’t have to accept any dodgy assignments from my half-brother again? You’re quite dangerous, with your abilities. You could have done far more harm to me than you did. And I don’t really want to have you as an enemy, so there. Do you accept that explanation? Does that help your pride?”

I took a few deep breaths and considered it. “Oddly, yes.”

“Thank god. Are we done, then? Is that all you wanted?”

I flicked my gaze between all of the various scrolling monitors around the room. “No.”

He groaned.

“I accept your money. But I want to work for it.”

When he spoke, his words dripped with an unpleasant sarcasm. “How? Are you a computer science specialist? Or do you intend to be my tarot card reader for... oh, infinity?”

“Alright, I get it, my work is worthless. And the latter is more my wheelhouse, if you’re genuinely asking.”

“Well, reading my cards again would require trust. Trust which is sadly broken between us.”

That hurt. It shouldn’t have, but it did. Sometimes, I did let myself be vulnerable. “Trust can be rebuilt.”

“I don’t think starting off your career in eternal debt to a CEO you despise is a very exciting start to your business, don’t you agree?”

I tried again to let my defenses down, to open up that connection we’d felt before. “I don’t despise you.”

But his defenses were still up. “Of course. Where did I get that idea from? It can’t have been from you giving me the finger on camera for quarter of an hour then furiously kicking down my door to berate me for daring to pay off your debts.”

I sniffed. “I didn’t kick down your door.”

He all but rolled his eyes. “My apologies for the inaccuracy.”

I huffed. Forest was exhausting. It was tempting to just accept his offer and leave, get out of all of this drama, maybe spend some time actually being able to consider that positive pregnancy test I’d barely had time to think about.

But ultimately, though he said I shouldn’t start my career in eternal debt, I also couldn’t start it knowing that I’d received a handout – basically, a pay-off, if I accepted his version of events where he was paying off my debts so I didn’t have to accept sleazy assignments from Apollo.

“What if I could help you take down your half-brother?”

That snapped him out of his bitterness, if only temporarily. He stared at me in astonishment. “Excuse me?”

“That’s what’s bothering you, isn’t it? That’s the problem you came to me with in our first session, at the networking event. Apollo’s got it in for you, and you’re outsmarted. Or at least, you’re equally... smarted.”

He narrowed his eyes. “How exactly do you think you could help?”

“I don’t know. But you said I’m dangerous. If I’m dangerous – and I don’t quite understand how – then use me as a weapon. Then, consider my debts paid.”

He looked up from his desk to stare at me for a moment.

When he spoke, it was in an odd, thoughtful tone. “Leave it with me. If I can come up with something I might be able to use you for, I’ll be in contact.”

He was brushing me off, and I was happy with our stalemate, for now. I was feeling queasy. I hoped I wasn’t going to be sick into one of the fake plants in the reception.

I waved goodbye to Jenni, threw up into a trash can outside, and made my way sluggishly home. Shit.

## FOREST



When I'd said Ria was dangerous, I'd not really thought why. But it had been the insidious way she'd been able to convince me, of all people, to sit through almost an entire tarot card reading. And it was her skill with the cards – to use symbols and images to get to know a person, understand where they came from and where they were going. The power to unlock a person's understanding and capabilities. It was powerful.

I mulled on it for two sleepless nights. I got snatches of sleep here and there, I wasn't totally deprived. I'd gotten accustomed to passing out at my desk whenever I felt the urge to rest, then jolting awake an hour or so later and continuing my business. But I had to admit, I was becoming less and less productive the more hours I spent in the office.

In that way, Ria had been right too. I needed to do less. I almost wished Ria could do a card reading for me to help me come up with a plan to topple Apollo, or at least keep him at bay. That's how I knew even more that she'd managed to get to me. I was considering tarot in my plans.

In the meantime, I'd been continually badgered by my brothers. I responded just enough to get them off my back.

**Winston: Honestly, @Forest, are you dead?**

**Forest: Sadly, I still inhabit this earth**

**Sylvester: What a tragic response**

**Sylvester: Do you need a therapist?**



**Sylvester: Or the world's smallest violin?**

**Jude: Elsie can put you in touch with a therapist. The violin, you're on your own**

**Sylvester: I can provide the violin. An entire orchestra of them, if you so wish**

**Winston: Can you play the violin, @Sylvester?**

**Sylvester: Actually, yes. But it's a shameful secret**

**Jude: We'll take it to our grave**

**Forest: Along with our guilt, bone-weariness, and inherited wealth**

**Winston: God, you really are a downer right now @Forest**

**Winston: Were your jokes always this bleak?**

**Forest: Only since rumors of my tragic death started circulating amongst my family**

**Winston: Alright, we can back off**

**Forest: It's okay. I've just been working on something**

**Sylvester: Ooooooooooh**

**Sylvester: I love it when you're working on something**

**Forest: Don't get excited. Believe me, you three will be the first to know if I have any exciting news**

After the let-down of my previous schemes, I was going to hold my cards (excuse the pun) close to my chest until I had something to show my brothers. I didn't like to let them down. If that meant I had to pull away a bit, lie just slightly, then so be it.

Gradually, a plan came to me, without the use of fake magic cards to guide my intuition. A plan tailor-made for Apollo's eccentricities and making full use of Ria's abilities.

Of course, I couldn't do the same thing to Apollo as he'd done to me – send Ria in to read his cards. But if he was sending in tarot card readers to try and infiltrate my confidence, maybe I could use Ria as a sort of... double agent.

Maybe she could subtly try and infiltrate Apollo's confidence, too.

And Ria, unknowingly, had sown the seeds of my scheme when she'd chosen the Ace of Cups card to lie to Apollo about what my reading of the 'future' had said. It laid the perfect backstory for my plan. If Ria agreed to it.

I sent her a message.

**Forest: *Ace of Cups.***

This was four in the morning. I didn't expect her to reply. But she came back almost immediately.

**Ria: *Are you drunk?***

**Forest: *On scheming, maybe. Alcohol, no***

**Ria: *Are all your brothers so cryptic?***

**Forest: *You're a fortune teller. Don't like cryptic?***

**Ria: *My grandmother is a fortune teller. So, no.***

**Forest: *I've got a plan. Are you free tomorrow?***

**Ria: *I can be***

**Forest: *My office. Nine am.***

**Ria: *Sure. Let Jenni know I'm coming, will you?***

**Forest: *Who?***

**Ria: *Blonde receptionist. Deserves a raise. Don't make her have to put up with my shit again.***

**Forest: *I'll make sure the front desk is informed***

I was about to lock my phone and try and get a triumphant hour of shut-eye when my phone pinged again.

**Ria: *It's a date.***

I threw my phone onto the desk. Why did my stupid heart skip a beat reading that message? Something about attractive women turned middle-aged men into teenagers. And god, I was approaching 40 now, wasn't I? Jude was only slightly older than me, and he was now almost fully silver-haired. It wouldn't be long for me.

And yet I felt both youthful and ancient. In work terms, I was elderly, probably dying. I'd worked more by my age than some people would their whole lives. In social terms, I still felt like I was in my twenties, on account of having socialized so little since adulthood. Work didn't count as socializing, I knew that.

And the thought of Ria somehow made my heart throb like I was back in my teenage years. Sylvester liked to bring up the funny fact that I'd been a jock in high school, a popular member of the football team. It had been on a sports scholarship that I'd studied computer science at university. Back then, pre-Emory, I'd not had a care in the world. I'd loved freely, as only teens could, and had my fair share of dalliances and romance. Nothing that had stuck, but I was young, I wasn't thinking long term.

And now? I had no time for it. Was I lonely? Sure, objectively. But the life I'd only half-chosen didn't have space for a partner. Every time I'd briefly envisioned the possibility of forming a life with someone, I'd only been able to imagine a kind of put-upon housewife figure. She'd be consistently unfilled and lonely, furious that I worked so much, having affairs on the side just to give her some excitement in her life. And who would choose a life of consistently disappointing someone over comfortable loneliness?

But then I'd not felt his way about anyone until Ria. And before we could even make a start of it, before we'd even met, she'd betrayed me to my half-brother – the one person I could never forgive. A romance that was doomed before it even started seemed par for the course in my life.

I managed to get *two* bleary hours of sleep at my desk. I showered in the management showers and dressed in the clean clothes I'd started keeping in my office since I'd been getting my dry cleaning dropped off here. Work-life separation? Not needed when you didn't have a life.

I was basically assembled and caffeinated by the time Ria arrived for her appointment. I watched her enter the reception on CCTV. She chatted with Jenni for an infuriatingly long-feeling five minutes before entering the elevator.

This gave me food for thought. Ria may project confidence, but in a building full of some of the best-paid software engineers in the world, she'd made friends with the shy receptionist. What did that say about her? That she felt out of place here, maybe. Or that she wasn't superficial – she didn't feel the need to network with the 'higher-ups'. Or that she felt small – she knew her place, and it was with the reception staff, in the grand scheme of things. It could be all of those things... or none of them.

I scowled at the CCTV screen. If I had Ria's intuition, I'd be able to ascertain more about her character from watching that small exchange. I was so transfixed in my thoughts that the knock on my door came before I realized that Ria was even on her way. I quickly closed down the CCTV window and called her in.

She was more cheerful today, and wearing a garish yellow suit that on anyone else would have looked dreadful. Unfortunately, it suited her complexion and personality perfectly. She looked radiant, and more than a little intimidating. You didn't mess with a woman confident enough to carry off a banana-yellow business suit, that was for sure.

Amongst the drab grayness of my office and attire, she certainly stood out. But she didn't seem phased. "Lay out the plan, then."

I tutted. "Impatient."

She took a seat opposite me, crossing one leg over the other and rolling her eyes. "You messaged me at four in the morning asking me for a meeting at nine. I assumed you were raring to go."

"I am quite pleased with the plan, actually."

"Go on."

"Well, the problem is, I think, that I've been trying to come up with a complete plan from start to finish, accounting for all of the variables and possible reactions that Apollo might have. But he's been managing to get under my skin, and he's done it by being lazy."

“Lazy?”

“Yes. Unless he has some grand master plan we’ve yet to see unleashed, he’s just been doing things to fuck with me... seemingly at random. He sent a tarot card reader to give me a reading, for god’s sake. He can’t have gotten that much insight from what I said about my cards. He’s just... doing stuff. And if something gives him insight, by chance, then great for him. If not, he’s not lost anything. He’s not putting all his eggs in one basket. Or even ten baskets. And I’ve been working like a fool, trying to come up with some amazing scheme to get Apollo off our backs forever.”

“And you haven’t had success.”

“Exactly. Because the game he’s playing is too chaotic to be able to determine. If he were someone that acted predictably, then I might be able to counter him effectively. But if he’s just sowing chaos, then there’s no predicting that.”

“So what’s the new direction, then?”

“It’s twofold.” I grinned. I loved using the word ‘twofold’. “One: I use his own moves against him. Two: I play him at his own game. Chaos.”

“And in practice, that means...”

“His move was to send you to me. I have to use you against him in return. Like I said, you’re dangerous. And... my plan needs to have a start, but not a middle or an end. It needs to be adaptable. I just have to sow the seeds of chaos, and... see what Apollo does. Then react. And trust that some kind of plot will come together for me in the end.”

“And how exactly are you going to use me against him? I’m not the mastermind you seem to think I am. You weren’t that difficult to manipulate.”

Harsh, but true, possibly. “Do you still have a line of contact with Apollo?”

Ria sighed, and looked a little guilty for just a moment. “Yeah. He said to get back in touch if I had any more information that might interest him.”

“I suspected as such. That’s perfect. I want you to go to Apollo and tell him everything that happened up until just before the point that I sussed out his involvement and interrogated you.”

“So that *was* an interrogation.”

“Besides the point. If I’m right about him sowing the seeds of chaos, he will propose that you continue our rendezvous, gathering information on me as you go. And I propose that you accept his proposal. You’ll be a double agent. One who is on my side, if you’re as keen to repay your debt as you seem to be.”

“And then what?”

“We drip-feed him incorrect information. The Russians do this all the time – a ‘disinformation campaign’. ‘Fake news’, in America. And you and I will open our hearts to each other, fall in love, plan our engagement... publicly, and in the watchful eyes of Apollo.”

“We fake it?”

“A fake relationship. Ace of Cups. That’s what you told him lay in my future, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“Then let the prophecy come to pass. Let’s play into it. Do you accept, Ria Moon?”

## RIA



The first thing I thought after Forest Brock, billionaire CEO of *Brock Industries*, told me his plan was for us to engage in a ‘fake relationship’ was: *man, these billionaire brothers are childish.*

Second, came a kind of thrill at the idea of subterfuge. Third, dread. And fourth, a kind of regret that our initial chemistry had been seemingly destroyed by the revelation of my supposed betrayal. Fifth, and last: I knew that I would say yes.

So, I did. “I accept.”

“Wonderful. As far as a further plan goes, I’m going to remain deliberately... flexible. Play it by ear. See what comes up for me to use.”

“You’re excited about this.”

“I am. I’m not sure why.”

“I do.” I pulled a deck of cards out of my handbag – the Rider Waite tarot. I searched the deck for the Ace of Cups and placed it on the table. “The Ace of Cups. Your fake future. Opening your heart to love, starting a new relationship. Generosity, compassion, inner peace. You, happy in your relationship with, er, me.”

Forest nodded. He was following me so far. “Yes, precisely.”

Then I found The Sun and placed it in its upside-down position on the table. “Your real future. The Sun. You left

before we could discuss this card. I know you see The Sun as Apollo, but bear with me here. In general, The Sun is a positive card, even reversed. Ignore the symbol of the Sun itself and look at this child. Carefree, playful, young and vulnerable. The card being reversed doesn't change that. But it makes it more... a plea to your inner child to come out and play. And maybe we could see the child as triumphant over the Sun. The child rides away without a care in the world... The Sun is stuck up there, in the sky."

Forest nodded again, more slowly this time.

"If we pair that with the reversed Hanged Man of your present, who needs to slow down because he's going too fast... " I sought out the last card, the Hanged Man, and placed it upside down slightly overlapping The Sun card. "Your cards may have suggested exactly this plan you've come up with. One that means you get to relax, take your foot off the gas, just coast and see what happens. You embracing chaos, engaging in a form of play with this subterfuge, this public 'charade' of romance... That's The Sun reversed, to me."

"You think I'm excited because this means I can drop the idea of having a master plan to defeat Apollo?"

"Yes."

"And that this plan seems well-suited to my current state, according to the cards?"

"Yes."

"Then, by gods, on this occasion I'll listen to the cards, I'll listen to you, because I sorely, sorely need some rest."

And then, amazingly, he grinned.

\* \* \*

AS PLANNED, I contacted Apollo as soon as I arrived home.

**Ria:** *You said to contact you if I had some information on Forest.*

**Apollo:** *I'll send someone to pick you up.*



It took no time for the car to arrive. This time, I was alone in the back seat. I was to be taken to a location where I would meet with Apollo, presumably. The driver was silent – it was the woman I recognised who had stopped me exiting the subway, before.

We drove for a while. I quickly searched the internet for the location of Apollo's head office, which was in the city just like all four of his brothers'. Cross referencing that with a map, and I could tell that was the direction in which we were going.

I was right. *Brock Industries* was the biggest of all the Brock corporations. I knew a little bit more about the family now that I'd been reading up on them. After Emory's death, his businesses had been split into five parts. Four of the brothers – Jude, Winston, Sylvester, and of course, Forest – had kept the businesses running steadily, downsizing in some cases but not running at a loss. Their business priorities had changed. They took on different clients, new ways of working.

Apollo's business, on the other hand, had grown and grown. In some cases, he had taken on staff or projects that the others had dropped, therefore expanding his own business out into the areas the others had original domain over: charity, technology, science including medical science, and entertainment. His had originally been 'commerce'. Now, his business was a sprawling, but successful, mass.

The headquarters of *Brock Industries* loomed terrifyingly above us as we drove up to the entrance. It was a formidable building, brutalist and shadowy. I'm sure this was Apollo's, or his late father's, intent. I was surprised I was being taken to the entrance. I followed the driver wordlessly to the reception.

Sat at the reception desk was Jenni.

I was incredulous. "Jenni?"

The woman at the front desk scowled at me. "That's not my name."

I could see it now, the differences in their mannerisms and the slight differences in facial structure, cheekbones. This

definitely was not Jenni. But it was someone almost identical to Jenni. “Are you a twin?”

She scrunched up her face. “Unfortunately, yes. You’re here to see Mr Brock, correct?”

I nodded, dumbfounded.

“You’ll be escorted to him. Wait here for a security guard to arrive. Linda, you’re free to go.”

The driver nodded and departed. I stared at the Jenni twin, who was staring resolutely away from me at her computer screen. A member of security arrived after not too long.

Apollo’s security staff were much more seriously equipped than Forest’s. They looked like they were carrying at least three guns, and spent several hours a day at the gym, as well as being on steroids. Combined with the architecture, the receptionist’s attitude, and my general knowledge of Apollo, the whole atmosphere was far, far more oppressive than Forest’s office.

As I followed the guard up in the elevator and through the twisting corridors of the penultimate floor of the building, ‘The Imperial March’, Darth Vader’s theme from the Star Wars films, came unbidden into my head. I wasn’t much for movies, but it floated up out of some hidden memory, and seemed appropriate.

I smirked to myself quietly. As if hearing my thoughts, the guard stopped walking and snapped his head around to stare at me. I dropped my smirk. We kept walking.

Eventually we came to my destination. The guard entered a keycode and gestured at the door, and I entered.

He was sat at his desk, one leg resting on the opposite knee. “Ah, Ms Moon. I was highly delighted to hear from you today.”

“You were?”

“Of course. It’s not every day I get to employ a tarot card reader like my late mother. You remind me of her.”

This was highly weird. And yet I had to go with it. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

He waved a hand. “It was some time ago now. Anyway, to business. You said you have some information for me?”

“I’m not sure if it’s information, as such, but I thought it might be useful to know...”

“We’ll see. I’ll pay it’s worth, don’t worry. I’m not short of cash.”

I swallowed, then spat out the news. “We slept together.”

Apollo froze for a moment, as if his brain was ticking over. And then he laughed in delight. “You *did*? How on earth did that happen? I thought my brother was a prude, or celibate.”

“I can confirm he isn’t.”

“And you thought this would be useful to me?”

“I wasn’t sure. But you said if I had anything.”

“Ooh. Yes. You were right to be in contact with me. Tell me, how did this occur?”

“After the initial session you sent me to, he got in contact and wanted to arrange further sessions.”

Apollo frowned. “Then why weren’t you in contact sooner?”

“I wasn’t sure it would go ahead. He ghosted me the first time. I wanted to be sure that I had something, so I didn’t waste your time.”

He touched the fingers of both hands together in thought. “You need the money, correct?”

I swallowed and nodded. “I do.” Then I continued. “He did turn up for the second session. We chatted, and I read his cards again. Then... it happened.”

I gave him all the details he asked for, feeling dirty. He went into the corner to think, by a terrifying painted portrait of his late father. He appeared to be muttering under his breath to the picture. This was just comically villainous.

After some time he returned, pulled out his cheque book, and wrote a cheque and handed it to me. Upon seeing the numbers there, my eyes glazed over again.

“What would you say to continuing your rendezvous with my brother? For his own good health, of course.”

Before I had a chance to answer, he appeared to think of something else. “Do you like him, Ms Moon?”

“In what way?”

“Do you have feelings for him?”

I couldn't lie completely here. I needed to tell a half-truth. “I could, if I let myself. I need the money, but it's not my usual way...”

He nodded. “I understand. Well, if you like him, you'll sell it even better, won't you? He's quite handsome, is he not, my brother? Well, we all are. My father wasn't the best looker, but he chose his companions well.”

This was a disgusting line of questioning. I nodded in lieu of having to say anything. Though Apollo was objectively handsome in photos, his slimy demeanor in person made him seem anything but.

Apollo was twirling his old-fashioned corded phone line around his index finger. “I will of course require proof that you aren't lying to me... before we can proceed.”

My heart sped up. “Lying?” Had he caught onto our plan so soon? How could I prove that I wasn't a double agent?

“That you have in fact slept with him.”

Oh. So he didn't suspect my agenda – he just thought I might be lying to him in exchange for money. “How would I even prove that?”

“I don't know. That's up to you.”

How could you prove you've slept with someone? I wracked my brain.

Then something horrible dawned on me. Something I'd not told anyone yet. I did have a quite concrete way of proving I'd

slept with Forest... I was pregnant with his child.

“There’s something you’re not saying. Spit it out, or the deal is off.”

It was either tell him, or ruin Forest’s plan and have to find some other way of paying off my debt. Or be in imaginary debt to Forest forever.

I sighed. “I can prove it, if you really want... because after we slept together, I missed my period. A week later I took a few pregnancy tests. I’m pregnant with your brother’s child.”

After a moment’s pause, the most horrible smile I’ve ever seen spread across Apollo’s face. “Oh my.” He became positively giddy. “Ria Moon, you have given me far, far more than I ever bargained for from our little deal. You are a goldmine.”

The longer we talked, the less he was pretending to care about Forest. He was letting the mask slip. I filed that away – he may be sneaky, but his excitement to screw over his brothers would always eclipse any pretense he had.

I folded my arms defensively. “Is that enough evidence?”

“I’ll arrange a prenatal paternity test. I have samples of my brother’s blood stored away, of course. In case anything ever happened to any of them... but until then, I will have to take you on your word.”

Ugh. “What should I do next?”

“Why, you should arrange a date with your new boyfriend.”

## FOREST



*S*leep. Oh my god, sleep was amazing. How had I forgotten the wonders of it?

The night after Ria had agreed to my plan, I slept – in my own bed – for a full fourteen hours.

When I awoke, it was a beautiful Saturday outside. I normally called into work both weekend days, as there were undoubtedly teams working overtime on some latest project or other. ‘Crunch’, as it’s known in tech, wasn’t mandatory at my company. But there were such great pay bonuses for working overtime that most everyone pulled in the hours anyway.

Well, *I* didn’t get those pay bonuses, and *I* was going to be taking the weekend off, I decided that morning. I was groggy and headache-y from the sleep, but I could tell once the headache wore off I was going to feel rejuvenated.

I dressed myself in the dressing gown Sylvester had gifted me but that I’d hardly ever have the opportunity to wear, and padded into the kitchen barefoot. My housekeeper, Mrs Jamroz, was reading a gossip magazine at the kitchen table, her feet up on the surface.

She barely looked up as I entered, just turned the page and muttered something I could hardly hear, with a wry smile on her face. “The things young people wear these days...”

Then she looked up at me in sudden horror and jumped to her feet, slamming the magazine onto the table and almost knocking herself over onto the ground with the haste at which she pushed the chair under the table. “Forest!”

“Relax, Mrs Jamroz. I’m having an irregular day. I don’t expect you to be polishing twenty-four-seven.”

She stared at me. “Well, good for you. I’m always telling my sons you work too much. ‘He works too much!’ I tell them. ‘That’s the only way you’ll ever become a billionaire, too, so you better figure out how to be a good husband and marry rich!’ Lazy boys.”

“The apprenticeship offer is always open.” I went to the coffee maker, waving Mrs Jamroz off. “It’s fine, return to your magazine. Please.”

“You wouldn’t want them at your company, believe me.” She plodded back over to the table and sat back down, peering warily at me over the top of the open magazine. “What’s got into you then? Are you in love?”

I glanced over at her, figuring out what to say.

But she’d already decided the affirmative. “Ahhhh, of course. Love makes you do crazy things. Even taking a day off work now and then. I’ll make sure we have feminine products stocked in the bathroom and kitchen. I’m not sure any lady would want to eat what you do.”

I smiled. While I wasn’t in love, it was nice to pretend I was. And besides, I’d need to pretend I was, so I may as well start at home. “Thanks, Mrs Jamroz. I’d not have thought of that.”

“That’s why you employ me.” Satisfied she’d demonstrated her worth, she returned happily to the magazine. Then she glanced up at me again. “I hope she doesn’t wear what these young girls wear nowadays. I don’t mind them exposing all their bits. It’s the bad craftsmanship. My *tata* worked in textiles. Beautiful dresses. Every so often he’d afford to take one home for one of us girls.”

“Maybe you can help me choose something as a gift for her. Coffee?”

She beamed up at me. “I’ll make a shortlist. No thanks, I’ve had tea up to my eyeballs.”

I went to the balcony. There was a cool breeze, but not enough that I was too cold in my gown. I sipped my coffee and checked my phone.

**Ria: *Date tonight?***

We'd agreed not to mention Apollo in our messages. To anyone reading them, we'd seem like a genuine couple. It was pleasant to imagine.

**Forest: *5pm. I'll pick you up.***

**Ria: *That's early. Not working?***

**Forest: *Day off.***

**Ria: *Wow. You really meant it about relaxing***

**Forest: *I usually mean what I say.***

I was excited for my 'date' with Ria. I shouldn't have been, really. She had betrayed my trust once, and, apart from as far as I needed her for my scheme, I'd vowed to not trust her again. It was too risky to give second chances when your very powerful half-brother was out to get you all the time.

But the excitement happened unbidden, a swirling feeling in my stomach and chest that was both sickening and intoxicating.

**Forest: *I'm going to send you something to wear. I'll make sure it's with you by 4 pm.***

**Ria: *You don't like what I normally wear?***

**Forest: *It's a gift. For my girlfriend.***

**Ria: *If it's ugly, I'm not wearing it***

**Forest: *That's your prerogative***

I finished my coffee and joined Mrs Jamroz at the kitchen table. "Reckon you can get that shortlist together for me in the next few hours? I'll go over it with you at noon."

