



OFFICE

GRUMP

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NICOLE SNOW

OFFICE GRUMP

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

OceanofPDF.com

NICOLE SNOW

ICE LIPS PRESS

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ABOUT THE BOOK

My “interview” with boss-ho-le supreme was anything but normal.

He picked the worst day ever to chase me off my favorite park bench.

I retaliated with a spray of cinnamon latte all over his Italian shoes.

Then—for some unholy reason—Magnus Heron offered me a job.

Even his name sounds like a piece of work.

Guess what? He is.

But when you’re single, broke, and barely surviving in Chicago, you hop on the gift horse offering a six-figure salary and *ride*.

I picked the stallion on a one-way trip to hell.

It’s not the impossibly long hours working under Grump-zilla.

It’s not the fact that he’s snarly, demanding, horribly rich, and chiseled.

It’s not even the pesky way he makes me blush every flipping time we’re together.

Mag is my boss. I’m his lowly assistant. Some rules are carved in stone.

That’s my mantra until we’re sharing a sunset too beautiful for life.

Alone with wandering lips, whispered secrets, and disaster in the making.

The plan was simple: punch the clock, get paid, and keep hating my boss.

What's the blueprint when the office grump brings me to my knees?

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HAPPY FRIDAY (SABRINA)



I know the moment I open my eyes that it's going to be a *day*.

It's Friday the Thirteenth, the worst day ever invented in the history of time.

A date belonging to screeching black cats, tumbling salt shakers, and broken clocks.

Not a day where good things happen to hardworking girls who wake up on the wrong side of their beds—and the achy crick in my neck tells me today's black magic already started on my pillow last night.

Awesome.

Somehow, I manage to crawl out of bed and get showered and dressed, without losing any limbs. But as I hop out of my bedroom in a brand-new outfit, still zipping my knee-high boot while trying to check my phone for the time, I realize what else feels off besides my poor neck.

I'm flipping late.

Apparently, the alarms on my phone love this infamous day just as much as I do.

"Ohhh, Brina, big date tonight? You look amazing! But you're late." Paige holds out my purse and a paper coffee cup with an easygoing smile.

"Where would I be without you?" I mutter, unsure whether I'm rolling my eyes at her for going all Captain Obvious or the

fact that I *would* be worse off without a friend like her.

I jerk the boot zipper the rest of the way up, then snatch the cup and purse from her. I'm wearing a sweater dress with a jacket thrown over it and high heeled boots, an ensemble pulled together more for Chicago fall warmth than fashion. And I've thrown my walnut-brown hair into a ponytail this morning because it's the quickest fix.

"No dates written in stone yet. You know how flaky Tinder dudes are," I say, checking my phone again, willing time to slow down.

"Don't worry. You'll make it," Paige says with a sunny confidence I wish I had. "Personally, I think you should rock the Miss Superstitious vibe. You've already got the name and we've been through this before—"

"Right, and it always ends with the same question. Do I look like a teenager or a witch?" I watch her lashes flutter as she bats her eyes so innocently.

God. I'm starting to wish I was magic because if I don't make my bus...hello, doom.

As I'm lunging for the door, I realize it's way too early for my night owl of a roommate to be out of bed. "Why are you awake, anyway?"

"I'm going to Lincoln Park to meet a potential client." She runs a hand through her blond hair like it's totally natural for anyone to be so beautiful this early in the morning.

So maybe I wish I could steal her confidence along with her style mojo, too.

"It's Friday the Thirteenth," I remind her. "Be careful."

She sips her coffee with a loud snort. "Oh, you and your hocus pocus. Some of the best things ever happen on Fridays ending in thirteen."

"Like what?" I call over my shoulder, but I don't have time to wait for her answer. I power stomp down the stairs without a second look, hoping she's right.

But seriously?

Good things?

Today?

No. Nope. Never.

Racing down the block, I glance at my bus stop...

...just as the bus drives away.

“Sonofa—” I cut myself off mid-curse when an old lady out for a stroll casts me a dirty glance.

Rather than daydream about how heavenly it must be to waltz around this early without panicking over a job, I push my lips against my coffee cup and slurp so loud I hope it scares someone.

Third time this month I’m late. *Happy happy, joy joy.*

Luckily, no one at the office ever said anything the last two times. Mostly because I work my ass off and I always make up the time in the evenings.

I rage-gulp my coffee and then toss the cup in the trash, waiting on the next bus to come, keeping my eyes peeled for more bad luck.

So far, no velvety black cats on a personal mission to ruin my day.

Small consolation.

When I finally catch the next bus and stumble into the building’s elevator, the metal doors start closing in slow motion right in front of my face.

I’m already forty minutes late. *Again.*

No freaking way am I letting these doors shut before I’m in. Stretching one foot in front of the shiny doors, I jiggle it, hoping to set off the sensor so they reopen.

Instead, they close.

Right over the spike of my high-heeled boot.

Oh.

Oh, God.

I gasp, terrified by the loud *crunch!* that erupts through the silence.

Bones?

Heart pounding, I wiggle my toes, bracing for the worst.

But my foot doesn't hurt at all.

It only caught my heel, tripping the sensor—though the second the door pings open, my mangled heel hits the floor. I throw myself in as fast as a girl on one heel can and scoop up the broken part with a sigh.

These things happen.

It's Friday the freaking Thirteenth.

If shearing off a heel and a late bus are the worst things today? I'll be *fiine*.

Except, from the instant the elevator stops on my floor, I know something's off. It's weirdly quiet inside Purry Furniture & More's downtown headquarters, and I'm half expecting to see the cutesy black cats on the posters come leaping out after me with their claws drawn.

I also spot Vanessa, my boss, as soon as the steel doors pull apart. She stands at the front desk and smiles.

Not a nice one, exactly. More like a wooden smile that says, *oh, hey, I'm trying to pretend I have it all together, but I'm actually juggling atomic bombs, and I'm about to drop one in your lap.*

What now? Is it my timing?

I step out, brandishing my heel.

“Vanessa, so sorry I'm late. My alarms were off and I had a little mishap with a hungry elevator, so...” Before I can even get my whole sob story out, she stops me with a raised hand, her fingers splayed apart.

“No big, Sabrina. Can you come into my office for a sec? I need to talk to you.”

Odd.

So is her ominously formal use of my name. Why didn't she just call me Brina like always? Like *everyone* always has, since the dawn of time.

As I follow her, limping on my broken heel, I swallow a cold, bitter rock in my throat.

Friday the Thirteenth.

My boss wants to "talk."

How screwed am I?

She wheels herself behind her massive glass desk with another awkward semi-smile and tents her fingers in front of her.

"Well. Sabrina, there's no easy way to say this and you're too good for me to sugarcoat it, so here goes. You've been a fabulously talented, hardworking member of our Purry creative team. We absolutely *love* your designs; however...I'm afraid we're facing budget cuts."

"Oh." That sounds like a downer. But I'm a valuable member of this team. I get things done! "I...I thought you told me the designs I did were phenomenal? Half of them are hanging around the office."

"And they are, yes. But the hard truth is, Mr. Tillis, the owner, believes it's time to take a look at hiring talent to save costs in the same places where our furniture is manufactured. Jack found a way to get similar graphic designs from Bangladesh at about one dollar a piece. They're not quite as polished as yours, of course, but..."

I'm not listening anymore.

Jack? Did she just say Jack? *Jack-ass?*

"You mean the frat boy I've been training—um, I mean, the—Jack the Intern?"

Frowning, Vanessa clears her throat and nods.

Holy Hannah. It's hard not to roll my eyes right out of their sockets.

Now I get why the kid was so interested in buzzing around my desk to find out what parts of the process we—meaning *he*—could automate or outsource. All for a shiny unpaid internship to slap on his college resume.

“So this means I’m fired?” I ask numbly.

Her eyes widen in a *Goodness, no!* kind of way.

For a flimsy second, I think this day might not sink into the tar pit it’s heading for.

“Let go,” she whispers, as if that softens the blow. “Mr. Tillis prefers the phrase right-sizing.”

I choke on the air in my lungs and focus on trying to breathe through cement so I don’t flip her the bird by reflex.

You’ve got to love whatever evil genius came up with comically brutal corporate speak like *right-sizing*.

Whatever we call it doesn’t change the cold, hard facts.

This is the third entry-level position I’ve lost this year.

The last time, in the spring, I had to beg Paige to cover my rent for a couple months. Hardly a burden for a girl who’s grown up semi-wealthy, but I hated it with a vengeance.

I also chowed down on ramen noodles and instant mac and cheese for every meal. Going out for a six-inch sub felt like an extravagant use of my funds.

I’ve known young adult poverty in the big Windy City, and it sucks to suck. Definitely not something I want to revisit.

Vanessa stares at me with a worried look from across her desk.

With the resume-dusting, pavement-pounding, ass-kissing horrors of the job search swirling in my mind, I wonder if it’s not too late to rewind and salvage this job. Make such a good impression during my exit interview that she decides she’s making a terrible mistake.

If I could just get her to sweet-talk surfer dude cat furniture mogul CEO Tillis into keeping me on...

“Vanessa, tell me one thing...is there anything I could’ve done differently? To help me at my next job?”

She gives me a relaxed, sad smile. “You’re a hard worker and a positive employee. You haven’t even been here long enough for me to give you any kind of real appraisal beyond that, I’m afraid. These things happen.”

I feel my eyeball twitch.

Why, yes, *these things do happen* on a craptacular day when the entire universe spins on its bitch axis.

“It really is a budget cut. Nothing personal and no reflection at all on your impressive skills,” she drones on. “Your last paycheck will be direct-deposited next week. I’ve paid you for today, but once you’ve packed up, you’re free to leave.”

Lovely.

“Isn’t there like, um, another job here I could take? Maybe a position that pays less?”

Pity flashes in her eyes. So that’s a hard no.

“With the business plan to lower operational costs, most of our personal assistant roles are being handled in the Philippines. If you’d like, I’d certainly be happy to keep your resume on—”

Nope.

Done.

Let her file this.

I scurry up from my chair and walk out without looking back, feeling like I’ve been slapped across the face. Really, though, it’s par for the course in Sabrina Bristol’s career world.

My first job was with a start-up firm. They went belly up when a big, bad G rolled out its own revolutionary app update, rendering their company obsolete a couple weeks after I started.

After that, I took a temp-to-hire position. The pay sucked, and they never kept any of the temps, so that was another dead end.

Purry Furniture & More seemed like an ideal fit. I mean, witchy black cats aside, I love animals.

Once you get past the idea that the entire job was marketing pet furniture, it was a pretty sweet starting place. Crap pay, sure, but it was supposed to be good experience, an open door, one more step up the ladder, dammit.

Three freaking months. That's not experience.

That's a radar blip, just enough time for a boss to decide you're disposable when a penny-pinching knucklehead decides to right-size you right out of a job.

I don't say anything to the few people milling around, avoiding me like I'm carrying the plague. I just go clear out my desk.

There isn't much to remove, honestly.

A lonely picture of Paige and me at the Navy Pier on New Year's Eve. Another photo with my parents from Christmas a couple years ago.

My last designs are scattered across my desk, a set of grinning cartoon cats raving about how *Meow-some* the company's latest cat beds are. I never had time to pitch them properly, and I hope Jack the Rat hasn't seen them.

Contrary to what my supervisor thinks, not everyone can *purr-fectly* picture cat and doggy heaven like I did in these mock-ups. So I'm swiping them for my portfolio before they claim dibs on the rights.

I throw the framed photographs in my purse, and when I don't find anything to put the prints in, I swipe a hot-pink bedazzled folder off an intern's desk. I throw a couple of dollars down to make up for taking her folder. I don't leave a note. I doubt she even knows my name.

All of my high quality, professional work gets crammed into pink bedazzle.

Don't get me wrong, I like pink. But I always pictured myself with a sleek black leather briefcase, not walking around like some high school art kid.

Ten minutes after my unceremonious departure, I'm back in the elevator that ate my heel as my phone vibrates.

A guy I talk to on Tinder, Brad B., messages to ask if I'd like to meet up at two p.m.

So maybe things are looking up?

He's cute from his picture, at least. Seems hard-working, says he's on track to be a partner at his accounting firm. He's cute and funny, and his self-deprecating messages lead me to believe he might be the last normal single guy left in Chicago.

Sure, Sweeter Grind okay? I text back.

It'd better be. I'll die without good coffee and a pastry today.

You're on, Brad sends.

Cool. This fluttery hope sails through me. Maybe Paige is right.

Even though I lost my job and my heel, maybe, just maybe, things can still turn around.

At precisely one forty-five, I plant my butt in a booth chair at my favorite coffee shop and wait for him to arrive. I scour the web for graphic design jobs—nada—all the while glancing toward the door for Brad.

At two fifteen, I message to see where he is.

No answer.

At ten till three, the jackass still hasn't shown up, and I'm feeling like a massive sucker.

What kind of pretty graphics could I make by layering Brad B.'s smirky Tinder pic over a donkey?

I cock my head and ponder. If nothing else, it might be a fun way to blow off some steam.

To hell with Casper the not-so-friendly date ghost.

I need my Sweeter Grind fix and I've waited long enough, so I head for the counter.

"What can I get you?" a chipper redhead with a ponytail asks.

My stomach snarls, famished because I haven't had anything all day. "A medium cinnamon latte and a cream cheese bear claw, please. Oh, and one of those Heart's Edge truffles, too."

"Excellent choice! That'll be nine dollars and nineteen cents," she says.

I wince trying to subtract nine dollars and nineteen cents from the last fifty bucks I had in my bank account this morning. Math was never my best subject, and about an hour ago, I'd really been hoping Brad B. would show up like a gentleman and insist on buying my snack.

"Are you okay?" The cashier studies my face for a second.

I look past her, my eyes flitting up to the large black-and-white photos behind the counter. They're all scenes from some idyllic little mountain town, a smiling family, a huge man with a scarred, handsome face licking chocolate off a spoon.

"Just admiring the décor. I'm fine," I say, already tasting a month's worth of ramen noodles. I finally stick my debit card in the stupid machine. I really shouldn't be spending money on this, but I need the sugar and caffeine rush to get through the day I'm having.

A couple minutes later, she hands me a paper sack holding my treats plus a hot cup of coffee. I breathe in the cinnamon steam.

Sweet nirvana.

Since I'm off work in the middle of the afternoon, I might as well enjoy it. I decide to take my coffee to the park across the street. There's plenty to mull over besides jerks who don't show up for dates. Like what I'm going to do now that I'm jobless, for one.

The scenic park always calms me down.

Even more so at this time of year with the trees casting off their summer greenery for the kaleidoscope reds, oranges, yellows, and browns of autumn.

I tighten my grip around the warm cup in my hand, bracing against the crisp Chicago breeze as I head across the street. My favorite bench is empty, thank God. I plop down there with so much force the cinnamon latte splashes out of the sippy hole in the lid.

Smooth. Now my new sweater dress is stained.

I hate that I wasted a sip of my drink, too. I need to savor the flavor. It'll be my last cinnamon latte before I'm a working gal again.

My half of the rent is a thousand bucks a month. No idea how I'm going to make that, and it's the cheapest place we could find in a decent area.

Paige pays more since her room is larger—not by much. But Paige has rich parents and zero student loans which means she has luxuries like savings.

I have debt that compounds daily and will only blow up faster if I don't find another job, pronto.

It's not just *my* rent I have to cover, either. My parents depend on me, too, whether they know it or not (hint: they don't).

Ugh. It's going to be tricky bulk buying Mom's books this month with no income.

How long does it take to get unemployment, anyway? I doubt I'm even eligible since I wasn't part of Purry Furniture for long.

Also, it's *still* Friday the Thirteenth. The day's barely half over.

Plenty of opportunities to dump more messes in my lap, I think sourly, popping the truffle in my mouth.

For a second, I wilt back against the bench, smiling as a sugar high washes over me.

Good Lord. Whatever else is conspiring to go wrong today, it's got nothing to do with the chocolate goodness bursting in my mouth, sweeping my woes away for thirty whole seconds.

When I open my eyes, there's a camera crew bustling around the park. Their tight, hurried movement pulls me from my thoughts.

A heavysset bearded man frames the shot with his hands, counts down, and yells, "Action!"

Two guys with cameras swing themselves around the scene. A statuesque woman stands in the middle of the circle like this weird oracle, her head tilted slightly up, a blue dress blowing gently in the wind.

On a day like this, how does she even *manage* a gently rustling garment?

The wind almost bowled me over on my way to the bench. Or maybe it was the broken heel.

Models. Bah.

They know how to make life look easy.

All of these people do, actually. They're real artists, creators playing midwives to the images in their heads. Making real art and getting paid real money.

Bitter much?

Yes. I. Am.

I glance down at the stupid bedazzled pink folder on my lap, wondering who you have to kill to be a real artist with a real salary. Also, why does that woman have to be so perfect?

When I look up from the folder, there's a new man staring at me.

Holy Hercules.

When did I miss the lightning bolt that sent him down? If Miss Model looks flawless, this guy is divine.

Over six feet of sculpted muscle stuffed into an Italian suit that probably costs more than my parents' mortgage.

The cut of his chin, lethal.

Thick sandy-brown hair like a lion's mane.

The cheekbones, the brow, the dusting of a well-trimmed beard all hint at an inner wildness tucked behind his *hell no to any and all nonsense* expression.

What really makes me clench my coffee cup until it dents in, though, are his eyes.

Hands down.

Yes, they're blue, but to liken them to a pristine sky or beautiful gems almost feels offensive.

His ocean-blue eyes are riptides, humming with a distant, unforgiving energy. Still so close I can feel it like the ozone before a storm.

His gaze sends an instant shock down my spine, and my whole body tingles. My toes shrink up inside my mismatched heel boots.

He...he has to be a male model, right? But the better question is why he's looking at me like a scorned Casanova.

Oh.

Oh, God.

His expression turns me inside out. One arched eyebrow raised significantly higher than the other and cocky as hell.

I glance down, desperate for an excuse to break eye contact. And halfway afraid I'm in the middle of a terrible wardrobe malfunction I'm clueless about.

Nope.

Sweater dress still intact.

Heart still beating.

Panties still safely concealed where they should be...

I think?

When I look at him again, those feral eyes have shifted away from me, back to the photo shoot. I slowly exhale a sigh

of relief.

This stranger and his sexy voodoo eyes are just the kind of trouble I don't need today.

The chubby bearded guy close to him, who I peg as the photo manager from the way he scurries between the cameramen and Miss Perfect, becomes the focus of the male model's glare. Stroking his chin, he watches the scene with a cold eye and clenched jaw.

I frown.

Everyone seems to be working their butts off to please this guy, and he can't do more than grump-stare and make slight hand gestures now and then?

Life in the arts is hard enough, but having to kowtow to an entitled suit...woof.

Don't feel too sorry for these people, Brina, I remind myself. They're still getting paid by Mr. Entitlement. Well, hopefully.

But still. That's what suit-wearing pricksters do. They treat the artists who make their precious ads that they depend on like trash. Without us, they'd be nothing.

I glare at the annoyingly gorgeous jerkface and take a loud slurp of my latte.

Model Man's stabby blue eyes jerk to mine again. This time, I hold my ground, telling the butterfly swarm in my belly to stay put.

He holds a thick hand up, pointed directly at me, and motions to the statue beside my bench. Like he's telling me to move without even having the decency to come over and ask politely.

Bad, bad move, Neanderthal.

Of course he does it again, this time more forcefully.

Of course.

Really? You don't even know me and you think you can order me around?

With a snort, I dig my heels—okay, heel—into the ground. If looks could kill, there'd be a smoking crater right where his smug, rude, devilishly fine figure used to be.

Their group takes a break a minute later, and the chubby production guy jogs over.

“Hi t-there,” he stammers, stopping in front of the bench I'm sitting on, leaning on the back of it to catch his breath.

I give a floppy wave and sip my latte, bracing for what's next.

“So, I was wondering if there's any chance you'd be willing to move? This spot has better lighting for our shoot. I hate to ask. I'm sure you're just out here enjoying your day, but...it's a big job. We'd be really grateful if you could clear it.”

Could I “clear it?” Sure, let me just vacate public property with a grateful smile. All so your rich bitch boss can get his ever so important shots.

Before I can string the words together to form a nicer response—I know this guy is just a fellow minion doing his job—Mr. Rich Bitch himself stomps up.

“You're going to have to move, miss. We need this spot.” At least his grumpalicious voice matches his looks.

I meet his eyes and smile. Not because he's just as confusingly barbaric and good-looking up close.

“Now,” he adds, when I don't move an inch after several long seconds.

I blink, shocked at his bluntness. I open my mouth to respond, but I haven't gotten a word out before he folds his arms, his brows drawn together like thunderheads.

How fitting that he has the temperament of a heartless Greek god, too.

“This is public property. I'm not going anywhere,” I snap, giving him my best defiant face. “My mom says you catch more flies with honey than vinegar, you know. Maybe you should try it.”

His eyebrow quirks up. “As cute as clichè Midwestern sayings are, there’s a marketing campaign happening here with a very tight schedule, and you’re stealing our light.”

Oh, their light.

I’d forgotten.

How do you *steal* sunlight, anyway? Is he so rich he thinks he owns the sun? Arrogance and entitlement go together like chocolate and peanut butter with this dude.

“So sorry. I bet you’re pouring a ton of money into this campaign, aren’t you?” I ask sweetly.

He nods, his scowl easing. “I’m glad you get it, so if you’ll just—”

“What I *get* is that you should’ve locked down a more private venue for your little campaign if it’s life or death. This is a public park, last I checked, and I’m not moving until every last bit of my cinnamon latte is gone.” I hold up my cup, sloshing the liquid around loudly.

He crosses those huge arms again, his shoulders bowing out like they’re ready to rip through his imported fabric. “Lady, I’m done being polite. If you don’t get your ass in the air, I’ll move you myself.”

Whoa. That was polite? I wonder what rude looks like... but I’m more interested in telling this millionaire bully where he can shove it.

I hold my hand up, showing off the fresh set I had done last weekend.

“Choose wisely. Touch me, and I’ll dig my plastic so deep into your pretty face you’ll need the jaws of life to extract it. *Capisce?*”

His jaw clenches before he answers.

Yeah, *Grump* with a capital G confirmed. Being wound so tight he might break a few teeth must be his preferred facial expression.

But then he just sighs, raking a hand through his hair, before hitting me with another dizzying starlight-blue gaze. “Ha ha, you’re funny. Congratulations. Now if you’re done with the comedy act, move.”

I blink, unsure what to even say to that. And did I really call him *pretty*?

Too late to deny it, unfortunately, and as horrible of a person as our brief encounter leads me to believe he is...the man does make truffle-good eye candy.

Heck, if I were a casting director, this guy would be Mr. Darcy. You know, before the whole redemption arc.

I take another small sip of cinnamon courage, savoring it slowly, thinking how far I really want to take this.

“You’d be better off leaving me alone and letting me finish my coffee in peace,” I say, leveling my tone. “You’re going to run out of good light for quality images soon. The sun craps out way too fast this time of year.”

His death-glare actually makes me uncomfortable.

I shift my legs and that ridiculous bedazzled pink folder slips from my lap, hitting the ground with a *thunk*. Half a dozen cartoon cat cards slide from the pockets, the height of my genius exposed to the world.

I’m about to extend a foot to slam down on top of them, but I don’t get the chance.

The Suit bends to pick up my mess, muscles rippling behind his clothes, his blue eyes filled with this cruel wonder.

Not fair.

Why do so many men with dangerously beautiful bodies turn out to be ogres?

He surveys the cards quietly before making any effort to return my things. I clear my throat and our eyes lock. I don’t dare let on how small I feel right now.

“I propose a trade. Your cats I’ve kindly rescued from blowing away for my camera space.” He smiles, and not in a

friendly way. “Are you a cartoonist? A cat-toonist, maybe?”

I fight back an eyeroll so intense it’ll probably land me in the ER.

“Ha, ha, ha. So original. Hope you’ve got copywriters.”

“My writers are some of the finest marketers in the country, from sea to shining sea,” he says, pride entering his voice.

“Cool, then I’m sure you’re set. God knows no one pays for your jokes,” I throw back.

“Damn, you’re mouthy,” he growls.

That’s it. It’s a statement. And not an entirely furious, insulting one. There’s a hint of amusement, too, like *mouthy* is something that interests him.

Awesome.

He’s known me for three minutes while trying to extract me from a city bench but *I’m* pegged as “mouthy.” Like he isn’t the one who made me that way?

Well, two can do the pegging today.

Besides being a rich suit, an unbearable McHottie, and a park tyrant, he seems like one of those guys who think women should keep their mouths shut.

I shoot him a fake docile smile. “My bad, your highness. I’ll try harder to be seen and not heard. Of course, I’ll be *seen* on this bench until I’m good and ready for a walk.”

His jaw tenses again and there’s the faintest flash of angry white teeth around his lips. He stares up at the sun, muttering something to himself, and then turns back to me.

“Frankly, Miss Hardass, I don’t care where you’re seen or heard as long as it isn’t on this bench. You’re blocking the light. You’ve already been told.”

Funny thing is, I probably would’ve moved in a heartbeat, with no problem, if he just asked me *nice*ly.

But he picked the wrong day to dick with my pride, and now I'm on a mission.

This bench is *mine* until I say it's not.

"When was that? I didn't quite hear you," I say with a yawn, looking back at my phone.

He rolls his eyes so hard I think they might stick to the back of his head.

I swallow a laugh. At least we're having fun with this crapfest, right?

"I'm impressed! You roll your eyes better than a thirteen-year-old cheerleader," I say matter-of-factly.

"Only when I'm being faced with someone as obstinate, immature, and insufferable as you," he grinds out.

"Fancy words." I shrug. "I just call out BS when I see it."

"Then you should get your eyes checked. There's no 'bullshit' here."

"Hmm, maybe you're right," I say slowly, tilting my head. "Just a loser in an overpriced suit trying to act important. Trying to remind the little people of their place."

"You have no—find another damn spot and someone else to annoy. Leave now." His voice is a drawn saber, rattling with this raw, masculine warning.

"Uh, did you just growl at me?" I blink, trying not to snicker.

"Why the hell are you walking around Chicago with a folder full of cat cards, anyway?" He straightens the knot in his tie, working those huge, angry fingers on fabric and holding my eyes hostage longer than I like.

"What's it to you?" I whip my gaze back at the ground. "I work—*worked*—at a pet furniture company."

"Pet furniture?" he echoes, as if he's one breath short of laughing in my face.

No.

He's just pissed off the wrong girl. I'm out of banter. I don't need to do more talking, really, to extract myself from this misery.

It's been a day from hell and the last thing I need—the very last—is being mocked by a jackass suit with a God complex. I push the Sweeter Grind cup to my mouth and chug the remaining delicious liquid, as much as I can hold in my mouth.

Then I lean forward, look down, aim, and *spray* cinnamon-colored coffee all over his expensive Italian shoes.

So much for savoring the flavor. It kinda sucks that I spent nearly ten bucks on this unexpected date with Chicago Satan.

But the result is worth it.

The guy doesn't strike me as the type to have any emotions beyond pure bleating rage, but in his cold eyes, I see something else leak through.

Abject horror. Shock. Maybe a little humility—finally!

He doesn't say a word, just stares down at his soaked shoes, thinning his lips like he's considering how to retaliate.

I grin triumphantly.

The big bearded guy has been so quiet through this exchange, I've forgotten he's there. Until he looks up with his hands pressed against his cheeks in utter fear, and whispers, "I-I'll go find you a napkin. Right away!"

He scurries off and I add up the score.

Unlucky Girl: 1.

Colossal Prick: 0.

I smile up at the arrogant jackass with my latte still dripping off his shoes, slowly standing up. "The space is all yours, pal. I'm done with my coffee now."

With my parting jab signed, sealed, and delivered, I storm away.

Well, I *try*.

Storming is hard when one shoe is three inches taller than the other.

“Forget the napkin, Hugo,” King Asshole says behind me. “We need to get this shoot going now.”

I can't resist tossing a look back over my shoulder. Only to find the jackass still watching me, something on his face I can't quite read.

He doesn't look angry or humiliated anymore.

More like...awkwardly amused?

Okay, yeah, my broken heel is hilarious. It's easy to laugh it up when these boots aren't made for walkin' anymore.

The worst part is, even after all that, he's still hot. That kind of wound-tight-to-snap caveman pose wrapped in a silk suit that's hard to ignore and even harder to avoid drooling over.

Or maybe I'm just on my last nerve.

Jesus. I've got to go home and lie down. I need to wake up on Saturday the fourteenth.

Though I should probably check on my parents first. Fridays are usually the best day for that. I should also start scanning jobs and unlikely unemployment requirements before calling it a night.

I *will* make it to the fourteenth.

Eventually.

And no amount of growly egos and good looks are going to stop me.

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LATTE GIRL (MAGNUS)



Her long brown hair whips in the wind as she limps away. Is she hurt? Maybe that's why she didn't want to get up.

If so, I should've assigned someone to help her instead of demanding she move. Then again, she could've just *said* she was injured like a normal human being instead of going on a tirade about having a right to occupy public property as long as she damn well pleases.

The self-righteous ones don't impress me. I guarantee I pay more taxes than a thousand of her combined, and I'll only use this space again if I need another shoot. She's welcome to come squat on her bench another time.

Shame there's no denying the hot current coursing through my blood like a chainsaw.

There's something about this girl.

Unfortunately.

It's still hard to peel my eyes off her. When she sprayed coffee on me, my eyes were as glued to her as they are now. I was fixated on her lips—very full, kissable, hellfire lips—when the cinnamon reeking liquid splattered my leather shoes.

Now? It's hard to pin down one good reason why my eyes have a mind of their own.

It could be the way the purple sweater dress hugs her body, accenting curves I shouldn't be so interested in. The fabric stretches across her breasts in a colorful band, swoops in, and

spreads across her hips. An ass like a plum, begging for a sinful hand.

She's not a tiny girl—not toothpick thin—which makes me relish the thought of taking her over my knee even more.

Fuck.

I scan the length of her and my gaze catches on her boot.

So she's not limping from pain.

A missing heel, actually. For some unholy reason, I want to know the story behind it.

I swallow a chuckle and shake my head. The day's taken a strange turn. I can't help being curious about the hellcat who might've used her claws like she threatened, rather than that cinnamon dreck pungent enough to strip paint.

She turns to look back at me as she shuffle-retreats. Deep mocha-brown eyes connect with mine for a split second. A crease lines her forehead.

“Go to hell,” she mouths, if I read her lips correctly.

Damn.

She's this territorial over a park bench?

I stand by my mouthy description.

“Mr. Heron? Do you want me to get the park police?” Hugo asks. “She...she's crazy! I'm worried she'll come back the second your back is turned.”

“The cops?” I shake my head. “Don't be ridiculous. I've stepped in far worse on these streets than coffee spit. Get back to work and pretend this never happened.”

Hugo Little may be many things—awkward, whip smart, and always so high-strung I worry about his blood pressure—but the man's a loyal workhorse to the end. No sooner than the words leave my mouth, he's bustling around, calling for our camera people to get to their places, directing them to move everything over to the vacated spot with better light.

I realize I'm still holding something that doesn't belong to me. I remove the papers I stuffed back in the pink folder after collecting them off the ground. Thumbing through them again, I nod, muttering to myself.

Apparently, Miss Llama Spit works in advertising. Her work speaks for itself. Hard to believe she's developed the same defense mechanism as a shaggy camel if she's ever called an office home.

Cats aren't my thing, and neither is *purr-niture*, but her work is clean. About as good as the polished work my creative team sends across my desk every week for approval.

The cartoons are witty and the color contrast says she knows her stuff.

This isn't novice work.

I smile. My latest assistant cracked and quit a few weeks ago. Executive assistant duties are far more demanding than graphic design, however...

What if this woman brings the same guts to a meeting I saw on a park bench?

She could be what I'm looking for. I need someone with a backbone, and any girl with a sharp, acid-spit mouth like hers could really—

No.

Shit.

Those lips just became completely *unkissable*, if I'm seriously considering this insanity.

I don't mix business with pleasure. Ever.

She's left a rare impression, though, and there's no denying the stone-cold fact that I want her.

On my team. In my bed. At my desk. On all fours.

I can't decide which I'd enjoy more.

Hell, for now, I just want to see her again, talk to her, preferably without the turf war or anything liquid she can hock

up.

“Hugo?” I ask as soon as he’s circled back.

“Yes, sir?”

“Track her down. I need to talk to her about the assistant job,” I say.

Hugo stares at me with a blank face, adjusting his spectacles like there’s something wrong with them.

I inwardly groan. *Come on, man. I don’t need you questioning my sanity, too. Not after the routing that chick just put me through.*

There’s a reason I relate so well to Louis XIV. I *am* the company.

People follow my orders, and not just because I have CEO, Owner, and President as job titles. They do it because I’m the beating heart of this leviathan that spins them gold.

“You mean...latte girl?” he finally whispers, batting his eyes in disbelief. “Mr. Heron—”

“Did you see another girl with no filter here?”

“R-right. But you’re serious? I still think we should call security, just to be on the safe side. She’s unhinged. You really want to give her a job for...for spitting on you?” Hugo asks.

Phrased like that, it does sound strange.

“Yes. She’s perfect for the open EA position. I have no doubt she has the energy to fill my shoes when I’m otherwise occupied, and that’s what I need. No excuses, no nonsense, no endless babysitting.”

Hugo shakes his head.

“Energy. Because that’s the only skill required...” he mutters under his breath, then goes quiet for a minute. He shifts his weight, rocking gently at my side. “Mr. Heron, with all due respect, you go through assistants like tissue in a sick ward. Wouldn’t we be better off finding someone with more qualifications besides a bad—um, uncooperative—attitude?”

“No.” I look at Hugo and narrow my eyes. “Get it done before she’s gone.”

“But the shoot, the lighting...”

I flash him a cutting look. “The cameras are flashing, our model’s smiling, and you’re wasting time.”

He nods at me, then cups his hands around his mouth as he takes off at a run.

“Hey! Hey, latte girl, wait up,” Hugo yells, racing across the street to the bus stop.

The model—Sylvia, I think—struts up to me after the camera guys flash each other a thumbs-up.

She’s worth her pay. We’re shooting in a busy park, and she’s managed to keep those stilettos free from a single speck of dirt or misplaced grass. She approaches with a slow, practiced walk meant to win respect like English royalty.

The button-down business-like jacket she wears has light-blue silk at her arms. The back of the skirt is longer than the front and more silk fans out in a tail. It’s this weird clash of regal pomp and modern sizzle, but I just market Big Fashion, not think up the designs.

All she needs is a gold tiara over her platinum-blond hair, and she’d be princess personified.

“Are you okay, Mr. Heron?” she coos, flashing a set of teeth like perfect ivory. “That woman was so vicious.”

She bites her bottom lip, batting her fake lashes.

I’m tempted to step back since she hasn’t left much personal space between us, but I don’t want to offend her. I need her to complete this shoot I promised our client I’d personally oversee, and we’re running out of daylight.

Not everyone controls their emotions as well as I do.