"Aye aye." She closed the magazine decisively.

Mrs Jamroz liked being given little projects to do around the home. She was a 'classic' kind of housekeeper who liked to feel involved in the domestic life of her employee.



She was very under-utilized with me. If I'd had a wife or kids she'd have been in her element. Or if I was the kind of person to host parties or gatherings of any kind. I'd had Mandy over for drinks once, and Mrs Jamroz had made preparations as if the President of the United States was visiting.

A few of the projects I'd made up to keep Mrs Jamroz occupied were dotted around the apartment. Most notably there were the creepy dolls she'd made of me and my brothers, which they called the 'voodoo dolls' and joked that if Apollo were to get hold of them we'd be finished. They were stored on a display shelf in the rarely-used living room.

She'd framed select magazine photoshoots and interviews with me and dotted those around the flat, too, making me appear surely quite vain to any guests. Luckily, I never had any.

Admittedly, it was only Mrs Jamroz's touches that made the place seem lived in at all, rather than a guest house. I'd meant to decorate a bit after moving in, but my work had quickly taken up all of my free time. It was all grays and silvers, much like the tech industry aesthetic, and quite frankly depressing.

I changed to go to Tai Chi, packing my bag so I could attend fencing straight after. I usually went on weeknights for a break from work – before sometimes returning to the office.

My Tai Chi master couldn't believe his eyes. "Forest! On a weekend! Thought I'd never see the day."

The fencing teacher was even less subtle. "Get out of here right now, foul creature! You are no Forest, but a mere imposter... you should have known that Forest Brock would *never* be seen out of the office before 7pm!"

I'd normally have found this a smidge irritating, but I took it in the good spirits of a well-rested man. After the classes were over, I even considered going for the after-class brunch that was apparently a common occurrence. I decided against it only so I could have more time to rest and prepare for my 'date' that evening.

Arriving back at the flat, I showered and dressed and found Mrs Jamroz in an intense flow state, gathering the shortlist together.

“Nearly done, Mrs J?”

“You’re very sprightly today.” She glanced smugly up at me. “Bring me a glass of water. I’ll be done in ten minutes.”

I smirked at her request, but complied, then waited until she was done. She announced the completion of the shortlist by downing the glass of water, almost choking, and then gesturing at the laptop screen as she stood up to stretch her legs, still spluttering.

Keeping one eye on her in case she was to pass out, I clicked through the ten tabs she had open in the browser. After some time, I had the list cut down to three.

“And this one, Mrs Jamroz, I don’t think is Ria’s style. Did you by any chance choose it for the shortlist because a certain housekeeper’s birthday is coming up?”

“A lady never tells.”

“That’s not how that phrase is used... never mind. Alright. Duly noted. What do you think of these three?”

“They’re all gorgeous. I chose them.”

“I can’t decide between them.”

“Tell me what you plan for your date. Then I’ll tell you which of the three is best suited.”

“Nothing fancy. Dinner, drinks.”

“Casual vibe?”

“Casual, but at one of the city’s top rated restaurants. If that’s a vibe.”

“Classy but not too elaborate. I see. Okay, number two it is.”

The second dress was an all-black sleeveless maxi dress. I’d not seen Ria in black – she tended to wear bright colors,

and she pulled them off exceedingly well. The thought of seeing her in this dress almost made my mouth water.

“Alright, I’ll get this one sent to her express this afternoon. Thanks again, Mrs J.”

“Always a pleasure. Now, am I needed for anything else?”

“No. Go home and wrangle your boys.”

“Terrible boys.” She shook her head. “I treasure every moment with them. Appreciated, Forest.”

Mrs Jamroz departed to spend some time with the family she clearly adored. I ordered the dress and let Ria know it was on its way.

I had to choose something to wear myself, which wasn’t particularly difficult – men’s fashion wasn’t imaginative by default, and I wasn’t flashy like Sylvester or, sometimes, Winston. I went for a classic look, in general, so all it meant was deciding which suit and which shirt to wear.

This was a date, not a workday, so I’d forego the tie, which was the spiciest my dress sense got.

I sent a car to pick up Ria, deciding it was best if we arrived at the restaurant separately. And then, when enough time had passed considering her comparative distance from the city center, I called for my driver, timing it so I could arrive at the restaurant a few minutes early and get our table.

I had a standing reservation at this restaurant for their best table. It wasn’t a particular favorite of mine, but it was the kind of restaurant I occasionally needed to impress a business associate, or my brothers, whose tastes could be more expensive than mine.

Did I want to impress Ria? Deep down, sure. I mean, not even very deep down. I was wounded by her temporary alliance with Apollo, but that didn’t mean I could just switch off my feelings, as much as I often liked to pretend I could. And my feelings were only going to be exacerbated by our fake relationship.

I’d simply have to be quite careful.

Of course, all thoughts of being careful went out the window when Ria was brought to our table wearing the dress Mrs Jamroz and I had picked out for her.

It was classy and glamorous, hugging her curves while baring just a minimum of cleavage. Since I'd always seen her in suits, it was odd to see her in a dress, even though I'd chosen it. Her natural femininity was amplified in the long slinky layers of fabric, the soft flesh of her bare arms just a small touch of tenderness that balanced out her striking strength.

She glowed, as she usually did, but with the air of a femme fatale, rather than the 'professional mystic' look she usually went for.

She looked like the kind of woman who had combat knives concealed in at least five locations on her body. The kind of woman who wouldn't be afraid to use them against anyone who crossed her.

My heart was in my mouth. Warmth spread to my crotch. Dear god, I'd made a mistake choosing this outfit for Ria tonight.

## RIA



As Forest's eyes took me in, I could tell I'd made the right decision with the dress.

I'd had a nervous wobble at the entrance. The wealth and luxury of this restaurant was overwhelming. I would never in a million years have considered I'd be dining here. The other patrons felt so impossibly out of my league. I'd almost turned on my heel and ran.

But Forest's hungry stare made it all worth it. His obvious lust revived me, made me feel impenetrable. Of course I deserved to be here.

I'd never felt so studied as I did in that moment. But I didn't feel exposed. I felt powerful.

The dress had certainly given me powers, it seemed.

I sat down, suppressing a grin. "You have good taste."

He tore his gaze away from me and cleared his throat. "If you mean the dress, the credit goes to Mrs Jamroz."

I batted my eyelashes. "Who?"

"My housekeeper. If you mean I have good taste in *women*, well..." Forest paused, then seemed to suddenly realize what he was saying. He beckoned the nearest waiter. "Can you find out where our wine order is, please?"

"I meant the restaurant, of course." I said it so innocently, but then I smirked into my hand, betraying my tease. "I know we're technically here on business, but I'm not opposed to

playing up our flirtation. Just to keep up appearances, of course.”

Forest looked darkly around the restaurant. “Problem is, I’m liable to get a little carried away.”

I rested my elbows on the table and leaned my chin into my hands. “Why is that?”

When he finally made eye contact, he looked almost wounded. “Ria, you know my feelings-”

I interrupted, leaning back and dropping the act. “Relax. It’s fine. I’m not trying to mock you. I’m just trying to have a little fun with our situation. I want you to join in, but if you’re not up for it, I’ll stop. I wouldn’t want you to feel ‘carried away’.”

He watched me for a moment. The waiter brought over a bottle of champagne on ice. I dreaded to think how much it cost. After the waiter had retreated, having popped the bottle and poured us both a tasting amount, Forest was still thinking.

Then, he seemed to make a decision. “Fuck it.” He slapped the table, and poured us another glass of champagne each. “You’re right. And you’ve caught me in a good mood today. This plan is supposed to be low-pressure, so, sure, let’s have some fun with it. Cheers?”

I looked across at his open, honest face and smiled. He’d dropped a layer of his defenses just like that. I liked that he was willing to change his mind on things – so many men were stubborn beyond the point of foolishness, never wanting to admit that their initial opinion could be altered.

I clinked my glass against his. “Cheers.”

I took a sip, remembering my unfortunate womb problem, which is how I’d taken to thinking about the pregnancy for now. I made a mental note to pour my glass into his while he wasn’t looking and tell him I’d topped us up.

Forest drank about half the glass with an abandon I hadn’t previously witnessed in him. He’d made a decision and by god he was immediately running with it.

“Wow. Do I get to see your ‘wild side’ now?”

Forest raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure I have one. I suppose we’ll see.”

I smirked again. “I’m not so sure you don’t. I’ve seen inklings of it.”

I had – our sex had been passionate and intense, and his interrogation had been the same, albeit in an angrier fashion. I knew there was something wild in there waiting to get out. I liked Forest, but it was that touch of darkness that I found truly intriguing, underneath the mild-mannered façade. For better or for worse, I found myself wanting to provoke it out of him.

“Get the business out of the way first, then. You saw Apollo?”

“I did. At his own office, no less. He’s bought our story. Or at least, he seemed to. I’m not psychic, but I’m fairly intuitive, and I didn’t feel like he was lying.”

“Good.” Forest nodded, thinking it over. “Good. I don’t know if he was ever a great liar.”

“I’ve already got some intel, too.”

“Go on.”

“What do you know about Jenni, your receptionist?”

“Not much, personally. But I have everyone strictly vetted before hiring them, to try and filter out Apollo’s agents. He’d do that a lot, in the old days – send in his spies as our employees. We have methods now of keeping them out.”

“Did you know she has a twin sister?”

“I told you, I don’t know her at all. Will you get to the point?”

“Alright, bossy. Well, okay. Her twin sister works as Apollo’s receptionist.”

Forest froze, his brain ticking over with possibilities. “What does this mean? Jenni is an agent of Apollo?”

I considered it, and shook my head. “I can’t say for certain. But like I told you, I have a good intuition about these things. When I asked the Jenni-twin about Jenni, she pulled a face, which indicated they aren’t on good terms. There is something going on here, but I don’t think Jenni’s an enemy.”

“Because of your intuition? Which I’m supposed to trust and just... let Jenni remain at my company?”

“Let me get to know her. We’re on good terms, me and Jenni. I’ll take her out for a drink, try and find out more. If she *isn’t* on Apollo’s side, and I strongly suspect she isn’t, she might be useful. For intel or for... espionage.”

Forest nodded slowly. “Okay. Sure. I’ll give you a bit of time. I can get someone to keep an eye on her. Or invent an excuse to temporarily take her away from the reception desk – a training course, or something like that.”

“Sounds good. And that’s all, really. It was a brief meeting. I’ll be checking in with him tonight, actually. After the date.”

Forest frowned, as if disappointed, but what he said next didn’t match his expression. “Good. Sounds good.”

As soon as the ‘business’ side of our meeting was over, and the food started arriving at our table, Forest brightened back up again. I was glad – I’d been worried I’d ruined his good mood.

We ate, Forest drank, and we prodded fun at the stuffiness of the wait staff and laughed into our napkins. When Forest was relaxed, as he seemed to be, he was actually good fun. I already liked him even when I thought he was *never* good fun. But getting to see this angle of him made my heart ache just a little for what could have been.

And I was going to have to play out blow-for-blow ‘what could have been’ for Apollo’s viewing, knowing it could never be real.

But the lines between reality and fiction were already blurring. At the end of the meal, we departed the restaurant hand in hand. Forest helped me into my coat as we walked out into the cool evening breeze.



“Thank you, Ria. I had a very nice time tonight.” He leaned in close to me and winked. “Even if it was all for the public eye.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” I leaned in slightly closer, practically whispering into his ear. “If you ask me, I think we had eyes for each other a little, too.”

He smelled very good. He always looked very well-put-together, even when he’d been sleeping in his office. I wanted to scrape my nails over his scalp just to see his hair out of place again. Well, not just for that reason...

Forest jerked away as abruptly as if he’d been struck by lightning. He scratched his chin then folded his arms briskly in front of his chest. I could see what he was doing: trying to maintain self-control.

Still, his tone was somewhat teasing and breathy when he spoke. “No playing games. You have a meeting to go to, Ria Moon.”

I grinned and hailed a cab as I had been instructed to by the other Brock in my life.

Pulling away from the curb, I looked out of the back of the taxi. Forest looked slightly lost, standing there by himself, watching me drive away to meet with his nemesis. I smiled to myself and slid down further into the back seat.

I was a little bit high on my chemistry with Forest. It’d taken a temporary dip while he’d been pondering my betrayal. But I was glad it was back. I felt strangely electric whenever I was around him.

Unfortunately, the shine was taken off my evening by having to go directly to Apollo. Why he was still in his office at this time of the evening, heaven knows. Maybe he slept there, I wondered, hanging upside down from the ceiling like a bat.

That image provided me with a good giggle for the remainder of my journey. Before I knew it, I was filling Apollo in on the evening we’d had. Minus the part where we’d been scheming against him.

He was pacing the office, appearing to think over what I'd said, though the updates had not been particularly thrilling. "Do you have any obstacles with getting to know my brother? Any challenges I might be able to provide intel for?"

"Challenges?" I did have my challenges with Forest, it was true. "Getting him to loosen up." Maybe Apollo could actually provide some help on that front. I was doing a good job, but there were still some defenses remaining, I could tell.

Or not. "Ah, yes, I can't help you there. He's always had a stick up his ass, as long as I've known him, anyway."

My frustration here was genuine. "I've gotten close a few times. But he pulls back."

"Yes. Well, that's a good sign that you're getting through to him. If he's resisting. And if he does ever fully pull away... you've always got that trump card up your sleeve."

"Trump card?"

"The pregnancy, of course. You weren't planning on telling him yet, were you?"

I wasn't. But I didn't like the idea that Apollo had a say in it. "I've thought about it."

Apollo shook his head. "Keep it to yourself. If you tell him now, he'll run for the hills. And then our plan will be in tatters. No money for yourself or your mother."

"You're probably right." I wished I didn't agree with him, but I kind of did. Now was not the time. That didn't mean I was necessarily going to wait for Apollo's say-so. But I didn't want to tell him yet, anyway, and this was a good excuse to delay it.

In the back of Apollo's car, I checked my phone. I was pleasantly surprised to see I had a message.

**Forest: *I don't quite feel like the evening is over***

**Forest: *Do you want a nightcap?***

**Forest: *Just because Mrs Jamroz will be devastated if you don't use the 'feminine' hand wash she's bought for you***

**Ria: *Yeah, alright.***

**Ria: *I'm in the back of Apollo's car.***

**Ria: *Reckon I can just... redirect the driver?***

**Forest: *I'm sure he knows where I live already, so, sure***

I leaned forward and rapped on the translucent plastic partition between the driver and I. “Excuse me? Excuse me! I’ve got a change of destination, please.”

The driver glanced over his shoulder. “The residence of Forest Brock?”

“Erm. Yes, please.”

True to Forest’s prediction, the driver did indeed know the address. We pulled up at the fanciest apartment building I could possibly imagine. I thanked the driver, who didn’t answer, of course, and made my way up to the penthouse as per Forest’s instructions.

The door was unlocked, as he’d said it would be. I pushed it open tentatively, and stepped into an apartment that looked like a rental. An expensive one, at that. The lights were dimmed and gentle jazz music was playing, which only added to the apartment’s vibe of being a fake set in a TV show about rich people.

“Care for a drink?”

I jumped, then clutched my hand to my chest and giggled.

Forest smiled at me from the open-plan kitchen, clutching a glass to his chest, one arm leaning on the counter behind him. “On edge from meeting with my brother? I can relate.”

“Just some water would be great.” I was still dazzled. I couldn’t stop looking around. “This apartment is insane. It barely looks lived in at all, though. I guess your office really is your first home.”

“Mrs Jamroz tries to give it some personal touches. She’s fully to blame for the voodoo dolls, before you ask.” He indicated a set of four large dolls on a shelf above the cinema-style television.

“They are... terrifying. I do like the sound of your housekeeper. Do you have a *swimming pool* here?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“A jacuzzi? Hot tub?”

He winced as if ashamed. “I do have a hot tub on the balcony. A never-before-used hot tub, actually. Want to break it in?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” I flipped my hair over my shoulder in a silly gesture and made a beeline for the balcony door.

“You need a keycard.”

“To get *out*? That’s slightly terrifying.”

“Anti-Apollo security measures.”

“Woah woah woah. If you’re telling me I’m gonna need to ask your permission to get through each of the doors in this house, I’m out of here right now. With your permission to exit the front door, of course, m’lord.”

Forest smiled. “Don’t stress. I’ve got a key card for you here.”

“That you could deactivate at any time?”

“Does it make you feel any better to know that in most offices and private homes you can easily be locked in at the owner’s whims?”

“No, it doesn’t! My Grandmother tried to lock me in a cupboard once. I used a broom to batter down the cupboard door and I went after her with it.”

Forest moved towards the balcony door, swiped his own key card, then leaned backwards against it, pushing it half-open. “What I’m saying is, there’s no more risk here than in any private residence. The question is, do you trust me?”

He was staring at me quite intensely from the doorway. I noticed he’d unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt, so I could just see a hint of that chiseled physique I’d only had the pleasure of seeing once before.

My voice was a low purr. “I can trust you for tonight.”

I followed him outside. He uncovered the hot tub and allowed me a moment to walk the length of the balcony, gawping at the sights.

Eventually I returned to Forest and the hot tub, looking between the two. I touched my hands to my collarbones demurely. “I shouldn’t get this dress wet, should I? I imagine it was quite expensive.”

“Yes, you wouldn’t want to ruin... the material.”

I slipped off the shoulder straps and unzipped the back of it. It fell effortlessly to the floor, pooling around my feet. “Hmm. And this lingerie set is quite nice too. I’m not sure what the hot tub water would do to it.”

Forest nodded, staring at me and sipping from his tumbler as if in a trance. “Yes... the chemicals...”

I smiled and unclasped my bra with one hand, shimmying it off my shoulders, and dropped it into the pile of clothes on the balcony floor. Forest set down his glass on the balcony edge, perhaps afraid of dropping it. I teased at the hips of my panties and slowly, carefully slid them down to my ankles and stepped out of them.

Then I turned on my heel and climbed into the tub. The water was nice and warm, and I ducked underneath the surface to wet my hair. Enveloped in the water, all the background noises of the city faded to a muffled rumble. Just like a rich man, to have a hot tub that he never used turned on all the time, wasting energy. I hoped at least his housekeeper had gotten some good use out of it while he was at work.

I emerged from the water, grinning at the thought of Forest’s housekeeper chilling out in the hot tub all day. A sight wiped the grin off my face. Forest had cast off his shirt and was in the process of getting fully undressed. I watched hungrily as he loosened his belt, unbuttoned his pants, slid them and his boxers off at once, then climbed into the tub to join me. As an afterthought, he took off his glasses and set them to one side.

I took him by the arm and pulled him down with me under the surface of the water. For a moment we were both fully submerged. Then we surfaced, Forest gasping as if we'd been under for far longer.

I reached out and pushed the wet hair out of his face. Then he grabbed me by the waist, the hunger that had been in his eyes since I'd arrived flaring in a passionate burst, and pulled me close into him, our wet skin meeting.

He kissed me like I'd never been kissed before. It was the kiss you are given by someone who has been trying to tell himself all evening it was a *bad* idea to kiss you, that it was *dangerous*, that he shouldn't do it, and then had decided against all reason to kiss you anyway.

I trailed my fingernails down his strong back. He moaned into my lips, a noise of pure lust. His thigh pushed between my legs and I moaned, tracing my fingers lazily across his glistening wet chest, where the hairs were slicked smooth against his skin.

When we parted, he slid behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. "Follow my lead."

He steered me so I was facing outwards, close to the jet stream of the hot tub. One hand teased down from my waist to my hip, onwards to my thigh. I quivered, desperate for him to touch me there. With a flick of his fingertip I was moaning again.

He continued to flick and rub, the other arm positioning me slightly to the left, then slightly up, by my waist. I didn't quite realize what he was doing until he managed to align us perfectly so that the jet stream burst forth against my pulsing core, making me quake and moan and cry out.

"Oh, fuck." I laughed, in pleasure and at the suddenness of my own excitement, struggling to get the words out. "How'd you – know – the shower head's my favorite toy?"

He laughed into my neck, the hot breath tickling across the cooling beads of water so that I shuddered and rocked my torso into him. "Intuition."

I could feel his own hardness pushing into my ass cheeks from behind, practically begging to be touched. But he was a gentleman. All focused on my pleasure. Not like the younger men I'd slept with in the past. This was a man: powerful enough to take, strong enough to give.

Keeping me positioned just so in front of that powerful stream, he kept one hand rubbing and stroking my pussy, while the other wandered to my nipples. He circled my left nipple with his index finger like an artist, then squeezed the surrounding flesh. I was so sensitive there right now, I shook in his grasp.

My thighs were quivering, and my shoulders, too. The bubbles of the jets continued to churn rhythmically and tantalizingly, getting me closer and closer towards a precipice I was going to fall over any minute now.

He teased his fingertip across my nipple, then pinched it, just gently, but I was gone. I cried out, louder than before, loud enough the whole city could hear me, it felt like, but I didn't care. My body was rocked with sensation. He had to hold me in place so that I didn't fall. He held me as I threw my head back to rest on his chest, whimpering, while ripples of ecstasy continued to spread out across my body, only growing in strength.

I was still quivering and moaning when he lifted me up by the waist and sat me on the ledge of the tub. The air was cool, but my body was hot, and the two meeting made me shiver in the aftereffects of pleasure.

Seeing him naked, erect, wet and glasses-less was like seeing a different person entirely from his public-facing self, all suited and professional. I liked the feeling that this private Forest was seen only by me. I pushed my hand into his wet hair, pulling him in closer. He moved in close but ducked his head down to kiss my midriff, using his hands to push my thighs apart and lift them onto his shoulders for height.

And then he flicked the tip of his tongue across my clit, and sent my body once more into an erotic state of shock. I was cumming again, unbelievably. The small changes that

were happening in my body had heightened every sensation. Forest was very, very good with his hands, and even better with his mouth.

I rocked back, and he quickly secured me around the small of my waist, stopping me from becoming entirely boneless and floppy in the aftermath of so many orgasms.

When I could stand, he led me by the hand to his bedroom, where he located a bunch of clean towels and promptly threw them across the bed. “Here, dry off with me.”

We lay down on the nest of towels, dripping. I plucked one out of the assortment and dried the parts of me that weren’t resting on the bed, then leaned over to dab at Forest, laughing. He chuckled and snatched the towel from me

When we were almost dry I rolled over onto him, straddling his thigh. My own thigh met his still-hard cock. “Do you want to fuck me? Because I want you to fuck me.”

“You’re insatiable. Of course I do. Aren’t you supposed to have psychic abilities?”

I pouted. “Aw, you thought I’d had enough by now? You were gonna be noble and jack off after I’d gone home?”

He gave me a dark smirk then grabbed me by the waist and pulled me upright onto him. I cackled and wriggled, positioning myself above him so I could sit smoothly onto his shaft. I was lubricated enough already, despite the hot tub washing away most of the evidence of my arousal only a few minutes prior, that I slid on perfectly. I moaned as he pushed all the way in. He was big, and I felt full when he was inside me. It had been too long since our first time together.

We thrust in tandem, pushing up and down with my thighs as he thrust upwards, able to lift me off the bed with only the strength of his hips. He grunted as he did, his eyes closing from the effort and then fluttering open to sweep over my body, meet my eyes, with hunger and lust in his.

I, flushed and hot all over, was gratified to see he was at least sweating slightly from the effort, a few beads threatening



to run down his forehead, where the first little creases of age were making themselves known.

Each push was sending me more and more lightheaded. I couldn't keep myself quiet. I was threatening to burst, but I was being kept on the edge by the long, slow strokes. The feeling was overwhelming. And not at all in a bad way. In a very, very good way.

But he was getting closer, I could tell. His hands roamed all over me – my stomach, hips, breasts, back, ass. He seemed to want to touch all of me at once. I traced a finger down his chest to his pelvis, pinched the tender skin between his hips and his groin very gently.

He groaned and shifted his hips for a better angle. And that was it for me: I was done for. And oh, god. Whatever spot he was hitting, I never wanted him to stop.

I bucked and cried out, pushing my hands into my hair and staring up at the ceiling like I was having a spiritual experience. It sure felt like it. My whole body in worship of our connection, flushing with desire and the pure, pure indulgence of consecutive orgasms.

And then he moaned. He was joining me in climax, pushing deep inside as he throbbed and emptied himself, flooding me.

When we were both spent, I fell onto the pile of towels next to him, and said nothing for a while, catching my breath.

“You are quite, quite insatiable, Ria.” His voice was deep and approving. He stroked my hair. Then, in a lighter tone: “Oh, the energy of youth.”

I playfully slapped him on the shoulder, then laid with my ear against his chest so I could hear his heart. His heart rate slowed; his chest, rising and falling. It was peaceful.

But I had to get home.

Reluctantly, I murmured my apologies into his toned abs. “My Grandmother will be sending out a search party if I don't go back home tonight. Plus I don't have any of my things with

me. Mrs J is gonna have to meet me some other time. Tell her I loved the handwash, or whatever it is she got in for me.”

“I understand. Shall I call you a car?”

“Please.”

At home, I danced in through the door to be met by a shadowy figure, silhouetted against the dim lamp light. I came to a halt.

“Someone was out late.” She flicked the light switch. It was Grandmother. Who knows what she was doing awake at this time. I could have sworn the woman never slept.

“I’m an adult, gran. I can be out late if I want.”

“Of course you can, dear. I’m just interested, that’s all. Keeping tabs on the results of my prophecy...”