“I’m fine. It was just coffee,” I tell her. “I’ll have a change of shoes waiting back at the office.”

She closes the last smidge of space between us and puts her hand on my chest.

“You were such a gentleman about it,” she gushes. “Hugo’s right. You should’ve reported her to the park police. That was nuts. Practically assault.”

Now I step back.

Somehow, it doesn’t register with her that I’m trying to get the hell away.

With these huntresses who flirt with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer, it never does.

“Hardly. Having her grilled by a cop would be ten times the overreaction she gave me,” I snap, putting several more steps between us.

“Oh, well, you’re right to be upset.” Sylvia follows me like a helpless puppy. “We should get you a nice warm cup of chai when we’re done here! That always de-stresses me after a hard day.”

“We need to get back to work,” I remind her gruffly.

I shoo her back to the cameramen with a warning glare to shake their asses. Get it done. With unpredictable weather this week, it might be our last shot at the rapid turnaround I promised our client.

Hugo returns panting a minute later. “Couldn’t...quite... catch her. But I texted Ruby. She’s on it.”

I let him take over the production and drop back, analyzing the scene for anything they’d miss that needs changing. Rigid, intense, and impossible are what they always say about my standards.

Accurate.

It’s also why HeronComm remains the most respected agency in this city.

When this campaign is over, I’ll charge the client ten percent more for the next, and they’ll happily accept it. To get anywhere, we have to yield results.

~

BACK AT MY OFFICE, I take off the latte-covered spit shoes and swap them out for a spare set of leather dress shoes I keep in my coat closet in case of emergency meetings. I go to the sideboard, pour myself a finger of scotch, and gaze out the window.

Yeah. That view never gets old.

Heron Communications lords over the city, occupying space in one of the tallest buildings in Chicago. The only buildings higher are the Vista and Willis Towers. A lifetime of work put our office as close to heaven as I'll ever deserve.

When I hear my door swing open, I turn. It's a very short list of people who come barreling in without knocking, and Ruby Hunting is one of them with her big red curls bouncing.

She slams the door behind her, another woman who doesn't take shit from anyone.

She's only about ten years older than I am, but she's worked here since I was in middle school. If she ever had a meeting with my father, then-CEO of HeronComm, and I was out of school, I'd come with her so I could get versed in learning the ropes before assuming my destiny.

I've learned so much from her over the years.

She's been a mentor, an ear, and a nice swift kick in the ass whenever I needed it. She taught me everything my father should have—if he'd been born with more than a gaping hole in his chest where a human heart should be.

Age and experience aside, we're friends. That's why she's the only female employee welcome to visit my office nearly every day with the door shut for long periods.

After the legacy my old man left behind, I'm all about keeping boundaries.

“Are you fucking stupid?” she snaps off, her brows knit together like an angry V.

I grin. She's also the only employee who gets to speak to me like that. I move to my office chair, sit, and motion to the

seat across from my desk.

She barely looks at the empty chair, ignoring me.

“I never thought I was stupid, but I’m sure you asked for a reason.”

“Jesus Christ, Mag.” A heavy sigh falls out of her and she pinches the bridge of her nose. “You had a screamfest with a woman on a park bench until she literally spit on you, and now you want to *hire* her? Did you hit your head this morning?”

“She was blocking a clear space with good light,” I say. “We asked her to move.”

Ruby puts a knowing hand on her hip, thumping her fingers. “If she was blocking it, the space wasn’t clear.”

“It’s not up for discussion. Even if it was, it’s over and done. She skedaddled, and we got our shoot. Hugo agrees, it turned out well. Our client will be impressed.”

“Here’s what I don’t understand. You argue with a woman, trying to get her to move for ten minutes, and the conversation ends with her spitting coffee on you. Why does this convince you she has any skills?”

“She has guts, and she’s not easily intimidated. Seems she has no earthly clue who I even am. That’s more than we can say for the last three EAs you hired,” I mutter.

“And practical skills? Does she even know how to type?” Ruby asks.

“Ruby, do you know what year it is? Dogs can type and check their own Instagrams. Since I sign the checks around here, I hardly think it matters what her work experience is without a proper review. Just get her in here and find out.” I reach for the pink folder on my desk, pick it up, and pass it over. “But if you must know, yes, she’s perfectly digital literate. Her design skills prove it, and apparently, she has a thing for cats.”

Ruby opens the folder and starts flicking through the cards, huffing back annoyed murmurs. “She worked for a pet store brand? I guess that explains all the cats.”

“Pet furniture,” I correct sharply, holding up a finger.

Ruby purses her lips like she’s just bitten into an expired lemon.

When Miss Congeniality mentioned pet furniture, I thought she was being sarcastic. I’d virtually laughed in her face.

Yes, I’m a jackass. Guilty as charged. No wonder she was pissed enough to become a cinnamon coffee sprinkler.

“You act like you’re not surprised?” I ask, leaning back in my chair.

Ruby nods. “Hugo warned me you wanted to hire her and sent a picture he snapped on his phone. I scoured the entire internet until I found her.” She drops a couple of pages on my desk. “Here you go. Everything you’d ever want to know about a strange girl who’s given no good reason to work here. Stalk away.”

I shoot her a dirty look and eagerly sift through the printouts.

Her name is Sabrina Bristol. She has a BFA in Graphic Arts with a minor in English from the University of Chicago, and a string of entry level positions on her LinkedIn resume. Not the kind of background we usually consider for this role—especially since it appears she doesn’t work anywhere for long.

Rubbing my chin, I face my inquisitor, who flicks a red curl over her shoulder impatiently. “Ruby, I need a good assistant. *We* need good help because as long as that role remains vacant, my inboxes are cluttered, my schedule’s a mess, and poor Armstrong has to run himself ragged after my coffee and dry cleaning. If I had a right hand I could depend on—a helper who’d last—I wouldn’t have fought with some random woman over a park bench in the first place.”

I find myself smirking at the memory.

“If you weren’t such a bastard to work for, your assistants would last.” Ruby folds her arms in front of her chest. “What’s so funny?”

I can usually smile, beam a little Heron charm, and get most women off my back. Not with Ruby Hunting.

“She was feisty. A fighter. Miss Bristol held her ground rather gracefully until the bitter end. I can’t fathom how she can choke down that cinnamon crap. It smelled like perfume, but her attitude—”

“Her attitude, as you call it, sounds like trouble.” Ruby shakes her head. “Are you *sure* you want her as an assistant? Why do I get the feeling there’s more to this?”

My humor evaporates and my smile flattens.

“Careful. I don’t like your implication. You know I’m not my dad.”

“Oh, I’d never imply that, but you didn’t have time for a skills assessment, and she left an impression on you. I just hope you’re being honest with yourself.”

“She’s got a spine and that’s what I need. I don’t care if she doesn’t have the right background and a litany of glowing recommendations. None of those people with business degrees and letters from their last ten bosses ever lasted six months. Why don’t we try something different?”

“Because. Miss Bristol hasn’t kept a single job for six months, for one. She has no experience in a top-level EA position for a company of this size, much less dealing with horrible bosses. You’re downright draconian, especially to your assistants...”

She looks down at her hands and fidgets. This is the part where I fight back a smile, knowing what’s coming.

“Go on,” I urge, waving my fingertips.

“Do I have to spell it out for you, Mag? Again? After we have the same conversation every two to six months when another one bites the dust?” She rolls her eyes. “You’re demanding, condescending, and expect sixteen-hour workdays. If your emails aren’t prioritized perfectly, you freak out. You send unreasonable requests at all hours of the night, and even if you *do* provide very generous compensation, I’m

not sure any salary in the world is fit for the shitpile of torture you unload on their shoulders.”

Do I hear angels singing? I should’ve earned my wings and a halo by now. Always wanted one of those.

Ruby pauses her grand speech and sighs. “Look, if she can’t last six months at this purry...purry-purrniture place, or whatever the hell it’s called, how long do you think she’ll make it as your EA? What if she snaps right here in the office like she did at the park? What if she flips out on a client?”

I shrug. “So we’ll strip the K-cup machines from the break rooms and ban cinnamon in this office.”

“You’re ridiculous,” she groans. “I’ll be hiring someone else in two weeks anyway. You know I can do it. I already had several interviews lined up. Grow some patience. Wait until we find someone who can actually handle the job.”

“Why waste applicants’ time when we’ve found our girl?”

Ruby’s face drains pale. “She spit on you. For all we know, she’ll laugh in our faces before she’s even invited for an interview. What makes you think she wants to work here?”

“She’ll do it for the pay,” I say, drumming my fingers on my desk. “Oh, and the little hint she slipped about losing her position with the illustrious pet company.”

“Magnus Heron, I’ve known you for almost twenty years. If you’ve ever listened to me a day in your life, do it now. You’re making a bad move. This conversation started out dumb and just kept getting dumber. *Do not do this*. Just don’t. Okay?”

I lean forward and pick a pen up from my desk. I click the ballpoint in and out several times and sigh. Pretending to consider her request.

Maybe I really should.

Ruby is one of the few people I can count on to be straight with me. She wouldn’t have told me how stupid this is just for sport.

“Why are you so against it? This is hardly the most scandalous idea I’ve ever proposed.”

She purses her lips tighter and looks annoyed.

“I can see the dilemma on your face and it has nothing to do with hiring her,” she says softly, shaking her head. “Look, I’m not going to judge you for what happens outside this office. Hunt the woman down. Take her out. Take her to bed. Do whatever it is you want to do. But for God’s sake, don’t put her on payroll.”

My gut tightens and my fingers pinch the pen.

“Again, I’m not my—”

“Right. You’re not him. But you don’t need the temptation. If something happens, I know better than anyone that you’d never forgive yourself. This is nothing but playing with fire.”

I snort. “How did you keep a straight face while saying that?”

“I’m the one who’ll be interviewing for a new assistant in two weeks, remember?”

“You’re right. This is a horrible idea. Here’s a better one—run a new ad for a Human Resources Director, and *you* can be my new executive assistant.”

“No. No way in hell I’d ever be your EA.” She shakes her head furiously. “If you paid me three times my current salary, I wouldn’t do it. Not for all the money in the world.”

“Come on, Ruby. I need someone I can count on. We haven’t found the right person. You don’t like the talent I scouted. You’ve worked here for eighteen years. Take one for the team.”

She glares at me. “You didn’t find any talent. You found a bad-tempered Siren in the park who probably has a nice ass.”

“Hire her and you’ll find out you’re wrong. If she doesn’t make it a month, I’ll give you a bonus for having to re-interview candidates.”

Ruby flashes a fake, acrid smile.

“How generous.” She pauses, and the faux smile disappears. “I’ll offer her the job, assuming she holds it together during the interview, but I can’t make her take it. I probably wouldn’t want to work for someone I spit on either. Most people wouldn’t.”

“If it seems like she’s not going to take it, call me. I’ll let her know I’m doing her a favor by hiring her after that scene. Ask Hugo, he thinks I should’ve called the cops.”

Ruby throws her hands up.

“Oh my God, Mag. She was sitting on a *public* bench. She was right to tell you where to go. I would have too. I wish the cops had shown up and given *you* an earful. You can’t just chase people off of city property even if you are Magnus Heron.”

I grin at her. “I can. I did.”

She turns away from me and steps closer to the door, flashing a disgusted look.

“Whatever. But the one thing you can’t do is bully anyone onto your payroll.” She turns, giving me an annoyed glance. “I’m not just here to fill positions, you know. I’m also saving your ass from making moves that could tank this whole company.”

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“To call a twenty-three-year-old with barely any corporate experience and invite her to interview for a position she’s completely unqualified for. Where else?”

“How do you know she’s unqualified again? You’re being biased under your own HR rules. You haven’t even talked to her yet, and you already know she isn’t competent!” I call after her.

Ruby scowls at me. “I didn’t call the girl incompetent. I said unqualified. When I’m looking for an EA for you, I don’t interview people with less than ten years experience, a damn good cover letter, and multiple verifiable references. I interview assistants for the rest of your C-level team with five

years of experience, and also, *you're* biased. You've decided to give her a job because...she spit on you."

"Don't forget the nice ass," I say, just to tease her.

"You're a horrible, horrible man. And nothing about spitting says she handles pressure well, you know. Some of your clients are right next to you in the Genghis Khan department, maybe even worse. Are you okay with her spitting on them too?" Ruby asks.

"I deal with the clients."

Ruby rolls her eyes. "Right, and your assistant never has to."

"She may, but I'll always be present in those meetings at least for the first six months. I'll keep it controlled and teach her how to deal with their nuances before I'd ever send her off alone."

Ruby laughs. More than a snicker, breaking into a holding-her-sides-in belly-busting giggle.

"What?"

"She won't survive six months. You've had *one* assistant fall just short of that mark in all these years, and it wasn't a twenty-three-year-old with some Photoshop experience and a Fine Arts degree." She opens the door, beyond ready to walk out.

"Ruby." I almost forgot there's something else I need to tell her.

"What?" she asks.

"Contact the casting company we used for today's promo shoot and tell them not to send that model again. Sylvia whatever-her-face."

She raises an eyebrow. "The shoot went okay, right? Hugo didn't mention anything going wrong with the campaign."

"Her work was fine, but...she hit on me. Several times."

"That's it?" Ruby laughs. "Oh my God, you can't spend two hours a day in the gym and blame a woman for being

human.”

“She touched me in front of the whole crew.” I shake my head.

“The horror!” She slaps her cheek and gazes at me in mock-revulsion.

“It’s too much. You know why I don’t need those antics around here, and I prefer to pay people who focus on work. I hire professionals and I expect the same quality from our contractors.”

“Right. Professionals.” She walks out. “Just like the girl who glazed your shoes...”

The door shuts before I can quip back.

Typical Ruby.

What a bizarre day. I never should’ve allowed the schedule to become so crunched that we were desperate to shoot before dusk, but managing the workload with no assistant has been rough the past few weeks.

Rash decisions aren’t my habit. It’s unlike me to randomly hire someone off the streets.

Maybe Ruby’s right, and I’m making a blinding mistake. It can’t hurt to bring her in for an interview, though. If we see red flags, we can always hit the brakes.

One thing I can say for certain, no human being has ever spit on me before, and I don’t know why I can’t get that out of my head. I fucking need to.

Checking my schedule, I’m relieved to see no crucial meetings in the next few hours.

I kick my shoes off, put them away, strip out of my suit, hang it in the closet, and change into sweats before I hit the company weight room. Lifting heavy shit until I can’t should get that brunette medusa out of my head and whip my thoughts into shape.

If Sabrina Bristol is a walking, sassing, spitting mistake—notice I didn’t say one word about the fantastic ass—then I’ll

figure it out before she's one more cog in my well-oiled machine.

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PUNKED! (SABRINA)

The next day, Saturday the fourteenth, I hunker down in bed watching *Schitt's Creek*—okay, it's not the best show but I could use a laugh—when Paige comes in and flops down beside me.

“You can't hide in here all day,” she says, throwing me a smile.

I hug my pillow. “Wanna bet?”

“It's past noon.”

“Oh, I'll get up eventually,” I groan, checking the time and wincing when I see she's right. “I promised my parental units I'd head over since I didn't make it yesterday.”

“Let's grab lunch, then I'll drop you off at their place before I head for the studio.”

I love Paige, but sometimes she's clueless.

“I can't do lunch. Remember that whole pink slip thing?” I leave the *I'm broke* part unspoken.

“I'll pay for it, girl. You need a pick-me-up and I need to revisit that cute Italian place we like. I've got your back and I don't want to eat alone.”

My stomach rumbles, shoving aside the guilt over Paige covering me with thoughts of chicken parm and fettuccine, which beats instant ramen by miles.

“I'm not a bum,” I tell her. “As soon as I've landed something else, I'll—”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll pay back every dime.” Paige picks up a pillow and hits me playfully with it. “I’ve heard it all before. Now quit being humble and let’s get some food before I chew my arm off.”

Fine, she’s convinced me.

It’s a beautiful fall day with the warm sun peeking out behind the clouds, not too much wind, and trees lit up in their autumn best like candles with dancing flames of color for leaves. We sit on the front patio facing the sidewalk at the corner bistro, Mattarello’s Italiano.

Paige takes a slurp off her San Pellegrino. “So how’d it go with that dude you met at the coffee shop yesterday?”

I groan. “Oh, Brad the Unfriendly Ghost? I waited for nearly an hour and the loser never showed.”

I snap my breadstick in half.

“Sorry, Brina. Tough day. But you survived and now it’s the fourteenth! Better day, better times, better men.”

I shrug, popping the garlic bread into my mouth. “Screw dating. I’m more worried about finding another job than anything else, honestly. I wish there was like, a Tinder of jobs. You know that’d be awesome...or horrifying.”

We share a laugh.

Enough rambling. I pick at my fettuccine once the steaming dish slides in front of me. This bowl is huge. I’m definitely taking at least half of it home. It’s another meal I don’t have to pay for, or maybe two if I skimp.

“Oh, but you know what happened after I got blown off?” I ask.

“What?”

“I decided to have my coffee in the park to unwind. There was this big-shot film crew there shooting a fashion ad or something. They said I was in their way.”

“Too bad, so sad.” Paige takes a bite of her fried ravioli. “Just when you think you’ve met the biggest prick in this city

driving in rush hour traffic...”

“That’s what I said until this hot jerk—”

Oops. I stop mid-sentence, realizing I’ve slipped.

A slow catlike grin grows across Paige’s face. “A hot jerk? Go on.”

“I mean, his looks don’t really matter. Hot bod, nasty personality. He was a raging grumpasaurus in a suit. Anyway, he tells me if I don’t move, he’s going to move me.” I watch Paige’s eyes go huge. “Uhh—yeah, right. Then he stops just short of mocking me to my face for working at a pet furniture company...which I guess is pretty sad. But not as pathetic as being fired.”

“God. The idiots you meet downtown could run their own circus.” She shakes her head, her gold locks tumbling around her shoulders. “But if you just met him at the park, how’d he know where you worked? That’s weird.”

“Well, I took my prints before Purry Furniture kicked me out, hoping to boost my portfolio. I dropped my folder while he was busy pissing me off, and the cards spilled out.”

“Eek,” she winces. “So, he saw your stuff?”

“Yeah. Let’s just say he wasn’t a fan.”

“What an asswaffle. Tell me you didn’t just sit there and take his tantrum?” She takes another bite.

“Oh, no. I, uh...I kinda spit up the last of my cinnamon latte all over his shoes. Intentionally. He kept barking at me to move, and I said I would when I finished my coffee, so...I finished.”

“No freaking way. You didn’t!” Paige tumbles back in her seat, hiding her face behind her hands as she laughs. “Oh my God, that’s *awesome*.”

I flash her an awkward smile. Not my proudest moment, to be sure, but there’s no denying how good it felt to give Lucifer an ego check.

“You look worried,” Paige says, as soon as she can breathe again. “Don’t be. You don’t have to see him again. He got what was coming. It’s not like he’s going to track you down and press charges.”

“Yeah, let’s hope not. How are things going for you?” I ask, desperate to shift the conversation.

“Pretty well! I made enough off a website build last week for the interior design firm that I have next month’s rent banked. That’s a good thing because clients come and go. Oh, and you know my cousin, Liv? She commissioned me for this.”

Paige holds up her phone with a glowing photo of a man’s face half sculpted. He’s older, kinda handsome, beardy, and gives off the big daddy vibe.

“You’ve come a long way. I remember when your sculptures looked more like horror movie material,” I say with a smile. “Who’s the hot stuff?”

“That’s her husband, Riker. It’s supposed to be a big surprise for Christmas when I mail her the finished bust. If I’d snagged a guy like him, I’d probably be commissioning art too, but...we can’t all be famous authors who marry alpha security guys.”

“Your family’s so interesting. A bestselling author and an infamous pop star.” I wish her cousin would give my mother some writing advice.

I try to smile. Why can’t my life be more like hers?

“Interesting shoes to fill, you mean. Don’t think I’ll ever catch up to Liv and Milah,” she says, this sad, anxious flicker in her eyes before she turns back into easygoing Paige with the sunshine smile again. “Tell me about your other Tinder matches, though? Besides the no-show.”

I wave my hand like I can push the question away.

“Please. Before the guy who ghosted me, I had dinner with a match. He ordered a forty-dollar steak and forgot his wallet.”

Her mouth drops. “Did you pay?”

“What else could I do? So now I’m down to dregs in my checking account.”

“I would’ve told the waitress to separate the check, paid for my dinner, left the loser, and called an Uber,” she says smugly.

She’s right, of course.

Paige is too good at navigating these sticky life situations, even if her own life is far from perfect, which is probably why she has a booming bank account and I have crickets in mine. Even without her affluent folks behind her, helping fund her sculpture kick, I think she’d have her crap together in a way I still dream about.

My phone buzzes against the table, and I pick it up. Glaring at the screen, I shake my head and gulp down my hard tea.

“What is it?” Paige asks, noticing my expression.

“His *company* just emailed me for a second time. I don’t get it. It’s some kind of sick joke.”

“Whose company?” she asks.

“The jerk from the park. With my luck, he’s probably trying to get my address so he can send me a bill for his stupid shoes.” I swipe away the email on the screen like I’m shooing off a fly.

“He can’t be that nuts, right?” She laughs at my glare. “What does this email say?”

“They want me to discuss a ‘promising—’” I put finger quotes around ‘promising.’ “‘Opportunity’ with their lead HR representative. Yeah, I don’t buy it, either.”

“Are you sure it’s his company? If you need a job, I wouldn’t turn down any interviews.”

“Believe me, I was surprised when I got an interview request with a company I hadn’t even applied for, so I went to their website. Sure enough, he’s the CEO. It’s got to be a joke. Maybe one of the people on his crew trying to punk me for the fun of it. Sweet revenge.”

“What’s the name of the company?” she asks.

“Heron Communications,” I say. “HeronComm for short, I think.”

Paige pulls out her phone and Googles it with her brows pulled tight. She holds the phone out for me to see their team directory page, complete with smiling photos. “Which one’s your park prick?”

I point to the hottest guy on the flipping page, who else?

“Hello, gorgeous! Magnus Heron, huh? What a name,” she mutters, an amused smile hanging on her lips. “Actually, that sounds weirdly familiar...you said he owns the company, right?”

“Yep. Typical spoiled gazillionaire. Why do they think owning a company entitles them to ruling the rest of the world?”

Paige’s fingers fly against her phone and she stops and reads the screen for a moment. “Dude. He *is* a jackass—it’s not just you.”

“Told ya,” I throw back. “What’d you find?”

“Wow, this guy, I know all about him! I knew I’d read it somewhere. He’s like a local business legend, always in the press. He took over the company years ago when his dad retired. He became a huge CEO in his twenties. He’s a billionaire and *everyone* hates him. He likes to crush the competition with these elaborate marketing stunts...he’s put an awful lot of people out of business.”

My gut knots. It feels extra unpleasant with too much bread and Alfredo.

“Why would I want to work for an egomaniac like that?” I ask.

She’s quiet for a minute, considering.

“I mean...you need a job, right?” she says gently. “Nothing wrong with a little deal with the devil if it helps keep the lights on. No judgment here.”

I can't argue with her logic, even if every bit of me wants to.

"It's a sick joke," I say again. "It's got to be."

"Oh, at a company that size, you'll rarely even see the CEO. My dad's been a suit his whole life and he has no idea who's being hired for entry-level positions."

I stare at Heron's cocky, accomplished, unfairly gorgeous face in the picture and frown, imagining those dangerous lips saying, *Come. Interview with us. Destiny awaits.*

"I guess I should try it. Maybe. It can't hurt worse than what already went down."

So what if my pride takes another direct hit? If I get a job out of this, it's worth a shot.

And if it really is a sadistic prank and Heron tries something outrageous?

Well, he'll find out a latte spritzer is just one of my many talents when I'm backed into a corner.

~

"I LOVE YOUR PARENTS' house," Paige says when she drops me off.

I laugh. "You always say that."

"It's true! It looks like something out of a fairy tale. *Lord of the Rings* hobbit home, tucked away right here outside Chicago." She bats her eyes, temporarily somewhere else.

Uh, no. Paige is too well off to get that folks settle into these cramped, older working class homes for decades not because it's fun—it's because they're priced out of anything nicer by exploding real estate prices, and they're the lucky ones to have a home.

The tiny stone Bedford Park bungalow I grew up in will always be magical, though.

It's the place I still think of as home.

She doesn't know the tall purple flowers capping the stairs to the front porch are fake. Or that the house was already dilapidated when we bought it, and Dad spent fifteen years getting it to the general state of passable shabbiness it's in today. From the curb, it just looks charming and rustic.

"Thanks, lady. Thanks for everything today." I get out of the car and wave to her, heading for the door.

Placing my hand on the knob, I'm about to get my key, but a sneaking suspicion occurs to me.

I turn it instead. Yep, the door sails open.

They're still not locking it.

"Mom? Dad? You guys know Bedford Park isn't like, Mayberry, right?" I shout as I step in and shut the door, shifting the lock loudly into place. "It's changing all the time. It's not safe to leave the door unlocked."

"Aw, Brina baby, we ain't got nothing for anybody to steal," Dad says from his recliner without taking an eye off the Cubs game on TV as he takes a swig of his iced tea.

How am I going to convince them that while that may be true, some nut could still stab them in their sleep for the sport of it? I take a seat next to Dad on the lumpy couch.

From the kitchen I hear, "Hel-lo-oo!"

"What's Mom doing?"

"Dishes."

"And show tunes?"

He looks up from the game.

"She's in a good mood. Up to six hundred books sold after this month. It's always entertaining when your ma's happy." He laughs at her off-key rendition of "*Hello Dolly*." "She deserves to be happy."

"Is my Brina home?" Mom calls from the kitchen.

I smile because she already knows the answer, but she keeps up this cozy, familiar game of making me feel welcome

like only Mom can.

The house is small. Barely any space separates the kitchen from the living room where Dad and I sit. Before I can answer, she peeks through the passthrough and shrieks. Then she runs through the door, lifts me from the couch, and squeezes me in a tight hug.

“Welcome home, baby!”

I close my arms around her. “Hi, Mom.”

“Guess what?” She pulls away excitedly, and I can guess what she’s about to say.

“You sold six hundred books this month?”

“Oh, Nolan, you shouldn’t have told her! It was *my* news.” She waves a hand at my dad.

“Sorry, babe.” He doesn’t look away from his game.

I manage an awkward smile I hope to God doesn’t look suspicious.

Mom would be crushed to smithereens if she knew that over the past three months, I’ve bought six hundred and ten copies of her various titles and shipped them to libraries and used bookstores.

It’s going to be impossible to do that this month, and it kills me.

My parents depend on those book sales for extra money and Mom’s sanity. She’s struggled at this writing thing for *years*.

I always told her she’d make it someday. And if I have to help that along in my own secret way, so be it.

My face must betray my thoughts because Mom says, “Sabrina, honey, what’s wrong? You got so serious all of a sudden.”

“Oh. Nothing.” I smile. “Nothing at all!”

“Well, come into the kitchen and let me get you a cup of coffee.”

I follow Mom over and sit down at the four-person table. Her five-year-old writing laptop currently occupies a seat, the lettering on the keys worn off. The dishwasher gurgles behind us.

She returns to the table a minute later with two piping hot mugs of coffee and hands one to me.

“I’m working on a new book called *Farm Love*. It’s going to be my best yet.”

“That’s cool. What’s the story?” I ask, taking a long pull of warm coffee. It’s not Sweeter Grind but it’s familiar, and that makes it good.

“Oh, this sleek little city girl gets evicted from her apartment and has to move to northern Wisconsin.”

“That would suck.”

Although, it could be my life.

“She totally deserves it. She’s got plenty of lessons to learn when she takes a job as a farmhand with a big Marine and his mama’s old prize-winning pig, Sir Oinkswell...”

I don’t ask where an evicted city girl got the skills to become a farmhand. I doubt I’d be able to milk cows, if I needed to.

I scan the room as Mom talks. Again, familiarity is a comforting thing. The counters are lined with baskets of broccoli, carrots, and cabbage, still dirty from the garden, waiting to be washed. My parents have always had a massive backyard garden so they only have to buy produce half the year.

Dad used to hunt during deer season and keep the meat in the deep freezer for months. He’s not really well enough for it anymore.

Even if they’re happy with this life, guilt jolts through me. I’ve let my parents down, and money just gets tighter over the years. Meager pensions and Social Security can’t keep up.

Without me buying those books, they won’t even be able to maintain this humble standard of living.

“So, then, after a torrid affair and finding the missing pig, the Marine farmer man saves her from the Rodeo Clown Killer and they reconcile. He spells out ‘I love you’ in the mud the pigs play in and proposes right there!” She claps her hands together. “What do you think?”

Holy hell.

Marine farmer? Rodeo Clown Killer? Sir Oinkswell? Mud proposals?

I love dirty romance books—*what monster wouldn’t?*—but I don’t think this qualifies.

I was only halfway listening, but what I’m hearing sounds like a train wreck.

My mother tries so hard, but she’s not bestseller movie-rights material. She’s not even a mid-lister after twenty years pecking away at her stories.

I don’t have the heart to tell her my attention drifted, or that if she’d given this up years ago and gotten a real job, maybe I wouldn’t have to sock away all of my fun money into funding this pipe dream of hers.

Instead, I give her a thumbs-up.

“It’s great, Mom. Steamy and riveting.”

“Are you okay?” she asks again.

“I’m fine!” I insist.

Only, I’m so not fine if I’m dragging so hard I can’t even fake it for my folks.

“Finish your coffee, dear. You look tired.”

I put the cup to my lips and inhale another fortifying sip of homemade latte. I’ve got to give her credit for one thing—Mom always puts cinnamon and vanilla in my coffee.

That’s why I love the Sweeter Grind’s drinks so much. It reminds me of home in the heart of a sometimes heartless city.

As I sip my coffee, a weird *drip-drip-drip* noise starts to annoy me. The dishwasher has been quiet for the past few

minutes, so I have no clue where it's coming from.

Then I see it. In the corner, right above Mom's overwatered ivy, a steady stream of water leaks from the ceiling, straight down the wall.

"Oh, crap. The ceiling's leaking? Why didn't you tell me?" I set my mug down and sit up in my seat, staring sadly at the persistent drip.

"What?" Mom looks up, eyes darting around like it's the first time she's heard of it.

Dear Lord. How does she live in this house and not notice these things?

I point to the corner.

She follows my finger with her eyes. "Gosh, you're right! We'll have to get that fixed before winter comes."

"Dammit!" Dad yells from the living room.

"Hmm, it's halftime. It shouldn't be the game getting under his skin..." Mom frowns and pushes her chair back. "I better go check on him."

I follow Mom back to the living room.

There, Dad wads up a letter in his hand, shaking his head with a savage frown.

"What's wrong, Dad?" I ask, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder. He's so tense it feels like he's about to pop.

"Damn heart medication went up—again! Damn insurance won't cover the difference. I don't even know why we pay for this crap."

Because I can't possibly buy enough books to cover the heart drug without it? That's why, but of course I keep it to myself.

My own heart sinks into my chest. I swallow a sticky lump lodged in my throat. Just because Friday the Thirteenth ended doesn't mean I'm in the clear.

Bad things come in threes. What else is about to go wrong?

I wonder if Paige can drive me up to Wisconsin to see if any farms need help. If I could fix my parents' mess, I'd even be willing to take my chances with a hot Marine and a serial killer rodeo clown.

Then my mind goes to that damn email I got from HeronComm. *Gulp.*

Sad to say, I think it might be my best chance to hold back the flood.

No, let's be real—my *only* chance.



I STAND outside a skyscraper in downtown Chicago wearing a business suit and heels I swiped from Paige. I suck down air, my pride, and any pesky dignity I have left.

Then I march right in and take the elevator to the eighty-ninth floor.

Like Paige says, if nothing else, it's good practice for interviews at places I'd actually *want* to work.

The doors open to a wall of windows and a view that's just breathtaking.

Dang. I'm looking down on Millennium Park in all its gleaming wonder. The massive Bean glints like this otherworldly oracle, reflecting the entire cityscape back at me.

I take a deep breath, relax my shoulders, and walk up to the desk where a uniformed security guard sits.

"I'm here for an interview with Miss Hunting," I say.

She picks up a walkie-talkie. "Hunting, you have an arrival. Over."

I'm so out of place here.

This has to be a vicious joke. My stomach twinges, imagining all the wicked surprises Heron might have planned

for payback. What if I open the door and he's armed with a garden hose that shoots lukewarm latte?

Crud.

I should probably leave now. Before I find out what kind of sick revenge scheme a man who's arrogance and ego personified cooks up.

I'm actually turning to head back the way I came when a voice behind me says, "Miss Bristol! Welcome. I'm thrilled you could make it. Please come back and talk to me."

She doesn't sound thrilled. Not exactly, but her voice is warm and calm enough to risk it. I spin around to face her.

A tall woman with auburn curls in a black dress with split sleeves holds her hand out. "I'm Ruby Hunting, HR Director for HeronComm."

"Sabrina Bristol." I shake her hand. "But everybody calls me Brina."

"Right this way." She motions for me to follow, and I do, trying not to trip over my own feet.

We go behind the security desk to a door she uses her badge to open. We walk down a long hall in silence until we finally come to a conference room with tall leather chairs like someone attached rollers to medieval furniture and a long glass table fit for King Arthur, if his knights were a band of corporate cutthroats.

Okay.

Breathe.

My stomach is in stitches. I know I'm t-minus sixty seconds from getting punked.

I know it.

And I had Paige lend me her four-hundred-dollar black pumps, too. Another huge mistake if Heron decides to have a billionaire ragey man-trum with my shoes.

The room is dark.

“Lights.” No sooner does Ruby say it than the lights come on. She points at the table. “Wherever you’re comfortable.”

Um—that would be down the street somewhere. Not in this building where I could probably disappear forever and he’d get away with it.

Still, I take a seat at the very end of the table, folding my hands together tightly so I don’t start fidgeting.

No easy task. Everything about this feels weird, unnerving, sinister.

“I have to say, I’m surprised I got this interview considering the way I met Maggot—” Crap! Did I say that? “Magnus, I mean. Mr. Heron, I mean?”

So, this is off to a flawless start.

Ruby laughs, her cherry-red lips peeling back in a grin.

“That makes two of us,” she says.

Not the response I expected.

Okay, then.

“I’m sure you know I have pretty limited design experience, but I’m willing to learn. Whatever you need me to do, if this is for an entry-level thing.”

“You’re not interviewing for a creative job,” she says, her voice flat.

Come again? I’m sure I look as bewildered as I feel. Ugh.

What am I interviewing for? I literally have no other skills.

“I’m not?” I venture. “Oh. I guess I just assumed, after he saw my designs—”

“Mag was quite impressed with you. You’re interviewing for an Executive Assistant position. But you need to know he’s hard to work for. This won’t be a cakewalk, and you’ll work for every penny of the generous compensation package we’re offering. He’ll expect you here by six a.m. and I doubt you’ll leave until he does. The man is married to his work.”

I don't doubt it. But I get the odd feeling she's trying to talk me out of the job.