I rolled my eyes. “I thought you’d forgotten that already.”

“Oh, I never forget.”

Unfortunately, I couldn’t forget it, either.

\* \* \*

THE NEXT DAY, I planned to make it into the office early to check in with Jenni, but my plans were put back by a strong bout of morning sickness.

“What’s up with you, Maria? Is your work really that exhausting?”

“Yes, Grandmother.” I’d had to leave my room to make ginger tea, and thus had of course invited questioning. “Starting a new business is categorically hard.”

“Well, don’t make yourself sick. I barely see you at all these days! Out at all hours of the night!”

“It’ll get easier eventually.”

When I finally made it to the headquarters of Brock Technology, it was almost the afternoon. I wasn’t looking my best, but that was okay. Who did I need to impress, anyway?

“Hey, Jenni. When do you finish? You wanna get a drink after?”

“Y-you... me? Erm, I finish at three. Early shift. You want to go for a drink?”

“Yep. You. Me. A drink. At a bar. Three PM. How about it?”

Jenni perked up. “Sure! I never get to go for ‘work drinks’.”

“You don’t get invited?”

“Well, I do, but...” She pulled a face. “They all talk about computer stuff.”

“Yeah, I get you. I know as much as I ever need to know about computers already. Well, I’ve got some business to do, and then I’ll swing by, yeah?”

“Great!”

I went to a café and pulled out my laptop. Swept up in the Brock drama, I was getting behind on my emails, and I was continuing to get enquiries following the successful community fair. It was annoying that I had Forest to thank for that – and, actually, Apollo originally – but I knew that my service was good enough to deserve the attention. I just had to carve time in my busy fake-dating schedule to actually see some clients of my own.

When I arrived back at Brock Technology’s reception, I’d been writing emails and fielding calls for several hours and was now thoroughly in need of the promised drink. Except, I remembered, I was pregnant, so I’d be having sparkling water or something non-alcoholic. Sigh.

Jenni was waiting for me, visibly excited and ready to depart. She scurried out from behind the desk and linked her arm with mine and started to jog us out of the building. “Let’s go!”

I laughed and let myself be pulled along by her. I’d done shift work before, so I knew well that end-of-the-day feeling.

At the bar, we chatted and laughed like old friends. I liked Jenni a lot, and hoped my intuition about her was correct. Eventually she was a few drinks down and I managed to broach the subject.

“Jenni, can I trust you?”

“Oh gosh. You’re getting serious all of a sudden. I don’t know if you can trust me. I suddenly feel very responsible!”

I laughed. “Okay, I’m going to trust you, anyway. I think I met your twin the other day...?”

Jenni pulled a face that was remarkably similar to the one her sister had pulled when I’d asked her a similar question. “Ugh! Helli? What’s she up to these days?”

I lowered my voice. “She’s working the same job as you. But for Apollo Brock.”

Jenni looked at me in horror. “You aren’t... you aren’t in league with Apollo, are you?”

“What do you know about the Brock family drama, Jenni?” I was surprised. “But no, I’m not. You’ll need to trust me on that too.”

Jenni looked sad and tense, which I didn’t like being the cause of after we were having such a nice time. She started talking, with the air of it being the start of a lengthy explanation. “Helli and I weren’t always enemies. We were like, creepily similar growing up, like the twins in *The Shining*.”

“I can imagine it.”

“Our mom worked in one of Apollo’s warehouses. She was an engineer. One day, a man turned up at our home and told us that our mother had died in a warehouse incident.”

Oh no. I hadn’t expected anything like this at all. I touched her hand across the table. “I’m so sorry.”

She smiled in appreciation and continued the story. “We weren’t given much time to gather our things before we were taken to our nearest relative, but we grabbed what we could of our mom’s stuff, instead of our own toys and things, because

we wanted to have something of hers. And then, years later, amongst her things, we found evidence that Apollo Brock was up to no good in the warehouse. That our mom knew about it. And that the ‘accident’ she was involved in may not have been an accident at all.”

“Oh my god.”

“Yeah. I won’t go into the details here. I’ll tell you another day, if you want. But we started a campaign against Apollo when we were teenagers. We couldn’t get the police or anyone to listen to us, so we went around trying to find other people whose relatives died while working for Apollo, or ex-employees who had tales to tell. We gathered too much support. And one day, all the evidence we’d gathered went missing. We were young, we hadn’t made copies or kept anything particularly secure, not by corporate standards, anyway. But it hadn’t been stolen. In the end, it turned out Helli had turned over all the evidence.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Bought out by Apollo, I presume? I’m not sure. I didn’t believe it myself, until she told me with her own words that she had done it, that she didn’t want anything to do with the campaign or with me anymore.”

“That’s wild.”

“Yeah. Quite a big betrayal. That’s why I keep to myself a lot these days.”

“I bet. Well, I promise you that I’m not working for Apollo. I can’t give any more details than that. But, Jenni... if there was a way to get back at Apollo and your sister... something you could do... would you do it?”

Jenni nodded. She looked the most serious, the most calm I’d ever seen her. “In a heartbeat.”

I laughed nervously. “Alright well... stay tuned...”

Hanging out with Jenni was nice, but it was sadder than I’d thought it would be. I felt for Jenni. She had been abandoned by her sister, who had also been her closest friend, and she was alone in the world.

But apparently, if given the opportunity for revenge, she'd ruthlessly take it. That could come in handy if I could figure out a way of using this to our advantage.

I walked to the bus stop, and checked my phone while waiting. I smiled. A message from Forest.

**Forest:** *You want to test our relationship strength?*

**Forest:** *I'm in need of a date on Friday to a public event*

**Forest:** *My brothers will be there*

**Ria:** *Sure. What's the event?*

**Forest:** *My brother Jude, his wife Elsie is the co-founder of a charity. They're celebrating some milestone or other. It's publicity for the charity, really. It'll be nice, not too formal*

**Ria:** *Don't you love 'formal'?*

**Forest:** *When did I ever say that?*

**Forest:** *I'm a notorious party animal*

**Forest:** *I'll send you the details. I'll get a car to pick you up on the day*

**Ria:** *Do I get a new outfit gifted to me for the occasion?*

**Forest:** *You choose this time. Or I'll have to start paying Mrs J significantly more as your personal stylist*

## FOREST



“*I* went for drinks with Jenni.”

We were sitting down for a midweek dinner date at the same restaurant as last time. I’d not sent a dress on this occasion, to Mrs J’s disappointment. But Ria had come in one of her own that, despite being much less expensive, was almost as stunning.

I mentally slapped myself out of it. *Keep your head in the game.* “I saw. On CCTV.”

She toyed with the loose strands of her hair. “Are you always watching that CCTV?”

I swirled the whisky in my glass around, then met her intense eyes. “Only when I know you’re about.”

Ria smiled coyly, and I felt that warm flush of pleasure that wasn’t just the side effects of the whisky.

Our flirtation was, admittedly, a little dangerous. But I was enjoying myself, she was enjoying herself. Why should we not both take advantage of the situation we’d found ourselves in and make the best of it? I was sure both of us were sensible enough to not catch feelings too hard, considering the relationship was designedly fake.

At least, that’s what I told myself. I was already beginning to find that the heart and the brain can be quite at odds.

I forced myself to concentrate while Ria explained to me the history of Jenni and Helli. I couldn’t help glancing from

time to time at her exposed shoulders, her collarbones, and the ample flesh beneath...

I cleared my throat to try and push the horny thoughts out of my brain. It was becoming a nervous tic when around Ria. "How did I not know this about a member of my staff?"

It was concerning. I tended to get my staff very thoroughly vetted. Maybe, because Jenni had campaigned against Apollo, that had been enough to convince my vetters that she wasn't on his side. I'd need to review the process.

Ria didn't seem too worried, but then she wasn't a Brock. She shrugged. "My next step will be to try and speak to her twin."

"Her mean twin, you mean?"

"Yeah, she's certainly not as friendly as Jenni. But Jenni and I get along well. The two of them must have some similarities."

The paradox was that, while Ria had betrayed me, I also trusted her intuition implicitly. And since I had assurance for now that she was on my good side, all I could really do at the moment was cheerlead her attempts to infiltrate my half-brother's operation.

It felt scary to hand over control. It also felt good. It was slightly addictive.

I clinked my glass against hers. She hadn't joined me in drinking whisky, opting for a fancy elderflower mocktail. "Good luck."

We had a fairly civilized and pleasant dinner, chatting about our respective businesses like we were indeed just a normal couple in a normal relationship.

I was sad when we finished eating and there was no good excuse for us to stay chatting.

Ria glanced from her empty plate to me. There was a hesitancy in her voice. "I suppose we'd best get some rest."

I nodded, despite myself, and despite feeling like she wanted me to disagree with her. I was still trying to keep this



professional.

We stepped outside. The air had gotten cold while we'd been laughing and eating in the warm restaurant, filled with warm bodies. Ria shuddered. I glanced at her. Her arms were covered in goosebumps, the tiny hairs sticking up on end.

I reached out to brush her arm without thinking. She met my eyes, both of us surprised, and then she touched my bicep, our arms interlinked.

All thoughts of being professional fled my mind. I threaded my other arm around her waist and pulled her into me. Not just for warmth, though I am sure I had some noble notion of providing the heat she so clearly lacked in the icy night-time air.

She shuddered in my arms and nestled in closer until our faces were inches apart. I met her eyes, a mysterious combination of soft and intense, like she was seeing some illusion that I could not.

And then, I kissed her. My whole body felt aware of my lips meeting hers. Every part of me woke up. She smiled into my mouth and kissed back, gently at first and then passionately, threading her tongue in through my lips then tauntingly darting it away again.

Moments like this, she almost made this grumpy computer science skeptic believe in magic.

Almost. I pulled away. As nice as it was, it had to end.

She sighed, still smiling, still close to me, and nestled her head into my chest.

Oh. I hadn't expected that. It was so intimate.

I breathed in the scent of her hair. Fresh and floral, with a distinct note of burning incense. For a moment I just held her there, the warmth of my body against the slowly-warming cold of her skin.

But really, I was the icy-hearted one, because once again I broke off first. "I'll call you a car, get you home safe." I

murmured it into her hair and used one hand to pull out my phone.

I texted my drivers, squinting at the phone screen over her shoulder. She didn't seem inclined to leave my arms at all. Or to speak. For once, she was silent.

Even when her car arrived, she drew softly away from my hold, her hand lingering on that bicep still even as she walked towards the car, until she was an arm span away from me and had to let even her fingertips part.

Then she was in the car, and she was gone. I didn't even have the decency to feel ashamed, chasten myself for letting go once more. I simply flew home in a dreamy daze, jacked off in bed thinking of her touch, her skin – I don't claim to be a saint – and had the best night's sleep I'd had so far. Maybe ever.

\* \* \*

BY THE EVENING of the event, I was in a great mood. The best mood of my life, possibly. I'd now had an entire week's worth of proper, restful sleep, and I was feeling like I'd unlocked some secret to wellbeing. Except, of course, it was common knowledge that you needed sleep to feel good. I'd just been a fool and ignored that before.

I got ready early and made sure I was in enough time to pick Ria up personally from her home. I wouldn't be driving, of course, I'd be in the back of the car, but it was still a nice gesture, I thought.

Before I left my apartment, I checked myself out in the mirror. I looked a little stuffy, as usual, and I wasn't feeling particularly in the mood to be as stuffy this week. I ditched the tie, but it still wasn't quite right, so I undid the top button on my shirt. And then, the second button. Absolutely scandalous. Still needed a final touch... I ran my fingers through my hair, mussing it up from its usual combed-through look.

Then I scanned myself again. Yes, this was Forest 2.0. No longer haunted by constant nightmares of my half-brother,

working all hours and sleeping at my desk. This was casual Forest, play-it-by-ear Forest, who didn't have to plan for all eventualities and worst case scenarios. And go-with-the-flow Forest had a slightly unbuttoned shirt and slightly messier hair. It was a start.

I decided to use a car I rarely used because it was too flashy for day-to-day. But we were attending an event together for the first time, and I figured Forest 2.0 was flashier than old Forest. So I messaged my driver and asked for the limo, and to make sure it was stocked with iced champagne. *Gauche*, sure, but you could be a little *gauche* when you were actually filthy rich.

Ria took some time to come outside after I messaged her saying I had arrived. When she did, she looked incredible. She'd selected her outfit for tonight, and it was quite a little bit more showy than I or Mrs Jamroz would have selected, but once again I found myself dazzled by her.

The dress was floor length and a dusky mauve, with sequin embroidery, a corset bust, and floaty lace sleeves. I could name a handful of women that could pull off a dress such as that, and Ria was amongst their number. And even then, even if just in my imagination, she pulled it off best.

She'd matched her makeup to the dress, having gone for a shadowy brown eye look and a beige-coloured lipstick that made her look slightly unearthly. Forest 2.0 wasn't so cheesy as to tell her she looked 'out of this world'. But in a few days, I might be at that level of high spirits. Who could say?

I opened the door for her. "You look quite frankly breathtaking, Ria Moon." Okay, that was a little too honest and intense, even for Forest 2.0. *Dial it back a bit*. "Thanks for humoring me and accompanying me to this thing tonight."

She didn't respond immediately. She was looking a little pale.

"Are you alright, Ria?"

"Yeah, I'm good. Just feeling a little under the weather. I see you pulled out all the stops for us tonight, huh?" She

gestured to the car as she climbed into it. “Oh wow. Champagne too.”

“Would you like a glass?” I poured one for myself, and waited for her answer.

“I... probably shouldn’t. Just in case I’m coming down with something.”

I frowned in concern. “Do you still want to come? If you need to rest up, I don’t mind.” I would be disappointed, but it was uncouth of me to say that, obviously.

“No, it’s okay. I’ve had some painkillers, I think I’ll perk up.”

“Alright, just let me know if you feel any worse, and I’ll get a car to bring you home.”

She seemed to cheer up during the journey, so I assumed the painkillers were kicking in. We spent some time laughing at the people on the street gawping at the vehicle as we drove through her neighborhood and then into the heart of the city, where we rarely got more than a second glance.

Eventually, we pulled up to the event. I opened the door for us, again, to the head-shake of the driver, who was very stringent about his duties.

I turned to Ria. “You ready?”

“Excited to meet the famed Brock brothers.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

It wasn’t difficult to find my brothers inside. They were always seated in a similar-ish area in public places – private booth area, off to the side of the main crowd. Since it was his wife’s event, Jude couldn’t pull his usual trick of arriving five or ten minutes later than everyone else, so I was the last to arrive.

“Forest!”

“Long time no see!”

“Glad to see they’ve finally gotten you back out of cryostasis.”

I waved off their greetings. “Yeah, yeah, thanks, everyone. Good to see you too. I want to introduce you to someone. This is Ria, my girlfriend.”

I gestured to Ria, who was lagging just a step behind me, and everyone went silent.

Sylvester burst out first. “*This* is what you’ve been doing the whole time?”

Winston chimed in. “Yeah, you could’ve just told us you’ve been seeing someone. We legit thought you’d gone mad.”

It was only Jude who had the courtesy to welcome Ria, at first. “Nice to meet you, Ria. How did you two meet?”

I answered so that Ria didn’t have to. “We met at a company networking event. She’s a tarot card reader.” I quickly then changed the subject. “What are we drinking? We can do better than that. I’m going to get us something for a proper celebration.”

I made my way excitedly to the bar. Elsie, Jude’s wife, was waiting there too.

“Elsie! Hello.”

She turned around and grinned when she saw me. “Forest! The boys were starting to think you’d eloped.”

I chuckled at ‘the boys’, considering they were all in their forties. “Not too far off. My girlfriend Ria is here with me tonight.”

Elsie gasped. “Oh, I have to meet her! I’ll come and visit your table later when I’m sure the event’s running smoothly.”

“Well done on tonight. You’re a very fine party host. The best I know.” I turned to the bartender. “Bottle of your best champagne, please, whatever it is.”

“Splashing out?” Elsie was eyeing me with curiosity. She may have sensed my good spirits. You didn’t need a sixth sense to suss them out tonight.

“We all have cause to celebrate, don’t we? Especially you and the growth of your charity. Would you like a glass?”

“The staff bubbly’s good enough for me, thanks though. I don’t quite yet have the refined taste of a billionaire’s wife. It’d be wasted on me.”

I liked Elsie. She was humble, not with my brother for his wealth, and they complemented each other beautifully. I admit, it had given me second thoughts about the impossibility of ever having a wife, a family. But this whole situation with Ria and Apollo had put that option firmly out of reach once more. It was untenable.

But a man could have fun, couldn’t he? He could dream – even if he knew the dream was an impossibility. That is what spending time with Ria was becoming like: an impossible dream.

I took the champagne back over to the table, expertly managing to carry five glasses without dropping any. I offered it around.

Ria declined. “Oh, I’m still feeling a little under the weather, so I’d better not.”

My brothers all accepted a glass, with varying degrees of suspicion. Jude in particular was eyeing me very warily. So they’d not seen me in a good mood for a while, what was the big deal? I didn’t quite understand what all the caution was for. If any of them were happy, I’d be happy for them. I resolved to ignore their suspicion and enjoy myself.

“Say, Ria, do you want to have a bit of an explore with me? I feel like being a bit more in the action. We’re all cooped up here off to the side.”

Ria nodded, smiling.

As we departed, I heard Sylvester mutter something. “Not exciting enough company for our brother tonight, apparently.”

Winston snorted. “I don’t think you could compete with that knock-out, Sylvester. As glamorous as you are.”

Jude groaned, and then we were out of earshot.

I turned to look at Ria, who was smirking politely behind her hand. “I apologize for my brothers, truly.”

“Don’t. They’re just how I imagined them.”

“Really? You imagined three middle-aged billionaires who act like obnoxious teenagers?”

“Pretty much. You’re more mature.”

“That makes me, what, in my twenties?”

She grinned. “You wish.”

“Ouch.” I held my hand to my chest, miming being wounded. “Come on. Elsie’s charity organizes games and activities that bring people closer together. They’ve got a games corner over here.”

I wasn’t up for anything particularly intense, and neither was Ria. She seemed to be feeling perkier than earlier, though, which I was glad for. We decided to play a game of ping-pong where, when the other person scores a point, you have to give a fact about yourself – no matter how mundane.

Neither of us were masters of table tennis, so we quickly learned quite a few facts about each other.

I learned that Ria studied psychology at college but didn’t finish her degree, that she’d once had a boyfriend who was a drug dealer, and that she had actually *apprenticed* in tarot at one of those back alley parlors you’d see advertised on faded signs.

Ria learned that my birth surname was Jones, that I participated in fencing, tai chi and occasionally horse riding (she called these ‘rich people sports’), and that my best friend at school had been a goth named Winifred who still wrote to me occasionally from where she still lived in our home town.

As with Sylvester, the fact she found the funniest was that I’d been a jock in high school.

“No way!” She set down her paddle in surprise.

“Ask Sylvester, he’s got photos saved somewhere. Made a mistake showing him those.”

“But your best friend was a goth, you said. And you’re such a nerd.”

I was indignant. “Excuse me!”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, no, you’re not, obviously, you’re devastatingly handsome and incredibly wealthy. But you do wear glasses. Oh, here’s a free fact – I do, too, sometimes.”

“Really? What are your glasses like?”

“Large. Round.” She winked at me. “Got to add to that big-eyes mystic vibe.”

I nodded, imagining it. “Please, wear them to one of our dates.”

“In exchange for getting to see your jock photos. These I have to see.”

“Alright. It’s a deal.” I grinned. “Oh, I’ve got a free fact for you, too. My vision’s not terrible. I could easily get laser eye surgery and not have to deal with glasses ever again. It’s just that I strongly believe – and Mandy, my COO agrees – no one would respect me as the CEO of a huge tech company if I didn’t wear glasses.”

She swept the back of her hand tragically across her forehead. “Oh, the troubles of being painfully good-looking.”

I smirked. “You think I’m good-looking? Don’t think you’ve mentioned that before.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t think you’ve called me ‘breath-taking’ ever, either.”

When the game finished, Ria needed a brief sit down. She was looking paler again.

“Are you alright, Ria? Do you need to go home?”

She nodded. “I think the ping-pong took the last energy I had left. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“It could just be tiredness. That does happen, you know.” I should know. I frequently felt ill from lack of sleep, and rarely



stopped to rest, pushing through it instead. “Let’s say our goodbyes.”

I led us to my brothers’ table, where they protested at my departure.

“We’ve barely seen you!” Sylvester threw his arms up dramatically, while Winston smirked next to him and raised his eyebrows in my direction.

I hugged each of them in goodbye. “Soon, my brothers, soon.”

Elsie and Ria were chatting somewhere slightly apart from our table. I couldn’t make out what they were saying. I hoped good things about me.

I dropped Ria off, staying in the car with her to make sure she got home safely. And, like a gentleman, I walked her to the door and said goodnight with only the briefest of kisses. I wished I could have lingered, but I figured she just wanted to crawl into bed. I wasn’t a pushy kinda guy.

But in the car all the way home, I did torment myself by imagining what I might have done if I had indeed lingered.

## RIA



It had been nice to meet the Brock brothers, sans Apollo, but it was also kind of weird. Elsie, Jude's wife, had been watching me carefully all evening. What she had said to me at the end of the night kept coming back to me.

I had chatted with Elsie a bit while the brothers were chiding Forest for leaving. At the end, Elsie had put her hand on my shoulder. "I like you, Ria. You seem nice, and fun. But there's something odd going on here. Just... be careful, okay? The Brock brothers – I love them all, obviously, besides Apollo – but they do lead quite twisty lives."

Ria hadn't really known what to say to that. It was a lot to process. "Thanks, Elsie. I appreciate the... warning."

And now she was processing it.

Elsie was right, there was something odd going on. The relationship was a sham, designed to hook in Apollo and then figure out some way of closing the trap around him.

And the other thing she'd said had confirmed what I already knew. *They do lead quite twisty lives*. If only I could have told Elsie *how* twisty.

It was concerning that Elsie – and by extension, probably Jude and the others – thought something was up with Forest. Did that mean that Apollo would see it too?

I couldn't ponder Elsie's statement too long. I had to check in with the man himself, Apollo Brock, following our highest-profile outing yet. And I planned to use this meeting to try and figure out Jenni's twin, Helli – I'd been informed this was

short for 'Helga'. The only problem was, I had no idea what angle I was going to use on her.

And then, just before Apollo's car arrived, it struck me. I had the best angle going, the one that had been working for me right from the start. Tarot. I had to read Helli's cards. I hoped she wasn't as opposed to the idea as Forest had been at the start. And that Apollo didn't catch onto what I was doing.

At the end of our meeting, I decided to straight up ask. "Mr Brock. I'm intrigued by your receptionist. Call it a sixth sense or something. I was wondering if I might read her cards? I wouldn't want to overstep."

"Oh, of course you wouldn't be overstepping. In fact, I'll practically insist on it. If you let me sit in and watch the master at work, of course."

I considered it. It would be different with an audience. And I didn't like the idea that someone was once again going to be manipulated into receiving a card reading from me. It didn't feel right. But then, I had my debt to Forest to pay off. The quicker I could find a solution to his Apollo problem, the sooner this would all be over.

I nodded. "You'll need to be a passive observer. So you don't influence the reading."

Except, his presence would of course change things. I would have to try and use it to my advantage. See what I could glean about the relationship between Apollo and Helli.

"Of course. I wouldn't dream of interrupting."

Apollo marched us personally down to reception, to the alarm of most people we passed, whose eyes would widen but who said nothing, staring pointedly ahead and picking up their pace.

"Helli! Ria here has kindly offered you a free tarot card reading. She senses a quality in you. She has powers, you know. I absolutely insist you take her up on her offer. You can use my office for it."

Helli's customary frown moved between Apollo and me as she tried to figure out what was going on. But of course, she

could not say so. “Of course Mr Brock. What a... generous offer, Ms Moon.” She said ‘generous offer’ like she meant ‘absolute waste of time’.

“Splendid. I’ll call someone to cover reception. Shall we get started? I’m quite excited to see a reading in person. I’ve heard so much about your abilities, Ms Moon.”

The three of us went back up to the office. Helli trudged apathetically beside me, not glancing in my direction at all. I sensed she was less than happy about the situation. Possibly was not the introspective type. Maybe she didn’t want to think about how she’d sold out her sister, and her mother’s memory.

When all was set up in Apollo’s office, I asked Helli my usual questions. “Now, do you have a particular problem you’re grappling with at the moment?”

Helli looked like she definitely did. But what she said, in the bluntest, coarsest tone, was the opposite. “No. No problems.”

“Okay. Are there any questions that you have that you’d like to ask the cards? About your career, future, relationships?”

“No.”

I glanced at Apollo, who was surveying the scene gleefully, then back to Helli. “That’s okay. I can do a generic reading. I’ll do your past, present and future. Remember, it’s all about your interpretation of the symbols and pictures. I’m not going to tell you what they mean, but I might make suggestions, to guide your thinking.”

Helli shrugged. That was probably the most I was going to get from her.

I asked her to split the deck, and then I dealt three cards onto the table. I turned the first one over. The Devil. I tried not to visibly react to the card. “This one represents your past. What do you see in the card?”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“It’s not exactly subtle, is it? It’s a picture of the damn devil. And it’s called ‘The Devil’.”

“And what does that mean for you?”

Helli was staring at me like I was mad. But I caught the moment she let her mask slip for a moment, as she glanced down at the card. There was a glimmer of a strong emotion there. Like fear. Or maybe regret.