Why?

Because you're being punked. Duh.

I'm about to shove the chair away from the table and run but my parents' leaky roof pops into my head. I keep Paige's heels planted firmly on the ground.

"Can you tell me more about this role? What does an Executive Assistant do, exactly?"

"Whatever Magnus needs. You'll do his filing, work on contracts, be a point of contact, and fetch his coffee. It won't be fun, and time off is practically nonexistent."

I squeeze my eyes shut and blink them open, trying to believe what I'm about to say.

"Look, Ruby, you seem like a nice lady, so I'm going to ask you to be straight with me. The way I met Mr. Heron was godawful. I had a blowout with your boss in public, insulted him, and then you invited me for an interview that I guess I can't afford to turn down. I lost my job last week, and I'll be honest. I really need a new one and don't have time for games. So tell me. Is this real, or is it some twisted revenge plot because I spit on a rich boy's fancy shoes?"

She purses her lips. "Okay. For reasons I won't pretend to understand, you intrigued Magnus Heron. He's not used to people doing anything but fawning over him or else cursing him *after* he's won a negotiation. Frankly, I believe it's a horrible business decision to hire someone with few qualifications for this position just because they piqued his curiosity. I couldn't convince him otherwise, though, so here we are."

My gut sinks as she pauses.

"You need to understand his assistants don't last long," she continues. "They never have, and after they quit, they usually need therapy. Don't get all starry-eyed over the compensation package and starting salary and bite off more than you can

chew. This would be a hard job for someone with a lot more direct experience than you have.”

I swallow air and push a strand of hair out of my face. “What *is* the compensation?”

Before she can answer, the door whips open.

And there he stands.

King Dickwad himself, staring at me with an oh-so-superior look imprinted on his face as he adjusts his cufflinks. He’s a razor of a man, so tall and chiseled and rock-hard it’d probably hurt any girl unlucky enough to wind up in his arms even *before* he smashes her heart to bits.

Magnus strolls in and sits right beside me like I’m already his. Practically in my freaking lap.

In his element, he looks like less of a jackass. Ever so slightly.

But my eyes could be deceiving me because, yes, he’s sculpted like a Greek god, and I hate it.

He looks past me to Ruby. “Have you got the paperwork done yet? I need my new assistant today. There’s more than enough work and no time to waste.”

“Since when do you interrupt my interviews?” Ruby stares him down.

“Since I haven’t had an assistant in weeks,” he growls.

I glare at him. “I bet that’s not Miss Hunting’s fault. She says you’re a dick to work for.”

He scowls at me but doesn’t answer.

Ruby’s eyes trace from me, to him, and back to me.

Her lonely laughter breaks the silence. “You know, you might work out.”

Mag darts a glance at Ruby. “Glad you concur. So, no more holdups?”

“I’m ignoring you so I can finish this interview,” she says. Her eyes connect with mine. “Do you have any experience as

an executive assistant or an executive-level secretary?”

I shake my head. “My experience is all graphic design if you don’t count summer jobs in fast food and groceries. I’ve made a lot of memes.”

Beside me, Magnus leans his elbow on the desk and covers his mouth.

Oh, God. Is he hiding a smile?

I know what he’s thinking. *Cat memes.*

Probably remembering his pathetic *cat-toonist* job that wouldn’t make a twelve-year-old laugh.

“Where do you see yourself in five years, Miss Bristol?” she asks.

“Still thankful I survived today,” I say.

Oops. Wrong answer.

Ruby raises an intrigued brow at Heron. He motions her to continue, an impatient scowl tugging at his handsome face.

“And your greatest weakness?” Ruby asks.

I gnaw on my lip, trying hard this time to come up with the right response. Finally, I say, “Right now, the forty-something bucks left in my bank account.”

Magnus shifts again and slaps his hands on the table.

“Enough. Ruby, you of all people know I don’t appreciate wasting time. Get the damn paperwork signed. Now.”

My eyes flick to this rich, built, and bad-tempered grump and those hot blue eyes catch mine. They’re bright enough to sear me in my seat.

I think that’s when I know.

I *am* being punked.

Only, it turns out I’m doing it to myself by wading neck-deep into this insanity.

OLD ALMA MATER (MAGNUS)



“One problem.” Ruby smiles at me, winding herself up to enjoy what’s next. “Sabrina Bristol hasn’t agreed to anything just yet.”

My jaw tightens.

Miss Bristol sits beside me, staring at me wide-eyed, all big brown-eyed beauty and rosy innocence I can’t afford to dwell on.

However, I also can’t wait to slam her with the more than two hundred emails I haven’t gotten to today. Just because I need a good EA doesn’t mean I’m above enjoying myself.

Sweet revenge for trashing my Italian shoes.

I’d love to stick around and enjoy her shock in person, but I have to take the afternoon off. To the rest of the world, I’m doing a literary event—a charity sort of thing—one of many HeronComm initiatives to improve my dire image in the media and the company’s.

To me, it’s a bit more personal.

“Does Miss Bristol have any objections with the position?” I snap, tenting my fingers.

Ruby opens her mouth like she’s going to speak, but I don’t let her get a word out.

“Is she a serial swindler, an arsonist, or an axe murderer?”

Ruby runs a hand through her hair, wrinkling her nose. “If she is, she’s doing it in style.”

“Exactly. Tell her to sign the contract, then, so she can get to work and we can finish this nonsense. I *need* her today,” I growl.

Miss Bristol gazes at me with those dark-chocolate eyes gleaming. “You...you do realize I’m still here, right? You don’t have to talk about me in third person, you know.”

Amusement wars with raw agitation in my blood. I chase back a grin.

That feisty, take-no-shit attitude was cute at the park and landed her a job offer, but she’s not bringing it into my office.

“That’s the second time you’ve told me what to do since I came into the room. We need to get something straight if you want to work here,” I tell her, locking eyes. “I’m the boss. You work under me. You won’t be using that spear of a tongue unless I want it put to work. Got it?”

Before she can answer, enjoying the stricken, red-faced contempt souring her angelic face, I fold my arms on the table and lean into her personal space.

“Now do you want this job or not?”

She glares at me, pushes her chair back, and stands. “You know, on second thought, I don’t think I need to debase myself by working—”

Ridiculous.

She can’t be serious, can she?

“Think fast before you walk.” I can’t fucking help it, I laugh. “Not many people get a job with Cadillac health insurance right out of college, and two-hundred-thousand-dollar salaries don’t show up every day, especially for graphic designers from purr-niture companies.”

Her face goes deeper red and her jaw pinches, but she takes a deep breath, then hisses it out as her soul leaves her body. “Wait, what? Did you...did you say two hundred thousand dollars? Per year?”

The look she gives me turns my balls into overgrown Alaskan blueberries.

I don't know what it is about this girl—actually, I do, it's the feistiness—but I want her bad.

I see her pinned hard against my desk, skirt torn off, and me standing over her with my pants down, fingers pinched tight into that deliriously spankable ass, thrusting like the devil until she—

No. What the hell am I thinking?

Besides being hideously inappropriate, this company needs more office sex scandals like it needs a crushing lawsuit.

Fuck.

My eyes shift to Ruby, who's trying hard not to look past us, keeping her above this silly fray.

“Take Miss Bristol's reaction to the compensation package as acceptance of employment. Get her set up within the hour, and her company email live in the next ten minutes. Call IT.”

Ruby blinks like a tired cat, unfazed by my tone.

She's used to my shit.

Meanwhile, Sabrina Bristol glares at me like she's holding an invisible cigarette she'd love to stab out on my forehead.

What's her problem? I just offered her a job with a salary five times what she made at her old one. Beyond generous by big city entry-level standards, even if every dollar costs a person in this role a little more of their sanity.

Shaking my head, I ignore her death glare and exit the room before she makes me do something I'll regret.

~

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, the sleek black town car pulls up outside the building, a familiar shark darting through the crowded downtown traffic.

I yank on the back door and climb in before Felix Armstrong can open the door for me. My mind's already reeling from the day, which is probably a good thing, because I haven't had time to dwell on this literary event I'm attending.

The academy wasn't my favorite place when I was a surly teenager. When I graduated, I hoped I'd never have to see it again.

The black leather seat feels cool to the touch, a comfortable place to lounge. Armstrong has picked up my coffee on the way. It's still steaming from the cup holder as he reaches down and passes it back to me.

I grab the cup like a precious chalice and take a swig, letting the caffeinated heat roll down my throat. "Thanks for the morning joe."

"I got you, boss. Any place, anytime. How're you doing today?"

"Fine," I toss back, a single word that says how I really am.

Armstrong gets it. He's been my driver long enough to know from my tone that today isn't a time for idle chitchat.

My phone chimes with an email alert.

I put the coffee cup back in the cupholder and grab my phone. I'm trying to score three more major ad clients this week, and I can't lose a second in the negotiations.

I tap on the email icon and see Ruby's name with Sabrina Bristol cc'd, so I'll have her new work email.

I smile. *Welcome to the fold.*

I've got her housewarming committee ready.

Opening a spreadsheet of five hundred projects, all in various stages of the contract process, I hit share and send it to Miss Bristol, copying Ruby on it.

To: Sabrina Bristol

From: Magnus Heron

Priority: HIGH

Subject: To Do

Ms. BRISTOL,

YOU'RE INCREDIBLY eager to get started, and I'm happy to oblige. See the mess of a spreadsheet attached and the instructions below.

First, click on each project name and print any pages attached. Highlight the client's name and file them. The last page for each project should be a checklist of anything needed to execute the contract. If an item isn't checked, it's missing. Compile a list of all missing items and create a new spreadsheet of just those projects with the items pending.

I expect this completed by midnight tonight.

Yes, it's essential.

No, it's not your only duty.

Before work tomorrow, you'll need to pick up my dry cleaning and hang it in the closet in my office. There shouldn't be a single wrinkle.

The invoice number will come from Miss Hunting.

You'll also need to stop at The Bean Bar and pick up my coffee order, three large drinks as follows: a dark roast Kona bean with one tablespoon of heavy whipping cream, and two medium roast Kona beans. One with half a cup of heavy cream, four sugars, and cinnamon spice, and the other with three tablespoons of heavy cream. It's imperative no sugar winds up in that last coffee.

Since you like cats so much, you can also pick up three cans of cat food. I need a Whisker-Delight, Empress Pearl, and a Meow Meow Feast in any flavors.

Do not mess this up.

Because you have to be back at the office at five a.m. and you'll need to make a few stops before you get here, I'll generously send a car to the address you gave Ruby at precisely 4 a.m. Be ready.

Ruby will show you to the file room, so you can get this project done, stat. She should also be able to give you the passcode to my office to hang my dry cleaning.

YOURS,

Magnus Heron

CEO of HeronComm Inc.

“HEY, bossman, I can hear you hitting the screen up here. Having a rough day?” Armstrong asks, throwing back the same easy smile in the rearview mirror he always does.

“Not really. Just too much to do and not enough time in the world. I hired a new EA this morning and I have to get her broken in. I’m sending her the usual shitpile.” I pause. Technically, I’m sending her stuff to do right this second because I can’t get her out of my mind. “You’ll meet her tomorrow. You need to pick her up at four o’clock.”

“I need a raise to be up at that time,” Armstrong grumbles.

“Don’t we all.”

We share a chuckle.

Honestly, the problem isn’t that this girl has brunette hair like silk, mocha eyes designed to get lost in, and a body so tight she’d be like a cloud crashing against my mountain. I want to devour her, no question.

The real agony is the fact that I’ve worked at least seventy hours a week for so long I don’t recall the last time I had a good lay. I rack my brain, remembering the last time I bothered with a high-end lounge hookup well over a year ago.

I’ve been so busy it’s kept me living like a monk ever since. And that last conquest was mediocre at best.

Dammit, I need a *good* fuck. That’s all. A memorable sheet-ripping romp to reset my system.

It's no wonder this pretty stranger makes me dwell on things I'd rather not.

Her stunt in the park made her the only woman I've noticed recently who doesn't work for me—and no, the usual crop of seasonal interns who churn through HeronComm with a goal to seduce me don't count. I've never let a single one of them get off the ground, no matter how short their skirts get or how many excuses they dredge up to barge into my office.

I'm not going anywhere near that ugly minefield with Miss Bristol, either. She works with me now—*for me*—and I won't put her in that position.

Maybe Ruby was right, though. I should've let her pick another miserable, short-lived EA and found a way to bed Sabrina without bringing her into my company.

Bah.

Too late now.

I need a competent assistant more than I do a night of sweltering, bed-breaking passion.

Hopefully, my sacrifice pays dividends. Hell, if she's good enough, I might be able to take a day off and remedy my hormones. It's not like I have a hard time finding dates.

“So, what do you have this woman doing for you at four a.m.?” Armstrong asks.

“The usual. Picking up my coffee, my dry cleaning, and cat food.”

“Cat food? Aw, hell, something tells me I'm going to hear about this one, aren't I?” Armstrong laughs.

“Call it Plan B. If all goes well with the Stedfaust account, we won't have to resort to a demonstration,” I say.

“Man, are you trying to see how fast you can get rid of her with your antics?” Armstrong's eyes flash up in the mirror.

I frown. *Why would he assume that?*

I'm not that much of a raging hard-ass purely for the sport of it.

Or maybe I am.

Sure, I told her to get her shit done before tomorrow knowing there's virtually no way she can finish it. Then again, when you tell people they have four days, they take all four. You tell them two, they'll take two. And if Sabrina Bristol has the backbone I think—I hope—she has, then she needs a real test of her mettle.

“Of course not, Armstrong,” I finally answer.

He laughs again. “You can't pick up your own coffee for once?”

“Well. I *could*, but if I'm going to do that, what's the point in having an assistant?” I ask. “Besides, Kona coffee makes the office run. I bought that farm and invested in the Bean Bar for a reason. How much further?”

“About forty minutes in this traffic.”

I hold in a groan. Somehow, a man never fully gets over the sluggish crawl of Chicagoland traffic.

With more time to pass, I scroll through my emails, flipping through performance reports for a dozen ad campaigns, and then look for anything else I can send my new EA to get it off my plate.

To: Sabrina Bristol

From: Magnus Heron

Priority: HIGH

Subject: ALSO IMPERATIVE

Ms. BRISTOL,

PLEASE READ all of my unopened email, delete spam and sales pitches, and mark everything else urgent or low priority at

your first opportunity. You'll get credentials for my account from Miss Hunting.

YOURS,

Magnus Heron

CEO of HeronComm Inc.

TAKE THAT. I have three thousand unread emails.

When I look up again from hacking my way through my reports, Armstrong pulls up to a sprawling green field. There's a one-story red brick building in the middle with soaring columns.

We're right outside Winnetka at my old alma mater. He parks in the guest lot.

"Can I leave and come back?"

"Stay. This shit can't take too long," I say.

"The last time you said that we were here all day," he chuckles, shaking his head. "When are you going to admit you're a softie for these kids?"

"Never call me a softie again," I grind out, shooting him a dagger look in the mirror.

"You're the boss, Mr. Heron."

Grumbling, I take my coffee and get out of the car. He's lucky I tolerate his jabs, I think, taking a long slurp off my drink. I won't get through this without fuel.

When I go to check in at the main office, the white-haired secretary beams. "Well, well! Magnus Heron."

Why? Why couldn't I have chosen another school?

Most of the staff were in place when I was a student here over a decade ago. They think they can still call me by my first name, like I'm still a student, and not the head of a multi-billion-dollar advertising leviathan.

But as I gawk at the familiar lined face smiling up at me, I swallow a sigh.

“Hello to you, too, Miss Margo,” I say, giving her a flashy smile.

“You’re here for the Young Scribes assembly, aren’t you?” she asks, tilting her head.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“How lovely! I’ll escort you to the auditorium, then. We can’t have you wandering the halls alone since you’re no longer a student. School policy!” She cackles, no doubt remembering simpler times.

She pushes out of her office chair and gingerly walks toward me. The woman must be at least seventy by now, frail as ever, and it’s a surprise she hasn’t retired.

I’m also surprised she doesn’t need someone holding her up. Step by creaky step, she slowly inches over, looks at the door, and clears her throat.

I grab the door for her and hold it open. “Ladies first.”

“You charmer. You always were a roamer, too,” she says with a thankful glance.

“Miss Margot, I know where the auditorium is. There’s no good reason for you to walk all the way down there with me.” And at this rate, with her pace, I’m worried it’ll take us half an hour to get there.

“Oh, no. Principal Drew was very clear. I have to escort all guests,” she says.

“Even alum?”

She lets out a crackly laugh.

“Especially alumni like you.” She smiles up at me and squeezes my bicep. “You sure did grow up strong. You were a skinny thing when you were here.”

Goddamn. I glance around the hall to make sure no one else is around. I can’t be seen being talked to like I’m still twelve.

What would my clients think? Or any muckraking bloggers looking for a story?

Plenty of alumni from this school have become Very Important People, too.

“Yeah, well, the Marine Corps did a good job filling me out,” I tell her.

I place my hand over hers and squeeze it gently so she won't be offended by my next move. I peel her hand off my arm and drop it.

“Oh, look! The auditorium's right there.” I nod toward the end of the hall. “I'll just run right in since we're here.”

Then I take off at a stride she'll never be able to match.

She smiles behind me, shaking her head when I look over my shoulder.

“You always were a stinker,” I hear her mutter.

She's a sweet old gal, but I have other things on my mind.

I open the door and walk through the auditorium. A short lady with a blond bob and owlish black glasses walks up to me. Everything about her screams English teacher from her *Pride and Prejudice* scarf to her exactly knee-length khaki skirt. “Oh, you must be Mr. Heron! Thank you so much for coming. The kids will *adore* having you here.”

I nod at her, twisting my lips because I can't imagine any teenager getting truly excited over some rich guy showing up to grandstand.

“You're welcome.”

She points to a long table on the stage where a few other guests are sitting. “You'll be at that table. Have a seat, wherever you'd like.”

I settle into position, and the assembly begins just a few minutes later.

From the stage, I scan the rows of chairs in the audience as the students file in, searching for the real reason I'm here.

I spot him in the third row.

A tall, lanky kid with brownish-blond hair. He's damn near identical to the way I looked when I was that age.

He's got a few friends next to him, judging by the way they laugh and whisper to each other eagerly. The boy seems to be doing okay socially.

Good.

The teacher walks over to the microphone and rattles on about how she's so stunningly proud of all the kids and how much writing will help them in their careers even if wordsmithing isn't their main calling in life.

I tap a finger against my thigh. These lectures were as boring as watching cement dry the first time.

This kid will never know what I'm doing for him, but that's the whole point.

I shrug, then remember I'm on stage, and everyone's looking.

Get it together, a voice growls in the back of my mind.

"Now for the moment you've all been waiting for!" Miss English Teacher chirps. "Our first place essay winner is Jordan Quail. Jordan, will you please come read your essay?"

Polite applause ripples through the crowd as she steps away.

Jordan? What? So the kid's actually a writer?

I didn't know.

Thank God I came here today.

That lanky kid who looks too much like me comes to the microphone. The teacher hands him a piece of white paper. He stares into the audience and takes a deep, hurried breath.

"Thi—this piece is called *Me and Mom.*" He fidgets back and forth, shifting his weight, whether he realizes he's doing it or not.

It's obvious he's nervous. I should get him a speech expert, too, someone from Toastmasters or a debate coach looking for a side gig. Schmoozing is an important part of success, after all.

I doubt Marissa would allow it.

Come on, kid. You've got this. Go.

My fingers press tight against my slacks.

His voice cracks as he clears his throat and begins his spiel. "For as long as I can remember, it's always been just me—and Mom. For a while, I thought I was the luckiest kid ever. When other boys had fathers telling them to pick up their toys, I put mine away because I knew it made her happy. I got Mom to myself. I got Mom and chocolate chip cookies. I got Mom and walks in the park. I got Mom reading to me and Mom camping with me. Mom letting me stay up until midnight watching scary movies, and Mom who helped me memorize every dinosaur name I could hold in my head..."

He pauses as a few laughs from the adults echo through the crowd.

"But teeth got loose and fell away. Life changed. Then came father and son camping trips and father and son baseball games. Father and son Boy Scout meets, and Father's Day specials. Other kids had their dad to ask how to tie a tie, how to hit a home run, how to be strong when the world throws them a curveball. It was still just me and Mom."

Damn.

My breath turns to concrete in my lungs.

I've been gut punched.

"She always showed up to love and support me in everything I did. But elementary school faded into middle school, and one day I realized a camping trip with twenty-eight boys and their dads was probably no place for Mom. I threw away those flyers, and when other kids brought their dads for career day, I tuned them out. I have no childhood memories of playing catch with my dad. But I still have Mom," Jordan reads, stopping to clear his throat again.

I feel this deep, poison band inside me that's about to snap.

The same invisible thread that connects us, the devious viper I've tried so very hard to protect him from.

"A life of just me and Mom has taught me a few things," he continues. "I'll never be like him. That's a given. I couldn't if I wanted to. I know nothing about him and his absence has been the strongest message from my dad I'll ever know.

"Whatever I do, wherever life takes me, it will always just be me and Mom. And that's okay. With her, I learned to be grateful. I learned to have a hero. I learned how to dream."

Another pause, so silent I could die.

"So if I try hard enough, if I grow up strong enough, maybe one day I can be just like Mom. But deep inside, I'll always wonder...if I knew my dad, would I wish for something different? Would I wish for me and Mom plus one?" Jordan goes quiet and looks at his teacher wide-eyed.

My gut twists.

No, you wouldn't, kid. Stop fucking wishing.

I'm careful not to mutter it out loud. I should've known coming here would have a price.

Miss Jane Austen Scarf takes the microphone back, and we all clap for him. I catch a few looks from the people next to me and realize how hard I'm slapping my palms together.

Shit.

"Jordan, you did an amazing job! Boys and girls, we have a special surprise now." She turns from looking at the kids to me. "Mr. Heron, would you like to come up and say a few words?"

I know what she wants. I meet her at the microphone, pull a check out of my coat pocket, and make a production of offering it to her with a handshake that makes her whole body ripple.

"Just hold it up," she whispers, a warm blush on her cheeks.

All her natural response to the handshake does is make me think about Miss Bristol and her adorable, infuriating ass.

Not today. Not now.

I plaster on a fake businessman's grin and hold the check out to the audience, moving it in this triangle over my head, but there's no way they can see the print.

"Magnus Heron, the head of Heron Communications, went to school here just like you." She points at the kids. "He sat in the very same chairs you're sitting in now, and today he owns one of the most powerful rising companies in the entire country!"

I smile woodenly. Surely they've gotten new chairs since I was a pupil.

"He's also been kind enough to donate fifteen thousand dollars to the Young Scribes program." She turns to look at me again, but she's still speaking into the mic. "Mr. Heron, do you want to tell them what the money's for, and maybe say a few words about writing?"

My brows pull together. I didn't agree to make a big speech and don't have anything prepared, but...talking is what I do.

"Sure, my pleasure." I take the microphone away from her. "First of all, that was an outstanding essay I heard today. Congratulations, Jordan. I believe the contest benefited everyone, and I'm certain you'll all receive feedback that makes your writing stronger."

Their little faces are blank.

I see a few yawns and try not to laugh.

"Your teacher asked me to talk about writing, so I won't bore you. I'm no writer in the traditional sense. I don't do fantasy books about dragons or chase after scandals for a living, but I do know this—the world needs wordsmiths. I've paid millions for good copywriters to turn words into sales. And how do you become good? Practice. Listen. Write. I know, I know, it might seem like you'll never get there, but I started learning right here too. I used to wake up at four a.m.

every day and write for two hours every morning before school. If my words hadn't gotten stronger—and thanks to the teachers here, they did—but even if they hadn't, the discipline alone was worth it.

“The very same discipline carried me through the Marine Corps. A few years later, it let me take a business from limping along to a marathon run. I wish you all the same success. Words will open doors you can only dream of right now. That's why I'm here with this check—to help make sure each and every one of you has a sterling chance to work with a professional editor on your manuscripts. Take their criticism to heart. Let it burn you and then grow from the ashes. Listen to your guides, and you'll be standing in my place sooner than you think.”

I wish that were true.

Of course, none of them should *ever* be standing up here for the same secret reasons I am.

The kids applaud me the same way they clapped for Jordan.

The difference is, I didn't do anything besides throw money at them, and the kid wrote his heart out.

I scan the audience, wondering if Marissa is here, and if I should talk to her.

If I tried, would she *let me*?

OceanofPDF.com

IT'S A CINNAMON MORNING (SABRINA)



I sit at my desk at Purry Furniture & More with my face slumped over the keyboard.

I can't remember the last time my head hurt this bad.

The Instagram account pings notifications nonstop on the desktop studio screen. I mean, I'm glad my meme is getting traction, but *damn*. Who turned the volume up so loud?

I lift my head and hit the speaker on my keyboard. But no matter how many times I turn the volume down, the pinging gets louder, more annoying, more demanding.

Oh my God, make it stop already.

Snarling, I push myself away from the keyboard and blink my eyes.

Oh. Right.

I'm actually home in bed. And it's not Purry Furniture's Instagram account pinging me nonstop.

That's my alarm clock, and I grab at the phone like a blind octopus.

Crud.

It's been going off for fifteen minutes straight, and it's taken me this long to hear it. I'm down to my last emergency alarm. All because I didn't leave the office last night until a quarter after one, and it's a quarter until four in the morning now.

Sigh.

Does this jackoff function like this all the time? Or does he just expect his employees to?

A day this early feels inhuman.

I shake the thought from my head. If Heron sleeps less than four hours a night, it might explain why he's always such a colossal prick in the skin of a god.

No time to shower, so I just do a quick ten-minute routine, splashing water on my face and pits and gargling mouthwash while I run through the apartment like a headless chicken. I pull on a black dress and Paige's heels. She's lent them to me indefinitely since I don't have anything nicer for a place like HeronComm.

I have three missed calls from a number I don't know.

Probably the driver.

So I run through the apartment while calling him back, hoping he hasn't left without me.

I drop my phone in my purse when I see the black town car parked outside. No way he's here for anyone else in this neighborhood. An older man with dark hair and friendly brown eyes gets out of the car and opens the door for me.

His smile says he's been in my shoes before. At least I don't feel judged.

"Thank you," I say as I climb in.

I'm so tired my eyes hurt, but the nice thing about a driver is I can sit in the back seat and respond to some of the emails I didn't get through before I left last night.

Once he's back at the wheel, the driver says, "Miss Bristol? I'm Felix Armstrong, at your service. Call me by my last name like everybody else. We'll probably be seeing each other a lot. I doubt Heron's ever gonna let you walk home alone in the dark."

"Nice to meet you, and you can call me Brina," I say with a laugh. "I'm surprised. Mr. Heron doesn't seem like the kinda

guy to care about things like that.”

Armstrong’s otherwise friendly face becomes blanker. “Why not?”

I hesitate. Do I really want to strike up a conversation with my first co-worker ranting about the boss? Then again, if he’s been working here awhile...how could he *not* know?

“Well, considering the first time I met him he was barking at his people and ordering me off a public bench, he just doesn’t strike me as a Care Bear people person.”

“He sent me to pick you up this morning,” Armstrong offers, his warm smile returning.

“Because the bus isn’t running its morning schedule yet, I assume. Plus, he wants me to fetch his coffee and dry cleaning.”

“We also need to pick up new shoes...and there was one other thing I can’t remember,” Armstrong adds.

“Cat food. For some weird reason, he also wants me to pick up cat food and be at the office by five.”

Armstrong nods, his lips turning up in the mirror with a look that screams mischief. “He’s a hard-ass. I get it. I know he doesn’t always seem friendly with his employees. Part of that’s because he’s only thirty-one and can’t have his authority questioned. But most of the reason he walks around growling at people all day is because so much of this business depends on him. He has hundreds of employees, and if someone on the floor makes a mistake with ads, it could affect a lot of jobs. It was really hard for him to build the place up after...”

I look up from my phone as he trails off, suddenly interested. “What happened?”

“Oh, uh...” Armstrong shakes his head. “Sorry. Nothing you need to worry about. I only brought it up because he’s not as bad as you think. You’ve probably heard how fast he goes through EAs, but I promise you, if any of them took the time to know the man, they’d hate him less.”

I try not to frown, amazed that the boss-hole has at least one vote of confidence.

“I can’t blame you for being skeptical,” Armstrong says, shaking his head. “Let’s be real. He’s demanding as hell, but he expects as much of himself as he does everyone else. Plus, he’s generous with his employees. There’s nowhere else I could ever dream of making what I get paid to drive around Mr. Heron and his crew.”

“Do you like being a driver?” I ask. He might not make as much driving somewhere else, but there are other things he could do. Or maybe I’m wrong. Heron does pay well, I’ll give him that.

“Yes, ma’am! I was a truck driver in the Army for a while, and again back here. My mama lives in Florida, and when she came down with skin cancer, Heron sent her the best doctor he could find and gave me all the time I could ever ask for to visit. Then I had a minor stroke about a year ago...he paid me while I was off for over a month and got me looked at by top-notch specialists. Hotshots who aren’t even covered under the company insurance plan. He takes care of his employees when he’s not working them to death.”

Honestly? I’m shocked.

The idea that Magnus Heron might think of someone besides himself for more than three seconds never occurred to me.

“You seem to think very highly of him,” I say.

“Well, I’ve got it easy, I’ll admit. Car rides are kind of his downtime. Sometimes he works through his commutes, but he talks to me more than most folks around the office, besides Ruby. He doesn’t have much of a social life outside business, so I’d even dare say I’m his friend. He’s a good guy.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it, Armstrong.” I’m still not convinced, but it’s interesting to have another view of the monster I call boss.

We pull into an upscale shopping center, and I still haven’t looked at any emails yet.

The only thing open this early is The Bean Bar.

“Shoe Import is two doors away from the coffee shop. It’s not quite open yet but knock and tell them you’re there for a pickup for Heron, and they’ll give you the shoes. I’d get the coffee once you have the shoes, because he doesn’t like his morning cup of joe cold. Who does, right?”

I smile in agreement as I quickly step out of the car. Picking up the shoes goes without a hitch. I’ve printed his very specific order and read it off to a tiny blonde behind the counter at The Bean Bar.

“That will be thirty-three dollars and fifty cents,” she says.

Holy crap! What the hell kind of coffee does he drink? And it never occurred to me that if I’m here ordering the coffee, he hasn’t paid for it. That’s more than I have in my debit account. “Umm—I left my wallet in the car. Be right back!”

She sighs like I’ve disappointed her. “Right.”

I scan the room. There are a few other people here, but they’re not paying attention.

“That’s my boss’ coffee, and I really need this job. Please don’t throw it away. I’ll be right back, I swear,” I beg.

She nods. “I’ll leave it right here.”

I race across the parking lot as fast as I can in heels with a box of shoes hugged to my chest and throw the passenger side door open. “Armstrong! We have a problem.”

I don’t know what size shoes this guy wears, but they’ve gotten heavy in my hands so I drop them in the seat.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, turning around.

This is so embarrassing. I squeeze my eyes shut.

“The coffee order’s over thirty dollars and...I don’t have that.”

“I don’t miss being young. Here.” Armstrong chuckles and pulls a wallet from his back pocket.

God. I'm taking money from the company driver now?

He's probably not rich, even if Magnus Heron pays him well. He removes a sleek black card and hands it to me.

"Company card. Tell Heron to give you one."

Well...that's a little better.

But the fact remains that I've woken up late and still had to make a second run to the coffee shop. I'm going to be so late. When I tumble back inside, there's a line forming. King Dickwad's coffee is sitting there, getting cold.

I'm so fired, and only on my second day.

The barista has my drinks in a carrier. She swipes the card and pushes the cups out.

"Thank you!" I rush to the counter, snatch the carrier, and dart for the door. Somehow, despite lids, coffee sloshes on me.

Yep, I'm about to scream.

I have no clue why Heron hired me, but I'm not even close to fit for this job.

I don't have the know-how or the warp speed. My shoes are borrowed. Coffee seems destined to land on my clothes in this life, whenever it doesn't hit my employers. I'm a big fat floppy fish out of water.

"Good luck!" barista girl calls behind me, like she *knows*.

Thanks. I need it.

Once I'm back in the car, Armstrong asks, "You made sure you got a coffee with no sugar or sweetener, right?"

"I printed the instructions and ordered exactly what he sent. Two didn't have sugar."

He smiles. "The sugarless medium roast is mine. I'm diabetic. Could you pass it up here, please?"

Wow.

And here I thought Maggot was just a big anal jerk about his drinks like he's a big anal jerk about everything else.

I lean up and hand Armstrong his drink.

He lets me use his company card to buy the cat food too, which is nice, because I probably couldn't afford it either with my sad balance. In another week, I'll be sitting pretty when the last payment from my old job shows up and the first deposit from this one hits, but for now, I'm effectively broke.

At the office, I set down the drinks and stack the cat food neatly on Maggot's desk, hang his dry cleaning in his closet, place the new shoebox on the floor under the garment bag, and return to my workspace outside his office.

It's almost a little like having my own office, which makes the hell hours into the night ever so slightly more tolerable. There are walls on two sides and my desk sits far enough away from the main hall so no one can bother me without making an effort.

But there's also no way into his office without passing me.

How fun. I've gone from being an entry-level employee to a freaking gatekeeper.

When I check his inbox again, my gut pinches.

Even though I almost cleaned it out last night, he has another eight hundred messages waiting. I open his email, delete spam, respond to what I can, and start flagging urgent stuff.

He passes my desk without speaking to me a little while later. Probably for the best. Nothing he says is pleasant.

Ten minutes later, my messenger pings.

Magnus: Come to my office. Now.

Seriously? He can't just open the door and talk to me like a normal person?

Sighing, I stomp over and tap on the door.

"Get in!"

Get in? What the actual hell? Is that even a command for entering a room?

I step inside his office, trying not to cringe. If I treat him like a wolf and show no fear, maybe I'll survive this.

"Over here, Miss Bristol," he says, his eyes never meeting mine.

Dude. Can't you just tell me what you want?

A second later, I stand beside his desk, wondering what I'm in for.

He waves a hand in front of the items I placed there at five twenty this morning.

"What's all this?"

"Your coffee and cat food," I answer, feeling like there's a trick question coming. "Everything you asked for...isn't it?"

"Very well."

"You're welcome?" I venture, suspicious because it feels like there's going to be a but.

And I'm right.

A second later, he says, "Do you think next time you could place the coffee away from this pet food?"

I stare at him, mouth slightly open.

Oh my God. Is he effing for real?

The cat food is tucked away in airtight, sealed cans.

But since I can't afford to lose two hundred thousand dollars a year, I nod. "Yes, Mr. Heron. I'll try. Sorry for the disappointment."

"Are you sure?" He tilts his head at me. "Your lips say one thing, but your eyes say another."

Guilty. I'm sure they say, *You're a ginormous moron.*

My face always gives me away.

Somehow, I nod again, forcing a neutral smile.

"I'll see to it that your coffee gets placed *safely* away from any objects pertaining to pets in the future. Also, I've

forwarded you all the emails I couldn't respond to last night, and if you don't need anything else, I'll return to work now."

I smile and then, for added effect, I curtsy.

He does a double take, a faint lash of something like amusement cutting through those deadly blue eyes.

"What the hell was that?" he asks.

"It was just a—"

"Never do it again."

"Um, okay." I give him my best mock-innocent smile.

Innocence is a hard feat around this man. Aside from being an absolute jackass, he's—okay, he's divine. Undeniably delicious.

Like Sweeter Grind cinnamon latte delicious.

I can't deny what's right in front of me, plain as day.

A horrible part of my brain I wish I didn't have would love to taste him. Right alongside a billion other women who'd die for the chance, I'm sure.

Of course, he's an egomaniac and also my boss. So there'll be no forbidden man-fruit tasting. Not today or ever.

"I take it you gave Armstrong his coffee too?" He ignores my request to be dismissed.

"Yes, sir."

"I had you order three for a reason." He picks up the cup with "C & S" written down the side and hands it to me. "I thought I should make up for your wasted drink last week."

I smile and put the cup to my lips. The cinnamon infused brew smells heavenly and warm liquid pours down my throat, temporarily taking me away to a place where guys are as nice as they look.

"Thanks," I tell him. "But how did you know I take cinnamon in my coffee?"

"You used the words cinnamon latte right before you spit on me. Also...the stench lingered."

Against my better judgment, I smile.

There's no polite response to that, and he deserved it.

In two strides, he stands in front of his window wall looking out over Chicago.

"Come here," he says.

With my cinnamon coffee clasped in my hand, I join him at the window. Hopefully this drink will make his bullshit easier to tolerate.

"How did you know I'd like heavy cream and sugar, though?" I ask. I've never tried heavy cream in my drink before. It's like lacing rich dark coffee with velvet.

"The so-called coffee you sprayed on my Italian leather shoes was almost white. It had to have a lot of something in it, and since The Bean Bar is known for the highest quality Kona beans available on the mainland, I feared it would be too strong for you without the cream."

"How benevolent of you."

The corners of his lips turn up into an almost-smile that he immediately pushes off his face.

Yeah.

Don't let anyone dare think you're human, Magnet—I meant Maggot.

Magnet might be more true. Even with his foul temper, he's still too charming, too good at drawing people closer, before he swings his trap shut.

He stands so close to me his sea breeze cologne tinged with testosterone wafts around, overpowering my coffee.

Dear Lord. Here we go.

If anything could be more tempting than this man's physique and those crystal-blue eyes, it's his scent.

"Look out there," he urges softly.

Weird request, but I gaze out the window, trying to pinpoint what he's looking at.

“What do you see?” he asks.

“Downtown.”

“Buildings, right? Skyscrapers?”

I nod. “I said downtown Chicago.”

“Here’s something you need to understand. It’s been clear you don’t respect me from the moment we met—”

“Which makes it pretty weird that you hunted me down and hired me,” I tell him. “Not that I’m complaining. I need the job.”

He cocks his head, his jaw tight.

“You’re gutsy. I knew we could use that. My point is, I won’t ask you to respect me, although you *will* act like it in my office. What you should respect—what every single person in this office, myself included respects—is the awesome power of Heron Communications.”

HeronComm has powers? I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

This man takes himself far too seriously. He really thinks he’s some gift to the world. The worst part is, in spite of his arrogance, I’d relish peeling that dark suit off his body.

Or maybe I’d just like to hang off him the way his jacket does.

Either way.

“Without this business—*my* business—so many of those buildings would be empty. They’d go bankrupt and their people would be out of work. Without marketing, a business is nothing more than a stalled engine. HeronComm has worked with two thirds of the companies you’re looking at right now. We’re jet fuel for everything that soars in this city. Even the fastest blip of a mobile ad or Instagram advertising another mindless game to download helps someone accomplish their dream. Advertisement’s the blood of the business world, Miss Bristol, and we’re the lion’s share of that market. It isn’t just a numbers game. We charge what we do because I guarantee

conversions. We work sixteen hours a day to make their engines, their dreams, roar.”

Am I supposed to be impressed?

It’s a good speech, but it’s hard not to roll my eyes.

He’s got a high and mighty view of what he does.

Not that I think he’s wrong, exactly. Marketing is important.

If I could convince Mom to believe in it, get her to take a few self-publishing marketing courses, maybe I could quit secretly buying her books. But if HeronComm wasn’t providing the service, wouldn’t some other company just steal their clients?

I glance over, carefully avoiding his eyes.

Is he done? I’ve got too much work to do to stand here listening to big speeches all day.

But bits and pieces of what he said echo Armstrong’s words from this morning.

A driven man with a clear vision fits the crass grump in his glassy tower like a glove.

Maybe he’s not so bad after all.

So I take the olive branch, smile, nod, and turn my foot.

“I appreciate the introduction,” I tell him.

I’m about to walk away when he grabs my arm. It’s not some harsh power move. It’s gentle.

My whole body tingles.

Still, his unexpected touch stops me in my tracks. I take a deep breath, hoping he doesn’t realize I’m already hooked on his smell. My eyes lock on his face, every hard angle and the halo of a beard, which tells the world he’s not afraid of breaking the clean-shaven convention for most big city tycoons richer than Midas.

“Are you enjoying your drink?” he asks, his voice like low, pleasing thunder.

“I am.” I blink, wondering if I’ve unlocked some strange softer side.

“Good. I trust it’s the fuel you need to get your ass in gear,” he snaps, shattering the illusion.

Stupid me.

Forget maybes. He definitely *is* that bad. And just like that, any kind gesture with the coffee is erased by his acid words.

I’m starting to get why so many people quit this job. If I didn’t have to cover both my expenses and my parents, I’d be gone in a flash.

“What? No smart-ass comeback this time? You’re a quick study, Miss Bristol, and I like it. I’ve sent a new project list, also. You’ll need to go through it the same way you did yesterday’s assignment. Once you’re done with that, you can start making courtesy calls to clients who haven’t rebooked and let them know you’re offering them the chance before our calendar fills up.” He runs a hand through his sandy mane of hair.

“Okay. I’m on it.” I have to physically bite my tongue to restrain said *smart-ass comeback*.

“After that, there’s plenty of filing to keep you busy. Old records on paper as well as our digital system which desperately needs some TLC. Remember to answer my emails along the way. Finally, you’ll be happy to know there’s something else right up your alley...”

He leaves me in suspense.

“What?” I ask. *What now?*

“We have a meeting with a large pet brand at one o’clock this afternoon you’re expected at. You won’t be doing any talking, but I will need you to record what’s going on. Having a record makes it easier to keep everyone on the same page. Are you going to remember all of this?”

I nod, biting my tongue extra hard. “I’ll write it down as soon as I get to my desk.”

“Next time I call you to my office, bring a pen and paper, or have a notepad app ready. If you need supplies, ask Ruby. I’ll see you this afternoon. Don’t be late again.”

“Again?” I echo, unable to smother the edge in my voice.

He smiles like he’s caught me and he enjoys it. *Prick.*

“You weren’t here at five. Don’t pretend you were.”

“How would you know? You weren’t even here when I got in. Don’t pretend.” I fling his own words at him with a cheesy smile.

“Oh, I was here before four. I had a meeting with the creative team lead at five. I’m sure you remember Hugo from the park?”

Damn.

Busted.

Also, knowing he was here earlier than anyone else makes me hate him a sliver less. I can’t be angry at a supervisor who holds himself to the same expectations—even if those expectations are Joe Stalin worthy. “I won’t be late.”

“Good.”

He goes back to his desk, and I start for the door. Thank God.

“Wait, Miss Bristol,” he calls. I cringe. “One more thing I forgot.”

“Yes?”

“Come here.”

Ugh. Does he just want me taking extra steps? I head back to his desk.

He pulls a drawer open and hands me a black card.

“Armstrong said you needed this.”

My face warms. It was one thing for Armstrong to know my desperation, but it bothers me that Heron knows it, too. Not that I’m turning down a chance to use company credit for whatever insane snipe hunt he sends me on next.

“Thank you,” I say, trying hard to be sincere.

And then, before I realize what I’ve done, I curtsy again.

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BAD ART PROJECT (MAGNUS)



It's almost time for the meeting with Woof Meow Chow, so I voice dictate the email I'm working on, press send, close my laptop, and grab my briefcase.

I have to say, things are better.

Before Sabrina Bristol, I couldn't hold down an assistant to save my life, and the last girl wasn't nearly as good as her first impression seemed. Finishing everything I dumped on her last night should've been impossible.

Somehow, she managed.

For the first time in over a month, my inbox isn't overflowing. It's like standing up from a weight machine after an hour at work, taking a deep breath with two hundred pounds of raw power still hanging over your head.

Miss Bristol is air. Room to breathe. And she's whatever the hell else a man should say about a beautiful woman who does her job while looking like Venus incarnate.

When I arrive at the conference room, the entire C-level team is already there, including my new assistant. The dress she's wearing today hugs her body the same way the sweater dress did the day I met her in an explosion of cinnamon rage.

But this is no sweater.

The creamy skin of her shoulder rests on either side of her delicate black dress straps.

Is it as soft as it looks?

Her face is expressive, this whirlwind of emotion and bright-eyed gumption.

I can always read her real thoughts in those big brown eyes, and I like it.

A grin spreads across my face. I wonder what her face would show if I ever traced my finger along the edge of the black fabric from the shoulder strap, diving right where it swoops above her cleavage.

Fuck.

Not thoughts I ought to be having about my new EA.

Not fantasies I should ever let myself have about *any* EA, especially this one.

When I realize I'm grinning, I set my face straight. I don't need the CEO of Woof Meow Chow to come in and think I'm a pushover because I'm part Cheshire cat.

I'm also well aware I've been staring at Sabrina too long. She's so alluring it's hard to look away.

I tell my eyes I'm still in control, and as I peel my gaze off her, I notice her sleek black laptop has a sticker on it the size of my hand.

I shake my head.

We're going to have a talk about office appearances.

She can't come to an executive-level meeting with her laptop dressed up like it belongs to a damn college kid.

What *is* that thing anyway? It's got pink feet and wide yellow eyes, but it's...a bulb of garlic?

Why would garlic have feet and eyes? Who puts humanoid garlic on their laptop?

Shit. I'm going to be thinking about that all meeting long now.

Not the distraction I need.

There are three empty chairs across from me. I made sure my team left them so when Chester Stedfaust and his people

get here, they'll be right where I want them.

The man's older, close to my father's less-than-graceful middle age. In fact, they're still friends, which doesn't make this any easier.

He comes in flanked by two guys my age. The younger minions immediately take the leather seats across from me.

Stedfaust scans the table. His eyes linger on my twenty-three-year-old assistant longer than they should.

A biting urge to punch the guy burbles up, but thirty seconds ago I did the same thing.

He's only human, and apparently, I'm only part jealous caveman.

The difference is, he finds one empty chair at the end of the table and takes it, so Sabrina is right beside him.

An alarm goes off in my head. Executives don't normally come into this room and automatically plop down beside the youngest, prettiest, most inexperienced new girl.

Not sure what game he's trying to play, but it's not happening on my turf.

Client relations be damned.

"Miss Bristol, do you want to come closer?" I motion to the one seat left across from me.

She raises an eyebrow, then nods and begins moving her laptop.

"Easier for you to help with the presentation," I add, since it's clear she has no idea what's going on.

She nods and takes the open seat.

The old man with the bulldog face at the end of the table looks disappointed.

Douchebag. I take care of my employees, even the childish ones with pink garlic stickers on their company laptops.

Sabrina opens the PowerPoint and syncs it to the projector, beaming it on the pull-down screen.

“Thank you all for coming today. I know you’re a busy man, Mr. Stedfaust, so I’ll get right to it,” I say, casting my eyes around the room. “Let’s start with data on the target audience you’re after, and then I’ll show you our concepts and explain how each one corresponds to what the data says.”

Each member of my team is poised at their laptop, ready to take notes. The two guys from Woof Meow Chow across from me nod.

“Sounds like a swell time,” Stedfaust mutters.

I stare at him. He has a hard face to read. Is he using words like “swell” because he’s as old as my father? Or is he being a jerk in my meeting room?

I’ve seen the guy around for most of my life, though casually, and often several years apart. I rack my brain, trying to decide if I’ve heard him use “swell” before.

Either way, I need laser focus, so I dismiss the thought.

HeronComm isn’t losing this account.

I point to the first bar on the graph. “Here’s your current market share. As you can see, Boomers buy Woof Meow Chow like the pet food apocalypse is coming.” I touch the second bar. “Sales with Gen X are evenly distributed among you and your top two competitors, but there’s a major dip when it comes to millennials.” I mark the drop from between the two data points with my finger, drawing attention to how vertical it is.

Then I touch the baseline. The next bar barely reaches over it, and I need to scare the shit out of this old man.

“Now your sales with Gen Z. Virtually nonexistent. That’s a problem because the time will come when those younger buyers grow up and become happy pet owners.”

I nod to Sabrina and she changes the slide. A black slide with cherry-red facts appears.

Too bright. The slide looks like it jumped out of a horror movie.

Who chose this damn color scheme? It had to be someone on the design team. Very doom and gloom. I'll have a talk with them later.

“One thing we know about millennials and will likely prove true for Z,” I continue, “is that they’re having kids later in life, if at all. To them, it’s a financial risk and they’re often straddled with too much student loan debt to take on the challenge in their early twenties.”

“You’re telling me things I already know. What’s this have to do with selling pet food?” Stedfaust asks, thumping his fingers against the table.

“Great question,” I say. “Because they’re having kids much later, if at all, they tend to view their pets as surrogate babies.” I put finger quotes around babies. “Birthday parties for their dogs and shiny new outfits. They spoil their pets in the wildest ways, making cats and dogs king, and kings need luxury. If you want to grab that market by the horns, that’s the image you have to display.”

“I’m not sure that’s our brand, Magnus.” Stedfaust frowns, again looking too much like a pampered bulldog himself.

I shrug. “It’s what the younger market wants, and the market is judge, jury, and executioner.”

My eyes flick to Miss Bristol.

She taps her computer and the slide shifts to a black-and-white image of a five-star dining scene. An English bulldog in a tux sits at a table, lapping up his food from a crystal goblet.

The words “Woof Meow Chow” appear in the background in pearly white letters.

Mr. Stedfaust looks down at his phone next to him and slides a lazy finger across the screen.

Dammit.

Something’s gone terribly wrong.

He’s becoming disengaged, and I have to wrestle his attention back where it belongs. Letting clients see how their makeover image clinches any sale.

“So—” I slap my hand against the table. Everyone looks up, Stedfaust included, blinking. I point to the pup in the tux. “This adorable, classy pooch screams—or barks, if you will—upscale dog food. Something every dog mom and dad can be proud of feeding their baby.”

At this point, I’m used to questions, concerns that help me pick through their objections or make alterations if needed.

Right now, I’m faced with silence.

Shit.

This is the textbook definition of a crash and burn. It’s been years since I’ve been in a pitch meeting like this with everything misfiring.

I’m going to have to pull the feedback out of them with pliers.

“What do you think, gentlemen? This is only the first concept, of course, and we have plenty of similar designs for cats and dogs. Hit me.”

“It was nice work,” one of the younger guys says slowly. “We have some other things we still have to look at, but we’ll be in touch.”

Damn it all.

I’ve been in this business long enough to know that translates to *no chance in hell*.

Trouble is, he’s not giving me anything I can work with, refusing to throw me a bone so I can swing this back around.

“Mr. Stedfaust, any questions?” Once, he was friends with my dad. I’ve known him my whole life, ever since they walked in here for their first campaign under my father, back when their only flavors were tuna or beef.

Come on. Give me a clue where things went wrong.

He crosses his arms and leans back in his chair, a stiff barrel of a man.

“Well, technically speaking, your work is great, as always. Very clean, maybe even sparkling. However...there’s no polite

way to say this, but you bring me down here for a meeting and tell me I'm looking for millennials—hell, son. I told your last girl that. And no damn millennial will ever be sold by this lifeless concept.”

“Lifeless concept,” I repeat, glaring at Hugo.

He looks terrified behind his glasses.

He should be.

This was his baby.

I'd rejected the first and second round of concepts, told them to dress it up, but he insisted 'classy' was the best mood for these ads with every revision.

If we lose this account, it could cause cuts, and it's going to be on his hands if I can't fix his mistakes.

Hugo holds a hand up in apology, looking from me to Stedfaust. “I admit the designs I sent over were a bit more... experimental than usual. It was a risk, sure, but I thought it might be an interesting twist.”

“Experimental? They're black and white and dead.” Stedfaust sighs. “The designs look more like a bad art project for a college class than an ad campaign. My grandson could've done a better job, and he's in elementary school. Our brand is fun, trusted, and safe for every animal. This comes across as amateurish at best.”

Fucking ouch.

I try not to wince. Hugo looks destroyed, his normally jolly face transformed into a hangdog look. The dressing down from our client is harsher than anything I'd deliver.

“I...I'd be happy to send you some updated concepts ASAP. Fun, sir, that I can do!” Hugo's voice has a pleading tone which is only going to make matters worse.

Nobody likes desperation.

Stedfaust begins to answer. I don't pay attention to his words.

Instead, I glance at the cat food tins Sabrina fetched from my office. They've been placed beside the projector as part of the setup. She managed to get three cans, all with a pop top.

Hell. I didn't think I'd actually have to break out Plan B, but desperate times, desperate measures, you know the rest.

I slide around the table until the cans are in my reach and grab one. After a quick, theatrical toss in the air, I pull the tab and tear it open.

The can pops. Once again, I have the room's attention.

I look at my EA. "Miss Bristol, there's a gold spoon in the front pocket of my briefcase. Could you grab it for me, please?"

"What?" she asks, confusion on her face.

I raise my eyebrows.

Don't ask questions right now. Just do it.

She must hear me scolding her telepathically and leans around the table, fishes into my briefcase, brings me the spoon, and returns to her seat with a worried look.

Yeah, let's do this.

Glowing, I stab the spoon into the cat food, bring it close to my face, and fight the urge to gag.

The whole room goes silent.

"What the—have you lost your mind, Heron?" Stedfaust barks, shaking his head so hard his cheeks flap.

I ignore him, open the next can, stab my spoon in, and bring it disgustingly close to my face. It smells like a heap of rotting rats.

I turn my head and my nose scrunches up. Then I plunge the spoon back into the can and shake it until the clumpy feline food falls off back into the tin.

"Third time's the charm, people," I whisper, repeating the vile process with the remaining can.

This one isn't dead rat bad, but it doesn't smell like something any human being would ever want to put in their mouth.

I survey the room. Stedfaust has a deep crease in his forehead, staring at me in abject horror.

His brows are up, and he's watching me closely.

Both of our teams stare at me slack-jawed. Poor Anita, our video head, looks like she's about to pass out at the table.

Three shiny cans of Woof Meow Chow sit on the other side of the projector, leftovers from our video shoot.

"Hugo, could you pass me a can of Meow Chow?" I ask.

Fingers shaking, he picks up a can and slides it across the table like a hockey puck. I pop the can, in goes my spoon, and I bring the chow to my face, fully intending to keep an ironclad poker face no matter how *bad* this stinks.

Thankfully, I don't have to.

No, it's not some gourmet feast fit for a human being. But there are no preservatives, so it's not foul like the others.

Ever so slowly, I touch the spoon to my lips. The room erupts in loud gasps.

Now, I've got their attention.

"Of course, I'm joking. I'm not *that* insane." I drop the spoon in the can and lower the can back to the table with a rattling plop, wiping my mouth. "Let me tell you, what's no joke is that the other brands smell like an outhouse. I wouldn't feed that stuff to a stray."

Stedfaust leans forward and studies me closely, then sniffs.

"You may be onto something, Heron. That was...an unorthodox way to make your point. But I still need new proofs. How does that little presentation translate to advertising—a scratch and sniff campaign? Any marketing hinges on the design and execution, obviously, and I'm not investing in something I'm unsure of."

“Nor would I expect you to,” I agree. “We’d be happy to work out some new proofs and meet back here next week, Chester.”

He brightens at the casual use of his name.

Progress.

He’s not sold, not yet, but we still have a fighting chance to keep the biggest organic pet food maker in the Midwest. Hugo and I need a serious church session with the full creative team before we meet again.

My brain simmers, high on averting a total disaster, when I hear a voice I damn well shouldn’t.

“Oh, I used to work for Purry Furniture and More!” Sabrina blurts out next to me. “They have a similar vibe. I have some ideas.”

Slowly, my neck whips around. My eyes bore into her. Too bad the table’s glass, or I’d be kicking her under it.

Has she lost her fucking mind?

Assistants don’t talk in these meetings. They don’t pitch concepts, and I definitely didn’t hire her for her design skills. Talented or not, I’m up to my neck in creative types.

Stedfaust gazes at her. His eyes roam up and down her body.

Bastard.

“Tell me more, sweetheart. This could be interesting,” he says, lacing his fingers under his chin and leaning forward, all ears.

“She’s Miss Bristol,” I say, my voice low. “The newest addition to our team.”

He doesn’t acknowledge me, but she catches my eye and smiles like sunshine. Something about it feels so disarming it’s hard to glare back at her.

But I do. She’s got to learn to stay in her lane, and fast.

This is not her role, and if she fucks things up for me, for HeronComm, so help me...

“What if we did something like animated dogs and cats dreaming? The dogs can sleep in clouds.” Instead of looking at him, she stares at her laptop screen. Her hand hovers over the mouse she clicks as she talks. “The cats walk around the treetops, hunters on the prowl until they all wake up in their cozy beds, and then they run straight for their bowls of Woof Meow Chow. The stuff of dreams.” She turns her computer around for him to see it, cartoonish sketches from an old project of hers, no doubt.

He squints. “I can barely see that from here.” Stedfaust looks at one of the younger guys sitting by Sabrina. “Is it good?”

She turns her laptop toward him. He leans over and studies it for a second, then nods. “Yeah. It looks decent. It’s more our thing.”

“Bring it here.”

She pushes the laptop closer to him, and he peers at it. I can already tell by the way his eyes widen that he likes what he sees.

I’ll be damned.

Stedfaust jabs a finger at her. “That—now *that* is exactly what I’m looking for, Bristol. It’s fun and whimsical. It fits with the brand. Can you work something up with a concept along those lines? That would be worth seeing and you already have mock-ups.”

She nods. “Of course. Right away, sir.”

Shocker. She sold him. He’s not even objectifying her like a crass old hound anymore.

Remind me to pick my jaw up off the floor.

Still. It wasn’t okay to pitch in *my* meeting without approval.

I thought I made it clear that her job was to show up, get the presentation working, switch the slides, and make sure

everyone's coffee was topped off, not play CEO.

This could've gone down very differently.

"We'll have new proofs for you by the end of the week, Chester," I say. He's happy and I'm not pushing it into next week when he's ready to buy now.

"Looking forward to it." He nods to his team and pushes back his chair. "We have a three o'clock, so sorry if we cut this short."

I nod at him. "I understand. Thanks for coming in. You'll have your proofs before the close of business on Friday."

Stedfaust and his team file out. My crew starts leaving, too, already rehashing the scene in frantic whispers. At least the office gossip mill will be on fire for the next week.

Hugo and the rest of the creative team leave while Sabrina throws the opened pet food away, tying the garbage bag shut for the janitors.

She picks up her laptop and steps toward the door.

"Miss Bristol, you can stay for a minute," I snap.

"Okay? Sure." She sits down reluctantly.

I let the silence yawn between us like a gaping chasm.

The imagination usually comes up with better punishments than anything I'd actually say.

Pity I can't subject her to all of it.

"Mr. Heron?" She starts, gnawing at her lip. "Is something wrong?"

"You're my EA, not part of Hugo's creative team," I finally growl. "But since Chester Stedfaust liked your idea more than he did staring at your tits like the pervert he is, you can spend the afternoon brainstorming with the senior designers. I'll still need your remaining administrative tasks done before midnight, of course. Congratulations. You're doing *two* jobs today. Got it?"

She purses her lips. "Whatever."

“You made your bed,” I say, trying not to soften at how pissed off she looks. “Lie in it.”

“You mean I saved your bed, Heron. Because he was *sooo* impressed with that stunt you pulled, spooning cat food in your face.” She cocks her head. “It might have packed more of a punch if you’d actually eaten it—at least the Meow Chow.”

Probably, but even I’m not taking that hit for the team.

I’m not willing to actually eat pet food purely because my creative designer brainfarted this project. That has to be what happened. Hugo’s better than this.

“I bought us time,” I rumble, my fingers flexing into fists.

“Yeah, I’m not denying you did, but he wasn’t sold and you know it. He’d just come back next week the way he was today. I bailed you out and you can’t even say thanks.” Her dark-brown eyes are all hellfire, this angry pixie who takes what I dish out and hurls it right back.

“My ‘thanks’ is called your paycheck since I did you an even bigger favor by hiring you when you have zero experience. You tell me where else someone with a year or two of work history earns your salary? I hired you to be my EA. If I wanted you in design, I’d have put you there, and you’d be making a third of your salary. I pay you to handle my administrative tasks and Hugo for creative solutions. Learn the difference. Understood?”

“Yes,” she hisses back. Her face goes red and her jaw clenches. “I understand just fine. May I be dismissed, *boss*?”

Mouthy again.

God, she annoys me.

If I were a more horrible man, I’d pull her closer, take her over my knee, hike up that dress and—

No. I’m not letting myself do this shit. Fantasizing about a new hire who turns my blood bullfighter red.

The only real answer to her question is yes, and that answer shifts the power to her. Except I don’t work for her. She works for me.

“I don’t quite think you understand everything,” I tell her, narrowing my eyes.

“What? I told you—”

“And I’m telling you. If you know what’s smart, you’ll take notes quietly in future meetings. I know your outburst worked out today, but if it hadn’t, we’d be having a very different conversation right now.”

“Are you sure? It sounds like no matter what I do, you love to find fault.” She grabs her laptop, huffing out a breath, and stands.

“Wait.”

Her free hand goes to her hip and she glares at me.

“What the hell is on your laptop? You can’t come to executive meetings looking like a college sophomore. Is that sticker supposed to be garlic?”

“Yep. Garlic wards off evil spirits and vampires. Like my boss, for one.”

Inwardly, I groan. This woman will be the death of me.

Don’t laugh.

Stay firm.

“And why the hell does your magic garlic have eyes and feet?”

She shrugs. “It’s cartoon garlic. I thought it was cute.”

Of course, it is. She’s a graphic designer at heart, after all.

“Remove it,” I tell her, folding my arms.

With one last roll of her eyes, she storms off. I don’t know if that was a yes or a no. But so help me God, if I see that garlic staring at me again, she’s gone.

Before I’ve packed up my laptop and left, she reappears in the doorway, chewing her bottom lip.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Umm—where’s the creative department where I’m supposed to go brainstorm?”

“I’ll walk you over before I go back to my office,” I say, without really thinking.

Why? I don’t escort people around here. That sounds like something I pay someone else for.

Whatever, though. I’ve already said it, and if she’s holding a grudge over my tirade, she knows how to hide it.

So I grab my stuff and walk her to Hugo’s department like a gentleman.

As I introduce her to the crowd, I think that goddamned garlic bulb on her laptop winks at me.

I swear. If it’s not gone tomorrow, she is, before she takes my sanity.

It’s a promise, and I’m a man of my word.

OceanofPDF.com

BAD OMEN (SABRINA)



The creative department already feels like home.

The meeting room is this candy-bright space with vivid splashes of blues and pinks, alongside funny memes plastered on the wall. Outside, the designers have cozy cubicles with little tchotchkes everywhere. It's vibrant, young, inspiring... and fun.

Not something I associated with HeronComm and its permanent-stick-up-the-ass owner until now.

"Wow! This place is awesome," I gush.

A woman in khakis and a blue three-quarter sleeve shirt laughs. "Says the woman who works in the executive suite. Everything's polished like a castle over there."

"More like a fancy dungeon," I grumble. I tried to put up one of my cat designs on my wall, and Heron made me take it down, calling it "unprofessional."

She holds out her hand. "Angie."

"Brina." I give her a handshake.

Hugo bounds up to us, out of breath as he usually is whenever I see him these days. It's not because he's a big guy. More like the poor guy is running for his life, wherever our boss is concerned. I feel for him.

"Oh, good. Intros are out of the way, I see." He looks at me. "Angie's my lead designer. Thank you so much for what you did back there. You really saved my bacon."

“No big deal.” I smile because it’s all I can do.

Anywhere else I’ve ever worked, it wouldn’t be a big deal by default to help out during a *team* meeting. But my dickhead boss seems to think he is the team.

Didn’t he get the memo every place that runs on corporate speak holds dear? *There’s no I in team!*

“It was a huge deal, Brina,” Hugo insists. He holds his hands above his head and then stretches them out. “You practically rescued my job back there.”

I laugh. “No way. He’s not that much of an ogre, right? You think he would’ve fired you on the spot?”

The grim look Hugo gives me over his glasses says everything.

Oof.

“Don’t worry about it,” I tell him. “Everyone has a bad concept now and then. It just happens, and if Mr. Heron hasn’t figured that out by now, he’d better. Creativity isn’t something you can turn on and off like a faucet. No one’s on point every single time.”

The smile leaves Angie’s face.

“So, uh...I’m not trying to scare you because I know you’re new here. But you don’t know Magnus Heron,” she says. “He doesn’t tolerate anything less than perfection every time. No excuses. Designers may have a bad day or crappy concept at other companies, but here...there’s no room for it.”

“That’s totally unrealistic,” I hiss, but knowing what I do about my boss, it’s not unrealistic for him—and that’s the problem. “Nobody hits home runs all the time. That’s just not how life works.”

Hugo and Angie exchange worried glances.

“Well, Heron is a hundred percent perfect a hundred percent of the time—”

“He *thinks* he is, you mean,” I tell her.

Crap. I didn’t mean to say that out loud.

I definitely didn't mean the sarcastic laugh that followed. I cover my mouth with my hands.

Angie and Hugo both laugh, finally more at ease.

"Um, please don't let that get back to him," I say.

"Of course not," Angie says with a grin.

"Never! Because no matter what you think, if you hadn't rescued that meeting, I'd be one more warning away from an unemployment claim today," Hugo says, scratching his shoulder nervously.

He's exaggerating, right?

The office can't really be this scared of Magnus the Ridiculous all the time.

Armstrong isn't. Neither is Ruby. They have stories about him and his big heart. It must exist behind his vault of a scowl...somewhere.

"I've got your back," I tell them. "If you need me to step up and tell him the truth, I will. He doesn't scare me."

"Not yet," Hugo whispers, looking away.

"Don't make it a habit. No one wants you gone, either." Angie runs a hand across her braids.

Hugo shakes his head. "I don't think he'll fire her unless she *really* tees him off. Mag puts up with stuff from her he wouldn't take from anyone else. I mean, she spit on him and he gave her a job. I was there!"

I laugh, but it does make me wonder. Why did he do that again?

And if I was supposed to be such a perfect fit, and I screwed up by inserting myself into that meeting...why didn't he fire me?

I shake my head. "When you put it that way—"

"If it was anyone else, you'd be explaining how the latte spray was an accident to a judge," Hugo says.

“Really? Over some coffee?” What the hell is wrong with this guy? And what’s so special about me? He did have his eyes on me the whole time. Or was it just my cleavage? “Maybe he needs to chill out and get his mind off torturing people. If it’ll help, I’ll start wearing a lower-cut top to help him check his ego at the door.”

Clearly, I’m joking, and I’m expecting a round of easy laughs.

It never comes.

Angie bites her lip. They both go quiet, exchanging a look like I’ve just dredged up a murder case.

Silence surrounds us.

“I’d better get to work. Everybody’s favorite Chicago hot dog chain wants their latest video edits done and sent over by tonight. I’m sure you two can finish up the feedback on the new mock-ups. Hit me later when you’ve got something.” Angie walks away.

Was it something I said?

Hugo looks around like he’s making sure it’s still just us.

“So, Brina...don’t do that. Please,” he says.

Huh? What did I say that caused such a dramatic reaction from a guy who was just profusely thanking me for saving his job?

“Do what?” I ask, cocking my head.

He scans the room again. “Don’t get risque with anything you wear to this office. I’m the last guy who wants to tell a girl what to wear, but anything lower cut than what you have on now...bad idea. Don’t even joke about it.”

Lower cut than what I have on? I look down. It’s basically a normal dress.

I’m almost offended, but I hold it in.

He lets out a huge sigh that shakes his massive shoulders. “Sorry, Brina. I’ve upset you. I can tell from your face. I’m just trying to help you the same way you did me, I promise.

After the crap that went down here years ago...let's just say Heron doesn't take the slightest hint of office fraternizing lightly."

"Fraternizing?" My brows go up at the strange, heavy word. "Is this like the military or something? And what happened?"

Hugo shakes his head. "I can't talk about it. I've already said more than I should. *No one* around here talks about it for a reason."

I look up at the old-school clock overhead, what looks like an antique from an old fire station or something. It hasn't moved for the last five minutes. Oh, God.

"Your clock's broken."

"Huh?" Hugo turns and glances over his shoulder, then looks back at his phone. "Dang. Looks like you're right. We'll have to swap out the batteries."

As if I needed a sign from the universe that's as subtle as a falling piano to the head. My 'silly superstitions,' as Paige would say, exist for a reason.

This conversation is a warning. A bad omen. The broken clock proves it.

Trouble is, I'm not sure what exactly I'm being warned about.

What dark secret has them walking on eggshells?

"Can you at least tell me why he's so up in arms over women's clothing?" I blurt it out before I can stop myself. I have to know.

Is he just a pig on top of being an arrogant asshole? Bizarrely, he doesn't really strike me as the type—not like that Chester Stedfaust guy who couldn't rip his greasy eyes off me.

I take a deep breath. "You're saying he doesn't like women wearing sexy clothes, or what, Hugo?"

"Basically, yeah. It's not because he's psycho or a gross old fogey. It's just...he has his reasons, and everybody who's

been here long enough respects the rules.” Hugo nods, sweat beading on his brow. “He hates flirting or anything that’d encourage it in this office. He’s axed people over it. *A lot of people.*”

For a second, we share a gaze, Hugo’s bulging eyes pleading to move on to something else.

Fine.

Time to end this awkward conversation and my own boiling confusion.

“Well, thanks for the heads up.” I point at the lightboard. “Let’s get started on the concepts. I have a lot to do once we’re finished here.”

“I bet. He’s hard as hell on EAs.” Hugo gives me a dry, sympathetic smile.

Don’t I know it?

I follow Hugo back to Angie’s office, where she sets aside her video edits for the fast-food chain. We take the dreaming pet concept and run with it.

We call the campaign Doggy Dreams and alter the original idea so the dogs eat Woof Meow Chow up in the clouds while they’re still asleep. The cats climbing in the treetops are on a hunt for their Meow Chow fix. With the concept nailed down, it’s a matter of choosing fonts, images, and colors, then smoothing them to perfection.