She needed some prompting. “The Devil often represents greed, addiction, lust... sacrificing long-term happiness for short-term pleasure. The Devil also represents your shadow self – the darker, hidden parts of yourself that you don’t deal with.”

“Well, I’m not an addict.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

Obviously, the card represented selling her soul to Apollo. I knew it, Helli knew it from the look in her eyes – hell, even Apollo seemed to know it, as his eyes twinkled wickedly away in the backdrop of the reading.

“Let’s move on.” I continued to speak gently. If she didn’t want to acknowledge anything out loud, that was okay. Hopefully I’d made her think. “The next card represents your present situation.” I turned over the next card. “The Four of Pentacles, reversed. What do you see here?” I didn’t bother explaining the reversal of the card to Helli just yet. The explanation would be wasted on her.

The card pictured a man sitting miserably alone, clutching onto a coin. Particularly when reversed, it represented a strong desire for control and stability – one that could easily turn to greed.

“I don’t know.” Helli met my eyes. I could see some awareness there. She could see more in the cards than she was letting on.

“Let’s try your future, then.” I turned over the last card. Five of Cups.

The card pictured a figure in a long black cloak looking down at three cups that have been spilled. The figure is alone. Behind them, two still-standing cups go ignored. There's some scenery in the background – a river, a bridge, a building amongst some trees on the hill.

She clearly wasn't going to help herself here, so I decided to lay it out for her. "The Five of Cups traditionally symbolizes regret or disappointment, as well as being blinded to the positives of a situation. Does that resonate with you at all?"

"No. It's supposed to be my future, right? So why would it resonate with me now?"

"We all have an inkling of our own futures. It's called free will."

Helli scoffed at 'free will', and stood up ready to depart. "Thanks for the reading." She did not sound in any way grateful.

In the background, Apollo gave an elaborate one-man applause, despite the reading being one of the most underwhelming I'd ever given. "Bravo! Very interesting, wasn't it, Helli?"

"Yes. Very illuminating. Shall I return to reception now?"

"Yes. Please. Take Ria down with you, will you? And Ria, I'll see you again soon."

I waved my goodbyes and walked down with Helli to the entrance. Neither of us spoke until we reached reception, when she reached out to shake my hand stiffly in farewell.

Something crinkled from her palm to mine – a scrap of paper. I clenched my palm around it when I retracted my hand. She gave me a single nod and retreated to her desk. The interaction was over.

In the back of Apollo's car all the way home, I kept the note clenched tightly in my fist. It was burning there, willing me to read it, but of course, I was still being monitored.

Finally, in the safety of my bedroom, I unclenched my fist and read it. The scrawled handwriting read, simply: *Burner phone in handbag.*

I searched my handbag and found it – a simple, cheap cell phone with no contacts or messages. I supposed I would be contacted on it – by Helli, or someone she was acting as an agent for.

Interesting. Very interesting.

The phone still hadn't rung by the time of my next meeting with Forest. I was excited by recent developments, and keen to share my progress. Maybe a career as a spy was well-suited for me, after all.

“I managed to get Apollo's permission to give Helli a tarot card reading.”

Forest frowned disapprovingly. I wasn't quite sure why. “What did you think you'd achieve with that?”

I shrugged. I didn't see the problem. “Probably the same thing Apollo thought he'd achieve by sending me to you in the first place. I wanted to get a better read on her after hearing about their story from Jenni.”

He wasn't yet convinced. “And did you?”

“I did. The cards were quite revealing, and she was trying not to react, but with the context of what I knew, I could tell it unsettled her.”

“So, what? She has doubts about her alliance with Apollo?”

“Wouldn't you?”

Forest thought over it for a moment. “That was a risky move on your part. Apollo knows you're interested in the twins now.”

“Does every move I make need approval from you in advance? Or would you rather I act on my intuition – which as we know, is quite trustworthy?”

“The latter, of course.”

“Well, good. Because it worked instantly.” I waved the burner phone Helli had given me.

“What’s that?”

“Helli dropped a phone into my bag on my way out. She’s not contacted me yet, but something stirred – either when I mentioned her twin the first time we met, or during the card reading.”

Forest blinked. “Wow. Good work.”

“Finally, praise. Thank you.”

He tapped the table. “It could still be an Apollo trap.”

I was getting more than a little exasperated. “Sure, but everything could be from that viewpoint. That’s where intuition comes in, yes? And to my intuition, she seems genuine.”

At that point, Forest’s phone started ringing. He picked it up, and his eyes narrowed. “I have to take this in private. I’ll be right back.”

“No problem.” I watched as he stalked off, phone to ear, wondering who was on the other end.

When he returned, he was in action mode. “Ria. I’m needed somewhere for the weekend. Do you want to accompany me?”

“That’s... just about the vaguest invitation I’ve ever heard.”

“I can fill you in on the way. Not here. But it involves my private jet, and going to assist in a... family matter.”

“Brock family?”

He shook his head. “No. Forest family. Jones family.”

I was maybe a little too excited at this prospect. “Oh. Wow. Forest Jones. Did you know David Bowie’s real name was Duncan Jones? Ignore me. Okay. Color me intrigued. Yes, sure, I don’t have any plans.” I’m sure I managed to play it cool, though.



Forest was used to my ways by now, and he was becoming unflappable. “I’ll get a car to take you home to pack a bag. I’ll have it wait for you – unless you think it’ll take hours – then I’ll meet you at the jet.”

“Erm, wow, okay. Right now? Sure.”

I took the car home. Grandmother attempted to intercept me, and I fielded her nosy interrogations while packing my bag.

Before I knew it, I was pulling up in the car alongside Forest’s private jet. It was only at that point that I realized – I was going in a private jet. Wow.

I had to strike up a conversation on the jet. “So, are you gonna fill me in on the situation, or just leave it a mystery ‘til we arrive?”

Forest was tenser than he had been recently. More like the old Forest. “My sister needs some help.”

“Sister? What’s her name?”

“Juniper.” He was tight-lipped.

I started putting two and two together. “Forest... Juniper... and do you have any other siblings?”

“Six.”

“Let me guess...” I waited for him to catch on.

He folded his arms. “Yeah, our parents were hippies.”

“Were?”

“They passed away about five years ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Well, it’s not. It’s... you know. Part of life, I guess.”

“Very pragmatic. Well, what help does your sister need?”

He groaned – not at me, I could sense, but at the thought of his sister’s problems.

I waved my hands. “It’s okay. I’ll just follow your lead. I’m sure I’ll get the gist of it.”

“Thanks.”

He was quiet for the rest of the flight. I gathered that there was some adjustment needed going from his life as Forest Brock to his ‘old’ life as Forest Jones.

I’d not even asked where we were going. We stepped off the jet in a new city, and got straight into a cab. I quickly figured out where we were.

“Holy shit, we’re in Chicago.”

My surprise was at least enough to bring a smile to Forest’s features, if only briefly. “We are. Sorry, I should have said.”

“Where are we going?”

“Random street corner.” He sighed. “Juniper gives little detail.”

We pulled up on, indeed, a random street corner. A woman in her thirties, dressed younger, was waiting for us, slouching against a wall.

“Thought you were never coming!” She sounded exasperated, but she embraced Forest with a great deal of energy, practically leaping into his arms.

“You do realize I live in New York, right?”

“Yeah, but you’re rich. And a dork. Can’t you teleport?”

“Soon. Not yet. Juni, this is Ria, my girlfriend.”

Juni craned around Forest to peer at me. “Oh, wow. I thought she was a billboard. Look at you!” She came towards me now with those open arms. “How’d *my brother* get someone like you? Oh, wait, money, I forgot.”

I couldn’t help but laugh in her embrace, despite the implication I was a gold-digging billboard model. Juniper was so normal that it amazed me that she was Forest’s sister. I supposed Forest himself had been normal once.

“Ignore her, Ria. She’s just jealous. Why are we here, Jun?”

Juniper clapped her hands together. “I didn’t know you’d be bringing a plus-one. But I’m glad. Might need the two of you to get the job done.”

Forest put his hands on his hips. The stern, responsible big brother. I could see it. “What’s the job?”

“Alright.” Juniper splayed her arms out, ready to tell the tale. “I broke up with my girlfriend last week, alright? I give her a week’s grace to cry and punch shit or whatever you do when you get dumped by me, a queen. It’s gotta be hard for her, y’know? But get this. After a week, I turn back up to get my stuff, and she won’t let me in. She’s all like, *you can get your stuff back when you take me back. It’s all or nothing.*”

Forest’s shoulders were getting tenser by the minute. “And I’m here to, what, strongarm my way into your ex-girlfriend’s place? Don’t you have someone else you can call on for that?”

“Not really. And you said if I *ever* needed *anything*-“

“Alright, alright. No problem, I’ll do it. Why do you think it’ll take two of us?”

“She’s an ex-bodybuilder.”

“Bodybuilding’s all for show anyway.”

“Sorry. Ex-bodybuilder. Then she went into cage fighting.”

Forest finally couldn’t help but give in and laugh incredulously. “Are you serious, Juni? Where do you find these women?”

Juni grinned proudly. “Best lesbian bar in Chicago town.”

Long story short, we turned up at the apartment number we were given, announced we were there to get Juniper’s things, and Juniper’s six-foot-tall, cage wrestling ex-girlfriend immediately burst into a flood of tears, which didn’t stop the entire time we walked gingerly around her place picking up things that she pointed out as being Juni’s.

I delicately tiptoed past a spot where someone had clearly punched the wall to pick up a small plant pot the ex-girlfriend indicated as belonging to Forest's sister, while Forest patted the sobbing cage fighter gingerly on the shoulder.

Then we were done. When the door closed behind us and Forest and I were alone, we both burst out into silent giggles.

"Are we evil for laughing?" I was almost crying myself with laughter. "I think we're evil. Poor woman."

Forest managed to reply between laughs, just about, as we went down in the elevator. "I think what's funny is the difference between what we were expecting... and what happened."

We'd been expecting to be wrestling a bodybuilding cage fighter and had ended up consoling her as we gently picked up her ex-girlfriend's scarves and plants. I did feel for her.

"You did it!" Juni was ecstatic.

I handed her a box of her things. "We did. But is your ex going to be okay? She cried *a lot*."

Juni shrugged. "I'll message her best friend an SOS on her behalf."

Forest shook his head. "You're heartless."

But Juni was already dancing ahead, leading them down the pavement, with the energy of a teenager. Forest, still holding a large box of assorted objects, looked sideways at me and rolled his eyes. I grinned back at him.

It turned out Juniper had been couch surfing since turfing herself out of her exes apartment, so she needed sorting out with a place to stay. She'd also recently quit her job.

Forest tutted at her. "You know, you only have to ask me for money. You don't need to call me all the way across the country."

"I wasn't going to ask. I genuinely needed more help with getting my stuff." Juniper sniffed. "But if you're offering..."

“Of course I am. What good is all this money if I can’t assist you in being jobless for a while?”

“I’m not totally jobless. I’ve been making soap-“

“Talk to Ria about it. She’s a new small business owner.”

Juniper talked my head off about soap while Forest rang around various rental agents. He managed to sort out a place for her, and paid the first twelve months in advance. He then paid his sister the equivalent of a hefty one year’s salary, before we headed back to the private jet.

“Sorry you had to come all the way out here for this. Sometimes my siblings make it sound like they’re on the verge of death.”

“No, I liked it. I liked meeting your sister. I definitely need a nap now, though.” I thought of something. “Hey, why not buy your sis an apartment? Why rent it?”

Forest shrugged. “She’s like you, deep down. She wouldn’t know what to do if she suddenly had everything paid off. People want to feel like they earned things, I guess.”

“Hmm. Just like you. And how hard you work.”

“You’re good at connecting the dots. I hadn’t thought of it like that. Sure, me too.”

I smiled.

On the plane home, Forest was more relaxed than he had been on the journey out. “Ria, I just want you to know, I really appreciate you coming with me. I thought I was asking because I wanted to keep up the – ‘illusion’, I guess – of our relationship. But I actually think I really needed some support. So, thanks.”

“I get it. Family can be difficult.”

I was soon to find out just how difficult. We had just arrived back and stepped off the plane when I turned my phone off airplane mode and the missed calls started rolling in from my mom. My heart started pounding, and I called her back immediately.

“Mom?”

I listened carefully. My mom was okay. But Grandmother was in the hospital, and I should get there as quickly as possible. Signal was weak, so I couldn't ascertain how bad it was before the call dropped.

I turned to Forest in alarm. He'd been graciously looking the other way to give me some privacy. I grabbed him gently by the arm. “Forest – I know we've just got back into the city, and the last thing you probably want is more family drama – but we've got to get the car to take me home. My grandmother's had an accident. That's all I know.”

Forest nodded and waved his driver over. “Take us to Ria's, please.”

“You're coming?”

“Why not? You came with me. Unless you don't want me there, of course.”

I surprised myself by finding I did want him there. At my side. “No, come. Just don't listen to anything my Grandmother says.”

Forest gave me a reassuring smile. “I'm well practiced at not listening to you. It shouldn't be so different.” He said it gently. I appreciated him keeping things normal as per our verbal sparring.

His warmth, when it came out from behind his natural reserve, was just as compelling as his darkness.

I wondered which would win in the end.

## FOREST



We found Ria's Grandmother in the nearest hospital. As soon as we entered her hospital room, she practically tried to spring out of her bed, and was wrestled back down by a woman I presumed was Ria's mother.

"You need to stay put!" Ria's mother held her own mother down by the shoulders. "Ria, tell her."

Ria immediately snapped into stern mode. "Grandmother! Stay there, right now! Do not move a muscle until we have say-so from the doctor!"

"Oh, Maria, you are a worrywart. I just had a little fall."

"Yes, but you're *ancient*, Grandmother, so a 'little fall' lands you in hospital. And you'll be here permanently if you try and push yourself."

Ria's Grandmother relaxed somewhat sulkily back into the bed. "Fine."

"Thank you!" Ria was exasperated. I got the sense that her family always made her instantly exasperated.

Then Ria's Grandmother perked up again. "Who is this dashing young man you have with you?"

I almost forgot I wasn't invisible, surveying the scene from a safe distance.

"He's not so young, Grandmother." A harsh judgment from Ria, but true.

“Oh, everyone’s young to me. Come closer, young man. Did you know I have the sixth sense?”

I found my voice. “I may have heard something about it.” I drew warily closer to Ria’s Grandmother’s hospital bed. “My name’s Forest.”

“Forest, is it?” Grandmother peered curiously at me. “Give me your hands.”

It didn’t seem like Grandmother was someone I could disobey. I started to reach out my hands. But Ria swatted them away and stood in between the two of us, which I was admittedly grateful for.

“None of your nonsense now, Grandmother! Give your sixth sense a rest too. Lest I start speaking in tongues.”

Grandmother smiled wickedly but relaxed back into her bed. “Go and speak to the doctor then, *quite contrary*. Find out when I can get out of here. Then you can wash your hands of me.”

“I wish I could!” Ria stormed out to find the doctor, leaving me alone with her family.

No one seemed particularly ruffled by this angry exchange. I supposed this was typical for their household.

Next to the bed, Ria’s mom was observing me, in a quieter way than Grandmother was. “Are you a friend of Ria’s, then?”

“Er, business associate.” I realized I had no idea what Ria’s family knew about the whole situation.

It struck me: I’d been selfish, letting Ria be part of my life without being at all involved in hers. I hadn’t even asked how her family were doing, besides paying off their medical debt. Maybe it was ‘rich guy’ guilt for having been able to pay them off so easily.

Then I remembered that our relationship was fake, and some of my guilt was alleviated. Some, but not all. After all, our relationship may be fake, but neither of us could deny anymore that there were real feelings under the surface. Though we’d certainly try, knowing us.



Thankfully, Ria stormed back in, followed by an exasperated doctor who was sweating as if having sprinted over here.

The doctor checked Ria's Grandmother's chart. "If you're feeling okay, you can go home." She looked up at Grandmother, and a little sternness entered her expression too. Maybe Grandmother was known around these parts. "*Strict* bed rest."

"How will I cook? Tidy?"

"You are to do none of those things. You have enough family here, they can help out."

Ria nodded. "Mom's not well, either, but I can do the cooking and cleaning. How long does she need to rest for?"

"At least a week. Then limited exercise after that. She needs to work back up to it very, very slowly."

"Last question. Can you loan us a straitjacket for the period my Grandmother needs bed rest for? Some bed restraints? Handcuffs?"

The doctor laughed. "Unfortunately, no. Your Grandmother just needs to be sensible. This time. We'll give you a wheelchair to get her home, though."

Ria muttered something under her breath that no one in the room could hear, then smiled professionally at the doctor. "Thanks, doc. We'll get her out of your hair now." She turned to look at me. "Can we use your car?"

"Yeah. It's a little small, though... I can get a mobility vehicle to come. Just need to wait an extra while."

Ria nodded. "Perfect. Thanks, Forest. You're free to go whenever you want, by the way. I was worried this was a bigger emergency than it was."

"No, I can... help out. If you'll have me, that is."

"Sure." Ria looked confused, but also relieved. She didn't seem to have the energy to question me like she usually might.

That was how I found myself wheeling Grandmother in the chair to the car I'd sent for, while she tried to trip me up with the crutches she'd also been gifted – I swear on purpose.

That's also how I found myself sending Mrs Jamroz to pack a bag for me, to be sent over by courier.

And how I ended up moving into the family's living room for the week, ostensibly sleeping on the couch but making nightly trips to Ria's room.

Upon arrival at her family home, Ria and I surveyed the kitchen and living areas and determined there was a backlog of tasks to do here. I got to see Ria's own perfectionist streak in full form: she wasn't going to be able to cook in the kitchen until it was spotless.

She was slightly embarrassed. I could tell by her need to justify herself to me often. Things like: "I usually help out more, but I've obviously been a lot busier than usual lately."

I'd shrug it off each time. "The only reason my apartment is spotless is that I employ a housekeeper. No judgment here, I promise."

I did consider sending for Mrs Jamroz, actually. But I decided against it. For some reason, I liked the idea of staying myself to help Ria clean and cook and look after her gran. Maybe it took my mind off the impending Apollo doom. Or maybe I just liked spending time with Ria, no matter the circumstance.

It was when we were cleaning the kitchen that I realized it. Ria, engaged in scrubbing the sink, hair tied up into a messy bun, wearing yellow rubber gloves, must have been none the wiser. I'd rolled up my sleeves and had been mopping the floor on the other side of the room. The two of us, companionably engaged in domestic chores without needing to talk.

My realization: I was in love with Ria Moon.

I didn't know what to do with those feelings, especially not right now, when we were trying to keep things stable at her

family household. So I picked up the mop again and finished the job I'd started.

Five days into my stay at Ria's, I received an ominous text from Jude in the group chat.

**Jude:** *@Forest. Meet with us, tonight, mine, 8pm, please?*

**Forest:** *Ominous. Any indication why?*

There was no response to that.

**Forest:** *Fine. See you there*

**Jude:** *Perfect*

When I walked into Jude and Elsie's living room I immediately knew something was up. All three of my brothers were already there, plus Elsie, sitting in a solemn circle.

I tried to keep things normal. "Where's Olivia?"

Elsie answered. "With the nanny."

Jude spoke up next. "Forest, as you might have guessed, this isn't a normal meeting. This is an intervention."

Sylvester snickered a bit, but even he was fairly silent compared to normal.

"An intervention? About what?"

"We were hoping you could tell us that." Winston was unusually tense. I didn't like that either.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." I wasn't even feigning ignorance. I literally had no clue.

Sylvester folded his arms. "C'mon, Forest. You've been acting weird. Everyone's noticed it."

"This is an intervention on... me acting 'weird'? Go on, present your evidence then."

"You've been fobbing us off with excuses. We thought you were busy with work, but it turns out you've been taking weekends off."

"You're watching me, now?"

“And then there’s Ria.”

“What’s wrong with Ria?”

“And your weird behavior at the event.”

“What, because I was enjoying myself? Because I decided to not work myself to death? Because I’m having a nice time with a beautiful woman – that means I must be in need of an intervention? Is that so out of character for me?”

“Frankly, yes.” Winston stretched his arms out down the side of the armchair. “Don’t get us wrong, if you’re happy, we’re happy for you. It’s just you seem a bit...”

“A bit what?”

Winston looked unhappy to finish his sentence. “A bit *too* happy.”

I laughed spitefully. “This is ridiculous. Wasn’t I supportive, Jude, when you fell in love with Elsie?”

Jude was staring at me, trying to figure me out. “Are you in love?”

I knew I was. Shit. “Well – yeah – I might be!”

Elsie looked between the three seated brothers. “Love *can* make you crazy.”

I growled. Not at Elsie, but the whole goddamn situation. “That’s what this meeting is about? You all think I’m crazy? What do you want – you think I should just keep pushing myself to protect all of you idiots, while the three of you gallivant about having the time of your lives? When do I get what I want then, huh? When do I get to have a life of my own outside of all this Brock family bullshit?”

The room was silent.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

I didn’t wait for any further justification from the four of them. I walked out, leaving the door open, and got into the back of the car waiting for me.

As if sensing my tension, the driver put his foot on the gas and got us out of there as quickly as possible.

## RIA



Forest arrived back from the meeting with his brothers a bit tense, but he shrugged it off and started chopping vegetables for tomorrow's meals. I left him to it. I didn't need a sixth sense to discern when someone doesn't want to talk about something.

By the next morning, his tension had mostly cleared.

I'd woken up with terrible morning sickness and he'd caught me eating a plain biscuit in bed to try and stave off the nausea. He had laughed at me, but fondly, as if it was a funny little habit of mine and not a way to cover up my secret pregnancy that he didn't know about. A stab of guilt in my already churning stomach.

At least he really did seem to be relaxed in my family's home.

I was rolling out of bed when the burner phone Helli had given me lit up. It was a phone call. I scrambled to answer it, raising my finger to my lips in the direction of Forest.

"Hello?"

"Hello. Ria Moon?"

"This is she."

"You have a meeting with Apollo today. Afterwards, tell him you need to buy some groceries in town and you'll get the bus home. Then meet me at the location I'll text you."

"Er. Sure, okay."

The phone clicked off, no goodbye. It was Helli, for sure. I'd recognise that voice, so similar to Jenni's, anywhere.

I turned to Forest. "Helli wants to meet with me in private after my meeting with Apollo."

Forest nodded. "It could be a trap. I'll get some security together. Where's the meeting?"

"She's going to text me the location."

I showered and dressed, staring at myself in the mirror as I did so. Was I starting to show? I wasn't even sure when I was supposed to. I'd had barely any time to think about what was happening inside my body, never mind research it. There would be time, I presumed, to do all that later.

In the meantime, I'd already noticed some changes. Changes which Forest was thankfully oblivious to. The obvious worship with which he regarded my body when we were intimate must have overridden any concerns of detail.

But at some point, it was going to become obvious. I needed to tell Forest before it reached that point.

At the end of my meeting with Apollo, he surprised me with a question. "Ria, do you love Forest?"

I blinked. I did.

And yet I couldn't admit it to Apollo – not when he knew my other secret.

I looked him dead in the eyes as confidently as I could. "He can be good company. But it's not real. I know the difference between real feelings and pretend ones. I could never love him, not when I knew I'd been sent by you to... spend time with him." A half-truth was still a lie but could be masked with enough genuineness as to make it seem real.

Apollo nodded wisely, as if he thought himself a sage elder. "Sensible girl. Well, I'll arrange for the paternity test to be conducted at your home, if your Grandmother is unwell."

Sensible... indeed.

After the meeting, I made my excuses as per Helli's request – that I wanted to pick up some groceries in town – and walked to the location she'd picked out. I'd been instructed to go to an actual grocery store and ask for 'Monica'. I felt like a total fool doing so, but sure enough, I was handed a key for the back room of the grocery store.

And there was Jenni's twin, eerily Jenni-like when removed from the oppressive atmosphere of the Brock Industries reception.

“Were you followed?”

I couldn't help but laugh. “How am I supposed to know? I'm not a spy.”

Helli raised an eyebrow. She was sitting on a chair with its back against a stack of chip boxes. “You aren't? I thought you were Apollo's spy.”

“Not a trained one.”

“Let me cut to the chase. I think you're nice, Ria. Too nice, just like my sister. I don't think you'd turn me over to Apollo, knowing what would happen to me if you did, so... I'll put my cards on the table. *Not* tarot cards.” She pulled a face at the memory of the reading. “I want out. I think you're not on Apollo's side. I think you're pulling something over on Apollo. I want Forest's protection, and I want to see my sister again. In exchange, I'll give you the location of the evidence that Jenni and I had collected against Apollo during our campaign.”

My brain was ticking over what she'd just said. “The location? Why can't you just give us the evidence?”

“It's in Apollo's headquarters. I can say that much – you'd never find it without my directions. But, like you, I'm not a spy. I don't have the resources to get it out. Forest would, though.”

I pulled a face. “I don't know, Helli. If I did work for Forest, he'd have to put a lot of trust in your word. Trust I don't think he'd have.”



“And he trusts you?” Helli smirked. Then the smirk dropped off her face. She stood up. “Fuck this. I’m not paying my cat sitter overtime just to get suspicion and doubt from a holier-than-thou psychic. Did you cheat at that reading? You chose those cards in advance to sway me?”

I shook my head. “No. It was genuine. But hold on. Let’s discuss this. I didn’t say no to your terms.”

She shook her head, too, and headed for the door. “Nah. I’m done. You had your chance. Good luck, whoever’s side you’re on. Oh, and give Miguel the key on the way out. Don’t follow me, or we’ll both get caught.”