“What about a gradient blue?” I point to the sky. “It’ll be darker on this side and start to fade across the screen with multiple hues. It should make the image more colorful and the words will pop.”

Angie makes the changes on her laptop. The color contrast is brilliant, but it’s the time stamp at the bottom of her screen that catches my attention.

“Shit. It’s past five. I have to get back to my desk, or I’ll never get through everything by midnight,” I say, rocketing out of my seat.

“You’re an awesome thinker. Pop in anytime you want,” Hugo says, earning a grin from me. It’s nice to hear sincere praise for my skills after the way I was discharged from my last job.

And if I ever get a break in the future, I might just join them again.

I love graphic design. Spending an afternoon in this room makes the minutia I have to slog through the rest of the evening almost bearable.

It also leaves me wondering what the hell Magnus Heron is hiding.

~

SINCE THE WOOF MEOW CHOW meeting, I only see Heron in passing the rest of the week.

Even though he’s effing horrible, I kinda miss sparring with him.

Shocker.

Still, it’s six o’clock on Friday morning, and I’ve worked over sixty hours this week. I’m not complaining about force-of-nature job demands. I’m already numb to it the way anybody living in tornado alley expects to lose a roof every so often.

I’m just hoping I can wrap up everything and be home in time for dinner tonight with Paige.

I might pass out if I work past midnight one more day.

Thank God for the weekend.

After the debacle with the ‘bad art project,’ Heron wanted the proofs sent directly to his email, and I’d send them on to the client.

When Hugo sends them over, I open up the slides and go through them one more time, holding my breath. Some of the changes I advised weren’t implemented, and a few slides seem glitchy.

Damn.

We can't afford to upset this client a second time. That isn't going to go over well. But the ruthless bossman made it clear, I'm not part of the design team, so what can I do?

My gut twists.

I don't want to send subpar work for the deadline and risk anyone's job, but I also don't want to tattle and make Heron rip poor Hugo or Angie's heads off.

I settle on a half measure.

Opening the slides, I mark up the changes I'd make. Then I send the originals and my markup to Magnus with "Final Draft" in the subject line.

He wanted the proofs sent to him for a reason. Let him make a decision.

That's above my pay grade. I almost expect to be growled at for doing the extra work of making corrections. But with the email sent, I get back to my other work, trying not to dread the response.

Less than an hour later, my messenger pings.

Magnus: Accept all changes you've suggested except for slide 18. You'll get an email with the verbiage for that one. Good catch.

Holy...

Did he just give me a compliment?

Whatever.

I shouldn't feel like a happy puppy. The fact that he's satisfied gets this off my plate and I'm free to move on to the next item on my endless to-do list.

Amazingly, I get home just in time for dinner, around ten-ish when Paige likes to eat.

When I open the door, I'm blown away by the savory scent of fresh tomatoes, basil, oregano, garlic, and warm baked bread.

“O-M-G! Something smells like heaven,” I sing, stepping inside home sweet home.

My stomach tries to eat itself, and I realize the heavy cream and sugar with my coffee this morning are the only calories I’ve had all day.

“Who are you? Home before midnight?” Paige bounces up from the couch with a smile. “I made dinner. I thought we could eat together since I haven’t seen you in a week, but by eight o’clock I was starving. Sorry!”

“No problem.” My job shouldn’t starve my roommate too. “Thanks for making food.”

She stands. “Are you just getting off work?”

I nod.

“Yes, and my feet are *killing* me.” I pick up my foot, unstrap her heel, let it fall to the floor, and then take off the other shoe. “Tell me I’ll get used to these things?”

She gives me a pained smile, and I wonder if generously loaning them wasn’t her only reason for letting them go.

“So, have you really been at work all those times I texted at night?” she asks. “I was about to file a missing person’s report!”

“Unfortunately,” I say, walking to the couch. I drop down, suddenly boneless. “He sends a driver for me every morning. I’m at the office by five. One morning, the driver came at four, because he had half a dozen stops he wanted me to make before work.”

“Holy shit. You must be starving. Let me get you a plate.” She heads for the kitchen and comes back a minute later with a plate piled high with lasagna, salad, and garlic bread.

Yeah, I’m ready to eat my own weight in good Italian food.

I dive in and don’t stop, letting the TV wash over us until I’m almost half-done.

“Paige...I’m having an orgasm. I can’t believe I forgot how good you cook when you’ve got the time. Thank gawd, too. It’s the first real meal I’ve eaten since I started this job. It’s nice to chomp on something that isn’t frozen.”

She laughs and sits back down on the couch beside me after fetching us a couple glasses of wine.

“I’m kinda worried about you,” she whispers. “If you’re going to work at five every day...what time are you coming home? I know you’re not here at eleven most nights when I crash.”

“Well, I’m supposed to be done by midnight, but it’s usually closer to one a.m. Though, I think it might be better soon. First week’s the hardest, right? I’m getting the hang of it. In a week or two, I could totally be rolling in a couple hours earlier.”

“You’re literally working, what, fifteen hours a day? The man seems horrible. I still can’t believe you’re taking his shit after the way he talked down to you, girl.”

I smile at Paige doing what Paige does best—getting angry for me.

Of course, she’d never need to work for someone like Magnus Heron who shows his coffee cup more respect than any person.

“But a couple hundred grand a year is an insane amount of money,” she tells me, taking a long sip of wine. “My dad barely makes twice that and he’s been working for decades.”

Paige is a rich kid, no question.

But if her dad only makes a little more in a top role after thirty-something years, ugh. I can never quit this job. I’m stuck with Lucifer.

I sigh. “I’m not sure he’s paying me enough to deal with his BS forever. I’m not the only one to think that. He has a hard time keeping assistants.”

“Is it that bad? We knew it was weird when we scoped it out after they randomly asked you to interview, but...I was

hoping it wouldn't be horrendous. You're there all day. You should snoop around and find out what made this jackass such a raving loon."

I give her a tired smile.

"When would I find the time? I'm there by five responding to emails and sorting through client files to see who needs what. Some days, I forget to eat lunch. If I do, it's at my desk, and this is the first time I've gotten home before I turn into a very tired pumpkin. I don't have time to care about why he's a mega-prick." I shovel a forkful of lasagna in my mouth, burying my rage in delicious food. "I'm so drained, Paige. Like if I don't get twelve hours of sleep this weekend, you're gonna find me with no pulse."

She winces. "Hey, at least you have a weekend?"

"Careful." I flood my mouth with sorely needed wine. "Don't jinx me."

"You know what, screw it." Paige picks up her phone. "I'm Googling your boss. We're going to get to the bottom of this. Maybe we'll find the asshat's kryptonite."

I swallow a chunk of lasagna and laugh. "I thought we already did that before I started working there?"

She shrugs. "I did a preliminary search just to see if it was legit. Time to find out why people are so scared of him." She taps away at her phone while I eat. "Oohhh, read this."

"What?" As soon as the word falls out, I bite off a chunk of warm garlic bread.

"I just sent you an article. *The Magnum of Advertising*. Apparently, that's what they call your jerk-wad boss."

My eyes roll so hard it hurts.

"I'm finishing dinner before I read anything that puffs up his ego," I say. "Magnus Heron has gotten enough of my time this week. I deserve one good meal before he steals more attention."

Paige stares at her phone, her eyes ticking over the screen.

“When he inherited HeronComm—wait. Inherited? Oh my God. And this ass thinks he’s really something? We’d all be CEOs at thirty if we got our daddy’s company,” she quips.

I nod, angrily washing the bread down with wine.

“And it says here...the place wasn’t doing as well when he took over. It was more like a run-of-the-mill ad agency stuck in the mud. Just a handful of big clients,” she tells me, quickly summarizing the article. “He built a machine. They call him a shark. Probably why the jackass thinks he’s some wizard.”

“Define not doing well?” I take another bite of lasagna, hating the fact that I’m curious.

“It was hemorrhaging money and had trouble attracting new clients, I guess. But when Magnus took over, he got attention any way possible. He jumped on every new digital toy he could find. The firm grew thanks to his antics, and today he’s well known as ‘the Magnum of Advertising.’”

Magnum, my ass.

“Oh, antics. Sure. You mean like stinking up a meeting room because he opened cat food so he could pretend he was brave enough to eat it?” I snort.

That was so dumb, even if it was kinda funny.

Stedfaust wasn’t even impressed enough to jump back on board. He was a maybe at best, and in my experience, maybe means no.

“He does worse things than that,” Paige says slowly. “Like...he hired this Instagram influencer, a big-time model named Mariska Crista to pretend they were engaged. All so he could land a freaking press conference. He wanted to get publicity for a new deal with a major startup. ‘Success yields success,’ so says the jerk.”

If only it weren’t true.

It’s far easier to be successful once you already are, but most people don’t say it out loud. Especially since he inherited his company. He’d be way less successful, I’m sure, if his dad never owned it.

With my food gone, I set my plate on the coffee table and roll up into a ball on the couch. I can rest while we talk.

“Tell me that model thing blew up in his face. Pretty please?” I ask.

“I mean...looks like Mariska called him King Asshole in a blog post and the nickname stuck around, so I’d say he didn’t walk out of it unscathed. But he got to talk about his tech deal with an electric car company that’s everywhere now, and that scored him several more huge clients.” She grits her teeth.

Awesome. Somehow, I knew there wouldn’t be a happy, humble pie ending.

Magnus Heron is the devil.

Nothing gives him the comeuppance he deserves. He wouldn’t allow it, and I’m pretty sure he’s got a black magic spell of protection over him or something.

Paige scrolls down on her phone, stops, and smiles.

“Oh, looks like he does some charity work.” She shrugs. “He donates money to some literary causes and a private school, I should say. Here, I’ll send you this one, too.”

Charity. Right. Because rich kids at academies always need more help.

“He’s probably after the tax deductions,” I say bitterly.

She shakes her head. “No, looks like most people think he does it to improve his image. No one’s really fooled, though. People still call him King Asshole. Thanks, Mariska, for that one.”

I snicker. “Yeah, thanks. At least everyone knows he’s the biggest jerkface in the history of ever.”

My brain whips through several memories, rapid-fire.

The conversation I had with Armstrong the first day. He tiptoed around some mystery scandal on the way to the coffee shop. Then Hugo danced around it like a man on fire.

“So, here’s something weird. Everyone at work talks about this terrible scandal from a long time ago, but no one wants to

dish what happened. Do you see anything like that?” I ask.

Paige frowns and spends the next few minutes pushing her Google-Fu to its limits before she says, “Nope. Not finding anything besides his dumb PR stunts.”

“Not like it matters, anyway. I don’t have another high-paying job lined up.”

My phone pings, but I’m too tired to look.

“Can you see who’s sending me what?” I ask.

She takes my phone.

“It’s probably just my articles, don’t you wo—oh.” Her mouth pulls into a thin line. “Speak of the devil. You’ve got mail from Mr. Maggot.”

“God,” I moan, sitting up. I snatch the phone from her and open the email with my head already throbbing.

To: Sabrina Bristol

From: Magnus Heron

Priority: HIGH

Subject: LA Excursion

MISS BRISTOL,

THIS IS your notice that I’m pitching a large fashion design client in L.A. this weekend and it requires your immediate assistance. I regret the short notice, however, that’s the way this outfit rolls.

So pack your personal effects and be ready for an early flight. Armstrong will be waiting on you at four o’clock sharp. L.A. is considerably warmer than Chicago this time of the year, so you’d do yourself a favor to travel in layers.

Now for the good news: we'll be back in time for work Monday morning. See you at the airport.

MAGNUS Heron

CEO of HeronComm Inc.

KILL ME.

And that last line makes me want to gag. Because the world might end if I wasn't back in time to fetch his flipping coffee.

"What. The. Crap." It's all I can babble out.

Poor Paige looks at me like I've just snapped, and honestly?

Maybe I have.

I hit respond and start typing out my resignation.

"What is it? What are you doing? Brina?" Her voice cracks with worry.

"He...he wants me to pack my shit and be ready to go to the airport at four in the freaking morning on my day off—tomorrow! Probably so I can be his gofer all weekend."

"Oh, no. I didn't jinx you—I swear!" She holds up her hands with a defensive smile, claiming innocence.

"Relax. I'm not blaming you."

I may be superstitious, but I'm not a huge bitch about it.

"I'm so sorry, but wait! What are you doing?"

"What else?" I don't look up from the screen. "I'm giving him a two-word resignation. Guess what the first word is? It starts with a big fat 'F.'"

"Brina, no! Don't do it." Paige lunges over the couch and body-slams me, wrestling the phone away. "Wait an hour. If you still want to do it, fine. But you can't just throw away two hundred thousand dollars a year without thinking it through,

lady. Yes, he's a jackass, a tyrant, and a stuck-up suit, but if you can make it even six months working for him...you'll probably have a gold key to any job in the city."

Why, why, *why* does she have to be the voice of reason?

"You're right," I grind out, taking a deep breath. "Six months is roughly a hundred and eighty days. I've got five down. I can do this...I think."

I pause, imagining those days stretched out before me, longer than a Kardashian's eyelashes. Paige looks like she wants to give me a big hug, and that's when I crack.

"Oh, what the hell am I saying? I can't do it! I just..." I reach for my fork, considering a good place to stab myself and end this torment.

"You can, girl, and you will. Think about it. Think about the *money*. When you get your first paycheck, it has to get easier. I promise."

Her big green eyes catch my gaze, and for a second we share this almost sisterly mind-meld where I try to steal a little of the knock 'em out energy Paige offers.

A slow sigh slips past my lips. I'm talked down from the ledge. For now.

She's right. Grabbing my phone, I head for my room.

"Hey, where are you going?" Paige asks.

"To pack my stuff for this circus," I say. "You won me over."

LUCKY PENNY (MAGNUS)



I don't relish the idea of parking my Tesla at the airport, but I sent Armstrong to fetch Sabrina and the rest of my team. There's no time for too many stops.

I'm also not having anyone climbing into a cab alone with a driver neither of us knows at four a.m. with a high-stakes meeting on the line.

I leave the house at three thirty because I'm driving across town to make a single pit stop before O'Hare International. Sabrina Bristol has no clue how much she owes me.

Then again, I owe her for saving the Woof Meow Chow account, even if I'll never admit it to her face. That's the *only* reason I'm doing this.

Yeah right, Mag Heron, you've turned into a sucker, a prickling voice whispers in the back of my mind. Desperate to make a woman you can never have smile like she doesn't want to shank you in the throat.

I park my car in front of Sweeter Grind and dash in.

The place smells more like sugar than coffee. How does she even drink this stuff?

"Can I help you, Mr. Heron?" the barista asks, a hipster kid with a bushy beard and more piercings than freckles. "Wow, it's really you! I didn't believe it when the boss said we were opening half an hour early."

"I need a large cinnamon latte and a bear claw to go," I snap off, throwing my Centurion card on the counter with a

metallic clatter. “And if there’s a way to keep that drink extra insulated, I’d appreciate it.”

“Of course. What kind of bear claw?”

“There are kinds of bear claws?” I ask. Who the hell has time for this?

“Sure, the filled bear claws are almond butter, cream cheese, and huckleberry jam—a Heart’s Edge favorite. Then we have the original that isn’t filled at all. They’re all there in the case if you want to have a look. That always helps some folks decide.” He smiles and points to a pastry case.

I blink like a fish out of water. People actually put mental effort into choosing bear claws?

I follow his finger with my eyes and study them closely.

“Give me one of every kind,” I say. “A whole box.”

He quickly packages them up, and one closely resembles the pastry Sabrina munched on the day I met her.

“That’ll be thirty-five dollars,” the barista says.

I got almost a dozen pastries bigger than my hand and a large coffee for that much? No wonder this place reeks of sugar rather than being filled with the aroma of beans kissed by the Hawaiian trade winds and roasted to perfection.

Clearly, I need to train Miss Bristol’s palate.

“Tip yourself a hundred bucks and hurry up,” I tell him, tapping my foot impatiently as his eyes light up.

“Yes, sir!”

There isn’t much time, but I can’t resist one more stop at The Bean Bar for a carafe of real coffee—it’s too long of a flight for the instant stuff they keep on board—on my way to the airport. As usual, I’m still the first arrival.

I check in with the pilot, load my stuff on the sleek Gulfstream jet, and go stand on the tarmac.

Every now and then, I get a straggler, and I like to be calling or texting before we’re late. Ruby’s the next to arrive,

as always. Her leopard print dress accents her usual good fashion sense today.

She runs a hand through her hair. “I still don’t see why HR needs to be here. Don’t you have a sales team to pitch for you?”

“Having you around keeps everyone on their toes.”

“Delightful. I love being the one everyone hates,” she huffs out.

“Don’t flatter yourself.” I chuckle, leading her up the stairs and inside the plane, where I open the box waiting on the table. “It’s not you they hate. Care for a bear claw?”

She snatches one out with that huckleberry filling. Her first bite leaves her a little more at ease.

“Believe me, I know. Your name comes up in an HR grievance at least once a month. But I can’t fire the majority owner and CEO, so you’re safe. As much as I’d love to stand here and chat, you know my limits, Mag. I’m finding an overstuffed seat. Wake me up when we’re in L.A.”

“Go on.” I nod at her.

Hugo, Angie, and Dave, the Sales Director, carpool. I watch them arrive, back on the tarmac again, enjoying the bustle of planes taking off. I’ve always had a thing for aviation.

I’m about to call Armstrong to find out if my new EA made everyone else late when the black town car pulls up. Sabrina jumps out behind a few other designers. She’s wearing blue sweats, a pink tank top, and flip-flops with a lavender overnight bag.

“You’re wearing sweats to a business meeting for a fashion brand?” I ask.

“I love finding out I’m working at four a.m. on Saturday morning after eleven on Friday night as much as any gal, so yeah. That a problem, Mr. Heron? I’m going to wear clothes I can actually sleep in until right before we land, then I’ll change. Or do I need permission for that, too?”

Her claws are out today for good reason.

I offer her a real smile, for once, shaking my head.

“Your call, Miss Bristol. I have nothing pressing for the flight.”

Still, who wastes a four-hour flight sleeping? I couldn't do it if I tried.

She nods. “Shouldn't we get moving? What time does the flight leave?”

“The plane is right behind us. Get in. You'll sit at the front of the plane with me.” I use my thumb to motion to the jet behind us.

“*That's* the plane?” Her eyebrow goes up. “But we have to go through security, don't we?”

“I see this is your first time on a private jet.” I smile. “Because it's our plane, we just check in with the pilot. Already done.”

She grins, rubbing her eyes. “So we don't have to do the whole barefoot cattle thing?”

I laugh at her word choice.

“Not today. Or ever, if I have anything to say about it.”

“Thank God!” She jumps and almost drops the overnight bag, but catches it before it slaps the ground.

Then, before I know what's happening, her little arms are around me, squeezing for dear life.

We share this awkward smile before her face heats and she melts away.

“Sorry,” she whispers. “I couldn't help it.”

I try like hell not to register how good her hands felt pressed to my back.

Fuck.

Then as she turns, I watch her take a step, still struggling with the bag as her laptop strap swings back and forth on her

neck. I move so I'm right beside her, slip my hand under the straps, and lift the overnight bag away.

"I've got it."

Just like that, *I'm* carrying my assistant's bag on board as we head up the rollaway stairs.

Ironic.

She sits beside me in case anything critical comes up. I get the feeling she doesn't fly much, even commercial, so I give her the window seat.

It's a waste for me, anyway. I sit down and pull out my laptop, getting down to business.

Sabrina grabs a pillow and blanket from her overnight bag and goes to sleep. She has this cute little snore like a whistle, which starts even before we're taxiing down the runway.

I usually knock out a heap of work on these flights, but I can't focus today.

Listening to that cute whistle of a snore and occasionally glancing over to watch her while she sleeps drains my attention.

Damn.

Why is it like this? I should wake her up.

We both have prep work, even if it can wait a few hours. She's going to have a hard time getting stuff done before the meeting if she wastes the entire flight and drags herself off the plane in L.A.

Unfortunately, the young woman looks so peaceful and exhausted I can't find it in me to shake her awake.

Focus, I tell myself. Your ad managers have been drooling over this brand for weeks. This could unlock billions long-term.

It's also the parent company of the subsidiary I barely finished the ad shoot for because I was so damn busy arguing with Sabrina Bristol in the park.

I shake my head, calling the flight attendant over.

She arrives a second later. “Yes, Mr. Heron?”

“I need my dark roast Kona I brought on board. Black.” I wave her away with my hand and stare at my laptop.

“Oh? Oooh.” Sabrina whimpers in a soft tone.

I glance over, my body hardening. The look on her face is equal parts seductive and angelic.

A wicked part of me hurts to know what she’s dreaming about.

The edge of my face warms at the thought. I grin because I don’t blush.

I can’t rip my eyes off her face, the magnetic flutter of her long lashes.

Those lush, biteable lips part softly.

Her head rolls against my shoulder, then silky chestnut hair brushes my arm, and two seconds later, I’m so fucking hard I could rip through my trousers.

This is damn wrong.

Good luck stopping the sudden fire in my veins, the way my eyes narrow, the hunger I feel with every single breath.

Then it’s her turn to take a deep breath. She shivers as it releases, then blinks her eyes a few times.

That rush of seduction washes away, bleeds back into innocence, and with each blink she becomes my assistant again. Not this delicate pixie thing straight from a wet dream, ripe for pillaging.

I clear my throat loudly as she opens her eyes, fully conscious, and takes in her surroundings.

Goddamn.

Sabrina—*Miss Bristol*—works for me. This shouldn’t be so fraught, but it is.

I force a grin since I can’t shift back into my normal poker face. That’s a first, too, and I don’t like it one bit.

“Welcome to the land of the living,” I tell her.

“Um—hi,” she says, picking herself up from my shoulder, her eyes widening. “Oh, no. Sorry.”

“Quite alright,” I whisper.

Lies.

What’s still happening below my belt is the very definition of not alright.

The flight attendant returns and sets my coffee down next to my laptop. She leans past me and goes to Sabrina’s side.

“Hello, Miss. You were asleep when I came by for refreshments.”

“Oh, that would be great,” Sabrina says. “Can I get some water?”

She nods. “Would you like your pastry heated or cold?”

“Pastry? Is it in a fridge or at room temperature?”

“Room temperature,” the flight attendant says.

“Cold is fine.” Sabrina drops the blanket around her and pushes it back in the bag.

“Would you like coffee as well?”

Sabrina reclines in her overstuffed leather chair. “Yes, please. If you could put it in an IV that would be perfect.”

“I’m afraid this flight only serves drinks orally.” The attendant winks. “I have a dark roast Kona and a cinnamon latte today. What would you like?”

“Cinnamon latte, please.”

“Coming right up.” The flight attendant walks away.

I look over at Sabrina until she meets my eyes. “You know those sugary lattes are the reason you think you need a caffeine drip.”

“Coffee’s so bitter. I can’t handle it without the milk and sugar,” she says.

I take a long swallow of my drink.

“Coffee with sugar in it doesn’t even give me the same buzz.”

She laughs, flipping her brown hair back over her shoulder. “I’m not surprised the black coffee isn’t too bitter for you. Kind of seems like a perfect match.”

“Touché,” I say. Time to get serious now. We have a deal to close. “I sent you a list of things I need before the meeting this afternoon. We’re going to secure this brand if it kills us, because this could be the key to unlocking the entire fashion industry for HeronComm. I’ve been vying for an in there forever, but they tend to stick with old-school New York ad companies.”

She puts two fingers to her head and salutes me. “Yeah, I glanced at everything you sent over last night. I’ll have it done within the hour.”

She reaches down and pulls her laptop out of her messenger bag with a yawn.

Fine, I’m impressed. I didn’t expect her to read her emails before the flight. But does she have to be so snarky?

The flight attendant returns. “Here you are.”

Brina looks up and smiles. She takes the latte I had sealed in a thermos and the pastry from the flight attendant and sets them down before she sees the logo. “Oh my gosh! This is Sweeter Grind. How?”

Her smile rivals the sun, just as intense as the happy gleam in her eyes.

“I made a stop this morning,” I say flatly.

She needs to know it was nothing.

“Well, thank you for stocking the plane with my favorites.” She picks up the latte and takes a long gulp.

Her excitement disarms me so much I decide not to mention her crude taste in coffee.

She breaks off a piece of her pastry and stuffs it in her heart-shaped mouth, melting back in her seat with a grateful

smile. I'm glad it perks her up and puts an extra jolt into her work for the remainder of the flight.

When we land, she struggles to pick her bag up again, so I carry hers and my own.

"Do you think I have time to order another coffee before the car comes?" she asks.

I look at my watch. "Make it fast."

Sabrina saunters off and Ruby steps up beside me.

"I'm kind of jealous," she says. "I've worked here for how many years? And I've never once had the boss carrying my luggage."

I laugh it off with a shrug.

"She couldn't pick it up. If I'd made her, she would've dropped it twenty times and it would take us all day to get out of here. This was easier."

Ruby watches like a hawk while Sabrina exits and heads inside the airport. "She doesn't have the usual bounce in her step. Poor girl. She's exhausted."

"She went for a coffee run, and she was well caffeinated during the flight. She'll be back to normal in time for the meeting."

"Let's hope it's the same for you," Ruby grumbles.

But before I can pull her back to wonder what the hell she means, she's gone, pulling her roller suitcase behind her.

Is it that obvious?

Frowning, I march off the plane, telling myself this bag carrying business is the last favor I do anyone today.

Nice Guy Mag isn't who I am, much less what anyone else is used to.

I'm sure as hell not stumbling through another client meeting like that near-disaster with Stedfaust, and all because my EA turns me into something I'm not.

The stakes are too high.

I hope Miss Bristol enjoyed the truce.

If I have to growl and evil eye my whole team into locking down this client, so be it.

“SO LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT,” Millie Lindt, the CEO of Jazzle Razzle Designs says, leaning forward. “I’m supposed to give you a million-dollar budget for some Instagram posts?”

“Miss Lindt, the ads are all yours, and so is the budget. You can use them wherever you want, but I’ll *guarantee* they get picked up by the biggest influencers. That’s what’ll get you traction you won’t get anywhere else. You have a young, hip audience. They’re all on the Gram and TikTok.”

She cocks her head. Her platinum-blond hair ripples in the California sun streaming through the massive glass windows.

“A million dollars is a lot of money. You’re telling me you can guarantee results? I’ve never had another marketer make that claim.”

Technically, I can, as outlandish as it sounds.

We’ve never once had a client fail to see growth.

Still, she’s right, no other ad company guarantees results. Not if they’re in their right minds.

In theory, it’s impossible. There are too many variables. I don’t own the advertising platforms, which could glitch, and the influencers don’t have to play ball.

I also have zero control over other factors, like the formidable competitors in her space or Miss Lindt’s own quirks. She loves politics and her father is a governor. She isn’t shy about sharing her views, which could piss people off any time.

“I’ll tell you what,” I say, folding my hands. “If you don’t see at least a ten percent increase in sales from this campaign, we’ll create your next three ad campaigns free. No bull.”

Ms. Lindt meets my eyes. “If your million-dollar run is unsuccessful, what use do I have for another campaign?”

My phone vibrates against my leg.

Fuck. What now? I tap the screen under the table and look down.

Sabrina: Tell her the majority of our clients see a 20-30% increase in three weeks of the campaign's release, and when that campaign runs for up to three months, the sales increase can go to seventy-five percent. Jazzle Razzle would almost have to try to stop our campaign from driving their sales through the roof.

She's right about everything, but before I can mull it over, my phone pings again.

Sabrina: I mean, I'd tell her myself, but EAs don't talk in meetings, or so I've heard...

Damn this girl.

She needs to learn there's a time and place for her smart-assery, even if it's wrapped in wisdom I *will* take seriously. I look up at Sabrina across the table. She raises her face just above her laptop, hiding a smirk, and returns to typing like mad.

“Sorry, forgot to mute my phone. Miss Lindt, ten percent is the *minimum* increase most of our clients see. Our Return on Ad Spend often sails north of fifty percent roughly a month after a campaign's launch. When clients let it run for three months, the sales increase can go as high as seventy-five percent. Let HeronComm send your numbers to the moon. That's revenue for new product lines and new hires. Our results speak for themselves, and I'm confident they'll talk your language, too. The real question is, how confident are *you* in your team and its products?”

Lindt tumbles back and laughs so hard her chair rolls a few inches. “Oh, my. You're good, Mr. Heron. Show me these ads.”

I do exactly that, with pleasure. Halfway through, as she's complimenting everything, I hear Hugo breathe a bearish sigh of relief.

It's almost too perfect.

She particularly loves everything we shot in the park after I shooed a crazy, latte-spitting woman off her park bench.

The meeting ends without a hitch, and when I shake her hand, it's my turn to silently breathe a sigh of relief.

I'll admit it. After the Woof Meow Chow stumble, today had me worried.

Hugo grins at my side so hard it looks like his cheeks hurt. He needed a win today.

Lindt pushes her chair back. "Thank you all for coming out to see me today. I'll have that contract sent over by Monday."

A minute later, we're off, with the entire team swapping high fives behind me on the way to the elevator.

As we walk out of the glassy building into the L.A. sun, I tell Sabrina, "Nice job, Miss Bristol. Your performance note was on point and well received."

She doesn't say anything, just gives me a blank look.

"Nothing?" I grumble.

She rolls her eyes. "You're so funny."

Damn. I tried to give her a compliment, didn't I?

"I saved your ass back there, Mr. Heron. Again," she clips, casting a smile that's anything but friendly. "You're welcome. Is that what you're looking for?"

My turn to roll my eyes now.

"Please. I would've sealed that deal either way, but I told you, I'm grateful for your help. I've done *hundreds* of multimillion-dollar negotiations long before your sass showed up." I reach up, jerking at my collar to loosen it in this heat—or maybe it's just the presence of one insufferable assistant who makes my blood run hot for outrageous reasons.

"Three words," she says with a shrug. "Woof Meow Chow."

"That was an off day. A rarity," I grunt, lowering my voice so Hugo doesn't hear us. "And to be fair, that was far more the

design concept than anything I did.”

“If you say so, boss.” She’s wise not to meet my eyes after wagging that stinger of a tongue.

If she did, I’m sure she’d see flames shooting out to rival Hades. I’d fire her on the spot, if only she weren’t so damn good at her job.

We walk to the curb in icy silence and wait for our charter limo.

Ruby comes up behind me. “Hey, Mag, got a minute?”

I turn. “Sure.”

She glances at the other employees, clearing her throat.

“Over here, away from the team.” She walks almost back to the door, heels clicking.

Not good. I follow her, wondering what’s up.

“What is it?” I whisper as soon as we’re alone.

“What the hell are you doing to Sabrina Bristol?”

Wait. I did something? *To* Sabrina?

If memory serves, I sent her my driver and drove myself to the airport *after* going twenty minutes out of the way to make sure she had that stupid coffee flavored sugar milk. I even got her bear claws, for God’s sake.

“Excuse me?” I growl, trying to suppress the edge in my voice.

“She looks like hell. The warnings are there. She’s already twice as miserable as your other assistants looked right before they quit. Quit, you doofus! Do you hear me? At this rate, I doubt she lasts a month.”

“Nonsense. She’s doing just fine. Better than most EAs ever have. You’re being ridiculous, Ruby, stirring up drama over—”

“Watch your step with that bullshit. If you had a male HR manager, would you call him a drama queen for raising concerns about talent retention? You know every single one of

your past EAs weren't *all* problem children, right? It's statistically impossible, even if you are King Asshole."

A growl lodges in my throat and my nose wrinkles at Mariska Crista's old nickname. Then I sigh.

"Forgive me. I didn't mean to imply you were doing anything less than your job—looking out for my dumb ass," I tell her.

I may be a prick, but I'm man enough to admit when I'm wrong.

Also, she may have a point about running Miss Bristol raw, but that isn't my problem.

She's a smart, capable young woman. She knew what she was getting herself into, and under my tough love, she's thriving.

"Magnus..."

"Ruby, your concerns are noted. Sabrina's fine. So far, her work is impeccable. She beats most deadlines, and I'm even willing to put up with her goddamned attitude. If she were slipping, I'd notice, and remedy it immediately. I promise you."

"Did you just call her Sabrina?" Ruby's eyes dart up.

My jaw tightens.

"Regardless, she's bone-tired. You're working her to death," Ruby hisses. "She's twenty-three and has bags under her eyes thicker than mine."

Ouch. I had a good look at her face this morning and hadn't noticed. But when I glance over at her now...she does look frayed.

Then again, appearances are often deceiving.

"No way. If she were truly that tired, she'd be making mistakes left and right. And given her background, I expected a learning curve. So far, it's barely materialized. If she were as tired as you say, we'd be discussing her work quality, not her stamina."

Ruby places a hand on her hip. “Mag, not every mistake happens on paper or over email. You’re smart enough to know that. This is the best EA you’ve had in a long time. I’m just advising you that if you don’t want to be doing interviews again soon, cut the crap and give the girl a break.”

“She’s fine,” I insist, locking my gaze on her again to prove my point.

Her arms are crossed in front of her, and she leans against a concrete plant holder, slumping just slightly. She yawns, and something on the ground catches her attention.

I watch her bend over, scoop it off the ground, and come up holding a piece of copper between her thumb and forefinger.

“Lucky penny!” she squeals, as if she just struck gold. “Penny, penny bring me luck, I’m the one who picked you up.”

I look back at Ruby who’s also watching this whole scene.

Ruby raises a brow as if to say, *told ya*.

I don’t respond. But dammit, I may need to consider her advice.

Our limo pulls up a second later and we all slide in. Miss Bristol shows her lucky penny off to anyone and everyone. They humor her, but the second her back is turned, their eyes morph to pity, confusion, concern.

Fuck me sideways.

The girl needs a break.

She scoots in beside me as the car gets going, beaming at the thing in her palm. “I found a lucky penny. Seems like a good sign for the Jazzle Razzle deal!”

I’d ask if she’s drunk, but I’ve been with her most of the day and know the answer.

She’s only had enough coffee to tweak out a horse.

Maybe there’s more to this and I’m missing something.

“So I’ve heard,” I say quietly. “What makes it so lucky?”

“If you find a penny heads up, you *have* to pick it up. The rest of the day, you’ll have good luck.”

“You know it probably has city germs on it. You could get sick, Miss Bristol, and your treasure would be nothing but a curse.”

“Come on, Heron.” She sticks out her tongue. “Do you always have to be such a huge downer?”

I don’t answer. She moves to an empty seat across from me and falls asleep again.

Okay. It’s worse than I thought. She’s damn near talking in nursery rhymes.

Ruby’s right, and I admit I’m being a downer over something harmless.

Fine, dammit.

I’ll make sure she gets her break. A well-rested employee is a happy one, and happy employees are statistically more productive, longer lasting, and yes...

Less insane.

OceanofPDF.com

THE FIREMAN'S PREGNANT TINKERBELL (SABRINA)



Magnus Heron and I sit in the back seat of the town car, the tinted windows hiding us from the outside world. He's in his button-down shirt and slacks. His blazer hangs over my back, draped there since he noticed I was shivering. The royal blue hue contrasts with my ivory dress.

I'm sleepy but content.

His powerful arms are tucked around me, and I lay my head on his shoulder, just like I did on the plane. He presses his lips to my forehead, lingering there, a sweet and sensual forbidden kiss that takes me by surprise. I tilt my chin up.

Is it wrong I want his caustic mouth on mine when it's so gentle?

Yes.

Oh, but I still want it. Bad.

The scene swirls away as Dad hammers the wall hard enough to wake the dead, trying to fix something in the house that'll only wind up more broken.

"Stop, Dad!" I scream.

The banging continues. I wish he would've found something else to do when he retired from machining. Idleness isn't for everyone.

"Miss Breztle, will you let me in please?" a muffled feminine voice with an accent calls.

Huh? Giving up on sleep, I push the thick comforter down and blink my eyes open. Was the voice part of the dream?

I blink one more time, letting my eyes scan the area.

No town car. Definitely not my parents' house.

I'm in a swanky hotel room in L.A. and I ache all over.

Thankfully, I'm still sane because I definitely did *not* let Magnus flipping Heron put his lips anywhere near my skin.

Right.

Brina, get a grip. He's your boss, and he's a swinging dick. You can do much better.

I scoff at myself.

Yeah, no. I probably can't do better than an uptight billionaire, but personality-wise, I think a horned toad would beat Magnus hands down.

"Last call, madame! If you don't answer, I have to move on," the mystery voice calls.

It's real. Oh.

"I'll be right there," I say, stumbling out of bed.

I realize I'm in a tank top, and I don't know who wants me. Grabbing the big white bathrobe with the gold hotel crest across the chest, I throw it on and cinch the belt.

Then I pad over, opening the door, unsure what I'm expecting to find. But whoever it is knows me. She called me by name...sort of.

I swing open the door to find a tall blond lady in a grey hotel outfit.

"I'm from the spa. It's time for your massage," she says matter-of-factly in a thick accent. "Massage" comes out more like "*massaszh*."

"I'm sorry, you must have the wrong room. I didn't order any massage," I tell her.

"No, no. Magnus Heron ordered for you. He booked one hour for all of his employees staying here, and right now, it's

your turn.”

“Awesome.” I think?

I’m not turning down a free *massaszh*, anyway.

“Open the door very wide for me, please,” she says. “I’m going to bring in my table.”

My eyes drift beside her. Sure enough, she has a full-sized massage table with her. I open the door as wide as it’ll go and wave her in.

She drags the huge padded slab in and sets it up next to my bed.

“I’m Verena. I’ll be doing your *massaszh*,” she says with a smile and more of that thick accent I can’t quite place. “Since you’re already in a bathrobe, leave any clothes in the bathroom. I have a blanket you can cover with.”

I force myself into the bathroom to discard the tank top. I’m leaving my underwear on. I don’t care what she is. I always thought I didn’t do massages because they were too expensive.

Maybe I’ve never tried because it’s a little weird.

I walk back into the main room in just the fluffy bathrobe. A folded blanket sits on the end of the table now.

“Where’d you get the blanket from?” I ask.

It’s not from the bed, because they’re all still there.

Grinning, she holds up a huge black bag with a wide strap I didn’t see before.

Wow. What else does she have in that thing? Heron’s soul?

I still can’t believe he actually did something nice for the team, for *me*.

But he did it with the surprise Sweeter Grind stuff on the plane, too.

So what if he’s only eighty-percent Mr. Hyde?

“Please lie down and pull the blanket up. Then you can pass the robe to me from under the blanket,” Verena tells me,

stretching her hands, getting ready for action.

At least she has a system.

Maybe this won't be as mortifying as I thought.

She pulls a black box from her bag and moves to the counter where she plugs the box into her phone. "Woodlands or waterfalls?"

"Come again?"

"Soothing sounds for the session. You have a choice," she tells me very seriously, her brows pulled together, like it's a life or death decision.

"Hmm," I ponder, climbing up on the table. I pull the blanket over me, loosen the robe, and settle down on my stomach.

"I like water. Let's go with that," I say. It's true. It relaxes me...or makes me have to pee.

The rush of a waterfall going down a mountain fills the room as Verena steps away and returns a moment later.

"Are you ready to give me the robe?"

I slide my hand, grasping the robe and holding it out, and she takes it.

"Any problem areas?" she asks.

"Umm—my whole body? Mostly because my boss works me to death." I hold up my hands. "Fair warning, Verena, I've never had a massage. I might be ticklish."

"Where do you feel the tensest?" she asks without missing a beat.

"I don't know. Everything kinda aches." I sigh. "Not really unbearable pain or anything. I'm just sore and tired and worn out."

"I see. Close your eyes. Focus on your body. Live in the moment," she commands softly.

It's not bad advice, even if this entire moment of my life belongs to Mr. Heron for dragging me to L.A. and putting me

under a massage therapist he hired.

I do as she says. The soreness isn't all over, and some areas are definitely worse than others.

"The soles of my feet hurt, and my calves burn from the heels I wear like sixteen hours a day," I tell her. Whenever the bossman tyrant's gone, I take them off, but it hasn't helped much. "Oh, and my neck feels stiff, and my shoulders—"

"You spend a lot of time at computer?" she cuts in.

"Too much."

"I'll make you good as new. We'll focus on your neck, shoulders, feet and calves, and then do a quick back *massazh*. Okay?"

"Sure. Where are you from?"

"Switzerland. Do I have an accent?"

I smile into the table. "Not much."

She rubs her fingers into the side of my neck. Yes, it tickles at first, but only for a second. The pressure stings my already sore body, but then the pins and needles sensation evaporates.

Verena's circular motion stays in that spot until it loosens like jelly.

Not bad.

Not bad at all.

Plus, with my new salary, I can afford to do this again. Every week, if boss dickwad ever lets me leave before midnight or spares me a day off.

Maybe someday.

He ordered this for me, didn't he? For the whole team?

That's actually...thoughtful.

Not something a pure stone-hearted hard-ass with a windswept hole in his chest would do.

"Relax," Verena whispers, and I try.

No surprise, dwelling on my enigma of a boss coils more tension in my body.

She massages all the way to my shoulder, freeing muscles in her wake, and then moves to the other side of my head, repeating the process before starting on my foot and moving up my leg.

By the time she's finished, my whole body feels so light it's like I never worked a day for HeronComm. I should thank him.

Maybe I can even survive another eighty-hour week.

Is this what Armstrong meant when he said Heron takes care of his employees?

When Verena leaves, I'm so relaxed, it's tempting to fall back in bed and sleep for hours. But I fight the urge, because I think I might actually get eight hours of sleep tonight and I want to wake up well rested at a reasonable time in the morning.

I'm also starving.

So I rifle through my clothes for a sundress I haven't been able to wear in Chicago since July, and since it's cool in the hotel, I layer it with a sheer silky drape jacket.

I've never eaten in a five-star hotel before. My meals are covered on company travel, so hell yes, I'm enjoying it.

The elevator taking me down is all glass and gives a sprawling view of ivory growing over golden banisters as I plummet closer to the *pond* on the first floor.

Holy crap. A small lake inside the lobby.

As I drop to the bottom, fish jump for food.

If someone told me ten years ago—or last month—I'd be staying in a golden, glassy hotel with a man-made pond, I would've laughed. Girls from Ford Heights don't spring for places with decorative fish.

The restaurant looks dimly lit in this soft orange glow. The hostess wears a black three-piece suit and stands at the front. I

glance down at the huge pink and blue flowers splattered across my dress, part of my exclusively Target wardrobe.

I've always loved this outfit, but somehow, standing outside this restaurant...

I'm torn. Part of me wants to go inside and enjoy it.

Who knows when I'll get the chance again. But part of me wants to hoof it to the nearest burger joint.

Of course, I just had all the pain worked out of my legs, so why put it back?

After thinking it over another minute, I step up to the hostess. "Hi, do you have room service?"

She smiles politely. "We certainly do. Since you're already downstairs, though, why don't you let me find you a table? The restaurant has a better menu."

"Well...all right," I say, doubtful.

She peers at her screen. "What's your room number?"

"Seven thirteen," I say.

She nods. "Oh, very good. Your meals are taken care of by Mr. Heron."

Yeah, perfect, except for the fact that I'm horribly underdressed for this place. But if the hostess notices, she's damn good at hiding it.

"Uh, thanks," I murmur.

"Let's find you a table!" Smiling, she picks up a black leather book and leads me into the dining room. She swings her head this way and that, like she's lost. "I know I have a table, but I'm not sure where's the best place to seat you..."

I don't care where. I just want the biggest sandwich they've got with fries and some kind of sugary drink—after everything I've been through, I'm sure I have the calories for it—and once I've devoured the whole thing, I'm dragging myself up to bed.

I'll hibernate until Magnus Heron pings me with his next demanding jackass message. I'm probably too lowly to warrant a call. *Thank God.*

As I sit in a half-circle booth, I remember my last check from Purry Furniture should've landed by now, and the HeronComm pay will be hitting soon. I grab my phone as the hostess places a napkin next to me and type in my mother's latest offering into the online book app.

A horrible scraping noise pulls me from my thoughts. I look up to see none other than the Prince of Darkness approaching.

Speak of the devil.

He's pushed his chair back several tables away. He strides over so he's standing over me, casting his long shadow like a sword.

"Fancy seeing you here."

"Oh my God. Is that some line they teach pretty boys at prep school?" I bite off, wincing at how my body tightens with the soreness lingering from the massage.

I said that out loud. To my boss.

Stupid.

Heron's perfectly chiseled face is pure arrogance. It's punchable, hatefully gorgeous, and yes, still intimidating all at the same time.

"Someone's in a mood today," he observes with a smirk. "I thought the massage would make you a little less bloodthirsty."

Whatever. Sleep deprivation does awful things to me, but he's hardly Mr. Congeniality.

I shrug. "I didn't spit any coffee today. So you're welcome."

A corner of his mouth twists up. He's trying to stifle his amusement but it's far too obvious. "I guess I should be grateful for small miracles."

“Ah, I see you’ve moved.” The hostess looks from me to Magnus to the table he sits at. “Do you want to set up here?”

“No,” I snap.

“Yes,” he answers.

Both simultaneously. And his voice is deeper, carrying over mine like thunder.

“Actually, we’ll both be moving to my table,” he adds.

She raises an eyebrow.

“Fine,” I backpedal. “I guess.”

I heave a sigh and start sliding out of the booth. She holds the black leather book she carries in front of her face, blocking herself from Heron’s view.

“If you don’t want to sit with him, it’s all right, I’ve got your back,” she whispers, snickering under her breath. “But he’s handsome and rich. I say go for it. Just don’t give him your room number!”

My jaw drops. “He’s Magnus Heron! *The Magnus*—”

“Oh, shit.” Her face goes completely white. “I’m so—”

“No, it’s fine.” I say limply. “I’ll sit with him.”

The terrified hostess isn’t wrong. He’s a blue-eyed beast designed to electrify lady bits, and the fact that she thinks so reminds me it’s not just in my head. *Unfortunately*.

So I try not to dwell on his smug, stupid, dangerously sexy face while she collects our stuff to get us situated.

She pulls the chair out on the other side of Mag’s table and sets the leather book down in front of me. “Here’s your menu.” She walks away.

“Wow,” I say, hefting its weight as soon as I sit down. “Feels like a history book.”

“It’s hardly as thick as it seems, just a few pages tucked inside. They do it for show.” Heron chuckles, burning me alive with that lightning in his eyes. “You must have eclectic taste

for an English major. Wasn't that the other degree listed next to fine arts on your resume?"

I scan the menu. "Huh?"

"I mean, to enjoy *The Fireman's Pregnant Tinkerbell*."

I'm busy reading the entrees—and frowning because there are no sandwiches, probably no fries, ugh—so it takes a second for his words to click.

Fireman's Pregnant Tinkerbell? He must've seen my Amazon search.

Oh, great.

I decide to play it cool. After all, my personal shopping has zilch to do with him.

"Why would it have to be eclectic? There's a literary reference right in the name. Sounds very English major-y to me," I say.

"English major-y? Is that a word?" He holds his water up, taking a long, sardonic pull off the glass.

God. If only I could clock him in the nose right here.

"It is now," I say without looking up.

"Interesting. I must've missed the part in Barrie's work where Tinkerbell even *met* the fireman." The bastard winks.

Winks.

My face heats at his words and I abhor how good he is at getting me all riled in more ways than one.

Yeah, no, I decide.

He's not getting the satisfaction.

I scoff—I have to do something with the fire in my veins—and set the menu down so I can meet his eyes. "I'd love to meet a fireman. If I ever have an evening off in time for dinner, I'll cruise Tinder or Match for one."

"You're serious? Firemen are your type?" His face becomes more serious and slightly angrier than it was like two seconds ago.

Oh, God. Thanks, Mom, for putting me in this predicament. You couldn't just write a book with a more mysterious title?

I take a deep breath and look him square in the eye.

“Why does that shock you, Mr. Heron? Are you fireman-phobic? They’re heroic, hardworking, protective, and risk their butts all day to save lives,” I say, registering his grump-face growly mood with some satisfaction. I can’t resist adding a dollop of icing to the cake. “Plus, they’ve got big hoses. I know those are things preppy business guys probably wouldn’t know about, right?”

His face is, for once, completely blank.

I’ve caught him off guard.

Ha. I like being the one on top, so I continue while I’m on a roll.

“Especially the big hose part. I mean, you wouldn’t even know what to *do* with equipment like that. It’s not your fault. There’s no need for a long, thick hose in boardrooms.” I smirk at him and flip through my textbook of a menu again.

A second later, I’m actually a little mortified. My face heats, no doubt giving away the fact that I’m not as confident as my words.

What’s gotten into me?

Discussing long hoses with my egomaniac boss?

He manages a tight smile, then places his hand over my menu and pushes it back to the table.

Uh-oh.

“A woman I hired several EAs before you used to read similar paperbacks. There’d always be a guy in fire coveralls on the cover, jacket unbuttoned, chest bare, helmet clenched in his fist, glistening with sweat.” His voice is low, earnest, and he sounds kind of adorably clueless.

I snort. “Your point? Are you picking on romance readers or what?”

“Hardly. I’ll be the first in line to defend anyone’s choice in entertainment, considering the publishers we’ve run very lucrative marketing for,” he says, pausing to sip his ice-cold water. I’m dumbstruck, hating how my eyes stick to his face, his throat, as he swallows. “Here’s my point—the guys in those books are usually veterans, too, aren’t they?”

I glare. “I wouldn’t know. I think so. I’ve only read a few books about firemen.”

In truth, I’m more of a paranormal romance or family saga girl. Give me a hot vampire with glowing eyes and a silver tongue, and an attitude so horrible you can’t help but fall for—

Oof. Never mind.

But Heron seems to be obsessing over this fireman theme. *Why?*

That reminds me. I need to finish my bulk order. So I slide my phone out of my purse and pull up Mom’s author page again, clicking on her latest offering, and add a couple dozen copies to my cart.

The waitress comes up. “Are you ready to order?”

“I am. If he’s not, he can starve—”

Magnus smirks at me and closes his menu. “I’m ready.”

“I’ll have a peach Bellini and a steak. Rare. With fries?”

“Sorry. No fries on the menu this evening.”

“Baked potato then,” I say with a nod. “Load it up with everything.”

“Wonderful.” She taps my order into the iPad and looks at Heron. “And for you?”

“Lobster ravioli and a top-shelf bourbon. Surprise me.”

“Excellent choices.” The server looks back at me. “I’ll be right back with your drinks. Sorry it’s taking so long, we’re a tad short-staffed tonight.”

I smile. “No problem.”

I train my gaze back on Mag as she disappears to the next table.

“I’d kill for a drink right now,” I say.

“Lucky for you, Miss Bristol, she’s already bringing you one. I see your taste in liquid nectar rivals your love of coffee sweet enough to strip paint,” he says, lifting the other glass at his side.

“How hard is what you’re drinking?” I ask, betting the bourbon he ordered will be the fourth or fifth drink of the night. The vampire-freak in front of me has to unwind somehow, right?

“It’s tea,” he grunts. “Some sort of mango-flavored stuff from Hawaii.”

“I need a drink,” I repeat, draining the rest of my small water glass. “The massage therapist wasn’t kidding about feeling dried out.”

“Are you saying you want my tea?” He quirks an eyebrow.

“You’re offering?” When he doesn’t answer, I reach across the table and take it. I swallow a huge gulp and push it back at him, wrinkling my nose. “God. Use sugar. I didn’t think it was possible to make mango-anything so flat.”

He studies me. “You know, I’ve had a lot of EAs over the years—”

“Yeah, I know. You’re hard to work for.”

“Perhaps.” He lifts his eyebrows slowly like he’s truly considering my words. Shocking. “But of all the many things I’ve complained about them doing, drinking my tea was never one of them.”

I shrug.

“So we’ve established you’re a book snob who’s very English major-y,” he says, this lawyerly edge in his tone like he’s laying out a case. “I asked you about the fireman books earlier because I have something in common with them.”

“You? I doubt it.”

He shrugs, his big shoulders rippling at his sides. “Remember, you asked.”

Uh, I didn’t, but...but I’m instantly silenced as he slowly rolls up his shirt sleeve. The fabric pushes up over a very defined, sculpted, powerful bicep, revealing a purple-and-black *semper fi* tattoo.

Whoa.

I’ve seen similar military tattoos but never in that color scheme and it’s awesome.

Not to mention the way his muscles bulge under the ink, sending my mind jetting off on fantasies of all the hell he—we—could raise with those arms.

It’s not what I expected. Am I still back in my room dreaming? The other dream the masseuse woke me from rattles my brain.

Yikes.

I need to get out of here before I’m lost in dirty fantasies with Magnus Heron.

That’s not the kind of complicated I need, *no sirree*.

But since there’s no easy way to leave without making it obvious I’m fleeing, I try to screw my head back on.

“Oh. Nice. I wouldn’t have pegged you as a veteran. When did you serve?” I ask, forcing disinterest into my voice.

I need to tell Paige her Google skills are lacking. Not a single article she sent ever said anything about military service. Though that might explain his hard-on for discipline.

“Four years. Right after high school. I was on active duty in Iraq at the height of the war.”

“Thank you for your service,” I say woodenly.

“You’re welcome.” His blue eyes sparkle as if he hasn’t been told that a million times, like every other serviceman. As if *my* gratitude makes him feel special.

God. What’s even happening at this table?

The waitress returns with my Bellini and his bourbon and sets them down in front of us. I take a big, heavenly gulp of the drink. It's rich, smooth like ice cream, which is good. Otherwise I'd probably choke it up from the wild thoughts tearing through my head.

"So, are those years in the Marine Corps the reason you sleep like four hours a night? Because you know the rest of us don't have that training?"

He shrugs, a thin smile pulling at his lips.

"Living on military time was always an asset. I get a lot done in a day." He sets his jaw. "It doesn't matter whether you served or not. Working for me is all the discipline you need."

Dang. And for a second, I thought we might be having a real conversation versus wrestling that Godzilla ego of his.

At least I can do something more useful than listening to him boast about being God's gift to the business world. I add a bunch of Mom's books to my checkout.

If I'm glued to my screen until our food shows up, it'll make him think I'm not interested in his wild ink and savage muscles. Even though I'm staring at my phone, his big bicep is *all I see* in my mind.

Ugh.

Keep talking, boss. I need you distracted. I need me distracted.

I need distractions galore before you notice my eyes undressing you.

The server returns with our food a couple minutes later.

"Can I get you anything else?" she asks.

"Steak sauce," I say.

She nods at me and looks over to Mag. "And for you, sir?"

"It better not need anything else," he grinds out.

She walks away with a worried smile.

“Jesus. You need to be nice,” I scold him. “It’s bad enough when you talk to *us* like that, but at least you pay us for the privilege. She doesn’t make enough to put up with your shit.”

His eyes widen, revealing vast blue pools. He’s shocked, like I’m the first person in the world who told this poor rich boy to quit being a prick.

“Point taken. I’ll work on it,” he says, spearing a fork into his pasta.

I’m speechless. I look down at my steak, and my small, but overloaded baked potato. “Did I order from the kiddie menu?”

He looks over at it. “We’ll get dessert. It’s richer than it looks. Fine dining portions are controlled for a reason.”

“That’s okay.” I’ll go to a vending machine. At least I know what I’m getting there.

He takes a bite of his ravioli. “We have another pitch meeting on Monday. I’ll send you the info and a briefing list tonight.”

Lovely. Here we go.

My steak is on the fork, right in front of my mouth. I haven’t even taken my first bite yet.

I roll my eyes and lay it back on my plate. “You do realize it’s Saturday, and I haven’t eaten since our last pitch, right?” I pick up the meat again and take a huge bite.

“At HeronComm, we work on all days ending in ‘y.’”

Yeah, that’s the problem.

The waitress returns later, sets the sauce down in front of me, and turns on her heel. But before she can disappear, Magnus says, “Ma’am.”

“Yes?”

“We’re going to want a dessert platter. Have it ready for us when we’re done, please.”

Impressive.

The world’s richest Neanderthal remembered “*please.*”

We spend the rest of dinner making small talk. I listen to his hopes for Jazzle Razzle while I wolf down my food. I don't mind because he barely inserts himself into what it means for the entire company. Not just him.

The dessert platter arrives later on a silver tray lined with every upscale pastry, ice cream, and gelato outlined on the menu. None of them are large—and he was right about the richness—but there are so many bite-sized pieces that by the time we've shared them, I'm full.

She comes back and lays the leather folder with the tab down on our table. I reach for it, but Magnus beats me.

“Unnecessary,” he snaps off. “They're being billed through the same account.”

The waitress looks at me, unsure what to do.

I'm not sure either, but he does have a point, so fine. Let him do the honors.

As we're about to leave, Magnus leans in. He stretches a giant hand out and lets it hover over mine without ever touching me. “You have small hands, Miss Bristol.”

“Hmph. Maybe you just have big paws.” I try not to let my eyes linger as he coils his fingers with another insufferable smirk.

And another torrid mind flash of the awful, no good, very bad things those hands could do to me. It's an unwinnable battle trying *not* to think about them gliding through my hair, roaming my hip, slowly moving up my thighs until they—

“You know what they say about large hands?” he whispers, interrupting evil thoughts.

“Huh?” My face heats. “No, what?”

“All the better to handle large hoses,” he rumbles.

Then he pops a gourmet mint into his mouth and enjoys watching my tortured face cycle through every last shade of red.

OceanofPDF.com

NICE ACCESSORIES (MAGNUS)



My office is the most organized it's been in years, and my inbox is manageable.

The familiar smell of dark roast Kona greets me every morning with my coffee waiting on my desk when I arrive, still deliciously hot.

Replies to my texts and emails and calls come darting back promptly, even when I test her, firing them her way when she least expects like a mischievous principal on a fire drill bender.

I think I'm even getting used to neutralizing the barbs flying off her tongue by drinking in the view that accompanies her smart mouth. A body made for sin hidden behind her modest dresses and sleek fall sweaters, strawberry lips my teeth ache to claim, an ass too perfect for my hands, and—how could I forget?—those bottomless cocoa-brown eyes.

They haunt my fucking dreams. Always threatening to drown me in her loathing if my lust doesn't do it first.

In mere weeks, Sabrina Bristol upended my whole world.

Right now, on a fine November afternoon, I scroll through the emails she hasn't gotten to yet. Advertising titans pitching me to use their latest features, new clients asking to be pitched, journalists fishing for mud, shit to be paid, but there's one message that catches my eye.

A front section mention from Ad Wonk, the journal preaching marketing gospel to every agency in this industry.

Looks like Woof Meow Chow had their highest Black Friday sales ever, and the writer notes it's all thanks to yours truly.

Even Chester Stedfaust sings our praises.

Talk shit about my team again, old man.

There's no denying the obvious: my new EA is a godsend. I'd open the door and tell her that, give her the compliment I so rarely dole out, but there's just one problem.

She's late from lunch. *Again.*

The first couple times, I let it slide, but this is becoming a habit. One I have to break. She's getting an email this time.

To: Sabrina Bristol

From: Magnus Heron

Priority: HIGH

Subject: Your Tardiness

MISS BRISTOL,

CONGRATULATIONS. You've survived nearly six weeks as my assistant. However, that's no excuse for taking extended lunches and you know it.

Get here on time. You should be here right now, by the way.

Have you tried on the dress for the Adzilla Conference in Phoenix this weekend? Ruby and my tailor picked the color. I'll never comprehend your superstitions, but the conference organizers have assured me there'll be no black cats, tumbling salt shakers, or broken mirrors on the premises.

I need to know the dress fits so our plans are finalized. Please respond.

M.

CEO of HeronComm Inc.

I GO to work tweaking ad copy the marketing team sent over for an auto maker and smile when my computer pings.

To: Magnus Heron

From: Sabrina Bristol

Subject: RE: Your tardiness

HEY M (APPARENTLY, you're too busy to write your own name?),

GUESS WHAT?

I've worked like two hundred and forty hours over the past three weeks. Long lunches should probably be ignored in lieu of sixteen-hour days.

As for the Godzilla conference or whatever, what about ladders in walking paths, thirteenth floors, and indoor umbrellas? I'm not taking chances.

I still maintain I only survived L.A. because I found my lucky penny.

REGARDS,

S. (DEFINITELY too busy to write my own name for you).

Executive Assistant to Magnus Heron, HeronComm Inc.

I SHAKE MY HEAD, chuckling, and change the subject line.

To: Sabrina Bristol

From: Magnus Heron

Subject: GET YOUR ASS HERE NOW.

S.,

AD-ZILLA. We sell ads. It's the biggest annual gathering of digital marketers all year.

Hence, Adzilla.

If my EA ever returns from lunch sometime this century, I'll have her contact the coordinator and ensure there are no ladders in walking paths or broken mirrors or umbrellas indoors.

Where the hell are you?

Does the dress fit?

M.

CEO of HeronComm Inc.

RUBY CALLS ME THEN, so I hit send without signing off as I pick up the phone. She's saying something fast and garbled, but I don't quite catch it before the call disconnects.

"Ruby? Are you there?"

The line is dead.

There's a knock at my door, and before I can answer, it swings open.

Ruby shuts the door behind her and walks up to my desk. "I could tell you weren't paying attention. I need to know if you want to replace the office intern or not?"

I'm distracted, and it has everything to do with my EA.

"Replace her? What the hell do you mean?"

“Because your new admin doesn’t seem to need the help. The poor kid’s been stuck dusting and reorganizing stuff from the mail room,” she tells me.

“It’s an unpaid position and it keeps us in the university’s good graces. What the hell do I care if she’s stuck with make-work?” I say as my computer speaker pings.

I grin, knowing I’ll find Sabrina’s name in my inbox.

“Since when do you smile?” Ruby asks, taken aback. “Or tolerate interns hovering around with no real work to do?”

“What?” I look up, glowering at her, unsure what she’s getting at.

She purses her bright-red lips. “You got an email alert and smiled, Mag. Something I haven’t seen you do since before you became CEO. Who are you talking to?”

“No one,” I growl.

“She works for you,” Ruby mutters quietly.

Damn her for reading me so easily, but damn me for making it so obvious.

“Who?” I feign ignorance, staring at the subject line of her email: *My Ass Doesn’t Belong to You.*

Oh, yes, it does, woman. I open it.

M.,

TOUCHÉ.

Can’t even bother to sign off now, huh?

I’ll have you know I’m not just taking my sweet time every day to relish a to-go burrito as big as my arm for lunch. My dad’s heart meds haven’t been working right for some reason. So I’ve been at appointments with my parents the last couple days. I’ll be back as soon as we’re done here.

Dad is doing better, but isn't exactly okay, and Mom will be hysterical by herself alone here. Company policy covers family emergencies, or should I start CC'ing Ruby Hunting on these emails?

Sorry.

S.

Executive Assistant to Magnus Heron, HeronComm Inc.

THE SHIT-EATING GRIN slides off my face.

Well, hell.

She never mentioned anything about her old man's ticker, and she's still been working until after midnight the past two days?

This strange, long-forgotten sensation twinges in my gut.
Guilt?

"Is Sabrina okay?" Ruby asks with an all-too-knowing sigh.

I look up. "How did you know it was her? She's fine. Replace the office intern or don't at your discretion. I have a conference call soon."

Ruby nods but her lips are a straight line. She walks out, closing the door behind her.

I tap my keyboard with one hand for a few seconds, thinking of what to say.

I hope your parents are okay, I type back. Do what you can from your mobile devices for now, and get back as soon as you can.

I smile, knowing I can't let the email end without a jab.

P.S. You never answered my question. Does the damn dress fit?

That's the last email for a while. I have a conference call with Jazzle Razzle Designs followed by another update with Woof Meow Chow.

My email pings with another email from Sabrina halfway through the second call. By the time I have a chance to look at it, she's back at her desk outside my office. I can see her through the slip of frosted glass next to my door.

The dress is perfect. It fits like a glove. I'm beginning to wonder if you've stolen my clothing for measurements.

I've attached a picture, so you can see.

Now who doesn't have time to sign off?

I click the attachment and the image pops up.

My jaw nearly hits the goddamned floor, racing my dick to the ceiling.

Miss Bristol looks more like Miss America. Sequin-covered purple satin dips into her cleavage, drawing attention to her assets in this classy outline. And damn, what fine, supple assets they are.

I can't stop staring.

I need to stop staring.

Hot, jealous anger I've got no sane right to darts through my blood.

The very notion of all those pervy CEOs at the conference eye-fucking her makes my gut clench.

Mag, what the hell do you care? I wonder.

Yet I do, and I know why.

The dress is the same purple shade as the one she wore in the park that fateful day, and it cuts into a "V" in the front but trails in the back. Her chestnut hair, tied up in her normal casual ponytail, serves as the perfect contrast to the formal dress.

This woman's beauty is so intrinsic she doesn't have to try. An angel, heaven sent, finding her worthy halo of fashion with

a little help from yours truly.

Let's face the facts.

Anything she does is an inquisition for my cock.

A rhinestone chain dangles over her shoulder, and at the bottom of the picture, her hand clasps the train...with a subtle, but not *too subtle* middle finger clearly sticking out.

Damn her.

I know she'll be my personal apocalypse, and that dress may have been a bad decision. I've set myself up for a dagger to the face.

It piques my interest, though, and I can't help but wonder what's hiding under all the soaring scoops and sharp cuts.

"Get your mind out of the gutter," I snarl to myself. "You're not him. Not your sleazy father. You go down that road, you tango with fire, and there'll be nothing left but ashes and ruin."



I RARELY SPEAK AT CONFERENCES.

I'll do it occasionally, sure, because it boosts credibility, it's good PR, et cetera, et cetera.

Doesn't mean I like it.

Normally at these events, I try to just listen to overconfident blowhards spouting their success stories. I take good notes—or rather, have them taken for me.

And then I do the opposite.

Their strategy, with few exceptions, sucks.

It's an exercise in what *not* to do. Still, I like being up on all the approaches being marketed to marketers right now, so I can give my clients every single reason why they don't work.

Adzilla is about finding weaknesses in my competitors and splitting them open like lobsters.

Usually.

This year, it's not as cut and dry.

All because I can't take my eyes off Sabrina Bristol.

Her black slacks could be painted on and the spaghetti strap blouse shows too much skin. Her ass is as tight and round as a plum, and in those pants, it's impossible not to notice. The silk fringe around the low-cut neckline of her shirt dances under the air vent, tempting fate.

I want to yank that shirt down and find out if the hand-sized melons underneath are as perfect as they seem.

But part of me also wants to take my blazer off and button it around her. Because you can bet if I'm looking, every other male executive is, too, and men like this crowd are used to taking what they want.

Fucking Phoenix and its warm weather. It's still in the seventies here.

The layers and sleeves she normally wears to the office are easier to ignore, but at least I'm not chilled to the bone here.

She pokes me in the side, a movement so unexpected I almost jump.

"What?" I roll my eyes and shift so I can whisper only to her.

"I just wondered if you needed a pad or pen," she says.

"A pad?"

"He said to take out a pen and paper or your laptop," she whispers. "Since everybody else is busy scribbling away or pounding on keys, I thought you might need help?"

I give her a smile. "I could recite this bullshit in my sleep."

She's right beside me. How has she not noticed me staring? Or has she?

Focus on the session and you won't have to worry, idiot, I tell myself.

If only these speakers weren't so goddamn boring.

Somehow, I manage.

“What’s the plan?” Sabrina asks after the session ends.

“We should probably get dinner, then go back to the hotel to clean up for the formal tonight,” I say.

“Oh, no.” She wrinkles her nose. “Fancy food again?”

I fight back a laugh. “You could call it that.”

Her head tilts back and her chin is in the air.

“So, finger foods. Right. I’m going for tacos soon so I don’t starve.”

At this point, I lose the battle and my laughter escapes. “Are you riding with the rest of the crew or with me?” I hope she says she’s coming with me. “If you want to come along, we’ll stop at Taco Colita.”

“Taco Colita?” She blinks.

“One of the finest taco joints Phoenix has to offer. It’s savory and spicy and delicious. Nothing fancy, just flavor that’ll knock you on your ass. I promise.” I do, and my mouth starts watering.

“How spicy?” I love the little wrinkle of concern on her face that kindles into a smile fit for the Valley of the Sun. “Never mind, sold. I like a surprise and I’m not the type who runs from a little heat. This is my first time here, so show me what’s good.”

I nod, this drumming beat behind my ribs.

She’s so different from any girl I’ve ever dated—curious, grateful, ready to soak in life without expecting everything to be handed to her.

Hit the brakes.

I’m not dating her. She’s my employee.

“I’ll crash first for a little bit if you don’t mind,” she says with a yawn.

“You’re not crashing. I just invited you to taco nirvana. You’ll thank me later. You don’t want to be groggy from a nap at the event tonight,” I tell her.

She smiles, thinking, and bites her bottom lip.

“Okay, Heron, you’re on.”

~
AFTER A QUICK PRE-DINNER at Taco Colita—which she loves as much as I knew she would—Armstrong drives us to the hotel in the rental car. I watch Sabrina slide out of the car, the Arizona sun turning her hair into spun brown sugar.

When I make no effort to move, she leans back into the open door with a wrinkle in her forehead.

“Go on,” I tell her. “I have errands to run before tonight. I’ll meet you there.”

“Okay, see ya.” She bumps the door shut with her hip and walks away.

“Did you—” I start.

“No worries.” Armstrong lays his hand on the passenger seat and twists to face me. “It’s done, boss.”

I nod. “What did you get him?”

“Several fine tip pens—the really expensive ones you told me about, a calligraphy set, and half a dozen leather-bound journals,” he says.

“You didn’t say it was from me, did you?” I’m still watching Sabrina push through the doors into the hotel.

“Nah.” He shakes his head. “I said he won the Young Scribes contest and this was the grand prize.”

“You couldn’t come up with something better? The literary event was awhile ago and I already hired editors for the kids.”

“Hey, you’re lucky I came up with that much. This ought to be a Bristol job,” he says glumly. “I think she’d be better equipped to handle it than your driver.”