Helli left. The door slammed shut behind her. I was stunned. She had so little patience. Had I done something wrong? I didn’t think so. I was right to be suspicious of her. She was just quite prickly, it seemed.

When I arrived back, I found Forest in my Grandmother’s room, and the two of them were hooting with laughter like old friends. It was a sight both irritating and heart-warming.

Forest looked up, seeing me enter. “Ria. You were longer than I thought you’d be, so we’ve already eaten. Let me warm some leftovers up for you.”

He slid away before I could say anything.

I raised an eyebrow at my Grandmother.

“That young man is very decent.” She had an air of approval about her that I also found both irritating and heartwarming. “You could do much worse. Did you know he’s a billionaire?” She said that as mundanely as if she was saying *did you know he’s a builder* or *did you know he’s a postal worker?*

“Yes, Grandmother. Since we are business associates.”

Grandmother made a noise. “Pffff. You are clearly more than business associates. But if that’s the line you’re both sticking to, then sure. Either way. It’s been nice to have the help around the home. I have to admit it’s been quite relaxing putting my feet up, knowing that everything is being taken care of.”

I wouldn't have been able to accomplish half as much without Forest. I really did have him to thank for keeping my Grandmother from escaping her bed rest. It was odd how he'd slid into the role of caretaker without a second thought. Odd, and very, very nice.

I went through into the kitchen. He was standing at the microwave. I wrapped my arms around his waist from behind and nuzzled my face into his back.

He hummed a contented noise. "What's this for?"

"Thank you. For all of this help. You didn't have to. I didn't even ask you to."

"I've had a nice time. It's been no trouble. I rarely get a holiday."

I smirked. "Some holiday. You could go anywhere you wanted for a real holiday."

"Yeah, but when you can go anywhere, do anything, it isn't so special anymore. This has been... special."

That was it. I took him by the hand and led him discreetly into my room, barricading the door.

I kissed him. He kissed back, then pulled away to look at me. His gaze was soft and searching. I smiled. He returned it.

We lay down on the bed together and, facing each other, took off our clothes. I entwined my legs around his. He slid his arms over my shoulders. Our warm chests were pressed together.

And, lips meeting over and over, we pushed against each other. Forest rolled us over so that he was on top. He leaned on my headboard with one hand and used the other to run his fingers across my body, from my scalp down to the soles of my feet.

I reached for his cock. I'd been longing to touch him all day. I moaned as I stroked his hard shaft, squeezing his length gently. He groaned, and dropped his hips down against mine, grinding his member against my pussy. I wanted him.

When we had touched before it had been passionate, intense. This was different. It was just as emotional, but steadier, gentler. Intimate. Like we'd been stripped of our final layers and were seeing each other naked for the very first time, when before we'd never even been aware there were still layers left to go.

And when he entered me, it was to a feeling of completeness. I was filled, whole. He moved inside me slowly. The bed frame rattled at the slightest jolt. He covered my mouth so we wouldn't be discovered. He silenced his own moans, holding them in so he looked like he might choke from desire. It was excruciatingly lovely.

I wanted it to last forever, but the greatness of my want would make the moment short-lived: I was close. The pleasure that swept my body was light, not intense. Like a gentle breeze that cools you just the right amount when you need it, not a great hurricane that could sweep you off a cliff, or into treacherous seas.

And when I felt him thrum inside of me, my body sang too. We held each other in that moment as long as we could. Tears rushed to my eyes. And when we were spent, we parted, more connected than ever.

There was something I was bursting to say, and so I said it. "Forest. I love you."

For something that had been such a long time coming, had given me so much inner turmoil and could still prove to have much more turmoil to come, in the end it was easy to say. I hoped for his response, but didn't expect it.

But he gave it. "I love you too."

We looked at each other and we smiled. I was flying high, but I felt no need to say anymore. When I met his eyes, I felt he understood. And that I understood him.

It was simple.

We could gush sweet nothings later, when we were out of the fire, when all of this Apollo stuff would be behind us. But

for now, we formed our own little eye of the storm, a little pocket of peace in a tumultuous landscape.

## FOREST



Even in the high of mine and Ria's mutual love declaration, I was still stewing over the intervention from my brothers. I didn't feel good about blowing up at them the way I had.

There was a tiny, tiny bit of truth to what I'd accused them of – of leaving everything to me, while they were able to have some enjoyment in their lives. But the real reason I'd gotten so angry is because I, for some reason, didn't want to share my plan with them.

And now the plan was coming to fruition, it was time to draw up the scheme with Ria.

In her bedroom, Ria laid out the loose strands we needed to tie together. "So, we've got the knowledge that the evidence against Apollo is somewhere in Apollo's headquarters. We've got a twin, Jenni, of Apollo's receptionist, Helli, who has pledged revenge against Apollo and her twin if she is ever given the opportunity."

I was perched respectfully at the foot of the bed. Now was a time for business, not pleasure. Though sitting in Ria's bed was almost giving me a Pavlovian reaction in my pants.

I cleared my throat. "Yes. And from what I've researched, Jenni and Helli's campaign went on for some time before Apollo swooped in and did whatever he did to Helli – paid her off, blackmailed her, who knows. They'd been gathering evidence from other ex- and current employees of the same warehouse chain. That leads me to think they'd just come into

possession of a piece of evidence that could really take him down. He wouldn't have bothered with them otherwise. They'd have just been a kind of amusement to him if they weren't a serious threat."

"Right. But Helli retracted her offer of co-operation. She's likely scared of Apollo. Which is fair enough. Any of you Brock brothers can be fairly formidable when you want to be."

"Don't lump us in with him. He's something entirely of his own."

"Hmm. Sure."

I looked sharply at Ria, but she'd moved on. I didn't like what she was implying – not least because it tapped into one of my deepest fears about myself and Apollo. Were we alike?

Eventually, we settled on a plan. It wasn't perfect, but I'd forgone perfectionism in my attempts to mirror Apollo's schemes. We would plot out the start of the plan, but after that, it was all up to fate and chance. Destiny would be too dramatic.

The plan was thus: we'd distract or somehow remove Helli from reception, during which time Jenni would take her place and assume her identity. Using what we knew about Apollo and Helli, Jenni would then have a limited time to try and locate the evidence in his offices. We would be relying on her a lot, here. And of course, the whole plan relied on her agreeing to it. Ria seemed to think she would, and I trusted Ria's opinion.

After making the plan, I went for a walk around the block to burn some nervous energy. Since I'd been at Ria's, I'd not been keeping my usual fencing and tai chi appointments, so I was starting to feel out of sorts. The high of contact with Ria had only lasted so long, and now I was stiff and cranky and worried about the future, just like I had been most days before.

As I was arriving back at Ria's, I saw a suspicious car with darkened windows pull up outside her place. I hung back around a corner, watching as Ria came out of the house and got in the back of the car. After a few minutes, she left. She

hadn't brought anything with her or been given anything while she was inside there.

The car pulled away. I jotted down the number plate in my phone.

I returned to Ria's flat, intending to ask her about the car, trying not to jump to conclusions. But my phone started to ring. Worse still, it was Apollo.

I ducked into the hallway to take the call.

His horrible voice rang out, clear as if he was in the room. "Brother."

"Apollo. For what do I have the pleasure of hearing from you?"

"I just thought you should know. I've been paying Ria Moon to spend time with you. Quite handsomely."

My mind raced. What was his game plan here, telling me this now? And how would I react if I hadn't known this all along? Disbelief. I'd be disbelieving. "Is that all? Trying to get me to doubt my girlfriend? I thought you were above cheap tactics like that."

"You can disbelieve me if you like. But I speak the truth. When have you known me to lie?"

All the time. But I didn't say that. I hung up, as I would have realistically done in such a situation.

I sat down and put my head in my hands. Even though Ria and I had remained a step ahead of him all along, his call had still managed to fuck with my head. What advantage was there for him to tell me this now? Did he just want to sow some seeds of discontent between Ria and me – knowing that I would half-believe him, even if I claimed not to? But then what? Why would he want to cause turmoil in the relationship if he was still getting information from Ria about me?

Unless... something had made him realize he wasn't the one in charge here.

Or unless... he actually *was* in charge here. And it was his car I'd seen Ria get into for five minutes and then depart.

Which meant... what? My head was spinning. I couldn't make heads nor tails of the whole thing.

My conversation with Apollo wasn't to be the only infuriating conversation to mess with my head that day. I didn't want to confront Ria until I was calm, lest I go nuclear like I had during the makeshift interrogation early on in our business relationship.

I was almost, but not quite, level after calming down from the phone call when I received a private message from Jude.

**Jude:** *I'm nearby. Meet me at the end of the block*

**Forest:** *What the fuck?*

**Forest:** *Fine. Which end?*

**Jude:** *Turn left*

This was ridiculous, but I obviously had to hear what he had to say. I hoped it wasn't another of his little 'interventions'.

At the end of the block, Jude was leaning against a lamppost, wearing sunglasses.

"Very covert." I couldn't hide the annoyance from my tone. "What have you got for me this time?"

"I know you didn't take us seriously last time. Don't be mad, but I had Ria followed."

Him saying 'don't be mad' did not at all prevent the rising fury that his sentence prompted. "What the *fuck*, Jude?"

"I'm sorry for going behind your back."

"Are you? I can't help feeling if you were sorry about it, you'd not have done it in the first place. Go on, then, what did you come here to tell me?"

"Forest... I'm really sorry. I have pictures of her entering Apollo's headquarters."

I stared at him for a moment, and then I started laughing. He looked back at me in alarm.

"Jude... I already know she's meeting with Apollo."



“What the fuck, Forest? What game are you playing here? And you didn’t think it wise to inform me and the others of it?”

“Despite what you seem to think, I don’t have to tell you and the others everything I do.”

“What is this? A mid-life crisis? You’re acting like a rebellious teenager.”

I shrugged. A mid-life crisis wasn’t a total impossibility. “Just leave it well alone, Jude. You’re liable to scupper all my plans, going behind my back and doing something like that. Did the others know about it?”

Jude shifted uncomfortably.

I gathered a lot from his silence. “Even Sylvester and Winston told you it would be an invasion of privacy? Wow. Well, there’s all you need to know. I’ll see you around, brother.”

I was quite far away by the time he replied, but not far enough that I couldn’t hear his final, muted retort.

“Keep yourself safe, Forest. That’s all I ask.”

## RIA



I received a phone call out of the blue from Apollo.

“Just to let you know, the test results came in positive. Forest *is* the father.”

“Well, I’d hoped so. Or I’d be giving birth to the next messiah.”

“You weren’t a *virgin*, were you?”

I had the grace to chuckle at that. “No. But it had been a while.”

“Hmm. Well, did Forest tell you I called him to check in just yesterday?”

Forest had been unusually distant yesterday. It hurt, to have him go into one of his silences following our admission of love. I felt vulnerable. But I had to hope it was just the impending plan against Apollo putting him on edge.

And no, he hadn’t told me. “Yes, he did.”

“Oh, good. I wanted to double-check that he still trusted you, you see, Ria. If he starts keeping secrets from you like that, it’s a good indicator that he’s onto us.”

“Gotcha.” A sick feeling swirled in my stomach. “Well, luckily we seem to be on track.”

With Apollo pacified, I had to make my next move towards enacting our plan against Apollo and getting that evidence he apparently hadn’t destroyed but instead had stored deep within his headquarters.

And we needed Jenni to get it for us.

There was no time to be worrying about Forest just yet. Even though I couldn't help it.

I called Jenni when I knew she was off work. "Hi, Jenni."

"Ria! How are you?"

"I'm alright. My Grandmother's been out of action, so I've been a bit busy doing family chores. Do you feel like coming over for a drink? I could do with a bit of normal socializing."

"I'd be honored!" She sounded genuinely thrilled to be invited to my family's underwhelming home. Bless her. "Do you mean now?"

"Sure, if you're free."

"Text me the address. I've just finished up at work, so I'll get a cab!"

"It's a bit pricey. You might need to get a bus."

"I'll work it out. See you soon!"

I texted her the address to my home, and went to find Forest. I found him staring out of the window in my bedroom – the one I'd escaped from the morning I'd been sent to his networking event. It felt so long ago now, but in reality, it wasn't all that long at all.

"Hey. I spoke to Jenni. She's coming over soon. Are you ready to make a plan with her?"

Forest nodded slowly. "Yes. It seems like nearly time, doesn't it? Where should we go with her?"

"I don't know, the only place I can get any privacy here is my room. And only then when Grandmother isn't mobile enough to disrespect my privacy and enter at will."

"Your room it is."

Jenni texted when she was outside, and I went to meet her. She was very chipper, and it did ease my tension about the upcoming plan to see her.

"Hi Ria!" She waved excitedly.

I couldn't match her energy, unfortunately, but I smiled. "Follow me."

She followed me into the house and into my embarrassingly teenager-ish bedroom. I quickly closed the door behind us. Jenni was frozen just inside the room, staring at Forest.

"M-M-Mr Brock?"

I cleared my throat. "Jenni, I've lured you here under false pretenses."

"Am I in trouble?"

Forest chimed in to help me. "You aren't in trouble, Jenni. You indicated to Ria that you would take a chance to get revenge on Apollo and your twin sister if you were given one. We are here to present you with such an opportunity."

Jenni's eyes were wide. She stared around the room. "Is this your childhood bedroom, Ria?"

"And my adult bedroom." I grimaced. "I didn't get a chance to update the décor yet. Don't judge."

"Oh, never. I think it's charming."

Forest was eyeing Jenni suspiciously. She was a bit of an odd duck – that's why I liked her, of course. Forest should understand that by now, I figured, having met my family.

He cleared his throat. "What do you say, Jenni?"

"Sorry, Mr Brock. I'm just a little nervous. But, yes, I'd like to hear what your plan is. I hope I don't fuck it up." Then she paled. "Sorry for swearing, I –"

Forest smiled reassuringly. One of those moments he exuded his genuine, true, warmth. King of Cups, indeed. "You can swear, Jenni. And do call me Forest. If you're putting yourself in danger for us, I'm sure we can be on a first name basis."

Jenni didn't turn less pale, but she was just a naturally nervous person. It was difficult to imagine her fighting a

campaign against Apollo all those years ago. But appearances could be deceiving.

“Take a seat, Jenni.” I sat down on the bed, and patted the duvet beside me. “What we are about to tell you is confidential. No one but the people in this room know of this plan.”

She sat down, as if in a daze, and nodded very slowly.

Forest took over. “As I’m sure you know, Ria and I have been dating. Our relationship has in fact been faked for the purposes of luring Apollo into a trap.”

Jenni gasped, appropriately. “Oh no! But I thought you were such a lovely couple!”

*You and me both, Jenni,* I thought.

Forest did falter for a moment as if considering what Jenni had said in the same way I just had, then continued. “You see, my half-brother sent Ria to read my tarot cards at the networking event we hosted a while back. I don’t know why, but he wanted to hear what I had to say about Ria’s reading. I then contacted Ria with the intention of having her help me out with a problem... the problem being Apollo. As you can understand, I felt betrayed when I found out she had in fact been sent by him in the first place, but she proved her lack of loyalty to him, and a willingness to form an alliance with me. From that, we devised the plan... she would report our continued relationship for Apollo, who had promised money in exchange for information on me. While doing so she would be able to infiltrate Apollo’s organization, look for weak spots, places we might be able to prod...”

“And then you found my sister.” Jenni had grown more serious now. She was following our train of thought.

I continued where Forest left off. “And it got more complicated from there. Your sister dropped a burner phone into my bag and contacted me for a secret meeting. She told me that she would give me the location of the evidence she made off with, that you’d gathered during your campaign against Apollo all those years ago. She then retracted her offer

and stormed off, but we now know that the evidence didn't get destroyed, and it's somewhere in Apollo's headquarters."

Jenni's eyes widened. "I always thought that we must have gotten hold of something that we could have used against him."

I nodded. "We thought that too."

"What we essentially want you to do..." Forest folded his fingers in front of him, in a move eerily reminiscent of his half-brother's mannerisms. "...is impersonate your sister, go into Apollo's offices, and find that evidence for us."

\* \* \*

"YOUR MAN'S acting strangely these last few days."

I was sipping tea with my Grandmother, in an attempt to recover from the intensity of the day so far.

I should have known Grandmother was only likely to make things more intense.

Jenni had accepted our plan and gone off to prepare. I was sad, really, to have to draw her into our schemes. But it seemed like it would give her some closure, too, so maybe it was all for the best.

Forest had gone even more pensive since Jenni had been briefed on the plan. He was almost non-communicative. Anything I asked him would receive a nod or one-word answer. He was deep in some kind of thought loop or conundrum, and was as impenetrable as ever when he wanted to be.

"He's just tired, I'm sure." I took another sip of tea, pointedly avoiding my Grandmother's eyes. "He is a very busy man. It was nice of him to take some time out of his schedule to help us out, no?"

"Hmm." Grandmother nodded sagely, taking a sip of her own tea, too. "And is the baby his?"

I spat out my tea. “Grandmother!” Did she know, or was she calling my bluff? “What baby?”

“Do you doubt my abilities so much that you think you can hide a pregnancy from me? We live in the same house! The spirits bring information to me in my dreams every night. You thought none of them would find it worth my time to tell me?”

“I don’t know why it should be so important to the spirits.”

“Maria. Cut the bullshit. I already know you’re pregnant. Tell me. Is it his?”

I sighed. “Yes, Grandmother. Yes. It wasn’t planned.”

“Of course. Does he know about it?”

“No.”

“Whyever not?”

“It’s complicated. By our being business associates and all.”

“Maria, darling. You must tell him before it is too late.”

“Why would it be too late?”

“It’s just a feeling I have.”

I waited for more explanation, but more did not come. “What? You aren’t going to make up a prophecy to prove your point this time?”

“There is no prophecy. But don’t you doubt my intuition, young lady.”

I sighed. “I don’t. We may not see eye to eye on spiritual matters... but I would never doubt the intuition of anyone in our family. Me, you, or mom.”

Grandmother sniffed. “Finally, some recognition from my own granddaughter.”

“I need to think on it, gran. I’ll tell him soon. It’s not the right time just yet. But I will do it.”

“Just don’t wait too long, that’s all I’m saying.”

But when would it be too late? For once, I wished my Grandmother's prediction *was* a prophecy. At least I'd be able to try and decipher what it meant.

Instead, I just had a giant, looming ticking clock above my head. But the clock had no numbers, and too many hands, and so I couldn't tell how long I had left or how much time had already run out.



## FOREST



I had too many thoughts in my head. I wasn't used to it. I was used to living a simple life.

Well, that was a lie. I was used to living an incredibly stressful and complicated life, but it was usually only complicated in one realm: Apollo.

Now, it was complicated in a whole other way too. Ria was a big complication. One I could never have planned for.

We loved each other. When we had made the declaration, it had seemed so simple and pure, like nothing ever could come between us again.

Then, I had seen her get into that unknown car, and there had been the call with Apollo and the conversation with Jude. My head was messed up in three different ways.

And now, it was time to infiltrate Apollo's company. But I couldn't focus with all these doubts dancing around my head.

Was Ria on Apollo's side after all? Was I being led into a trap? Did Ria really love me, or was she just saying that, so that she could finish paying off her debt? Were the feelings real, or were they fake ones, caused by having to pretend to be in a relationship for the sake of public appearance? Were my feelings real?

Ria was always confident in her intuition. I'd been trying to follow her lead for the sake of this plan. Trusting myself had been relaxing. I no longer had to think of every possible outcome of every situation, like a gigantic flowchart that was

unfolding in my mind, constantly. I could just let go. See how things went.

But for some reason, I was now suddenly stuck back in the head of Old Forest. Stressed Forest, overthinking Forest, who had no life and could only work and make plans to destroy his half-brother. Well, I was still that Forest, really. The only difference was Ria.

I needed to get her out of my head. I doubted myself around her. I liked her so much – I loved her, in fact. But right now, it made me feel inadequate, it made me doubt myself, and that made me lose sight of my intuition, and lose the trust in myself that *she* had helped me build.

Letting go, it turned out, was a double-edged sword.

I didn't like feeling inadequate. As Ria had put it early on in our relationship, I didn't like doing things that I was bad at. And I was bad at relationships. I was bad at having feelings.

So, for the plan to succeed, I would need to sequester that part of me somewhere deep inside. Just for now. I could deal with it later. But we had come too far to mess it all up now. And if our plan failed, and Apollo managed to somehow take me down, destroy my reputation like he had in the past with Jude, then I'd never be able to consider any kind of a relationship with Ria.

I would put my feelings out of mind. It was for the best. For both of us. Ria would see, even if she didn't understand.

\* \* \*

I SUCCESSFULLY COMPARTMENTALISED my feelings and managed to draw my focus solely onto the plan.

Unfortunately, Ria chose that time to approach me with what seemed to be a personal matter.

She drew in close, trying to catch my eyes. "Forest, if this all goes wrong, and something bad happens... there's something I need to tell you first."

I flexed my fingers. “Let’s not assume it’s all going to go wrong, shall we? What’s that called, manifesting? Is that part of your tarot card practice?”

“Somewhat... but I would really feel better if I told you anyway, just in case.”

“Ria. Be honest with me. Can this wait until afterwards?”

“Yeah, it can technically wait. I’d just feel better-“

“I’d feel better if I could focus on the plan.” I was a bit sharper than I intended to be, but I was in danger of getting distracted. “Sorry, that came out-“

“No, I get it. Don’t worry.”

She left.

A bad feeling settled in my stomach, but I tried to put it out of mind. Would Ria’s Grandmother say this was a bad omen, that having a disagreement was likely to make the plan fail? Karma, was that a thing?

No, I was doubting myself again. I couldn’t be having any of that. Push it down, Forest. Don’t doubt, just do. Trust.

Trust in who? Myself, and only myself. Ria couldn’t enter my thoughts right now, except for as a pawn of the plan.

It was hard to push away the creeping feeling that I’d made an error, that I’d fucked something up, but I managed it. Or at least, I thought I had.

\* \* \*

THE DAY CAME AROUND for us to carry out the plan.

I’d been at Ria’s for approximately two weeks. By this point, Grandmother was more mobile, and liable to somehow get in the way of our schemes if we tried to carry out the scheme with our base of operations at the family’s home. Instead, to assist in household duties, I diverted Mrs Jamroz to Ria’s place rather than my apartment, paying her handsomely for the temporary change in duties.

All bases covered, Ria and I traveled to the *Brock Technology* offices, where I'd booked out an entire floor for us to use as our base of operations. It was only going to be the two of us, plus Jenni, but I didn't want anyone stumbling into the meeting room by accident.

Mandy had made the arrangements for us, including extra security. She met us just inside the entrance doorway to the penultimate floor of the building, above which were only our offices.

She held up her hands defensively as soon as we locked eyes. "I don't want to know what any of this is about. I don't want to know about your absences, your apparent alliance with one of our receptionists, and whatever is going on with this tarot-card-reading businesswoman. I've done what you asked, now leave me out of it."

I grinned. It was good to see her. "I'd never dream of making you carry the burden of any Brock family secrets, Mandy."

"Good. The safest secret is one that never enters my brain." She saluted, then departed without so much as a 'goodbye'.

Ria was scowling at Mandy's retreating back. I took it that she wasn't a fan. People rarely were fans of Mandy. At *Brock Technology*, I had the sole pleasure.

We waited silently in the meeting for Jenni. I couldn't tell if there was tension between Ria and me, or if I was imagining it. I'd thought over Ria's possible betrayal for a short while that morning. I'd figured that, even if she was colluding with Apollo somehow, she wouldn't risk Jenni's life. Apollo wasn't a murderer, but he sure had a way of being able to make people disappear when he wanted them to.

Jenni arrived shortly after us, dressed in slightly different attire, but seeming otherwise like the placid, slightly nervous Jenni who ran my reception desk weekday mornings.

Ria greeted her with a hug at the meeting room door. "You've prepared to be your sister?"

Jenni nodded enthusiastically. “Watch.”

She waved a hand in front of her face and changed her posture. Her chipper smile was replaced with a kind of apathetic scowl. She folded her arms and stood with more tension. I’d not met Helli, but it was a good transformation.

Ria clapped her hands. “Perfect. Thank you so much for this, Jenni.”

“No, thank you! Both! It’s been a weight on my shoulders all this time. I’ve felt weak and stupid for not trying harder after my sister absconded with all the evidence. Even if I fail now... I’ll at least know I tried something, rather than just giving up the moment I found myself alone.”

Ria nodded empathetically. “Okay, you go and get into position now. Here’s an earpiece through which you can communicate with us. Oh, and, Forest...?”

Oh yeah. The last thing we had for her. I handed her a handbag, a duplicate of the one Helli used for her work items. “In here is a mini drone. I’ll be commanding it remotely. It’ll give us video footage, but the main advantage is that it has some built in abilities. Like... being able to burn through locks. That kind of thing.”

“Oh, wow. So I can just point at a door, and... zap?”

“You’ll have access to most places, so don’t go zapping every door. Just the top-secret ones.”

Jenni looked very excited to zap things. And in high spirits, she set off.

I looked at Ria. “Okay, Ria. You’re up.”

Ria grinned. She had the important duty of distracting Helli from reception long enough for Jenni to sneak in and take her place.

We’d managed to track down the details of Helli’s catsitter. We’d spent considerable time making phone calls from different numbers – and using different voices – enquiring about her services. We’d recorded the calls, and since Ria

could do the best imitation of the catsitter's voice, she would carry out the fake emergency call.