I shake my head.

“Wrong. She doesn’t need to know—”

“Boss, relax. I’m joking, man. Will you calm down?”

I blow out a long hot breath between my teeth. “You’re right.”

“That’s a first!” Armstrong chuckles, his eyes snapping to me in the mirror. “You okay back there?”

I ignore the quip, not wanting to analyze it any deeper than necessary.

“I just wish I could do more for him.” I lean back into the leather seat, rubbing at my neck.

Armstrong’s face grows serious and his eyes flick away.

“You’re serious? With all due respect, sir—”

It’s my turn to cut him off now. “This isn’t the military. You don’t have to address me like I’m some kind of commander.”

“You kind of are,” he says quietly.

Obviously, he’s right.

I discipline this whole machine. I am the company. I’ve made myself its beating heart.

Sadly, right now, I don’t feel like I’m in control of anything.

“Go ahead,” I urge him, tapping my fingers against my thigh impatiently. “Tell me what you’re getting at.”

“You’re Magnus Heron. You could probably do anything you want for this kid.”

I shake my head. “I promised Marissa I wouldn’t spoil him. Those are the ground rules. We made an agreement.”

Armstrong shrugs. “You’re pretty good at sending anonymous gifts. So come up with another fake contest and send whatever you want.”

“Nah. I don’t want to go behind her back,” I remind him, a chill in my tone.

He nods, picking up on my boundaries like always.

“Well, the young man’s getting a private education. A good one. I don’t think he’s lacking in anything. You’ve done

him right,” Armstrong says, his trademark warmth in his voice.

I wish I believed him.

I wish to hell *anything* in my power could ever “do him right” after what happened.

Maybe I’ll set up a college fund. I’m sure Marissa will allow it. What mother wouldn’t want to save her only son from the menace of student loans?

“You’re off for the rest of the night,” I say.

“I am?” He looks at me in the rearview mirror again.

“Don’t get used to it. Tonight’s the formal and we’ll all be busy. I’ll rent a stretch so the whole team can go together with another driver. Enjoy Phoenix, Armstrong.”

“Aw, sweet. Thanks, Mr. Heron!” he belts out. “You’re a nice guy. I think it’s good for you to get away from Chicago.”

I glare at him. “You know better than to call me nice.”



A COUPLE HOURS LATER, most of the team is gathered in the hotel foyer, ready to leave.

I’m decked out in a full suit, bow tie, the works. All the tailor-fit sartorial armor any knight with a tie needs to ride into battle.

The limo driver comes to the door.

“Transport is here for the Heron party,” he says.

Dave the Sales Director looks at me. “I think we’re good to go, boss.”

“Not yet. We’re waiting on Miss Bristol,” I say, watching the elevator for her arrival.

“Angie hasn’t come down yet either,” Hugo says, wearing a sweater vest that makes him look like a professor.

“Angie?” I repeat.

“Angelica Raynette,” Ruby says. “My lead designer?”

Shit. I should know my employees' names.

"I thought Hugo was the lead," I whisper.

"Hugo's your creative director, Mag. Angie's the lead on his team. Don't worry. We're used to you not knowing the names of the people who work for you," Ruby says with a flippant hand wave.

Her eyes stay on mine.

"Why are you still staring?" I snap.

"No reason." But her tone says there's definitely a reason, even if I can't pull it out of her.

Hugo points to the staircase. "There they are!"

Sabrina looks like a sugarplum fairy coming down the stairs. The dress hugs her body like a Siren and it sparkles in the low evening light. I wonder if she skipped the elevator on purpose to make a grander entrance.

Goddamn.

It works.

She looks so delectable my appetite surges back from taco time, but it's nothing that can be quenched with unpronounceable, fancy snacks.

"You're late," I say.

She bites her bottom lip. "Sorry. Angie had to help me with my hair."

My gaze follows the dip in her neckline. I hadn't noticed her hair yet.

It's carefully braided, and those braids are twisted into a neat bun with two tendrils hanging down in front of her face. *How did I not notice?*

It's only after her statement when I see another woman behind her. Angie—I recognize her now from meetings—and make a note of her name.

"You guys go ahead," I tell the others.

I walk out beside Sabrina, and when we get into the stretch, I make sure I'm beside her.

“Your tardiness was worth it. I like your hair,” I say, kicking my own dumb ass for being tongue-tied.

Right. I mean, I *do* like her hair.

Even though it's the first thing out of my mouth, it's the last thing on my mind.

She smiles wide. There's a small dimple in her cheek I don't think I've noticed before. Unfortunately, now that I've seen it, my dick won't relax the rest of the night.

I swallow a bearish growl.

It's a festive mood in the limo. Everyone's laughing and Dave pops a complimentary champagne bottle, whetting their appetites for booze before we're even at the formal's bar.

Miss Bristol laughs herself red, making conversation with the others, so she probably doesn't notice how I can't extract my eyes from her.

It's not fair.

I already know she'll be the gorgeous center of the ballroom, a star wrapped in sugarplum no red-blooded man could ignore if he tried. Yet the thought of a single asshole ad exec thinking they should try their luck with her makes me want to punch something.

I'm wondering if I can squirrel her away somewhere until the party ends, without raising eyebrows, when I catch Ruby. Alert as ever, watching me, a warning in her eyes.

Shit.

Believe me, I know.

I shouldn't be losing it, let alone in front of a friend who's always had my back.

Even though it feels like ripping a bandage off a wound, I inch away from her so our thighs aren't touching. So I can *think* without her heat, her scent, her sight burning me alive.

I strike up a conversation with Ruby about her genealogy hobby. She's taken one of those mail-in DNA tests, and since she was adopted, it's been one surprise after the next tracing her family tree.

I lend her a tight smile, wishing I could ever share her amusement.

When your family's as marvelously fucked up as mine, the only shockers are *bad ones*.

Before I know it, we're pulling up to the front entrance at the glitzy resort in Scottsdale hosting our event.

The ballroom looks like an old-world palace. Not the sleek, modern conference room it resembled earlier in the day. A wide crystal chandelier hangs in the middle of the room. The tabletops are draped with cloths in pale blues and shimmering silvers.

There's a dance floor to go with the open bar, encouraging corporate debauchery.

Nobody ever said marketers don't know how to party—and scar themselves for life with their own stupidity.

Once we find a table, the rest of my team scatters. They're off to find drinks, mingle, what-have-you, but my assistant is MIA.

I go outside and find her in the darkened hall, wringing her hands.

“What's wrong?” I ask, stepping up beside her.

Sabrina doesn't look up, but she lets out a long sigh. “Do you need me here tonight? Like *really* need me? I took good notes during all the sessions.”

“Of course you did. Your work is always exceptional.”

I have no idea where this is going.

She bites her lip again and finally meets my eyes. “Unless you're closing some kind of deal or pitching someone, you don't really need me here...do you?”

Here's a first.

I've had employees call in sick when I didn't approve their time off. I've had assistants upset that I didn't bring them to conferences because there was too much to do at the office. And I've also had personnel furious because I brought them to the conference but didn't need them for the social schmoozing events.

I've never once had an assistant want to attend the conference, but not the after party. My brows knit together like pulled strings.

"Are you asking for permission to leave, Miss Bristol?"

She doesn't say anything, but nods, too beautiful for life in the shadows.

"Are you sick?" I wonder, worry bleeding into my voice.

"Not exactly. I just..." She veers her head toward the ballroom, a panicked look on her face, then trains her gaze on me. "I don't belong here."

What the fuck? I'm stunned but let nothing slip.

She sounds truly anguished, stripped bare, all her usual sassy hellfire a vacant torch.

"Sabrina Bristol," I say, closing the space between us. "If there's any woman in Phoenix tonight who deserves to be in that room, it's you."

She scans our surroundings like she's making sure we're alone.

"Both times I put this dress on, I needed help. I haven't dressed like this since I was a bridesmaid at my cousin's wedding. I couldn't do my hair by myself—"

"Do you know how many people here don't do their own hair? Hell, most of the men pay someone—"

"And..." she cuts me off. "And I just can't—I don't know how to be."

Because she doesn't have the time to figure it out? I wonder.

Maybe I am a selfish, demanding brute.

“Listen to me, woman. You’re uncomfortable here. I get it. So we’re going to get you some liquid courage, and you’re going to get used to it. Don’t be intimidated. Every millionaire prick in the room wishes you were his, and every lady in attendance wishes she was you. This is the life you’re meant for. This is the life you *deserve*.”

“You sound so sure.” She gives me a wry smile. “All because I spit on you in the park?”

I shake my head.

And before I know what the hell I’m doing, my hand reaches for her face. She gasps as our skin makes contact. My fingers lift her chin, my thumb traces her jaw, and this strange, unspeakable spark flashes through both of us.

Heat lightning.

I can only feel my own body, but I know it’s in hers, too.

Her dark, delicate eyes surrender, shifting slightly from side to side as our gazes fuse.

“If I hadn’t snatched you up, someone else would have. Guaranteed,” I whisper, unsure why my throat tightens.

“Mr. Heron...”

She’s lost for words.

That’s my cue to end this temporary madness, dropping my hand, adjusting my bow tie.

Pretend. This never fucking happened, I tell myself.

“Enough doubting,” I say, my voice level again. “Let’s get a drink. That dress was four thousand dollars. You can’t let it sit in a garment bag because you want to hide from jealous eyes.”

“F-four thousand—” She gags. “Holy hell. You’re kidding, right?”

I give her a warning look. “Stop.”

“Okay.” She sucks in a deep breath and exhales slowly. “Okay, let’s go grab drinks.”

I battle the instinct to lead her there by hand as soon as we're moving again. I'm hopeful this night won't get any weirder.

We walk up to the bar, and I almost suggest taking a walk around the grounds.

Except for the fact that the CEO of Already Sold, Jake Willis, stands in front of the bar with a brandy in his hand. I've met him a few times.

He's a middle-aged jackass, and worse when he's drinking.

He's tall and broad with silver hair and a face full of wrinkles like my father. Something about the resemblance makes me cringe.

Sabrina needs her liquid courage, though, so instead of walking away, I order a scotch and a sugary-sounding tropical cocktail for her.

"Here you are." I hand the drink to Sabrina.

Jake looks over at me, and I hear his breath stick with the inevitable, unwelcome outburst.

"Magnus Heron! Good to see you again, son! You're looking well, as you should be. Your name was all over Ad Wonk!" he gushes.

I smile, not exactly friendly, wondering if we should beat it and take that walk after all.

Then his beady little eyes fall on Sabrina. He winks at me. "Glad to see you brought some nice accessories this time around."

"What's that supposed to mean? He's my boss." Sabrina bristles right away. She damn sure isn't going to take his insinuations.

"This is my Executive Assistant," I snap. "I'm still a happy bachelor, thank you very much, and that's the way it'll stay."

Willis shrugs at me, making an exaggerated wince like *I'm* the one being ridiculous.

He doesn't dare lower himself to an apology.

“No need to be uptight, Mag,” he says, looking down as he swirls his drink in his glass. “Just meant you’ve got a nice young piece.”

“Watch how you talk about my employees, idiot.” It flies out like a bullet, harsher than the biting November wind back home.

Willis stumbles back, doing a double take, his lips moving.

“Christ. Calm down, boy. I golfed with your dad. No shame in your game; it’s how we all do things, isn’t it? The hot ones ought to be good for something more than pushing papers and typing.” He laughs. “Don’t you think?”

Fuck no.

I want to drag this braindead clod into the parking lot and break his nose, but that might cost me my career. I’m not sure which part of this is worse—the fact that he finds it funny or that he thinks I’m just like my father.

Another one of the boys with money and a reputation ruled by his dick.

“Final warning, Willis. If I ever hear you talk like that about one of my people ever again, I’ll hire the attorney to file the harassment claim myself.”

His bushy eyebrows almost leap off his face. “Now see here, I don’t know what you’re on, kid, but it’s pretty goddamn rude of you to get all up in arms over—”

“Over a despicable old worm who’s cheated on all four wives he’s ever had? Yeah,” I snarl, closing the space between us so I’m in range where only he can hear. “Also, you’ll be damn lucky if I don’t beat the shit out of you.”

His mouth drops. “Listen, I—”

“Don’t,” I growl, looking over my shoulder as I break away, heading in the other direction.

It’s for the good of everybody in this room.

One more second in his presence, and I *will* follow through on promise number two. Bruised knuckles and blood.

I hear Sabrina's heels tapping and the rustle of her dress behind me.

"Mr. Heron? Wait up! Hey. Hey, Mag?" she tries, her voice laced with fear, confusion, and so much uncertainty.

I hate it, but she can't follow me out of this room. Not now.

If she does, rumors will be lethal. They'll already be bad enough coming from anyone who saw me get up in Willis' face.

Stopping, I throw up my hand, spin around, then grind out, "Stay. Don't follow me."

She looks horrified.

I can tell from the way the clicking ceases that I've stopped her in her tracks.

Maybe I should have let her, though.

She already didn't want to be here, and after this shit, neither do I.

I'll find my own ride back to the hotel the way I prefer.

Alone.

OceanofPDF.com

OMENS, OMENS EVERYWHERE (SABRINA)



Heron's tone was a knife to the heart.

He left me all alone. Dizzy. At a party I don't even want to attend.

I get it. He's obviously upset, but I just wanted to make sure he was okay.

I'm still trying to figure out what just happened.

Yes, the old guy's words sting. Not only do I *know* I don't belong in this room for certain, but I'm aware everyone else views me as a prop. His little accessory.

And Mag's overreaction only drew attention to it. Awesome. *Thanks a lot, boss.*

That said, I can't forget the pep talk in the hall, the way he touched my face. What even?

He's never been...gentle before.

Until tonight, I didn't even think gentle and Magnus Heron shared the same universe. I totally didn't think he'd wind up defending me from a pig oinking far worse things than he's ever said.

It's so crazy, so unexpected, it's hard to breathe.

I scan the room, shaking my head.

Everyone's still watching me, leaning in, whispering under their breath. A couple of women across the room point, thinking I don't see them.

I want to die.

The HeronComm entourage looks frozen. Angie's face is blank, and Hugo's eyes are full moons behind his glasses. But neither of them make an effort to come talk to me.

I thought we were friends? Guess I can't blame them for processing, though.

That's all I'm going to be doing for the next month.

Finally, I spot Ruby tucked in a corner across the room, a martini in her hand, immune to the drama talk rippling around us. She stares at me, her face unreadable, assessing.

Ugh. What now?

I draw in a breath and cross the room.

"Wh—what was that all about? Any idea?" I ask.

"You tell me, Brina. What did Jake Willis say to kick things off?" Ruby asks.

"You know him?"

She rolls her eyes. "Every woman in this industry knows Jake. We're never in a room alone with him."

I glance back to the bar.

"Is he dangerous?" I ask quietly.

He looks like a grandpa, but he talks like an open sewer.

She sips her champagne. "He's fairly harmless. For now. But he's disgustingly handsy. He's more reserved when other people are around. A lot of men his age like to get loud and stupid and grabby at the more casual events, especially when the liquor flows like water." She pushes her hand away as if she can sweep the thought aside just as easy. "What did he say to you?"

I shake my head. "He didn't say anything to me. He told Heron he brought the right accessories and that I was a 'nice young piece.'" I make finger quotes around those last three words, my tongue flicking out in disgust.

Ruby glares at the bar.

“Jackass,” she mumbles, then she looks at me, taking a thoughtful sip off her drink. “Let me give you some sage advice. Magnus doesn’t tolerate rumors about his dating life. You’d be wise to keep a buffer because people come to these events to talk.”

“Talk?” I bite my lip. “To talk about people? Like gossip mills?”

Ruby shrugs. “Gossip gets more interesting with every zero tacked on to your net worth, and a lot of the people here come with many Zs.”

Rich people. Go figure.

“What rumors, though? And what behavior? Magnus didn’t do anything wrong.”

Her lips form a tight smile. “I can’t say much, but...there was an internal scandal years ago. It had nothing to do with Magnus. It happened while his father was CEO. Mag just cleaned up the mess.”

“Then why would he take the blame?” I ask.

Ruby surveys the room.

I follow her gaze, and I’m looking directly at the rest of the nervous HeronComm group gathered around the bar before she speaks again.

“We don’t talk about this—”

Her words remind me of Armstrong’s that first morning on the job, and Hugo and Angie’s reactions to a bad joke a little while later.

“This scandal actually involved our former CEO, Baxter Heron,” Ruby says. “What started as a family matter for the Herons soon involved the entire company.”

I blink.

Of course, I’d heard of him once or twice, but every time Baxter’s name was mentioned, it was always in hushed whispers. “Baxter? Mag’s dad?”

She nods, throwing back the rest of her drink like she needs it, pronto.

Weird.

None of Paige's research turned up any major scandal. I'm beginning to hope she never takes a job as a researcher.

"What happened?" I ask. "If you don't mind me—"

"I do mind, actually, and that's all you're going to get, and even that you didn't hear from me," Ruby says, a sharp look in her eye.

Jeez Louise. Why is everyone so freaking secretive about this terrible dungeoned secret?

Turning, I'm ready to flee for the hall, when she says, "Sabrina?"

I look back at her.

"Like I said. Keep a buffer. Don't be too friendly or chatty with anyone. You're a fabulous, talented assistant. I didn't expect you to last longer than a week, originally, but you've proved me wrong every step of the way. For everyone's sake, remember—Magnus Heron hates rumors." Frowning, she glances down at her phone, shaking the screen. "This stupid thing froze again?"

The digital timer on her screen has to be running at least five minutes behind.

Broken clock.

Another echo of the omen from Hugo.

Swallowing a sick lump in my throat, I head out to the lobby, eager to get away from it all.

My phone buzzes in my purse, so I pull it out. There's a text from Mag.

Armstrong has the night off. I'll send my stand-in driver if you want to leave early.

I smile and text back. ***Ty. That would be great.***

He sends back a phone number a second later to get a ride. While I'm waiting, I can't resist sending one more message.

Are you okay, M.?

I wait, the car comes, and then I wait some more back at the hotel.

Magnus never responds.



THE WORST PART IS, the conference is far from over.

The next morning, we return to it as a group. I don't get a chance to talk to Mr. Snarlypants in the limo. He's nestled securely between Ruby and Hugo.

A couple of guys from marketing sit across from him with Dave the Sales Guy. They've pulled up charts on tablets and they're going over some campaign pitch.

But before the conference starts, I find him in the same coffee line at this barista stand outside the main venue.

"Still hanging in there? You were pretty upset last night," I say, curling a strand of loose hair around my fingers.

Heron takes his scorched black coffee from the barista and looks at me. His body stiffens and his face is hard, and I know I should've kept my mouth shut.

"I'm fine," he says without a flicker of lingering anger. "Make sure you get today's notes in a Google document, so you can share them with me later."

Without another word, he walks off.

Wow. What a ray of sunshine...but I guess it's something that he's not hurling lightning bolts?

He stormed out, causing a scene, left me there, and now it's like it never happened?

He's the same arrogant jackass I met in the park a month ago.

I find Angie and sit with her, wanting as much space as possible between myself and Magnus Heron.

Of course, I'm careful to record all the notes he asked for in the cloud ever so carefully. There's no point in poking a very strange bear.

Later, there's a luncheon, and Magnus approaches the table we've occupied.

He stands behind the empty chair next to me and stares down. Then he places his hand on the back of the chair and leans in, like he's about to say something.

"Yes?" I smile up at him, and we lock eyes.

It's a hint of the same unexpected magnetism from last night when he gave me that pep talk, when he touched me, only...it's mingled with something darker.

I wait, but he doesn't even grunt.

His face firms, and he walks away.

What the actual fuck? He's like this brooding beast from one of Mom's books. I never thought those guys actually existed.

But somehow, I don't think their assistants are the ones who wind up stuck with their BS.

"Are you okay?" Angie asks, sipping her soda, looking over the cup with concern.

I look up at her and realize I've been staring after Magnus the whole time.

I shake my head. "I'm fine. Why?"

"Umm—you look like you're ready to punch someone, and you sighed really long just now," Angie says.

Did I? No wonder she's concerned.

I didn't even notice we're not alone at the table anymore. A few more HeronComm co-minions have joined us.

"Did he hear me?" I whisper. Crap. I didn't mean to ask. "I mean, not that I care, but—"

"No, of course, you don't." Angie grins.

I nod, still trying to catch a subtle glimpse of the boss out of my peripheral vision, hating that I care so much.

“Relax, he was already gone,” she whispers.

“It’s getting crowded. Want to go chat on the balcony?” I ask.

She laughs. “Sure.”

The resort hosting the conference is simply lovely. The balcony shows off Camelback Mountain in all its shadowy reddish glory. Even though it’s warm outside, it’s still morning, just before noon, so the sun is a welcome break from the cool interior.

“We’re here for a reason,” Angie says, giving me a knowing look. “Ready to spill it? If this is about last night—”

“No. Yes. Maybe?” I cut in. Then I sigh again, knowing I can’t keep dancing around it. “So, I talked to Ruby, and she wouldn’t tell me much. What’s this big scandal everyone keeps talking about but never says out loud? What happened at HeronComm years ago?”

“Oh, um...” She shakes her head and puts a hand up. “Sorry, Brina, my lips are sealed. I don’t even know that much, honestly. It was before my time here. I’ve only heard bits and pieces from Hugo over the years.”

“But you know the gist of it, don’t you?”

She turns away, her glossy lips going pale as she presses them together. “Brina, trust me. You don’t want to poke at this.”

God. They all act like it’s a murder mystery.

“Well—what did it have to do with last night? I know there was something. Like, without getting into details, what’s Heron so pissed about? Was his father some kind of crook or...Angie!”

I call after her as she starts to go back inside, but then she pivots around and gives me this pleading, strained look. “Leave it alone. No one talks about it for good reason.”

And just like that, I'm alone. The cool desert breeze sweeps down from the mountains, sending a fluttery chill up my spine.

Seriously.

What gives?

I swear, they treat this thing like Fort Knox, and I can't fathom why. I'm sure politicians would kill for this level of loyal secrecy. Whatever happened, it must've been terrible, but they're acting like...

...like Magnus killed someone?

Yikes. Surely, he's not that insane, and I hate to even go there.

So, I do the only thing I can. After today's session ends, I head for my room and hit the internet sleuthing hard.

Last night, Ruby said the scandal wasn't Mag's fault.

So that rules out willful murder, assault, or some kind of huge calculated heist. It also had more to do with his father, right?

Maybe that's why Paige's searches haven't yielded much. She Googled the wrong Heron.

I, in my infinite wisdom, look high and low for every little mouse crumb on Baxter Heron III.

Unfortunately, Mr. Google still doesn't have much to say. Only that the elder Heron abruptly resigned and turned over the reins.

Some reports say he has declining health and doesn't even live in the US anymore, but the way everyone walks on eggshells about his departure...yeah.

There has to be more here than a washed-up corporate expat.

After about an hour, I sit back and yawn, exasperated. The guy's a digital ghost, and I don't have more time to waste on this.

There's no denying the bigger issue—the past dominates the present.

Whatever happened, happened.

Magnus can be a royal jackass if he wants as long as he signs my check, but I'd love to see him dial it down if this weird cloud hanging over him is the reason why he's the mayor of Grumptown.

Rolling my eyes, I set to work on the weekly client summary to give myself a welcome distraction. Holding off just because we're at a conference will only make next week harder. Besides, it gives me a reason to stay in my room and avoid people.

I send the report to Heron with no message. None of our usual banter.

Predictably, I get nothing back.

It's hard to believe he's morphed back into the roid-rage lunatic from the park. He's almost acted like a decent human being for a couple weeks now. Why can't I know what set him off?

Let it go, a voice hisses in the back of my head. *He's wounded and you know it's none of your business.*

Even so, I can't stop my fingers from sailing over the keyboard and hitting send on a second email.

To: Magnus Heron

From: Sabrina Bristol

Subject: Worried

MR. HERON,

YOU'VE MADE it abundantly clear ever since I started this job that you're a big boy who can take care of himself, but I still

have to ask.

Are you okay? Do you need to talk? I'm here if you need me.

SABRINA

Executive Assistant to Magnus Heron, HeronComm Inc.

HE REPLIES IMMEDIATELY.

To: Sabrina Bristol

From: Magnus Heron

Priority: HIGH

Subject: RE: Worried

MISS BRISTOL,

YOU ARE MY EA. You're not my counselor. Or friend.

M.

CEO of HeronComm Inc.

MY MOUTH DROPS when I read it.

You're such a dickhead, I type out, stopping with my cursor over the send button. Then I delete that and go to bed. I still need my paycheck and this cruel joke of a job.

My phone pings again with another email, though, roughly twenty minutes later.

Nope.

Leave it on the counter.

Let boss prick send demands to someone else all weekend. But two hundred thousand dollars a year pays those student loans off a lot faster and keeps my parents afloat.

A shrill groan boils up my throat.

Whatever. I pick up the phone, scowling, and open the latest flaming bag of dog poo in my inbox.

To: Sabrina Bristol

From: Magnus Heron

Priority: HIGH

Subject: Jingle Bells

SABRINA,

Do you want to take several days off around Christmas so you can spend more time with your parents? Business slows to a crawl after the big ecommerce campaigns wind down, and we're in limbo before the new year. Who knows when you'll have another chance to take a vacation.

How's your old man?

M.

CEO of HeronComm Inc.

HUH? Whatever else I expected, it wasn't that.

Is this his way of changing the subject? Deflecting from the fact that he acts out like a rampaging grumpasaurus when I offer a second of comfort?

I sit on the bed, tapping the phone lightly on my chin.

Yeah. I don't know how to respond.

Between Mag's wild mood swings and Ruby's warning, I really don't want to give him any personal info about me or my family. I feel like a complete idiot for ever mentioning Dad's heart issues.

Still...I also recognize an olive branch.

However pathetic, this is his thinly veiled, uber masculine attempt to apologize—you know—without actually apologizing.

Part of me revels in his pseudo-apology anyway.

How sad.

I haven't known Heron that long, but I know he thinks he's always right. He never lies, he's brutally direct, and anyone who deals with him needs to take the same approach. Because Magnus Heron does not like to apologize.

To: Magnus Heron

From: Sabrina Bristol

Subject: RE: Jingle Bells

MAG,

MY DAD IS FINE. Thanks for asking. My parents will get by.

S.

Executive Assistant to Magnus Heron, HeronComm Inc.

TIME OFF WOULD BE NICE, but I'm not sold on his sympathy. His reply pings my phone less than a minute later.

To: Sabrina Bristol
From: Magnus Heron
Subject: RE: RE: Jingle Bells

SABRINA,

I HOPE SO. Truly.

Retirement can be hard, especially for a former machinist and an author. If you want the extra downtime, say so, and I'll approve it.

M.

CEO of HeronComm Inc.

WHAT THE HELL? When did I tell him my parents' careers?
Never?

To: Magnus Heron
From: Sabrina Bristol
Subject: Bad Santa

YOU CHECKED up on my parents? Creepy.

S.

Executive Assistant to Magnus Heron, HeronComm Inc.

I BITE BACK A SMILE. Yes, I'm half teasing, but still.

The man needs to learn boundaries, and snooping around after my family—even for a good cause like offering extra PTO—isn't normal.

To: Sabrina Bristol

From: Magnus Heron

Subject: RE: Bad Santa

MISS BRISTOL,

ALWAYS SO QUICK TO jump to conclusions. Watch where you land.

Of course, I had a full background check done. You're part of my C-level team. It's only appropriate, and you signed the consent form. Maybe some holiday time off with eggnog would help your holly jolly memory.

MR. Claus

CEO of HeronComm Inc.

DAMN HIM. I can't help laughing at his signature.

I'm actually starting to be a little more flattered than weirded out. He has a million things on his mind, and yet he remembered a micro-detail about my life? That's not entirely horrible.

But that doesn't mean I won't give him a hard time about it.

I hit reply and swipe my fingers across the letters on my screen.

To: Magnus Heron

From: Sabrina Bristol

Subject: RE: RE: Bad Santa

VERY FUNNY, Santa. /sarcasm

So I guess you'll be peeping down my chimney next?

I didn't know I was signing up to work for the alphabet with HeronComm, and when did I sign this consent form, anyway?

S.

Executive Assistant to Magnus Heron, HeronComm Inc.

NOT EVEN THIRTY SECONDS LATER, he blows up my inbox.

To: Sabrina Bristol

From: Magnus Heron

Subject: RE: RE: RE: Bad Santa

SABRINA,

IT WAS in the batch of paperwork you signed with Ruby the very first day. What alphabet?

M.

CEO of HeronComm Inc.

I ROLL MY EYES, wondering what else I agreed to in my wild rush to accept this job. It feels like forever ago. I fire off another reply.

To: Magnus Heron

From: Sabrina Bristol

Subject: RE: RE: RE: RE: Bad Santa

YOU KNOW, like CIA, FBI, NSA, etc. Maybe you can hook me up with a national security clearance too?

S.

Executive Assistant to Magnus Heron, HeronComm Inc.

HE'S BACK in my email a second later, and I can totally see the amused smirk pulling at his face in my head. I also laugh at seeing *Miss Bristol*. So we're back to Captain Growly, I see.

To: Sabrina Bristol

From: Magnus Heron

Subject: Your Spy Career

MISS BRISTOL,

WE MANAGE huge accounts that supply technology and security to every alphabet agency keeping this country safe. I believe my Marine credentials go a long way toward making those clients feel comfortable. We've even assisted digital recruitment campaigns for the FBI.

We always land our clients huge government contracts. You should know that, and you'll thank me someday when you're being lauded for your service as an undercover agent.

I'm sure I'll be disappointed to lose you to the CIA, but I'll manage, Miss Bond.

M.

CEO of HeronComm Inc.

OH. My. God.

I don't know whether to clutch my sides at how dumb he's being or feel touched that he admits he'd miss me if—no, when—I move the hell on from this company run by a crazy man.

Since I'm no longer worried, just amused, I change the subject line.

To: Magnus Heron

From: Sabrina Bristol

Subject: Nope.

MAGNUS,

OMG. There's literally no end to your God complex. How did you get so arrogant? Will you at least tell me that?

S.

Executive Assistant to Magnus Heron, HeronComm Inc.

MY BREATH STALLS in my lungs. Then my screen lights up with a shiny new email.

To: Sabrina Bristol

From: Magnus Heron

Subject: RE: Nope.

MISS BRISTOL,

No. You'll have to let your imagination run wild and love it. Just like I know you enjoy my immense confidence and off the cuff banter about big hoses.

M.

CEO of HeronComm Inc.

HOLY CRAP. And here I hoped he'd forgotten that awful exchange in L.A. on my first miserable week slaving for this company.

His email sends a shiver down my spine because damn him a thousand times, he's right.

A sick part of me enjoys this.

Ugh.

I need to end this before I get us both in trouble.

To: Magnus Heron

From: Sabrina Bristol

Subject: Bye

GOODNIGHT, Mr. Heron. It's been a long day and I'm turning in early to get ready for the send-off tomorrow.

S.

Executive Assistant to Magnus Heron, HeronComm Inc.

BY SOME MIRACLE, I catch myself and hit send before I type out, ***I have zero interest in dreaming about big hoses.***

His reply rockets back a second later.

To: Sabrina Bristol

From: Magnus Heron

Subject: RE: Bye

SLEEP TIGHT, Tinkerbell. Pleasant dreams of tattooed firemen wearing Santa hats.

M.

CEO of HeronComm Inc.

DEAD. He just slayed me.

I can't even enjoy the shameful, heated snicker that makes me blush. I just head for the shower and try to focus on Mom's hunky firefighters.

Not Magnus Heron and his catastrophically oversized ego—or any hose he might have.



FINALLY.

It's the last day of the conference and time feels like it's back to moving normally. Thank God. It's been a long few days, and I've never been so ready to leave a place.

We're about to start another marketing session with speakers and panels. The room fills up with people fast. I stick with Angie and Hugo again, sitting behind Magnus when some starry-eyed seductress walks up to him.

Okay.

So, technically, I don't actually know anything about her. She's skinny, beautiful, and blond, dressed very professionally, not like a bimbo at all.

Still, I'm overwhelmed by the sudden urge to rip her hair out and feed it to her when she sidles up to him, planting herself right in his face. Way too close for comfort.

She grabs his lapel. "Is that an Italian coat?"

I roll my eyes, then glance from Angie to Hugo to make sure no one noticed.

"Yes, from Lombardy." Mag's feet turn slightly out, and he shifts so he's a bit further from her.

"An Armani?" She doesn't seem to notice he's trying to get away from her. Her hand lingers on his lapel, that same wicked smile on her face.

"Canali," he says, swatting her hand away gently.

You'd think that would do it. But this lady doesn't fold easy. She just smiles like he hung the stars.

"It's gorgeous. It brings out your eyes," she whispers, pulling at her loose hair and winding it around her fingers.

"Thanks."

He's clearly uninterested, and I almost feel bad for her.

Now it's just awkward for everyone involved...including me as I realize I've been green with jealousy.

My desire to pluck this chick's hair out dissolves as fast as it came. I'm not sure what I was so pissed about. But I can't

help but giggle behind them.

Angie's brows lift up and she almost chokes on the water she's sipping from a bottle.

"Mag has a girlfriend," I try to whisper, but the words come between giggles, so I'm not sure how loud they actually are.

I know it's a twelve-year-old thing to say, but I can't help it.

"Brina! He'll rake you over the coals if he hears that," she hisses, casting me a warning look, her eyes darting around.

Mag turns his head to glare and then swivels back to his admirer. "My team is here, miss. If you'll excuse me, we have a discussion."

"Oh, of course, but...do you have a card?" she asks.

"Not on me, but if you have one, I'll take it," he says.

She pulls a card from a binder tucked under her arm and hands it to him.

"Thank you." He turns to face us. "Let's all step out in the foyer."

Once it's just the four of us, I say, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to giggle."

Mag shrugs. "Liability of hiring college kids."

I glare at him. "I'm not a college kid and you know it."

He shakes his head. "Garlic with a face on her Macbook, all giggles at a conference. Prove it."

That wipes the smile right off my face.

At least now I know what kind of mood he's in.

"I'm getting a coffee. You three stooges can wait here for fifteen minutes, and go back to the session," Magnus says.

"Wait, Mr. Heron. I thought you wanted to discuss something?" Angie asks.

He grunts. "I don't remember. It's not important."

I look at Hugo, confused, my eyes trailing his tall, broad shoulders as he walks away.

“Was he speaking in code?” I wonder, blinking.

“The boss just needed a reason to get rid of that touchy-feely woman. He doesn’t like being fawned over, much less hit on by strangers at professional events.” Hugo chuckles and shifts awkwardly. “If only we all had that problem.”

The rest of the morning goes smoothly enough.

The main session ends early for a luncheon followed by some early afternoon socials. The HeronComm team takes up two tables. Mag and Ruby are at the one behind us with most of the marketers. I’m with our office intern and the creative team.

“So, Brina, how’d you like the conference?” Hugo asks.