Around us, the monitors showed CCTV of the outside of Apollo's offices. There was only one entrance and exit – that's why Ria was always taken in via reception when she was summoned to a meeting – so we'd be able to see when Helli left, and then give Jenni the signal to enter.

Jenni's microphone was also hooked up to the PA in the room. "I'm in position."

Ria applauded. "Nice one, Jenni. Wait for our signal."

Ria picked up the phone we'd gotten for the occasion and called Helli's personal number. There was no answer. She tried again. Finally, Helli must have answered, because she started talking. "Oh god, Helga, I am so sorry but the cats got loose – yes, all of them! The sprinklers went off and I was trying to stop things getting wet but I left the door open – they must have gotten scared of the alarms and ran out!"

Helli used security cameras to monitor her cats, but it wasn't a very secure system. It was only designed for casual home usage. All I'd needed to do was get someone to cut the internet off to her apartment temporarily so that when she checked the cameras she wouldn't be able to get a signal. Check.

Ria hung up the phone. "She said she's on her way."

"Let's see." I turned to watch the CCTV.

Sure enough, only a minute later, Helli bolted out of the building and hailed a cab. The cab driver got out and tried to awkwardly wrestle her handbag off her to put it in the trunk. Helli protested, but still got in the cab, clutching her bag to her. She must have assumed it was simply an over-zealous driver, and not in fact... a plant we'd sent in to pickpocket her ID and pass.

Before pulling off, the driver chucked a 'drinks carton' into the nearby trash can that we'd set up just for that purpose. Then the car departed. The lid of the trash can was sealed over, only unlockable by Jenni, who had the code.

“Slight overkill, but it worked!” Ria punched the air. “Jenni, give it one minute, then it’s go time.”

We watched with bated breath as Jenni walked up to the trash can, surreptitiously keyed in the code and pocketed the pass, then made her way in through the reception doors.

She didn’t come out. The next thing we heard was her voice through the PA. “I’m in. No one noticed she was gone.”

I was pleased. “Perfect. First thing to do is figure out where Apollo is. I suspect he’s got the evidence in his office. He’s paranoid, so he always keeps things close to him. He used to sleep with his phone in his boxers.”

“Ew. Alright. I’ll check the system. Ooh! It’s similar to ours.” Jenni was an odd woman.

I didn’t know how she could remain so chipper. “Lovely.”

There came the sound of typing and clicking over the PA. “Apollo’s in an external meeting according to this. In Los Angeles.”

“Perfect. So all you need to do is get into his office, then release the drone.”

Jenni made a ‘thinking’ noise. “What about security?”

Good question. “All our evidence indicates that Apollo and Helli are close, so I would imagine she has access to all floors. You can check her access on the system, probably. The only thing you’ll need to do is get into Apollo’s office. The drone can help with that, but security will be a problem.”

“Hmm. I’ve got an idea. Leave it with me. I’m going to head up now.”

Jenni really was the perfect woman for the job. She had no qualms with any of this. I had severely underestimated the nervous receptionist. When it came down to it, she was a woman of action.

There was silence for a while, apart from the sound of the elevator, and footsteps.

Then we heard crying.

Then a man's voice. "Excuse me, are you... okay?"

Then Jenni shrieked. "No, I'm *NOT OKAY!*"

The crying continued.

Then the drone was activated. We suddenly had a visual of Apollo's office door, and Jenni stood next to it, grinning, her face streaked with tears.

I was gobsmacked. "What did you just..."

Ria was also shocked. "Can you cry on command?!"

Jenni was beaming. "Praise my acting skills later. And my insight into the psyche of security guards. Get the drone to bust this door open for me, will you?"

"No problem. Looking at it, I don't think we're going to be able to break the lock or crack the code... it's too secure. We're going to have to use brute force. I hope your crying was scary enough to keep the security away for some time."

Then the footage went dead.

Ria stood up. "Jenni?"

I hammered the drone controls, trying to bring it back online. But it was dead. And though Ria continued to call for Jenni, the audio had gone completely, too.

I slumped at my desk. "Shit. Shit. I hope there was just some kind of... signal failure."

Ria and I waited. But there was nothing. Ria even tried Jenni's phone, which went to voicemail.

Then the drone video footage reactivated, and we were treated to the sight of Apollo's gigantic smug face projected onto each wall in the meeting room.

He clapped his hands. "Bravo! What a splendidly elaborate plan. But you do know the thing about elaborate plans, right? They have so many points of failure. And this all fell apart based on a slight calendar error." He tutted. "Shame. I'd hoped you'd get far enough to trigger the delightful traps I've set on the entrance to the safe containing the... documents you'd hoped to find. Ah well. Better luck next time. Maybe I'll get to



see you, brother, getting impaled through the neck with an automatic crossbow, or tripping an electrified wire.”

Ria’s voice was cold and terrifying. “Where’s Jenni?”

“Ah, Ms Moon. So sad our alliance has to come to an end. I’d hoped to be treated to one of your famous card readings before we had to part ways. I do hope your mom and Grandmother remain well. I know you’d be heartbroken if anything were to happen to either of them. Farewell, goodbye, sayonara, and so on. Oh, and do send me an invite to the baby shower. Ba-bye!”

The drone footage clicked back off again.

There was so much that had gone wrong here, but for some reason my brain was malfunctioning over those two words: *baby shower*.

My breathing grew heavy and ragged. In the background I could dimly perceive Ria asking me what we should do, if I was okay, saying she hoped Jenni was okay...

When I finally spoke, I echoed the two words that had caused me to shut down. “Baby shower.” It came out like a growl. I stared at the surface of the meeting room table.

“What?”

I stood up and turned on Ria. “Don’t feign ignorance! What is he talking about – baby shower?”

Ria went very quiet.

“Ria! Now is not the time for secrets! Tell me, now!”

She looked away. “I’m pregnant.” She said it so quietly I could hardly hear it.

“Say it again.”

Louder: “I’m pregnant.”

“You’re pregnant. You’re pregnant.” I paced. “Is it mine?”

I barely dared look at her, but when I did, she was nodding.

“And Apollo knew this? Apollo knew about – about your child – my child – this big secret – all along? Yet you didn’t think to tell me?”

## RIA



Forest was scarier than I'd ever seen him. Scarier than he had been during the interrogation, the last time he'd been truly furious with me.

I wanted to calm him down, to apologize, but I couldn't bring myself to be sorry for having felt trapped into telling Apollo the truth. "I tried to tell you, the other day..."

"Too late, Ria! How long has Apollo known for? Did you tell him, or did he find out?"

"I told him. The first meeting I had where I went to tell him that you and I had slept together... he asked for proof."

"And you thought, why not share my secret pregnancy knowledge with the father of the baby's worst enemy? Did you realize how much danger you were putting yourself in?"

I folded my arms. "I couldn't think of any other way to prove it. What did you want me to do instead? I just wanted to pay off my debt to you. I wanted the problem solved. You don't understand, cause you're rich. I've had debts hanging over my head *my whole life*."

"That debt was made up! It was in your head, Ria!"

Alright, so he wasn't going to listen to reason. That was fine, I didn't have to be reasonable. I could be very unreasonable when I wanted. And right now, I felt like being unreasonable.

I turned on him, matching his own agitation, drawing bitterness into my voice from where it had been, deep down.

“Sorry if I didn’t trust some guy I barely knew and who all but kidnapped me and interrogated me about his half-brother to not ever hold the fact that he’d paid off all my debts over my head forever! I’d have been always afraid you were gonna show up and demand something from me-”

“I’m sorry for wanting to do something nice as an apology! I’ll never do anything nice again, just in case I scare someone into thinking I might one day emerge from the shadows to claim their soul.”

How dare he make a stupid joke at a time like this?

By now, I was possibly more furious than Forest had been at the start of this argument.

And, though *he’d* deflated somewhat, once *I’d* gotten going I couldn’t be stopped until I’d screamed myself hoarse. “You think you’re nice? A nice guy? No, you’re a rich guy who isn’t actively super evil. There’s a difference.”

I held eye contact. He looked away first.

And I just kept going. “You know why your brother – sorry, *half-brother* – bothers you so much, right? Because you’re *just like him*. Apollo is your shadow self, Forest. You’re both so alike, only you pretend to be noble and compassionate, while he leans into his cunning and deceit.”

Forest flinched, then tried to disguise his reaction. But I’d seen it, and it had hurt me almost as much as it must have hurt him.

But I couldn’t stop now. It was all pouring out. “But you’re both two sides of the same coin. You’ve *both* used me as pawns in your plans – pretended to care about my feelings, but really only caring about what I can do for you. I sussed Apollo out straight away, and I should have sussed you out too. But I guess you’re better at masking your shadow self than Apollo is. You sure fooled me.”

I could hardly bear to look at him. “And I’m the fool that’s knocked up with your kid. And you’re the one furious at *me* for not telling you? How was I supposed to tell you when all

you can think about is getting back at your half-brother, for what?"

It was rhetorical, but I expected him to chime in with some smarmy answer. He was silent. His silence scared me. He'd started the screaming match, and now I wanted some reaction out of him.

By this point, I was pacing, waving my arms, barely looking in Forest's direction. "Brocks! What is wrong with all of you? You have all the money in the world and none of you are happy! Try being in my place, try being terrified your mother will *die* by *choice* because the medical debt is going to cripple her daughter for life! You're a bunch of lazy, rich dickheads, more concerned with one-upping another than with the state of the world, or of real people."

His silence was pissing me off, now.

I whirled on him, nostrils flaring in anger. "Fuck you, Forest Brock. Why don't you just give into that shadow self? Team up with Apollo, your *brother*? Between you I'm sure you'd be a real force for the world to reckon with."

He opened his mouth to say something.

I shook my head and cut him off. "Forest, he *threatened my family*! He's *kidnapped* Jenni! Get over yourself and help me move my family somewhere safe, *now*! If they get hurt, this is all your fault. And that will be a far more monumental fuck-up than keeping a little secret from you."

## FOREST



I was silent after Ria's barrage of insults. What could you say after being stung so many times in quick succession? No one had ever pulled me apart like that, not even my brothers. Not even Apollo. Perhaps not even our late father, Emory Brock, who had a habit of breaking everyone down, so he could try to build them up in his image.

I'd thought he'd only succeeded with Apollo. Maybe I was wrong.

I ducked into another room to give Ria some space, and made a call to my security team to start setting up one of my safe houses for two families – Ria's family, and Mrs Jamroz and her sons. I also sent a van to go and pick them up, armed security guards and all. One could never be too cautious.

I went back through into the room where Ria was. She was staring at the wall where the video footage had screened, which was now blank.

"My security is on its way to your house to pick up your family. And my housekeeper." I sounded shaken. I supposed I was. But Ria was right, there was no time for my feelings right now.

She'd burned through her anger and now seemed merely tired. "And then what?"

"I'm getting a safe house set up for you all as we speak."

Ria's phone started ringing.

She looked at it, then stood up. "It's Jenni."

“Pick up. Put it on speaker.”

Ria nodded. She answered the call. “Jenni?”

Jenni sounded odd. And not her usual odd. More of a ‘held at gunpoint’ odd than usual. “Oh, hi, Ria!”

“What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“Oh yes, I’m quite fine. I was just calling to ask if you could pass on my notice to Mr Brock, please?”

She’d been calling me Forest since I’d asked her to. Her saying ‘Mr Brock’ was a sign things were not okay, even if she hadn’t called to quit her job after being possibly captured by my brother.

Ria was frantic. “Jenni, he’s there with you? Can you say anything?”

“I’ve decided to take a little sabbatical. Really discover myself.”

“I’m so sorry, Jenni. We – Forest – will try and find you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me!” She laughed, nervously. “I’m not vanishing. Just taking some time for myself. Anyway, I’ve got to pack! See you soon!”

The line went dead.

Ria stared at her phone. “What is happening?”

“Apollo’s tactics are unpredictable. She really could be taking a sabbatical at his command. He’d find that funny. Or she could be being forced to work for him from now on. Or... I don’t know. There’re too many options to consider.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“There’s nothing you can do for now, Ria. I’m going to take you to the safe house with your family. Apollo might have just been trying to keep you on your toes with his threats, but we can’t take that chance.”

Ria thought about it for a second, then growled in frustration. “I do need to go to them. My mom and gran will be freaked out.”

“I promise I’ll make them as comfortable as possible. It’s the least I can do.”

She stared at me for a moment. “Did you mean it when you said you loved me?”

The truth was: yes, a hundred times over. That’s what I should have said. But instead, I felt a sharp stab of insecurity. I parroted it back at her. “Did *you* mean it when you said you loved *me*?”

She continued to stare, then she looked away. “Unbelievable.” She slammed her hands on the table and pushed herself to her feet. “Send me to my family. The safe house.”

I stood up too. “Okay, let’s get going.”

She shook her head. “No. Not you. I don’t want you to set foot in there.”

“Ria...”

Her response was almost a bark. “Don’t.”

I sat back down and rested my head in my hands. “I’ll fix this. I *will* find some way to beat Apollo at his own game.”

“Don’t you see? That’s how you got into this mess. You’re obsessed. Give it up, Forest. You lost.” There was almost pity in her voice.

I couldn’t stand it.

She picked up her belongings and walked to the door. I could only watch, like an outsider to my own body, overseeing it happen from somewhere distant, disconnected from my own thoughts.

She turned to look at me only briefly. “Tell security I’ll meet them at reception.”

Then, she was gone.



## RIA



When I got to the safe house, it was chaos. My Grandmother was chasing Mrs Jamroz's three sons around, threatening to put curses on them if they didn't stay still and be quiet. Around them, Forest's team were still furnishing the place. It was almost funny to see heavily armed guards carrying armchairs and floor lamps into the place. A few rugs, some curtains, a little bit of décor in the otherwise barren concrete place.

I announced my arrival by yelling at my Grandmother. "Sit down, Grandmother!"

My mom was sitting with Mrs Jamroz on the sofa. I pointed to the empty seat next to Forest's housekeeper and my Grandmother mimed strangulation at the boys before slinking to her seat.

"Ria, what's going on?" My mom was the level-headed one, as always. "They barely told us anything."

I didn't want to explain the entire situation right now. The details could come later. "Forest Brock's brother has threatened anyone associated with him. That includes my family, and Mrs Jamroz's family. We have to stay here for our safety until it blows over."

If it ever blew over. I was already thinking we might have to live here forever, trapped in a concrete prison. It was an eminently depressing thought.

"What happened, Ria?" Grandmother looked like she was about to stand up to confront me, but even she thought better

of it. “What did you do?”

“What did *I* do?” I laughed a horrible laugh. “What did I do? All I was trying to do was support this family.”

“Maria-“

I dropped the spite. “Please, no questions right now. Have they put any beds in yet? I need to lie down. Oh, and mom, I’m pregnant.”

May as well rip the band-aid off while everything was still in chaos.

My mom’s eyes widened. Mrs Jamroz gasped. And I stalked off for a tour of our new residence.

There was indeed a bed in one of the rooms. I lay down, and amazingly, went straight to sleep.

When I woke, the place was transformed. This seemed to be in part due to the security team having finished furnishing the place, and due to Mrs Jamroz’s exceptional abilities to make a house into a home even from the barest of materials.

Her sons had settled down. I raised an eyebrow at my mother, gesturing to the quiet boys, as I approached her.

“Your Grandmother had one of her prophecies. Something about silence being the only thing to save their souls from the devil.”

Despite myself, I smiled. “Of course. Where are they?”

My mom tipped her head in the direction of the entrance, where the security guards’ equipment and refreshments were set up. “Grandmother and Mrs Jamroz have befriended one of the security men. They’re teaching him how to knit and how to connect with the spirit realm.”

“What a confusing lesson.” I sat down on the sofa next to her. “I’m really sorry about all this, mom. I hope it’s not for long.”

She looked at me carefully. “I bet you’re worried it’s going to be forever.”

I looked back at her. “You don’t think it will be?”

She shrugged. “Things have a way of working themselves out.”

I sighed, and slumped further down into the couch. “It was Forest who paid off all our debts, by the way, mom.”

“I had a suspicion.”

I was surprised. My mom always knew more than she let on. Unlike my Grandmother who let on more than she knew. “And they say Grandmother is the psychic one in the family.” I sighed. “I decided I wanted to earn the debt payments, and got myself embroiled in a rivalry between two billionaire brothers. Truth’s weirder than fiction, huh?”

“You couldn’t just let it be, could you, Ria?” Her words were harsh, but her tone was gentle.

My mother never tried to change who I was like my Grandmother did. She was different from us – she accepted people how they were.

Grandmother and I tended to pick at people, criticize them. In our hearts it’s because we cared, and wanted to help people improve. But our empathy made us get too invested.

Maybe that’s what had happened with Forest and me. I didn’t regret blowing up at him, because he’d said some pretty shitty things, too. But I did regret that that whole argument had gone down. I wished things were different. But they weren’t.

\* \* \*

WE SETTLED into a kind of routine. The three boys worshiped my Grandmother, constantly asking her for more stories about spirits and prophecies. I asked Mrs Jamroz if she was worried about my Grandmother filling their heads with ideas like that.

She had waved away any such idea. “Can’t be any sillier than the ideas already in their heads.”

Me and Mrs Jamroz divided the chores. She mentioned Forest a lot – it was clear she adored her boss. But it meant that he kept coming into my brain more often than I wanted.

“Did you know he set all three of my boys up with college funds? Shame they’ll never get accepted into any colleges.”

I had to laugh. I suspected that calling her boys stupid was a game she played with them – that when it really mattered, she would give them praise, boost their confidence. They were certainly plenty confident, and seemed like happy, if lively, kids.

My mom was quite content to sit around drinking herbal tea, chatting with the other adults, taking Mrs Jamroz’s sons through the homework they’d been given in lieu of attending their schools. Before she’d retired from ill health, she’d been a schoolteacher, and she still had the knack.

Everyone seemed to have faith in Forest but me. I didn’t see an end date on our stay in the safe house, not at all.

As for the man himself, we did not see him. He’d taken me at my word. It was silly, having asked him to not visit, but I felt sorry for myself at the fact that he hadn’t even tried to defy me. It was so annoying sometimes to have your wishes respected.

And I worried every day about Jenni. Her social media profiles were making regular updates – too regular, like they’d been scheduled in advance, or outsourced to a diligent gig economy worker to fake.

Though I tried to hold the doomed thoughts at bay, gradually they seeped into my consciousness, until it was all I could think about.

It was then that it occurred to me.

I had information on Forest that Apollo would surely find useful.

Surely that would be enough to buy our freedom?

It would go against all my principles. But once again I was forced to choose between my family’s wellbeing and my principles. My family would always win out in the end.

But I didn’t give into it. I waited, with a fading glimmer of hope somewhere deep inside, threatening to go out.

One morning, a morning that seemed just like every other morning here, the burner phone started to ring.

I didn't even know I still had it on me. But there it was, in the bottom of the handbag I always kept on my person.

I searched it out and stared at it.

What could whoever on the other end of the phone say that I would want to hear?

Nothing. I let the call go to voicemail, and then it was silent.

## FOREST



When I'd received word that everything was settled at the safehouse, I returned home to try and get some rest. But I found it weirdly empty. Mrs Jamroz wouldn't be coming by to polish the still-pristine countertops, leave gossip magazines lying around by accident next to the toilets, line the voodoo dolls up neatly where they'd flopped over on their cursed shelf.

My second night alone with little sleep, I went out for a walk around the city. My anger, which I'd put on pause to sort out the practicalities of the situation, had returned to me.

At this point I didn't know who I was angry at. Was it Apollo? Ria? Myself? The most likely answer was all three. But it was so much anger I didn't know what to do with it. It was too late to bottle it up like I always had.

And maybe this, now, was the outpouring of anger built up over the course of a decade, two decades. Two decades of being a Brock.

Maybe I wasn't really angry at Ria, or myself, or even Apollo. I was angry at the dead man, Emory Brock, who decided to wait until he was nearly dying to inform his illegitimate sons that they were the heirs to his fortune, and had thus dictated the fates of the rest of our lives. Because when you know something like that, there's no going back. No matter how all five of us debated simply declining and returning to our old lives, we'd all found that it was impossible.

The truth does not always set you free. Sometimes, the truth is a trap.

As it had been in the case of Apollo revealing Ria's pregnancy to me. I wondered how long he'd known that Ria was working for me. Or if he hadn't known, really, but was simply hedging his bets.

I realized he'd set me up perfectly to implode the relationship either way: one phone call telling me that Ria was working for him, one phone call telling me that he'd known Ria was pregnant with my child before I had.

The thought boiled my blood again. That *he* had known, that Ria had told *him*, but not me...

But there was a deeper hurt, one I'd ignored when I'd gone nuclear about not being told.

It was the feeling, deep, deep down... that there must be something wrong with me. Something that meant Ria hadn't wanted to tell me that I was the father of an unborn child. That Ria didn't think I was trustworthy, that she thought I would make a bad father, that she simply just didn't think that I might want to know...

Yes. I was angry at myself.

It was in such a wretched state that I found I'd paced the city for such a long time that I was in the vicinity of Sylvester's flat.

I considered this was maybe not a coincidence. So I turned up at his door, having been let in by the concierge who knew me as his brother, and hammered on it.

He answered after a minute, groggily pulling a robe on as cover. "Forest?"

"Can I come in?"

The sound of giggling came from inside the flat. I grimaced.

"Yeah, sure. I have guests, though."

"Guests you were undressed around? Guests, plural?"

He waggled his eyebrows.

The sight I walked into in his apartment was worse than I'd imagined. People in various states of undress were leaning, laying, stretching across all areas of his living space. With Sylvester's taste in décor, it looked like I was entering an upmarket strip club.

"It's not an orgy, if that's what you're thinking."

I scoffed. "Oh, at least it's not an orgy."

"I'll get rid of them. Go to the guest room and I'll get you when the coast's clear."

I skulked off to the guest room. Safe inside my temporary sanctuary from squalor, I heard the muffled sounds of Sylvester rounding up the guests and trying to get them out of his front door. It sounded like a mean feat. I lay down on top of the guest bed, realizing it could take some time. Then I climbed under the covers when the air conditioning made the room a bit too chilly for being stationary.

I relaxed there, comforted by being in the vicinity of one of my brothers. And by not being in my own empty apartment. And the thought that I'd had the good sense to seek help. And that help was coming – in the form of a half-naked Sylvester throwing the guests of his 'not orgy' out of the flat for me.

Before I realized what was happening, I'd fallen into the most peaceful sleep I'd had in days.

When I awoke and stumbled out of the room, it was light outside and Sylvester was cooking breakfast in his boxers. "Jesus, Sylv."

He turned around and grinned at me. "Don't worry your little head. I'll put a robe on for the prude."

I rubbed my eyes, grumbling. "Have you heard of clothes?"

He lunged for the robe hung on the hook by the front door, pulling it around himself. "Who wears clothing by *choice*?"

I didn't like the implication that the robe was kept by the door because he only wore it for public appearance. The idea



of Sylvester swanning around nude in his own place troubled me. Maybe I was a prude. “Literally everyone.”

Sylvester shook his head, smiling at me like I was a baby or puppy. “Bless your heart.”

I sat down and waited for him to finish cooking. He presented me with a plate of bacon and eggs, grinning like a proud mother. I accepted the plate somewhat ungratefully.

Sylvester sat and began heartily digging into his breakfast. “You seemed like you needed the rest. Started getting those dark circles around your eyes again. I’m the only Brock who can pull off eyeliner. Sorry not sorry.”

I prodded moodily at my eggs with a fork. “Ha ha.”

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your company, then?” Sylvester remained steadfastly chipper, but I could tell his façade was stretching thin, struggling to mask his deep concern.

I shrugged. “Wasn’t sure where else to go.”

“Do you want to... talk about it?”

“No.”

“Was there anything you actually needed from me?”

“No.”

“Just a place to hide out, then?”

“Sure.”

“Splendid. I’m much better at hosting an escapism retreat than I am at hosting a feelings parade. Though, if you do need a feelings parade...” He dropped his voice a little, taking some of the frivolity out of it. “...Do let me know. I’ll be happy to talk.”

I clapped him on the shoulder with little energy, hoping the gesture of gratitude made itself known, regardless. “Thanks, Sylv.”

“Just to check. You chose me over Winston and Jude? You didn’t turn up to theirs first?”

I frowned in confusion. “Yeah, I came here first. Why?”

“No reason.” Sylvester stood up looking pleased as punch and dumped his already-empty plate in the sink, whistling and quietly singing a little song that sounded like: “*Best brother, best brother, ooh I’m the best of all the brothers.*”

I smiled, despite myself. “I don’t think that one’ll be a hit, Sylv.”

He whirled around his apartment getting himself ready for the day ahead, I supposed, although there was little routine to his ambling capers.

When he’d managed to get himself decently dressed, he joined me again at the breakfast table. “I’m calling in sick to work!”

I stared at him. “You’re the CEO. You can do what you want.”

“C’mon, Forest. It’s a *gesture*.”

“You really don’t need to.”

“But I *want* to.”

I was beginning to worry about what I’d let myself in for.

\* \* \*

LUCKILY, after his excitement of the first day of having me at his place, Sylvester chilled out and became much less intense company.

Mainly, he would sit around playing his guitar while I sat in moody thought. At one point, he started playing the gloomiest arrangement of chords on his guitar I’d ever heard, and I looked up to find him squinting intensely in my direction.

“What are you doing?”

He stopped playing and looked guilty. “Oh, sorry. It’s just you looked so devastated that I thought it’d be quite something if I could capture that feeling in music.”

I rolled my eyes. “Gee. Thanks.”

He smiled goofily. “You don’t like having your thoughts soundtracked?”

Obviously, no. “Not really. Feels invasive.”

“No problem. Your wish is my command.”

Unfortunately, he took that to mean he should play cheerful country tunes, until I told him there *was* a middle ground between horribly upbeat and devastatingly sad.

He cooked me three meals a day quite cheerfully. Any complaints he made I could tell were just in jest. I could tell he liked the company too. Though we were close, the four of us, we lived quite separate lives in general, only coming together once a week or so. It was unusual, and nice, to spend an extended amount of time together.

But after a week of this, he seemed to decide I’d sulked enough and it was time to talk.

He sprang onto the sofa next to me, startling me out of my latest self-loathing thought train. “Alright, buddy. I’ve invited Winston over. Time for you to tell us what’s going on. M’kay?”

I was in the spot on his couch that I’d been wearing a dent into the entire week. “What if I don’t want to?”

He put a consoling arm around my shoulders. “You might *need* to. You been getting anywhere just thinking gloomy thoughts for a whole week?”

I folded my arms. “...No.”

“Do you think you can just do this forever? Sit around scowling and staring at the wall?”

I sighed. “No.”

“So...”

“Fine. I’ll tell you both. Get us some drinks ready though, would you?”

Sylvester, ever the perfect host, spread his arms wide. “It would be my pleasure.”

## RIA



Another week in the safe house and I continued to stew on the idea of selling Forest out to Apollo, despite my best efforts to not consider it.

The thing is, I was starting to think I had some intel that might interest the evil Brock brother.

The thing I'd realized about Apollo was that he fundamentally didn't understand the psyche of any of his brothers. He could get under their skin just by virtue of being slimy, and being their brother, and embodying everything they stood against. But in terms of the individual brothers, Apollo just didn't know their quirks, their insecurities, their fears. He couldn't. Because if he did, he'd have been able to do a much, much better job of *really* pushing them to their limits.

I, on the other hand, had gotten to know Forest quite well. He had weak spots that I was sure Apollo would *wriggle in delight* to be told about.

And I was a businesswoman. I only had to pitch it to him well enough and I'd be buying back my family's freedom in no time.

All I had to do was bare Forest's soul to his worst enemy.

Leaving the safe house was dangerous, everyone would have said so. Luckily, by the private rules of Ria Moon, I didn't need anyone's permission.

The safe house was large enough that everyone could be occupied in separate rooms. This was the safe house of a

billionaire CEO, after all. It was bigger than most people's normal houses.

And Forest's security staff were much more focused on preventing *entry* to the premises, as opposed to *exits*. Despite appearances, this was not in fact a concrete prison.

I climbed out of a ground-floor window and departed into the afternoon with ease. Getting past security was a piece of cake compared to getting past my Grandmother. And she was napping.

The safehouse was somewhat out of the way of the main transport routes, so I had to walk for some time to get to a place where I could hail a cab. I was half-expecting Apollo to leap out from behind every lamppost and catch me in a net. But there were no unpleasant surprises on my journey. I was relieved nonetheless when I found myself safely in the back of a cab. On my way to one of the least safe places on earth: *Brock Industries*.

I got dropped off a few blocks away so I could get some fresh air before betraying the love of my life to his brother. I was almost at the entrance when I got hit with a sudden wave of doubt so strong it felt physical.

Maybe it was the baby kicking. Either way, it made me stop.

I ducked down behind a large planter. All I had to do was walk into that reception and ask for Apollo. It would be that easy. And I could secure the safety of my family. Of my mom, Grandmother, and Mrs Jamroz's family, too, I reckoned.

But the longer I crouched there, the more I felt overcome with guilt. If I did this, that was it for me and Forest. There was no future for us. What about our child, then? And what about our love? We hadn't parted on good terms. But despite the doubt I'd voiced, I knew deep down that our love was real. It had just been too hard to admit that in the heat of the argument.

I was angry at him, sure. But I realized I couldn't make the choice to cut him out of my life forever. I wasn't ready.

I returned home empty-handed and furious at myself for letting my feelings get in the way of protecting my family. They'd always been my priority. To my own detriment, I supposed – I'd dropped out of college for them, worked jobs for them, dedicated the last few years of my life to my family solely. It seemed silly to do all that and then let my feelings for a man – one who'd said such hurtful things to me – get in the way of protecting them when I easily could.

I made it back into the safe house much the same way I'd left. No one noticed I'd been gone. I went to my bed and folded my arms, then slid under the covers to bask in how annoyed I was at myself.

Outside of the covers, the burner phone started ringing again.

I stayed under the covers. I didn't answer it.

Not today.

## FOREST



Four or five double whiskies down, I finished regaling Sylvester and Winston with my tales of fake relationship – and real love – woes.

Winston whistled. “Wow, we weren’t wrong with what we said at that intervention, were we?”

I spoke miserably into my drink. “I guess not.”

“In summary...” Sylvester stroked his chin like a drama student. “...You decided to defeat your evil half-brother by *becoming* your evil half-brother, used the woman you liked as a double agent *and* asked her to fake a relationship with you, then fell in love with her, *then* went absolutely nuts when it was revealed she’d not told you about her pregnancy...?”

I nodded, still miserable.

“But Forest, my dear, dear brother...” Sylvester paused for effect again. “...What about all of those strange things that you did... made you think you’d given Ria the impression you were mentally ready to hear about being a father?”

His point being the same that I’d concluded privately: if *I* were Ria, *I’d* not have wanted to tell me about the pregnancy.

I nodded reluctantly. “Yeah, um, I do think you’ve hit the nail on the head there. Do you both agree then? I fucked up?”

I looked up at the faces of my two brothers. Slowly and warily, they both nodded, with looks of sympathy on their faces. The Forest of a few weeks ago would have become enraged at the sight of their sympathy, deemed it ‘pity’ and



stormed off. But I'd had enough time to think over how I'd been acting recently. And... yeah.

I sighed. "What am I supposed to do about it?"

Winston cleared his throat. "I firstly suggest *not* trying another hair-brained scheme out of desperation. They don't seem to be going well for you recently."

"I don't get it. I used to be good at schemes! What went wrong?"

Winston ignored my question. "Why not get out of the city for a bit? Visit one of your tree-themed siblings from the non-Brock side of your family?"

Sylvester yelped suddenly as if having a thought. "Oh my god." He smacked his hands over his mouth to stop himself from saying whatever thought had just popped into his head.

I sighed. "You may as well say it."

"If Ria's pregnant with your kid, does that mean the kid is gonna need a *tree name*? Is your kid gonna be called... *Tree Moon*?!"

Winston shook his head. "Jesus, Sylvester."

"He asked for it!"

I shrugged. "Don't feel bad. You've given me a good incentive to follow Winston's advice and get out of the city. If I never again hear 'Tree Moon' it'll be worth it."

That was how, for the second time in a month, I blessed one of my siblings with a surprise doorstep visit. This was highly out of character for me, but I was prepared to try and style it out.

Juniper answered the door as if she was ready to rugby tackle whoever might be knocking, then she brightened up and leapt into my arms when she saw it was me. "Forest! What's up? Is something wrong with one of the Joneses?"

I hugged her back and shook my head. "No, no. I just felt like visiting my eldest little sister."

She took a step back and narrowed her eyes, scanning me over. “Oh god. Ria dumped you, didn’t she?”

I got on the defensive immediately. *Siblings*. “What, why was that your second guess? And why can I not just be checking in, seeing how you’re doing?”

She wagged her finger knowingly in my face. “You’ve got a look in your eyes I’ve only seen in the mirror twice before: at our parents’ funeral, and when my high school girlfriend dumped me *during* prom. We’re only technically half-siblings, but we must’ve inherited the same ‘haunted eye’ gene, whatever that is.”

I grimaced. Time to admit it, I guessed. “...Yeah, she did dump me. Though, for full clarity’s sake, our relationship was technically fake. But we were in love.”

Her eyes widened slowly for around ten seconds before she yelled out into the hallway. “Billy! Bring the popcorn!”

I stared around. “Who is Billy, and does he have to listen to my tale of relationship woe?”

“Oh, Billy’s mute, but he *loves* gossip. Swears he never tells a soul.”

“And how did he tell you that?”

“Wrote me a note saying it. He’ll love this one by the sounds of it. It’ll make his top ten for sure.”

It didn’t sound like Billy the self-proclaimed secret keeper was actually very good at encrypting the secrets he was given. But I was tired and didn’t much care about my privacy by this point.

“That gives me... so much confidence. Fine. Billy can sit in. Not like I have anything to lose anymore, anyway.”



Now that I didn't have a back-up plan, I was fully miserable. Selling Forest out to Apollo would have possibly made me feel worse in the long-term, but in the short-term I would have felt like I was solving the immediate problem and helping ensure my family's safety.

Now, I had nothing, no plan. And deciding against siding with Apollo had brought into my mind the uncomfortable fact that I obviously still loved Forest. And that he had said hurtful things to me. And that I'd told him I didn't want to speak to him, so now obviously he wasn't trying to speak with me.

I'd been terrified that my family were going to be hurt, and I'd been wounded by his accusations of me having kept the pregnancy a secret. In hindsight, I may have gotten a little too vicious. But in that moment, when he'd been so furious with me for keeping it a secret, I'd just wanted him to stop accusing me. And to do that, I'd had to crush him worse than he could crush me.

Maybe, just maybe, I'd overreacted.

I decided the person with the most balanced opinion in here – and just the most mentally balanced person in general – was my mom. So it was she who I selected to help me work through my complicated feelings about the situation.

I managed to get her alone, while Mrs Jamroz and Grandmother were occupied with entertaining the three boys. "Mom. If I tell you everything that happened, can you help me decide what to do?"

My mom seemed relieved that I was willing to share with her. “Of course, Ria. You can always talk to me.”

I talked her through everything that happened. From the very beginning, from the time I’d first met Apollo, to the argument I’d had with Forest just before reuniting with my family at the safehouse.

“Ah.” My mom nodded, as if all the pieces finally fitted together for her. “I did wonder why he had not been to visit.”

I pouted.

My mom laughed at the childish gesture. “Oh, Ria. What would Grandmother say – *Mary Mary quite contrary*... You can be a hothead when you want, can’t you?”

“You think I shouldn’t have laid into him? Am I in the wrong?”

“I don’t know. It sounds like you both contributed a lot of mess to the situation... but you were both doing what you thought was right. And you were both protecting your families. Did you notice that similarity?”

I felt like a fool. I hadn’t.

My mom laughed at the look on my face. “You and your Grandmother aren’t the only ones with good intuition. I’m just a bit quieter about mine.”

“Don’t compare me to Grandmother.” I said it moodily, but couldn’t hold back a small smile.

“Why are you smiling?”

“I’m just... I’ve been so angry at Forest. And in one sentence, you just made the bulk of my anger evaporate. *You were both protecting your families*. How did I not notice that?”

“Love and hurt can make us blind to the truth. When you get as close to someone as you did to Forest, your intuition about them is always filtered through your own worries about *yourself*. You lose the ability to see the bigger picture.”

I blinked. “Mom, do you want to consult for my business?”

She laughed.

“I’m serious, you are so wise. I am but a rookie compared to you.”

“Thanks, Ria. I’ll let you know if I ever feel like making some easy money showing billionaires pictures of kings and queens.”

I gasped in mock outrage and swatted my mom gently on the arm. She wasn’t just intuitive like me and Grandmother were. She could also be just as cutting when she wanted to. A dark horse indeed.

At that point, the burner phone started ringing from my handbag. I glanced over it.

My mom looked over at it, too. “Do you need to answer that?”

I thought about it. “Yeah, I think I do, actually. Back in a minute.”

My mom nodded. I grabbed the phone and took it to a private corner of the safehouse where I couldn’t be easily overheard by security or Mrs Jamroz’s nosy, entertainment-starved boys.

“Hello, who is this?”

It was Helli. “Ria, can we talk?”

## FOREST



For the second time in a week, I told the tale of my fake relationship to an audience of two. This time, they literally had popcorn.

When I finished, Juniper and her mute neighbor Billy applauded.

I smiled darkly at the two of them. “Hope that was worth the popcorn, Billy.”

He nodded with great enthusiasm, slid a ten dollar note into Juniper’s outstretched hand, waved, and departed.

“You *charged* him for that?”

“He likes gossip. I have friends with interesting lives. It’s a good partnership.”

“This your new job?”

“I told you, that’s soap-making. Come on, let’s get you set up in the guest bedroom. I suppose I can’t charge you for the stay since you paid the rent and all.”

My stay with my sister was more freeing than it had been hiding out in Sylvester’s flat. Because I was in a different city, I felt further away from my problems. I also felt less visible. It was also humbling to not have a driver at my beck and call – to have to try and hail normal taxis and make small talk with the drivers.

It was nice. My sister, for all her personal issues, had more of a ‘real’ life than I’d ever be able to hope for. She bought groceries at a market, drank at a dive bar with her friends and

girlfriends, watched reality TV with her neighbor Billy. For a while, it was nice to experience her life instead of my own.

One morning, I was cooking breakfast for us both, when Juniper waltzed in, fresh as a daisy despite her late night. “How are you going to win back Ria, then?”

I spluttered on the orange juice I was sipping. “Excuse me?”

Like I hadn’t heard her, she repeated more slowly: “How... are you going to win back Ria?”

I set my glass down on the side and prodded the bacon in the frying pan. “I’m not sure that’s an option.”

“That’s always an option.”

“Could your ex-girlfriend have won *you* back? When we had to get your stuff out of her place?”

“Sure she could! But not the way she was going about it.”

I turned off the gas on the hob and turned around to pay attention. “Explain it to me.”

Juniper seemed thrilled to have been asked. She crossed her legs onto the chair and leaned forwards across the table. “Alright. Well, I’d been having issues with her for a while. She’d blow things up, get dramatic too quickly over small things. And she’d always hold stuff over my head, like ‘*I did this thing for you, so you should do this thing for me*’ or ‘*I’m not going to do this thing for you until you do this thing for me*’.”

I remembered our visit: “What, like, ‘*I’m not going to give you back your possessions until you take me back*’?”

Juni slammed her palm into the table with enthusiasm. “Hot damn, exactly like that! And, *and*, that’s my point. I’d brought this stuff up with her, how she was always trying to bargain and exchange, how it was like she was tallying up the things we did for each other, how it made me feel on edge, etcetera. But she always got defensive, argued. She never listened and improved. It wasn’t a deal-breaker, her always tallying things up. She didn’t seem to realize she was doing it

– she couldn’t help it. But it was the fact that she never took it on board when I brought it up. She could’ve worked on it slowly and I’d have helped. But because she would never admit she was doing anything that was hurting the relationship, we could never work on it. And *that’s* why I wouldn’t take her back.”

I was silent while I processed what she’d just said. Juni crept in around me and stole some bacon out of the pan, returning to sit at the table and munch it out of her hands, caveman-like.

After a few minutes of thinking it over, I snapped into action. “Juni, help me pack my stuff. I have to get to the airport right now.”

She punched the air. “Yes! Billy’s gonna *love* this development.”

“Okay, but tell him after I’ve gone, please?”

She nodded, and we got to work. We gathered my stuff and rushed downstairs to hail a cab. Juni threw my stuff into the cab along with her blessing: “Give Ria a hug from me. She’s smoking hot!”

And then I was off.

Before I could hope to make anything right with Ria, I had to make things right with myself. And, by giving into Apollo’s dirty tactics, I’d betrayed myself and everything I stood for.

Therefore, as soon as I got off the plane, I had my driver pick me up and drop me off outside Apollo’s offices.

Then I marched into the reception area.

*Here goes nothing.*

Helli looked up from her computer. Seeing me of all people stood so nonchalantly in Apollo’s reception, she had the decency to gasp.

I was pulling no punches today. “Get my half-brother here. Now.”



A member of security yelled to the others. “Code red! Seal the doors! Shut this place down!”

Helli stood up, bolt upright. “Mr Brock isn’t answering his phone. I’ll go and fetch him personally.” She turned on her heel and swiped her ID at the door to the elevator.

And I waited.

The security figured out, eventually, how to activate ‘code red’. The entrance sealed over with a security shutter, and all the inner doors slammed shut and locked. A red alarm blared the most obnoxious siren.

Then, my half-brother, Apollo Brock, walked through the door that Helli had left by.

He looked paler than usual. I had managed to surprise him, I realized, by coming here. Even scare him. He’d not expected this from me.

“There you are.” I greeted him as if we were old friends. “I was starting to think you’d uploaded yourself into the cloud and left your physical form behind. Not seen you in person in years.”

“Same could be said for you, dear brother.” His voice dripped with villainy. Could he not hear himself? Or was it a role he enjoyed playing? “I thought you’d divided yourself up and put a piece in each of your silly little drones. That’s why I took so much delight pulling your spy drone apart.”

I dropped the act. I needed to maintain the high-ground here. “Look, Apollo. It’s tempting to get dramatic, but I’ve not turned up for a showdown with you.”

He smiled ghoulishly. “A pity.”

“Not really. For you, anyway. Because I came to tell you... I give up.” I held up my hands in defeat.

Apollo didn’t look happy.

I had somewhat expected that, but I feigned my surprise anyway. “Why aren’t you happy? Isn’t that everything you wanted? Didn’t you want to win? Well, you win. Want to

know any of my secrets? I'm an open book. Ask me anything."

He remained silent, regarding me with the utmost loathing.

"Okay then. Let me tell you my biggest secret."

His voice was a low hiss. "Don't."

I continued to play ignorant. "I thought you wanted intel on me? Isn't that why you sent Ria to strong-arm me into a tarot card reading?"

The thought seemed to cheer him up. "Originally. But I got something better out of it. You love Ria Moon. She's pregnant with your child. And now she hates your guts."

"Yeah, I fucked up."

Apollo cackled gleefully. "O-ho, so she *does* hate your guts! Gosh, that was a great guess."

"I'm not playing games anymore." Time to confess. I cleared my throat nervously, and took a deep breath. "Apollo, my biggest secret... is that you and I are alike. Before that, my biggest *fear* was that you and I were alike. But when you managed to pull me into your pointless rivalry, that confirmed it for me. I have not been a good person. A good brother, a good partner. A good... dad-to-be. I thought I had to lean into that side of myself – the side we share in common. We're so desperate to prove ourselves, aren't we? We just want to be liked, or to be hated, in your case. By our brothers, society, colleagues. I'm a people pleaser. You're whatever the opposite is. I thought the only way to get you to stop coming after me and my brothers was to become like you, give you a taste of your own medicine. I wanted to stop you for good, so that my brothers would think *I* was good. That I was smart, that I would protect them. I didn't trust anyone to just be in my life without me having to prove my worth. And it was stupid. I've pushed everyone away. What I actually need to do is give up. And so I give up. Throw your worst at me. I'll tell you anything you want to know."

Apollo had stared at the high glass ceiling the whole time I was speaking. When I was done, his eyes snapped sharply to

meet mine once more.

“That is so, so, incredibly dull of you, dear brother. You did get temporarily quite interesting, I’ll admit. But it is so disappointing to see you lapse back into complacent mundanity like our *other* brothers. Still, a win is a win. I’ll take it. Farewell. Security, you can deactivate code red at your leisure. Forest, you can see yourself out.”

He turned around to leave through the door through which he’d entered. Around us, the security rushed to turn off the alarm, and the doors released. Apollo had almost reached the exit door when it was thrown open with great force.

On the other side... was Ria. She was fanning herself with what appeared to be a stack of documents. “A win is a win, is it really, Apollo Brock?”

Security rushed to grab her from either side. Apollo walked over and personally snatched the documents out of her hands. “What was the point of this? You just handed me back the evidence you need.”

And Ria smiled.

## RIA



I was skeptical about getting back in contact with Helli after our disastrous last meeting. But something in her voice told me that she was going to say something worth listening to. And so, I left the safe house to go and meet her at the same store as last time.

Helli cut to the chase straight away. “I want out. For me and my sister.”

I was unconvinced. “Bit late for that.”

She wasn’t trying to be any more pleasant than she had been before. “I know, I know. You can give me a morality lecture. Just please, spare giving it to me in the form of tarot cards this time.”

I rolled my eyes – she was deluded. “Look, whatever you read in the cards came from your own brain.”

“Whatever. It’s all mind tricks. Look, the evidence that we gathered could actually bring him down. I was there when he mentioned the safe, so I know you know about it. Ria, I know how to get into the safe. I just can’t do it alone. Please, help me?”

Obviously, I wanted to soften at the words *help me*, especially delivered from someone as closed off as Helli. I did feel like she was being genuine. But I’d felt that last time, and then she’d changed her mind. I couldn’t discount the fact that she was prone to switching sides at the drop of a hat.

“Convince me.”

So she did. “All we need to do is trigger Apollo’s ‘code red’. It’s only for the most dramatic of scenarios, like someone threatening Apollo’s life, or one of his brothers showing up. It’ll shut the main doors, but it’ll open the safe. I think I can figure out how to set off ‘code red’. I’m the first point of contact for anyone arriving into reception, so I can call the alarm and it’ll take a few minutes at least for anyone to realize it’s false. The problem is, the person getting the evidence from the safe would need to be in Apollo’s office at the time the alarm goes off. Otherwise, only he has the emergency code to the office door.”

“Okay, so you somehow get me into his office in advance, then set off code red. Then what? If the main doors are sealed, how am I supposed to get out before he realizes the evidence is gone?”

“Well, there’s two options. I hide you in the building and hope that he doesn’t realize the safe has been emptied and send a search team out. Or... there’s the roof exit.”

Neither of those sounded fun. “The roof exit?”

“Traditionally for helicopters. Any good at abseiling?”

I scoffed. “Absolutely not. And I’m fairly certain someone in your office will notice me abseiling down past their windows and raise the alarm.”

“Actually, above the ground floor, all the windows are blacked out.”

“I thought that was just Apollo’s office. All of them? No one can look outside?” I shook my head. “And what about Jenni?”

“I’ve got the code for where she’s being kept. That one won’t be a problem.”

I sighed. I wasn’t going to abseil. But there might be another way off the roof... “I might know someone who can help.”

Helli was suddenly jubilant. “Yes, Ria!”

I stared at her. She looked mildly embarrassed. Her enthusiasm in that moment was so Jenni-like that I wondered if they'd swapped places. But she quickly returned to her customary scowl.

It was agreed.

That was how I found myself walking to Sylvester's offices to try and get in contact with him.

Sylvester's receptionist was apologetic. "Sorry. Mr Brock isn't in yet."

I was just glad she wasn't a triplet of Jenni and Helli. "Can you get a message to him? Tell him Ria Moon wants to see him?"

I waited. Eventually, the receptionist – who looked more like a rockstar or an alternative model – returned with a message for me. It was Sylvester's personal address. I was to go there if I wanted to see him.

When I arrived, Sylvester was groggy and wearing a silk dressing gown, which I was to assume was his way of appearing decent for my visit. "Long night?"

"Every night is a long night." He winked. "Can I get you some coffee?"

"Please."

When we sat down, he elegantly crossed one leg over the opposite knee and raised an eyebrow at me, holding his coffee close to his chest. "I thought you were in the safe house."

I was surprised. "Oh, so Forest came clean then, did he?"

Sylvester was giving nothing away. "He did."

I had to remember the brothers were close, and protective of each other. "Are you going to tell him I visited?"

He sighed. "I don't think that would do him much good right now. But it depends what you're here for."

I told him the plan. He agreed to help. And he wasn't going to let Forest know.

With Sylvester's offer of assistance secured, I couldn't *not* get in on Helli's plan. I wanted to go back to my family home. I wanted to repay my debt to Forest. The plan, if it went well, which by all odds it would not, would solve these problems. I had to try one last time.

The only thing left to figure out was how to get me in past security. Helli could fake an appointment easily to get me a guest pass, but the security knew what I looked like and had been primed to capture me on arrival – to take me to the authorities, apparently.

Helli was of little use. "I don't know. I'll carry you in a suitcase. Or a catering trolley. Whatever they normally do in the movies."

"Just how flexible do you think I am? And won't I immediately trigger the X-rays at the security gate?"

"I don't know. You're the spy. Come up with something."

I mulled it over. Nothing was coming to me.

Eventually, Helli decided on the course of action. "There's nothing else for it. We're going to have to give you a *really, really* ugly haircut."

"You know there are such things as wigs, right?"

So it was that, two days later, I found myself, wearing a wig, waiting in a utility closet on the same floor as Apollo's office for some kind of signal from Helli that it was time to get me into Apollo's office or trigger 'code red'.

**Ria: *It's really warm in here. Are you any closer?***

**Ria: *I hope you're not bottling it***

**Helli: *I am a bit nervous. Just gathering myself***

**Ria: *Okay, don't take too long or you'll find my sizzled corpse***

**Helli: *Hang on. Something's happening. Don't move***

Then the alarm started to blare. I waited. The next thing I knew, Helli threw open the door of the utility closet. The lights of the hallway, dim as they were, temporarily blinded me.

“Come on. Apollo’s engaged elsewhere. I’ve wedged his door open. You get the documents, I’ll get Jenni, then meet me on the roof.”

**Ria: *Sylvester, it’s time***

**Ria: *Are you ready?***

**Sylvester: *On our way***

I followed Helli’s lead into Apollo’s office, then she darted off to get her sister. This would be the real test – whether Helli had been tricking me for some purpose all along.

On Apollo’s monitors, CCTV footage of the reception area was playing out.

Apollo was speaking to someone. “...with your child. And now she hates your guts.”

Oh my god. He was speaking to Forest.

Forest spoke. “Yeah, I fucked up.”

Entranced by the footage, I completely forgot what I was supposed to be doing. My heart pounded in my chest seeing Forest after so long. Well, it had been around two weeks, not exactly an eon. But we’d spent so much intensive time together before that, it had been odd and lonely to be without him.

Here he was, saying everything I’d ever wanted to hear. And he didn’t even know I was listening in.

I wanted to go to him. But the plan mandated otherwise.

Then I heard the saddest part of his speech: “I didn’t trust anyone to just be in my life without me having to prove my worth.”

*Fuck it. I’m going to him. Plan be damned.*

I sniffed, wiped the tears out of my eyes, and messaged Helli.

**Ria: *Change of plan. You leave with Jenni. I’m going out the front door***



**Ria: *You'll have to grab the documents from the utility cupboard***

**Ria: *But I'll buy you some time***

**Helli: *No, come with us!***

**Helli: *This is why I didn't tell you he was here***

**Helli: *Don't put yourself in danger for him again***

**Ria: *What, you giving me dating advice now?***

**Ria: *Bit rich considering we were enemies only a few days ago***

**Helli: *Your funeral***

I grabbed some documents off Apollo's desk – random, non-confidential ones – to use as a decoy. Then I took the real documents from the safe, stashed them in the utility cupboard, and legged it to the ground floor.

As I left, Forest was saying: "Throw your worst at me. I'll tell you anything you want to know."

I hoped he'd wait until I was there to give up any more of his secrets.

On the ground floor, I approached the door to reception.

I could hear Apollo saying: "Still, a win is a win. I'll take it. Farewell."

I jammed the door release button and kicked open the door. Apollo was right in front of me. His guards rushed to grab me by the arms.

Apollo snatched the documents out of my hands. "What was the point of this? You just handed me back the evidence you need."

I smiled. "Take a look."

Apollo scanned the documents, and then looked back up at me. There was little in the way of his usual theatrics when he spoke, in a low, horrible tone. "You *bitch*."

Forest ran at Apollo. For a moment I had a glimpse of that fury, so reminiscent of our last interaction, but thankfully not

directed at me. “You watch your mouth!”

But security stopped him in his tracks before he could get close. He struggled against them, but his one-man tai chi and fencing strength was no match for Apollo’s beefed up security team.

Apollo drew closer to me, his loathsome face inches away from mine. I could tell he was no longer enjoying himself even remotely. “Where are they?”

I smiled very sweetly. He could be asking about the documents or the twins. Either way, my answer was the same. “They’re about to depart the building. You’re too late.”

Forest frowned in confusion, talking more to himself than anyone else. “But this is the only way out.”

I winked at Forest around the arms of the security holding us both in place. “I think you’ll find there’s one other way.”

The unmistakable sound of a helicopter starting up could be heard outside, from the roof. Its arrival not long before had been thankfully masked by the more abrasive sound of the ‘code red’ alarm.

Apollo turned away from me and bellowed to all assembled at the top of his voice. “Security. To the roof. *Immediately*. Don’t bother with her – get to the roof!”

The armed guards started running in the direction of the elevator. The ones holding me by both arms, after a brief confusion, let go. They let go of Forest too. I shook my arms amidst the chaos. My upper arms were going to be bruised tomorrow.

Forest raised an eyebrow in my direction. “Sylvester?”

I nodded my head and grinned. “Come on, let’s get out of here before *code red* goes off again. If I never hear that siren again in my life it’ll be too soon.”

I ran in the direction of the exit – and then, as if it were the most natural thing ever, grabbed Forest’s hand and pulled him along with me.

Outside, still holding hands, we stood on the grass and looked up at the sky. We could hear yelling, even from down here, as security and Apollo arrived on the roof to the sight of the helicopter pulling off into the skies.

Forest watched the helicopter go. “Ria, you’re amazing. How did you do it?”

Despite the cool outside air, my body flooded with warmth. “I am quite amazing. But actually, we did it together, you and I.”

He glanced at me. “What do you mean?” His face had that heartbreaking openness, that tranquility, that I’d only seen properly during his stay at my family’s home.

“When you arrived, Helli had an excuse to set off ‘code red’. It was the only thing that would spring open the safe containing the documents *and* divert Apollo away from his office.”

“And in the helicopter?”

“Both twins. Hopefully not fighting to the death. We could do with those documents if you want to stop Apollo coming after you or your brothers again.”

He laughed. “You know, my role was entirely an accident.”

“I know. But it was better than if you’d planned it.” The helicopter was becoming just a dot in the distant skies. We had work to do. “Come on, we’ve got to meet Sylvester and the twins at our meeting point.”

He held up a hand to stop me from jumping into action. “Wait. Can I talk to you first?”

I looked at him. His eyes were intense and earnest as he met mine. But I couldn’t help but meet his earnestness with defensive irony. “Wow. You have the opportunity to finally fuck over Apollo and you’d rather stay here and chat with me instead? You are a changed man.”

He wasn’t deterred. “I meant what I said. I don’t need to take Apollo down anymore. However, if you, Jenni and Helli want to use that evidence to get your well-deserved revenge

for Apollo almost destroying your families, that's entirely your prerogative." He winked. "Let's walk a bit, while we talk. I'm sure Apollo's security are searching the surrounding areas now the helicopter's definitely gotten away with it."

We walked on. We were silent for a while, breathing in the fresh air and basking in our reunion. There was a mutual glow that we shared, that increased whenever our hands met or our eyes swapped gazes. It had taken a brief absence to really prove to me how connected we were. And we'd both almost let this go over pride.

I nudged him. "Go on then. You had something to say."

He nodded. "I was a dickhead, Ria. I was so... 'tunnel vision' on getting our plan to succeed, I stopped you from telling me about the baby and then lashed out at you for not having told me. It was unforgivable."

"Yeah... but maybe I can forgive you." I shrugged and enjoyed his resulting confusion. I grinned. "After all, I betrayed you to your half-brother in the first place. *And* I considered giving Apollo the Forest Brock psychological profile lowdown in exchange for the safety of my family while you've been absent."

He started. "You did?"

I continued as if it were no big deal. "Yeah. I didn't do it in the end. But I was this close to fully turning on you." I held up my thumb and index finger – almost meeting, but not quite.

He thought about it, and then shrugged too, and laughed lightly. "I don't blame you, to be honest. I'd turn on me if I were you. I mean, I *did* turn on me briefly, and I'm me."

I laughed. "That makes no sense but also, so much sense."

He pressed his lips together sheepishly. "Like tarot?"

"Like tarot." I elbowed him in the ribs. "Hey, look at you. You're 'The Fool'."

He rubbed his side then pulled me in close around my shoulders, so we were walking as one. "Somehow you've

managed to warp my brain so much that that doesn't sound like an insult."

"You stepped off the cliff into the unknown. Apollo Brock being your nemesis who you must defeat – that was your 'known'. That was where you were comfortable, oddly enough. And now, who knows? Unlimited possibilities have opened up to you."

His tone changed. "I'm not so sure about unlimited." He was Mr Serious again. He meant business.

"What do you mean?"

He cleared his throat and looked straight ahead. "Ria, there's only one possibility I will even slightly entertain right now. And that's the possibility that we forgive each other, we discuss the future of our child, and you consider marrying me and us spending our whole lives together."

That was a lot to take in. My eyes widened. "That's a very specific possibility. Really... mapping out the rest of your lifetime. And mine."

But he wasn't deterred. "I've had a lot of time to think about it. That doesn't mean there can't be surprises along the way."

I thought about it. "I'm sure there will be."

He stopped walking and swiveled me around, so that we were facing each other, his arms still holding me close. "There will? Does that mean... do you mean to say...?"

A wicked thought came into my mind. "Yes, Forest Brock. Yes, I will *consider* marrying you." God, I was infuriating when I wanted to be.

He blinked, perplexed. Bless his heart. "Wait. Did I ask the question wrong?"

"No. I'm messing with you." I kissed his still-confused face and smiled. "Yes, I will marry you."

He gasped in mock-outrage, clutching at his chest. "*Mary, Mary, quite contrary...*"

I cackled. “You’ve spent too much time with my Grandmother. Come here.”

I put my hands around the back of his neck and leaned up to kiss him again. This time, he was no longer confused. He wrapped his arms around my waist and hoisted me up slightly so that our faces were at the same height. His lips were warm, and soft, and when they met mine I felt at peace.

And when I pulled back for air, he set me down gently on the ground, and I’d never seen him look happier.

I’d never *felt* happier.

When had we become so mushy?

## FOREST



To break our thrilled silence, Ria prodded me in the chest. “Do you have a ring?”

“Oh! I actually do.” I fumbled in my pockets for it.

Ria laughed. “While you’re looking. Here. Have one of mine.”

She slid one of the many rings she wore daily off her finger and handed it over to me. “My Grandmother used this to propose to my granddad. He turned her down, but I don’t think it’s bad luck. They still had a lovely life together as very close friends and co-parents of my mom.”

“That’s not... a bad omen, somehow?”

She laughed again. “No. If anything, a good one. Friendship must come above all else in a marriage. Or so I’m told.”

“Here it is.” I pulled the ring out of my pocket. It wasn’t much to look at, but I suspected Ria would find some enjoyment out of the backstory to it. “This one was inherited too. That’s why it’s so... well, it’s made out of wood. Like I said, my parents were hippies. You know they originally named me Forest because that’s where I was... conceived. I think this ring is actually made from a fallen branch of a tree from that same forest.”

“Ew! But also, aww? That’s weirdly sweet. If disgusting. But really nice?”

“Yeah, imagine being told that as a kid.”

“Wait, but what about Emory? He was your biological father, right?”

Here was the best part of the story. Or worst, depending on your perspective. “Yeah, I asked my parents about that one after I got called to Emory’s mansion and found out the truth of my biological parentage. If you thought the last part of the story was disgusting, you aren’t gonna like this one. I’m biologically Emory’s. But I was conceived... during a *threesome*.”

Ria looked equal parts amazed and horrified, which was the reaction I’d been banking on. “Oh my god! Emory Brock... and your hippie parents?”

“My parents claimed he had a brief but convincing eco-hippie phase. Sorry for the horror of that image. Ignoring the gross history of this ring... I thought you’d appreciate it over a fancy new one. Being that you prioritize family and meaning over... wealth. Though, say the word and I’ll buy you literally any other ring you like. Literally. Any ring in the world. And it won’t have to be related to anyone’s parents having sex, even remotely.”

Ria was laughing, but she was also crying, I could now see. She actually liked the ring. “No, I love it. It’s perfect. Thank you, thank you, Forest.” She slid the ring onto her finger, and covered her mouth, emotional as she studied it. Then she faltered. “Wait. Do I have to take the last name Brock?”

I laughed now, too. It was funny hearing the sound of my own real laugh again after so long being moody and mean. “You can have whatever name you like. Maybe I’ll take yours. You did say Forest Moon had a ring to it, the first time we met.”

She put a finger to her chin. “Let’s put a pin in that discussion for later. Come on, we really do need to go and meet the others or they’ll think I’ve been kidnapped.”

I texted my driver to pick us up and take us to Sylvester’s. It was a short journey. Ria was grinning in the back seat next to me. I was barely concealing a smile, too.



We got rushed from reception to the top floor by Sylvester's security team – who were dressed far more flamboyantly than mine or Apollo's, of course. Sylvester had recorded his voice as the voice of the elevator, which was largely disconcerting. And as background ambiance, a selection of his own hits played.

I rolled my eyes. It had been a while since I'd had the pleasure of visiting Sylvester's headquarters, the testament to his vanity.

But I couldn't be irritated by Sylvester at all. He'd stepped up to help Ria when I hadn't been able to. I owed him.

We walked out into Sylvester's office-slash-meeting-room, a vast room that took up the entirety of the top floor of the building and had a 360 degree view of the whole city. Stylish red sofas were the comfort of choice. The three of them – Sylvester and the twins – were there waiting for us.

I raised my hand in a sheepish greeting. I didn't know what the general consensus was on me and my recent behaviors with anyone but Sylvester. "Hi, all. Congrats on the plan."

Then Sylvester screamed the highest-pitched shriek I'd ever heard come out of a man's mouth.

I jumped. "What? What's wrong?"

Sylvester extended an arm out dramatically to point in our direction. His arm was shaking. "Is that – are those – is that – engagement rings?"

Ria looked at her own hand as if she'd already forgotten. "Oh. Yeah."

Sylvester glanced between the two of us like his head was going to explode. "What is wrong with the both of you?"

"Oh my god, Ria, congratulations!" Jenni ran forwards to embrace Ria. She glanced at me over my fiancée's shoulder. "You too, Forest."

"Thanks. Glad to see you're alive."

Sylvester had switched to sulking during the brief interruption. He was frequently disappointed that his brothers weren't as dramatic as he. "Yeah, well, I've got a surprise for you, too, Forest."

"Oh?"

"Ta-da." Sylvester listlessly gestured to the doorway to the right of the group.

Jude and Winston walked through.

Ria piped up, possibly to cover for my shock. "Wow, the whole gang."

Sylvester tilted his head to the right. "Figured getting evidence enough to possibly put Apollo behind bars was a momentous occasion enough to merit a gathering of the brothers."

Winston gave a short wave. "Hey Forest."

"Hi, Winston."

Jude was more cautious. "Forest..."

I could only echo him. "Jude..."

The last time we'd spoken had obviously not gone well for either of us. There had been radio silence between us since. The feud had been informally confirmed when Sylvester hadn't invited Jude to the 'hear how much Forest has fucked up his life' meeting he'd called during my mopey stay at his apartment.

We stared at each other. I had no idea what to say.

Luckily, Jude went first. "Come here, Forest."

I crossed the room and was in his arms by the time he'd finished his sentence. We added a few hefty pats on the other's back to retain our masculinity, of course.

Jude went first with the apologies, too. "Sorry for not trusting you."

My eyes were a little bit blurry with tears. "Sorry for being untrustworthy."

He shrugged. “Hey, it paid off in the end, didn’t it?”

I pulled away from him. “It did. But that’s down to Ria and the twins. Not me.”

Then Winston piped up. “Are those engagement rings?”

And everything descended into chaos again.

Until somewhere at the very far back of the room, Helli’s apathetic monotone managed to rise above the chaos. “Are we going to finish our business here or are we going to gossip like teenagers until Apollo sends a nuclear missile to obliterate all of us and, by extension, the entire planet?”

All of us hushed, thoroughly admonished. I for one was glad for the interruption. I still had tears in my eyes – manly ones, of course – and was quickly becoming emotionally drained from all of the... feeling that was happening in the room. Beside me, Ria squeezed my hand.

“Yes, right.” Sylvester sobered up fast, like a naughty schoolboy threatened with the principal’s office. “Well, I can take Jenni and Helli into my protection for now while they figure out what to do with the evidence. I think it’s only right we leave it in their hands – and Ria’s – since they did all of the work we’ll be benefiting from. That is, unless you want one of us to take it off your hands?”

Helli and Jenni shook their heads eerily in unison, from opposite sides of the room.

“No.” Jenni was as stern as Helli in this moment. “We’ll do it. I want to bring him down.”

“Did he really kidnap you?” Winston, master of timing.

Jenni was flippant as ever. She really took everything in her stride. “Kind of. I wasn’t in a dungeon or anything, but I was strongly ‘advised’ to remain in a sectioned off floor of the building until he could figure out what to ‘do’ with me. It was honestly not unlike a hotel stay. And I had my sister for company.”

Beside me, Ria was silently dancing from one foot to the other, overjoyed at the twins being reunited.

Sylvester was back in high spirits. “Alright, gang. Any other loose ends to tie up?” He grinned around at all of us in turn. “No? Okay. Class dismissed.”

Then Ria just had to go and say it. “Oh wait, I’ve got one. I’m pregnant. It’s Forest’s.”

As chaos once more descended around us, she grinned at me with the most mischief I’d ever seen in a person’s eyes. Truly, she was a master of her art form.



After my family's stay in the safe house, Forest was convinced he needed to make it back into their good books. As if purchasing two neighboring houses in an affluent suburb near the city wasn't enough.

My Grandmother knew of Forest's insecurity, and was taking full advantage of it. Every day it seemed she had a new 'whim'. "You know what I've always wanted to get into? Gongs. They can be very spiritually cleansing. They're quite expensive, that's why I never managed..." And then an unsubtly longing gaze in his direction.

Forest would just hold his hands up and grin. "You can have whatever you want. If you spare my life."

"Maybe." Grandmother would sniff as if unsure as to Forest's fate, then depart with an air of indecision.

I felt bad for Forest. "You know she's taking advantage of you, right? Her and my mom weren't even angry at you in the first place. Mrs Jamroz spent the whole of our stay in the safe house singing your praises. They basically think you're a saint."

"Yeah, well. I don't mind her enjoying herself for a while tormenting me. Especially if it gets her off your back."

"True. Chivalry isn't dead after all."

When I got back to checking my business inbox after an unannounced and unwilling hiatus, I saw it had absolutely exploded with messages. Somehow, my radio silence had led some quite important business leaders who were interested in

my services to believe I was *very, very* in demand, too busy to reply to them. This made them all the more anxious to secure my services.

I had messages of increasing enthusiasm from some of these potential clients, offering me larger and larger sums of money if I would select their business to receive some of my renowned consultancy.

I don't know if they knew I'd only had one real client so far, and it was my fiancé. I wasn't going to tell them.

I delegated baby preparations to Forest so I could concentrate on my business and getting back to some of my potential clients. I still wanted to pay my way – that was a part of me that wasn't going to change, even married with a family of my own.

I was excited to have a child. Family meant everything to me, and I'd pushed all dreams of parenthood out of my mind while I'd had to focus on making money. But I wasn't too hung up on the details. I would be more of a 'go with the flow' mother, I predicted.

As it turned out, Forest and Mrs Jamroz were a force to be reckoned with on the 'baby preparations' front. Decorating the new house and the baby's room, shopping for clothing and supplies, spending hours reading about pregnancy milestones and birthing options: they had it all covered.

All I had to do was attend some classes and be told facts about dilation every now and then. Easy peasy.

Mrs Jamroz was in extra high spirits because her sons' temporary relocation to the concrete prison known as the 'safe house' had inspired in them some new and productive hobbies. The eldest had decided, after being involved in such an exciting adventure, that he wanted to be an author, which meant he would have to read lots and lots of books.

The middle child, who had previously been the problem child, had now declared he wanted to be a ghost hunter when he grew up. This was less helpful, but Mrs Jamroz had cunningly managed to convince him that if he wanted to be a

ghost hunter, he would have to get really, really good at science.

And one of them, possibly inspired by me, had declared a new interest in psychology, and had started devouring everything he could about the workings of the human brain.

Magical things were afoot. It was almost enough to make me believe in my Grandmother's psychic abilities. After all, hadn't her prophecy kicked off a large portion of the events that had occurred?

It was something to think about, anyway.

For now, it was enough that I believed in the magic of family, and of the mind, and of the human capacity for love, which was greater than I'd ever realized before.

# EPILOGUE





## FOREST

The evening was nigh, and Ria returned home looking frazzled.

I waved and tried to tone down what would have been an ‘annoyingly chipper’ welcome to something more along the lines of ‘inoffensively pleased’. “Welcome home! Long day?”

She hung her coat, bag and scarf up on the coat racks by the door, then visibly slumped, her spine almost seeming to fold in on itself. “Oh my god, I’m exhausted. You have no idea. Well, you’re the ex-workaholic, you probably do.”

I nodded, knowing full well. Even if in my current work-free bliss it seemed like a distant dream. “Go on, give me the bullet points, then we’ll sit down to dinner and you don’t need to think about it for the rest of the evening.”

Ria nodded and crossed the room, turning her attention away from me but instead towards my chest. “Hi, baby!” She was addressing the real baby in my arms. She lifted Rowan up, cradling him to her chest. “Missed you, little guy.”

I watched the two reunite, my chest feeling very warm and proud. After all the drama, we had managed to reach something close to a normality I never thought I’d ever have. Strange how normality could become so appealing when your life was full of twists and turns. It was all I’d dreamed of.

After a short while, she turned to face me, joggling the baby in her arms as she paced the room. “Alright, bullet points. Well, you know I have to keep things confidential. But that big client, the biggest one, you know the one? Yeah, so

they told their friend about it, and their friend ‘swung by’ during the meeting today. I had to say sorry, I’m fully booked, yada yada. But get this, the friend then starts trying to out-price my current client – their friend! And it escalates into a full on bidding war. I did not encourage any of this behavior, in fact I actively discouraged it. It was wild.”

I was enraptured. I loved hearing ‘business Ria’ stories. “What happened? Who won?”

“Oh, I wasn’t going to let the results of the bidding war stand.” Ria sighed. “I could tell it’d destroy their friendship. I’m too nice, obviously. I told the friend that because of their enthusiasm, I’d open a new slot up just for them. But since I’d be working overtime, I’d be charging a premium. They were so thrilled, they were happy to pay any price. Crazy.”

I was proud, but a little worried. “You’re going to be working overtime? I’m not opposed to more baby-time, but I do like to get some baby-and-Ria-time, too. And just Ria-time.” I waggled my eyebrows. Rowan laughed in Ria’s arms. “He understands.”

To my relief, she shook her head. “No, don’t worry. You know that slimy guy who negotiated prices with me, saying that his work was super important, ethical, was gonna save the world blah blah? I did some more research – well actually, I just asked Winston – it turns out he’s full of shit. So I’m gonna drop him, put the new client in his time slot. Profit.”

I was constantly in awe of the woman I’d married. “Ruthless. I love it.”

“And then... the meeting.” Her expression grew darker, her voice more ominous, almost like the voice her Grandmother used for prophecies.

Ah, yes. I’d somehow forgotten the meeting. Ria and the twins were still campaigning against Apollo. The evidence had been enough to get him initially arrested, but he had been released on bail and they’d been scrambling ever since to build a stronger case.

“Apollo’s in a sticky position, but the lawyers are still thinking he’s gonna find some way to wriggle out of it. The resources he commands are insane. Jenni and Helli are working all hours trying to hunt down more witnesses, but as soon as they catch a lead, the person disappears into the woodwork. Apollo’s good. I don’t know. It’s got to be good for something, after all this?”

I nodded. “For sure. You’ve kept him in the doghouse for a good long while. And he’ll have to tread more carefully from now on. If he gets sentenced, even for a short while, that ought to knock some sense into him. Ought to, but it probably won’t. Still, more eyes are on him now. Critical eyes. And that’s got to be a good thing.”

“You’re right. Thanks. How about you?”

I laughed. Following Ria’s fast-shooting executive summary of her high-powered day, mine was going to be supremely underwhelming. “Ro-Ro and I listened to some classical music and went for a walk. I saw Mandy for lunch. Answered some emails while Rowan napped. Had a nap with Ro. Drank a coffee and tinkered with some electronics. Er, that’s it.”

She patted my head. She was the *only* person who could get away with doing that. “Aw, bless you. You’d make such a cute little house husband.”

“Don’t patronize me.” I winked, to make sure she knew I was joking, then grew serious. “I confess, if I had no other responsibilities, I’d happily let you be the breadwinner. It’s been really nice. But unfortunately, after you’ve got everything running smoothly, we’re gonna need to inch the percentages of labor closer and closer to fifty-fifty.”

She nodded with weary enthusiasm. “Believe me, I badly want to spend more time at home. I’m exhausted.”

“You’re enjoying the work, too, though?”

“I am.”

“Then we’re both happy.” I smiled. “Speaking of being a house husband, dinner’s almost ready. Shall we?”

“We shall.”

We linked arms like a Victorian couple and walked through to the combination kitchen-dining room.

After dinner, Ria leaned across the table and reached for my hand. “You know when you said I didn’t have to think about anything for the rest of the evening... did you have a distraction in mind?”

I raised my eyebrows, tracing abstract shapes onto her palm until she giggled. “Maybe. Your Grandmother’s coming over to take Rowan for a few hours.”

Ria groaned. “I don’t have the energy for even the shortest of conversations with Grandmother today. She keeps making bullshit prophecies about Rowan’s future. The worst thing is, I’m half-convinced they’re gonna come true. I don’t have the energy for a skepticism versus belief inner conflict today.”

I’d expected this. “We’ll make it contact-free. I’ll tell her you went to bed early. You can go hide in bed and wait for me, make it more authentic.”

She grinned. “Perfect. Did I ever mention that I love you?”

“Hmm, every day. But I still like to hear it. And I go on loving you, too, despite being a put-upon stay-at-home husband.”

“Shut it. I’m gonna go upstairs and get fully, totally naked and await you.”

“Don’t have too much fun before I get there.”

“I won’t.”

Ria danced up the stairs. Dinner had given her a boost of much-needed energy.

I picked up Rowan and went to the front room to await Ria’s Grandmother. While I was waiting, I slid my phone out of my pocket.

**Winston: *Uh oh. There’s been a development***

**Sylvester: *No!***

**Jude:** *Apollo?*

**Winston:** *Yup. Tomorrow, mine?*

**Forest:** *I'll be there*

I sighed, and looked down at baby Rowan. “By the time you’re an adult, I’m going to make sure you don’t have any of this bullshit to deal with. But I’m gonna do it slowly, carefully this time. I’ve got seventeen years...”

**Ria:** *Ready for you :)*

And in the meantime, there were plenty of enjoyable times to be had with Ria and our little family.

ALSO BY PAIGE DAWSON

Knocked Up by a Silver Fox

Knocked Up by a Cowboy

Ex-Seal Daddy