“I’ve learned a lot. The sessions have been great, really an eye opener for how this whole industry operates.” I don’t say the obvious, though. It might be a good, long while before I forget about that crazy formal the first night. “I just wish we had more downtime. We could’ve seen more of Phoenix. It’s my first time here and we’ve been cooped up at the conference and the hotel every day.”

“That’s the bad thing about these conferences,” he says with a frown, repositioning his glasses on his nose. “We visit so many nice places and never really get to see any of them.”

“Such a shame. I’m grabbing dessert.” I push my chair away from the table and head for the buffet, deciding to make the most of my last time here.

Mag passes by, holding a scotch.

When he sees me, he stops. “Did I hear you say you’d like to see more of Phoenix, Miss Bristol?”

I nod, wondering what protocol I’ve broken now.

“Want to skip the rest and go for a desert cruise?” he asks.

I smile. “Really? You mean, the whole team?”

“Just us.” *And Armstrong, I assume.* “I’m not sticking around and waiting for a dozen more advances now that the drinks are flowing and everyone’s ready to party their last night away.”

“You’re so conceited,” I huff out.

“And I think you’re forgetting your place.” An odd thing to say, considering he just invited me out with him, alone.

“Someone has to be honest with you,” I grumble.

He steps closer and leans in, dancing blue flames for eyes. Up close, his good looks are intimidating, far too effective at rendering any normal woman speechless.

“Are you going to ditch this place with me or not?” he whispers.

Ruby walks by. “Mag?”

He straightens up and clears his throat, adjusting his tie. “We were just talking about a confidential account. What’s up?”

That’s right, Mag. Don’t let anyone know you’re flirting with your lowly secretary.

My heart kind of skips at the reality.

“Oh, nothing. As soon as I’m done here, I’m checking into the spa.” Ruby moves past us to go eat with one last look over her shoulder at Heron.

I can’t help but sense some unspoken message between them—a warning, maybe.

“Confidential account?” I ask.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he tells me, clearing his throat.

“On this desert cruise?”

“If you’re coming?” His eyes reach down inside me and set loose a hurricane of butterflies.

Dear. Freaking. Lord.

I mean...what could a ride through the desert with an egomaniac hurt? I don’t want to socialize with most of these

people, anyway, and I definitely don't want a rerun of the formal.

We leave the dining room and go into the hall.

“Are you going to call Armstrong?” I ask.

“How high are your heels today?”

I turn my knee in and pick up my heel to show him.

“Long enough?” I venture, watching the amusement lash hot in his eyes.

Then he gives a small shake of the head. “Can you walk a block in those, Miss Bristol?”

I nod.

“We're going to rent a car, then,” he tells me. “I hardly get a chance to enjoy driving without the city traffic.”

“So, it's going to be just—”

“You and me. Totally optional. Don't tell me you're getting cold feet?” His eyes sparkle when he smiles.

And just like that, I'm heading off into the desert with my boss, wondering if I'll come back with my pride intact, much less my heart.

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TIE-DYE SUNSET (MAGNUS)



It's like I'm on cruise control and I can't pull out of it.

The black Ferrari I've rented is sleek, ready, and practically begging for some Arizona sun.

"How do you like the ride?" I ask my pain-in-the-ass EA.

"It's cool! Never been in one of these before." She climbs in the passenger seat with this wide awe-struck grin etched on her face.

I try to ignore how striking she looks in this car with the sun spilling down in gold rivulets, igniting the landscape around us in a promising spectrum of tans and reds. Phoenix shows most of its fall colors in an interplay of light and shadows.

"Let's stop back at the hotel and change. I'm not wearing a tie into the desert." I pull out of the rental place's parking lot. "It's nothing like the summer here, but a hike in the evening sun can still get warm. Just curious, why didn't you make our reservations at the resort? I would've paid any upcharge for the convenience."

"They were booked," she says. "Sorry. I made the reservations the day you asked me to. Reading your mind isn't on my list of powers yet."

Yet?

I snort, nodding. "It's fine. I didn't decide if this was the conference I'd bring the entire team to until I saw the attendee list."

“Always so tactical.” She grins.

“Always.” I pull into the hotel and leave the car with the valet to watch for the next ten minutes. “You’ll want jeans and sneakers.”

Sabrina’s eyes roll up like she’s thinking as we head for the elevator.

“Thanks, Dad. I can dress myself.”

I smile. “What, do you not have those things?”

“Won’t yoga pants and flip-flops do the trick?”

I chuckle. “I’ll loan you a pair of shoes.”

She glances down at my feet. “Yeah, I’m not sure that’s going to work. We’d also better get going while there’s still plenty of light.”

“Fine. Do flip-flops and we’ll stay on the kiddie trails. I guess I’ll carry you if we meet a scorpion.”

“Probably for the best.” She laughs, but I can’t help but notice the rosy glow on her cheeks. “Minus the you carrying me part.”

Oh, really?

I keep my quips to myself for once as we split apart for our rooms.

~
AFTER SWAPPING my suit for jeans and a button-down shirt, I head for the lobby, making a quick stop at the front desk to pick up the basket I ordered.

“Are you ready?” a familiar voice behind me asks.

I turn to find a very different Sabrina Bristol than any I’ve encountered. My breath catches for a hot second.

She’s wearing pink pants that accent every curve and a tie-dyed tank top underneath a silky white cardigan.

As usual, she’s gorgeous, but the dramatic tie-dye is probably the most outlandish thing I’ve ever seen her in.

“You’re into tie-dye? Do you also have a crystal healing habit I didn’t know about?”

She grins and her face goes rosy again. There goes my dick, jerking in my trousers like a badly behaved pet.

“The tank top’s technically part of my pajamas. When we come to these things, we never get much time to explore. I kinda figured I’d be in meetings the whole time we were here. So I didn’t pack for an outing at the park.”

“You aren’t going to want to wear those clothes to bed after being out in the sand.” I instantly regret my words.

What *will* she wear to bed, then?

I already know she’s adorable when she sleeps, I see it every time on our jet rides, and tonight she’ll probably have to sleep nude.

Fuck, what does she look like when—

“Are you okay?” Her eyes soften, and she bites her bottom lip with a smile.

Dammit, I’m flustered, and I’m sure she knows it.

“Never better. Let’s go. I know a few good places we can go. It’s not quite Sedona with its fabulous rocks and greenery, but Saguaros and sunsets are a godsend.”

Her gaze falls to the basket hanging in my hand.

“What’s that?”

I shrug. “Snacks. Just a few light things I had packed. Come on.”

I walk toward the door, forcing an end to this conversation.

Sabrina tags along, but being locked inside a vrooming sports car with her does nothing to calm my—nerves?

Sure, that’s what we’ll call it.

Any other description would be far less appropriate when it involves the hard-on from hell that just won’t die.

“Where are we going?” she asks, turning to bat her happy mocha-colored eyes at me.

“McDowell Mountain Park. It’s a big place, tons of trails, mountains, and wildlife. If we’re lucky, we’ll see a tortoise.”

“Oh, yay. I love those guys.” She claps her hands together softly.

God. I wish a certain part of my anatomy came with a shell to hide. It’d make this insane venture of mine a lot less awkward.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch her widening grin, hoping she hasn’t noticed my bulge.

I don’t say anything but glance from the road to her.

“You want to hear something funny? It’s slightly pathetic, maybe, but I think you’ll laugh.”

“Sure,” I tell her.

“This is probably the craziest place I’ve ever been, away from Illinois. The scenery, the air, the sun...it’s all so different here. I mean, before working for you and traveling to hotel rooms all over the country but never actually leaving the hotels, at least, I’d never been anywhere more exotic than Wisconsin.”

Wow. What has her life been like? I’m not blind to my own privilege and luxuries, but she seems sheltered even compared to my other hires.

“Do you like expanding your world?”

“Yeah.” She leans her head against the car window. “I love the mountains and cacti here. It looks like another planet compared to the Midwest. And I don’t mind traveling for work—I’m grateful for the chance—but...I also hope someday I’m able to go places with time to soak them in.”

I chuckle. “Work isn’t a vacation. We’re dealing with very demanding clients and competitors pissier than any rattlesnake out here.”

“I know, but we were so close to Hollywood in L.A. I wish I could’ve seen the stars.”

“Like who?” I ask.

“No, not actors. Like the ones on the ground.”

“Oh—the Avenue of Stars,” I say.

Mental note: Next time we're in L.A., make sure there's time for a Hollywood trip.

The desert sun dips low in the sky, casting a brilliant neon-red sheet over everything. We're well outside the city now, past Scottsdale and Fountain Hills. The suburban houses thin and the landscape turns wilder, filled with brush and soaring cacti and hawks that look like they're on a mission.

“Whoa.” Sabrina fuses her face to the passenger window. “This is beautiful, Mr. Heron. I knew I'd like the desert since it's unique, but I didn't know it'd be so breathtaking.”

“It only gets better at sunset. Trust me.”

“Wow, look—that's amazing!” She beams with a smile far brighter than the landscape lit all around us.

I glance over.

She's pointing to the mountain range in the distance, one of the taller McDowells with its wrinkled, rolling peaks and winding valleys. It looks like a giant took a rake to the entire landscape thousands of years ago.

“I've never seen rocks like that before,” she whispers with the awe only a flatlander has.

“There were mountains in L.A.,” I remind her, fighting a smile.

“Oh, right. We didn't really get out of the hotel much.”

“I'm sorry.” I pull over to the side of the road.

She shrugs, rolling her delicate shoulders.

“It's business, and you pay well. I'm not complaining.” She blinks as I turn down a rockier side road. “What are we doing?”

“Since you adore the mountains so much, I thought we'd stop and have a look around. This is part of the main park, anyway. Just not the main entrance.”

“Oh, sounds great.”

A minute later, we're parked and she opens her door, stepping out with the grace of an explorer in a new world.

“Be careful,” I say, getting out of the car. “Flip-flops probably aren't the best shoes for this excursion. These trails are rougher than they look.”

“Chill. I'm totally fine,” she assures me, throwing a thumbs-up as the desert breeze whips her hair around.

Destroyed.

For what feels like a minute, I'm rooted to the ground, standing there like a lunk who's forgotten how to walk.

All because the Arizona sun turns Sabrina Bristol into a work of art.

Passion.

Music.

Soul.

She's an angel cast in rusted light and shadows that contrast far too brilliantly with her mahogany hair and a smile that could rob a man blind.

My hands drift to my pockets, though my wallet isn't what I'm worried about losing.

I just don't have a way to check my head, my heart, and find out if I'm still all there, or completely hollowed out by this spitfire Venus I damn sure shouldn't be fawning over.

“Follow me,” I clip off, forcing my knees to move so I break the trance.

I point to the mountaintop and a wide, flat ledge of rocks below that should make a good place to sit.

“We'll have a great view from there if we hurry.” I grab the picnic basket out of the back seat and lead the way.

A few minutes in, I turn back to find Sabrina struggling along behind me.

“Why don't you go ahead of me? I'll catch up,” I tell her.

“I’m fine,” she says.

“I insist. Ladies first.” I wave my arm in front of me, hoping she’ll pass.

The ground becomes rockier and less even when we’re closer to the shaded area I plan to stop at. Sabrina almost loses her footing, rocks skidding out from under her.

I slow down, ready to catch her if she falls. She uses her hands to catch herself and rebalance several times, yet continues the climb.

She’s quick on her feet.

I’m not sure I could do that so gracefully in flip-flops.

Then she missteps with a loud squeal.

I slide the picnic basket up my wrist and stretch my arms to catch her. It doesn’t matter though, because she’s falling, overcompensating her balance, and slams into my chest.

Shit.

I brace myself to keep from keeling over with her. My free hand instinctively closes around her, turns her gently to face me, and I hand her the picnic basket.

“Hold this.”

“Why?” she asks.

I sweep her off her feet. Literally.

Before I know what’s happening, I’m cradling her head in one elbow while her feet dangle over my other. Our eyes lock with a hot polarity that makes her gasp.

Fuck.

For a second, I wish this grip on her was about more than preventing a broken neck. She trembles at my touch, supple curves and rippling hair, my own raging desire personified in one stubborn, gorgeous, and right now far too vulnerable young woman.

Sabrina.

You’re fucking killing me.

I have to turn my head, breaking our stare, and take a ragged breath. Who knew something that feels this good could be torture?

The proximity reminds me how beautiful she is, and the way she stares up at my lips with hers parted, stunned, and wanting does nothing to dispel the demon thoughts in my brain.

“Are you crazy?” she demands. “You’re...you’re actually carrying me. Did you see a scorpion?”

I smile, wishing like hell I had a less lethal reason for hoisting her up.

I’m fully aware this is inappropriate.

Making sure she doesn’t break her neck isn’t.

“Worse,” I tell her. “A broken neck and wrongful death suit are both things I don’t need. Send me an army of scorpions over that.”

“Ha-ha,” she says, wrinkling her nose.

She tries to glare at me, but it’s diminished by the way her lips turn up in a smile.

“I thought it was funny,” I growl. “Where’s your sense of humor?”

“Nowhere with creepy crawlies involved.” She shudders, tucking herself into my chest. “I don’t need that kind of wildlife up here.”

When we reach the ledge several paces later, I set her on her feet.

“Thank you,” she says.

“For what?”

She hugs her arms in front of her chest, rolling her eyes to the side. “Um, everything? Getting me out of that conference early, driving us here, making sure I didn’t fall on my butt. You’re a nice guy when you want to be.”

I don't dare acknowledge that last part, so I spread out the picnic basket, the blanket, and open the wine. I pass her a glass I've unpacked.

"You make it sound like I rescued you from a burning building. You hated the Adzilla conference that much?" Something in my gut screams I should say more, but this seems like a benign place to start.

She bites her lip.

"I liked the presentations. Very informative. I'm still pretty new to this industry." She gives a half-smile, but the expression looks pained. "I can't say I really like the forced socializing. It felt like high school on steroids."

Nice punch to the gut, but how can I blame her?

After that first night and my outburst with Jake Willis, anyone would wonder.

"I'm sorry," I say, clearing my throat. "If anything I did spoiled your time here, rest assured it won't repeat itself. I'm a man who learns from his mistakes."

And I am, even if the confrontation with Willis felt more like a near-crime of passion than any boo-boo.

Sabrina sits down, crossing her legs in front of her, sipping her wine. "Don't worry. I'm not complaining. This is the perfect end to a pretty decent time here."

"Tell me something good," I say, clinking my glass softly against hers. "There's more to your life than proving you can handle whatever I throw at you, hiding from black cats, and never venturing beyond the Wisconsin hinterlands."

Her smile is almost sad, and those russet-brown eyes darken a shade.

"I'm an open book, but there isn't much to tell. My friends call me Brina." She bites her lip. "You—you could call me Brina."

"Brina." I roll the name off my tongue, tasting how soft it feels mingled with the wine. "That's pretty, I'll admit. My friends and enemies alike call me Mag, but you already knew

it. You can, too, if you'd like, since we already went there over email."

"Oh my God." She laughs. "You have friends? Besides Ruby and Armstrong, I mean? I didn't really think you did anything but work."

Damn.

Busted.

Of course, I'm not going to let her know how artificial my social life really is.

"I don't do the best job keeping in touch with the folks who count. Not really, but they do exist. A couple guys from my old unit, now settled back in Cleveland with wives and kids," I say, finishing a glass of wine and filling another for her. "So, Brina, what else? Work, Wisconsin, and...?"

"I still design whenever I get a chance. I've always loved art, and it's how I met my bestie in school, Paige. Right now, though, I just like making money. Keeping a roof over my head gets expensive in the city. So is the leaky roof over my paren—" She stops mid-sentence and goes quiet.

I lean in, waiting for more, hating how she turns away.

One more reason I'm glad I hired her after that day in the park.

Besides being the best executive assistant I've ever had, she really needs this job.

"A leaky roof sounds dangerous with winter almost here," I mumble, pulling out my phone and opening a page I've bookmarked with a certain whimsical romance author.

"What are you doing?" she asks, draining her glass, struggling to look over my shoulder. "Mag?"

"Nothing," I say, trying not to smile.

"You're lying," she squeaks, reaching for my phone. "Let me see, c'mon!"

I jerk it away from her, type five thousand units into the quantity field, and before she can stop me, I hit *buy*.

“I want to see!” she hollers, twisting around like a playful kitten.

I’m laughing as her hand waves in front of my face. I lean back, moving the phone away from her.

The confirmation page comes up just as her hand closes around my phone, and she bends it in a way my hand can’t twist. The screen lights up her face in the dusk, showing me how delicate her lips look when they fall open, forming a perfect red O.

She stares at it for a minute and then looks at me. “Five thousand copies of *Farm Love*? Are you insane?”

“Yes. We talked about romance books in L.A., and you never told me your mom wrote them,” I say sharply, narrowing my eyes at her. “My EA needs to be more forthcoming. Now your parents can have a brand-new roof over their heads while libraries all over the country enjoy Emily Bristol’s work. Consider it a bonus. A belated one I would’ve given you anyway after your work on Woof Meow Chow and the Jazzle Razzle accounts. We might have lost Stedfaust and his gourmet pet food if you hadn’t been in the meeting that day.”

I didn’t think her eyes could get any wider, but they do.

“And frankly, I should’ve apologized sooner,” I grind out. “Better late than never. I’m only half the devil you think I am, Sabrina.”

“It’s...I just...*what*? Okay. First, it’s not an EA’s place to be ‘forthcoming—’” She puts finger quotes around that word and I smile. “Not about her parents’ occupations. Not even with her boss. But I’m glad you’re happy with my work, apology accepted, and...thank you, Mag. Thank you so, so much.”

Does she hear herself?

How could I not be pleased with her work? Aside from me, she’s hands down the hardest worker at the senior level, and she’s a breath of fresh air.

“You’re welcome,” I mutter, totally disinterested in drowning in her praise.

I turn my head and wait for her to follow, which she does a minute later.

“Will you look at that?” I say, pointing to the sky.

The lingering sunset turns the whole landscape into brilliant stripes of pink, red, purple, and orange. All the magic this place is known for, as I’ve seen years ago on other trips.

This time, though, it isn’t just the sun freeing my overworked mind.

Brina is a torrid sight I’ll never forget.

Every color in that tie-dyed tank top, which she rocks without the cardigan, hangs loosely in the flickering sunset. It loops down her freckled ivory shoulders, showing off cleavage like peaches and cream.

It’s fucking painful to keep my hands to myself, to resist the urge to yank her into my lap and kiss her, to steal every breath from her lungs.

The wine must be curdling my better judgment.

“Listen, just so we’re clear, I’m insanely grateful for the bonus. But in the future, it isn’t cool for you to research my par—”

“Background check,” I cut her off.

Damn her, she’s too cute.

“I know, Mag, but you can’t just buy my mom’s books. She’ll think she has real sales and living, breathing fans. She’ll start thinking she can count on those sales to—”

Screw resisting.

Screw her worries, too.

Before I can stop myself, I reach out and grab her, pulling that lithe body into my lap. I bend my head, facing her lips.

She doesn’t complain.

In fact, she sighs.

And every muscle in my body hardens.

“Save it for another time,” I whisper. “We’ll talk about it, I promise, but right now, we can’t save this magnificent sunset.”

“Oh.”

One word, and not even that, just a hot sigh pouring out of her, cascading against my mouth from the sliver of space left between us.

This woman will end me, and I’ll die smiling at her beauty.

Perfect sunsets aside, there’s something else I can’t save.

The narrow gap between us closes.

Her eyes go wide, all anticipation, an energy whipping through her.

My tongue flicks across her bottom lip.

She opens her mouth. This time her sigh is longer, higher pitched.

So much for a prayer of holding back.

I devour her then, slipping my tongue in and tasting her mouth, exploring her winding tongue, the inside of her lip, her top palate, and every airy breath she gives.

It’s a fuck-hot kiss for the ages under the tinted desert sky, as if we’re part of this landscape of sorcery and sin.

Her hands move to my head, her fingers attacking my hair, those nails that once wanted to slash ribbons across my face now begging for more. She shifts her weight over me.

Right over my hardness.

It’s a sweet hell, agonizing, and if it doesn’t stop now, it’s going to go too far. I deepen the kiss, pull her closer, claiming her with my hands, my teeth, my tongue.

My grip around her tightens, savoring the last few seconds, one last hurrah.

Because I know damn well what I have to do next.

I'm almost snarling as my head snaps back, jerking away, gasping for air.

I'm not alone. She's panting, struggling to catch her breath while every bone in my body soaks up this sickness.

Fuck.

I'm just like my old man. I can't lose the best EA I've ever had—not like this—and I won't let her suffer through a scandal I probably deserve.

Office scandals follow women, and for her, it isn't fucking fair.

“Sorry. We've both been drinking,” I say, trying to brush it off as the reckless, godawful wine-fueled error that it is, without making her feel ruined.

Right.

She stares at me wide-eyed but doesn't say anything.

“I had to do something to calm you down. You were acting like a lunatic because I bought a few books.”

She's confused. “Mag?”

I shake my head.

“Forget it. I meant every word of what I said; your bonus paid to your mother was well deserved, and you shouldn't worry about it. Umm—” I wag a finger between us. “This thing that happened...too much wine and not enough water. I always forget how dry the air gets out here, even in the cooler months. Again, I had to do something to calm you—”

Her eyes bore into me, and she cuts me off.

“Got it. It's not like I asked you to.”

Shit. Is she talking about the money or the kiss? Does that mean she didn't want it?

“We'll never speak of it again, and you're still the best EA I've ever had. Deal?” I ask, offering my hand.

She doesn't answer.

She storms away.

Downhill in flip-flops.

My gut clenches and my heart jumps into my throat. She almost fell several times on the way up, and going down, she'll only have more momentum.

I race up behind her and scoop her up again, tossing her over my shoulder. She's like a down pillow in my arms. She fights at first, her face crimson, but then she relents, shifting to stare at my lips like she can't believe we went *there*.

I'm such an unholy jagoff.

"I thought we were done? Never speaking of that stuff again?"

"We won't, but I'm not letting you break your neck either, woman. I have too much work for you to do."

"I hate you." Her words are humorless, menacing, a tone I haven't heard her use before, and fuck, do I deserve it.

Let her loathe the ground I walk on and surround herself in barbed wire.

It's the reminder I need, before I do the unspeakable.

If Sabrina Bristol hates me, maybe that's the best thing I could hope for.

~
Years Ago

To: Magnus Heron

From: Jesy Cho

Subject: You People Are Stupid

HERON,

WHEN WE SIGNED a six-figure contract for media and advertising management with Heron Communications, this

company wasn't expecting a block of ten a.m. commercial breaks. I need to know three things:

1. What moron books TV advertisements during The View? I don't know about you, but my grandmother doesn't wear designer jeans.

2. How are you going to fix this, or do you plan to cancel my contract with a full refund? Or do we need to sue, because most judges will agree I didn't get what I paid for.

3. How many damn emails do I have to send my account manager to get a response?

THANKS,

Jesy Cho

Marketing Director, Go Boom Denim International

I PUSH my chair away from the desk and sigh.

Apparently, Jesy emailed her account manager four times before shooting this off to me, and...

Yeah. I get why she's upset. The moron in charge of her account hasn't responded either.

At this point, we're losing a client and the why doesn't matter.

Dad shouldn't be putting up with this bullshit. I'd can a crappy account manager on the spot.

This is first-year intern fodder. The manager only rose through the ranks because he was one of my dad's frat buddies, too. He had no fucking idea what he was doing when he was hired, and years later, he still doesn't.

He obviously got talked into the worst ad slot available with the station. But I saw the bill for it. That poorly targeted slot hadn't come at a discount.

Any more of this, and HeronComm will be heading for the shitter. Jesy Cho is a mover and shaker who knows a lot of

people.

I've had it.

I storm over to my father's corner office and barge in without knocking—every time I do, he always yells that he's busy.

He doesn't seem to notice me at first.

I freeze in the doorway, taking in the scene, trying to comprehend what I'm seeing.

My father's face is a bright hell-red. He's screaming incoherently and shaking his fist.

A tiny blond woman cowers in the corner, next to the filing cabinet with her hands out in front of her, like she's trying to shield herself.

Maybe she is.

I'd never seen him this mad before, bowed up like he's about to fucking *hit* her.

He shakes his fist above his head, his back turned, his voice this vile hiss.

"How dare you. How dare you march in here, you street urchin, asking for more money for you and that brat? I fired you years ago. We signed a settlement!"

What is this? I study the blonde in the corner. It takes me a minute to place her, but I recognize her at last.

She was an intern here a few years ago, right after I left the Marines and came back to the family business.

Marissa. Marissa Quail.

That's her name, isn't it? We're roughly the same age.

"Hey!" I snap, the only word that comes to mind.

They both turn to look at me in slow motion.

Dad frowns, his lip curled in this vicious sneer.

Marissa doubles over, frantically wiping tears from her eyes.

Neither of them speaks as my blood pressure rockets and my hand forms a fist like a hammer.

“Dad? What the ever living fuck is going on?”


Present

MY EYES SNAP open and my whole body jerks.

I'm on the jet, I realize, the dull white noise of engines droning over everything.

It was just a nightmare, a memory I'll never forget no matter how bad I want to.

We're on the way home to Chicago. Sabrina sits across from me with her head turned toward me, looking right at me. Her face is hard, the disdain clear, holding another newer, sadder memory.

And I'm the shit who put it in her head.

When our eyes meet, she jerks her head away and she stares at her phone, tapping away.

Fine.

She has a right to be angry. I hope she doesn't quit.

From the sound of things, she can't afford to, but I really don't want to be without an EA again. And the assistant before Brina was as bad as a vacant position.

I stare at the back of her head, wanting to run my fingers through those long brown locks again. She's beautiful, funny, and far more fragile than she looks.

That kiss messed with my soul. So bad I spent the whole night tossing and turning in my bed, pulsing with guilt and aching with desire.

I couldn't even sleep until I jerked off like a college kid.

Goddamn.

This was *not* supposed to happen for too many reasons to list.

I need to keep my EA.

I need to stop fucking up.

I need to remember who I am, and who I'm not.

Not. Baxter. Heron.

Frowning, I open my laptop and get to work.

Well, I pretend to.

I can't concentrate, but I have to put something in front of my face to keep me from gawking. To keep my eyes off the woman who's become my own forbidden fruit. To keep a thin line of sanity between Brina and me.

Miss Bristol, I correct myself.

That's how it needs to stay.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

SECRET SANTA (SABRINA)



He kissed my face off.

He kissed me like a cyclone.

He kissed me freaking blind, deaf, and senseless.

Then he told me to never speak of it again.

The drive back to the hotel was ice-cold silence, and he didn't say a word on the flight home.

He no longer needs my help attending meetings either, but has no problem emailing me all times of the day. He's just as demanding as ever, and every bit as deserving of my hate.

Every time a new request comes in, it's hard not to chuck my phone through the nearest window.

Miss Bristol, please pick up my dry cleaning.

Miss Bristol, make another coffee run.

Miss Bristol, I'll need you here on Saturday and Sunday.

I'm waiting for the one that says, *Miss Bristol, could you kindly adjust the Earth's tilt?*

Go ahead. Call me clueless.

For a moment, out in the desert, I thought he'd actually crack and open up like a human being. I thought he had it in him to be real with me.

I almost thought—

I don't even know. That we were equals? That I might tumble into being more than his EA?

He kissed me in a way no one ever has, leaving me a puddle of confusion and clashing feels, and then the prick pretended it never happened.

So many questions and zero answers.

I'm even second-guessing the reason why I got this job.

Did he hire me all along because he wants in my pants? Or did something about me really impress him like he claimed when he was gushing all over me for a job well done, before the infamous, soul-stealing kiss?

Or—horror of horrors—maybe I'm that bad a kisser.

One smooch and he instantly realized I'm better EA material than fuck-buddy grade.

God.

I hate this.

I hate him.

I hate that I have to wonder, ponder, and decipher some more.

All because he can't just man the heck up and *talk* to me.

Maybe it's a blessing that I don't have to see him much these days with December grinding on toward its Christmas peak, the only break we're bound to get. This Chicago winter rode in with a vengeance, leaving the city a slab of drab grey, howling wind, and glistening ice.

The dinging elevator pulls me out of my head. So does the painful shock.

Mag's damn coffee burns the palm of my hand. Wincing, I shift the cup into the other hand and shake my fingers out until the stinging fades.

I head straight for his office to set his dark Kona with a splash of heavy cream in its usual spot, but he's at his desk.

He looks up with this wisp of a smile, just in time for me to hand it to him instead.

“You should invest in Kona beans,” I say, my voice so tight.

He grins. “I own the farm.”

“You—what? What farm?”

“I bought a Kona farm in Hawaii several years ago after sealing a particularly lucrative deal. The Bean Bar uses my beans. Don’t you ever read the signs? It’s called Heron Blend. It’s the highest quality and the only kind I’ll drink regularly.”

Well, la-di-da.

“So, you’re a huge coffee snob on top of everything else?”
Including asshole, jerk-off boss, brutally good kisser...

“Don’t you have work to do?” He scowls up at me, those eyes dark-blue whirlpools.

I plan to leave his office without another word.

I’m still pissed at him anyhow. I make it as far as the door when he says, “Miss Bristol?”

Lovely. So I’m only Brina when your tongue is down my throat, huh? I think, trying to hide the bitter crease in my lips.

I turn to face him, ever so slowly.

“Yes, Mr. Heron?”

“Take the week after Christmas off. We’ll be running on a skeleton crew.”

“Hmm, I don’t know, I have work. Just like you said. Maybe I prefer not to wind up buried after the holidays.”

“What do you mean? I don’t need an assistant while our clients are off counting their holiday sales hauls. Marketing is the last thing on anyone’s mind until January first.”

“I’d rather bank my vacation days for when I have a real vacation. Somewhere tropical like Kona with smoothies everywhere, maybe.” I fold my arms, daring him to push back.

I get my wish.

He clasps his hands neatly on the desk, leans his head forward, and sighs. “You can’t work the week after Christmas. I’ll give you extra comp time so you don’t have to use your precious vacation days. You’ll enjoy Hawaii more when winter teases us into thinking it’s over before slamming everyone with a March blizzard.”

“I—”

“My mind’s made up, Sabrina. Go spend some quality time with your folks.”

There.

There’s that hornet sting to the heart again, reminding me this horrible man knows about my parents, my family, and for some ungodly reason...he still seems to care.

I stare at him. “Whatever. I just...I never thought I’d see the day when you ordered me to work *less*, but okay.”

With a sad parting smirk, I exit and close the door, breathing a huge sigh of relief.

Our interactions are few and far between the rest of the day. Back to ‘normal.’

Honestly, I think he’s purposely avoiding me more, but as long as I’m collecting my paycheck with extra time off, I shouldn’t complain.

Still. I take every opportunity I can to look through his window, trying to make out details behind the frosted glass.

Every now and then I catch a glimpse of him in his office with his head buried behind his laptop, or taking a call, slouched in his chair.

His usual King of the Universe aura is gone.

I don’t know what happened, but something’s very wrong.

I’ve seen Magnus Heron be a jackass, a tyrant, a prick, and an unexpected, overprotective sweetheart.

But one thing I’ve never seen him be?

Deflated.

And it scares me.

I know. After the stunt he pulled—teasing my tongue like he wanted to devour me and acting like nothing happened—I shouldn't care.

But I do, and I hate that he's miserable.

That's why I push my doubts aside and stop at Sweeter Grind after work. I walk out with a bag of Hawaiian coffee, a box of Heart's Edge truffles, and my usual cinnamon latte. Back at my place, I hide the stuff from Paige and discreetly wrap up the coffee and truffles in shiny red and green paper, tie a ribbon around it, and write out a card.

MR. HERON,

I THOUGHT some variety might perk you up. No, it's not handpicked Kona beans, but it's Hawaiian. I hope you like it. Try not to work too hard over the holidays.

MERRY CHRISTMAS,

Brina

THE NEXT MORNING, I leave it on his desk next to the steaming hot cup from the Bean Bar.

At my desk, a fancy gold-wrapped package sits in my leather chair, waiting for me. And here I thought I'd be the one to surprise him...

Ripping through the paper that almost looks too expensive to ruin, I find a leather-bound planner with a black cat prancing across the cover.

A thought bubble over the kitty's head says, *As long as I'm yours, I'm lucky.*

Oh my God.

It's from one of my own art pieces. One of the last designs I did before Purry Furniture ditched me, and I stole away so they couldn't recycle it. I had it posted on my little website portfolio, which he's obviously seen.

A note on the first page tumbles out as I flip through it.

*CAT ART and superstitions are just a few of my favorite things.
Merry Christmas, Miss Bristol.*

HOLY HELL.

I stare at it so long it becomes a permanent part of my retinas.

I'm equal parts hollowed out and flooded with this strange heat.

I wonder what ghosts paid Scrooge a visit last night and knocked the Christmas spirit into him?

Let's be real.

I'm ecstatic. I want to hug it and dance around, but I'm also in public, in the office, so I set the planner on my desk and go about my day. My cheeks hurt from smiling by the time eight o'clock rolls around.

As I print contracts to check for missing items and finish the filing, I keep glancing at it, wondering how to thank him. Wondering what it means, if it isn't just one more of his silly games.

As long as I'm yours, I'm lucky.

Does he mean it?

I don't see Mag the whole evening. He snuck out for a meeting across town and never came back. So before I leave the office, I fire off a quick text.

Thanks for the planner. You caught me by surprise. Of course I add a black cat emoji and a Christmas tree.

Mag: Planner? I have no idea what you're talking about.

Yeah. Because anyone else on the planet would tease me with my own cat art and superstitions?

Liar, I fire back.

Mag: Prove it.

Sabrina: That's basically a confession.

Mag: So you've joined my legal team now? Shame, you'll be taking a pay cut.

I send an emoji with the tongue out and type, *Whatever, boss. I already do a better job than they do saving your ass.*

After work, I go back to the apartment, still getting barraged by messages from the Grump Who Gave Christmas and trying not to laugh.

Paige dances into the room with a green elf hat on and the world's ugliest sweater.

"Um...you have jingle bells over your nipples," I tell her, doing a double take.

"Oh, put that thing down, Brina!" she belts out, passing me a glass of mulled wine she just made. "The big man says no working whatsoever. It's almost Christmas Eve!"

"The big man?"

"Ho, ho, ho!" she rumbles. "Word on the street is, he's a lot higher up than that Magnum d-bag."

Oof. I should've known.

"Need help wrapping stuff for your folks?"

She dives down on the sofa next to me and we talk about our holiday plans, never missing an opportunity to tell me to go out and get laid. I just tell her I need to get away.

Since she'll be staying in the city, Paige lends me her car, and I drive home to the 'burbs. If I'm not going into the office every day, I might as well spend some time in my old bedroom. Except for Thanksgiving, I haven't seen my parents nearly enough ever since Dad's heart appointments.

I swing the front door open—still unlocked, *sigh*—and step inside.

It's warm and cozy as ever with a crackling fire. My nostrils bristle, gingerbread and sugary goodness everywhere. I grin.

"I see Mom made cookies already," I say, turning to lock the door. For the next few days, at least, I'll know they're safe.

Mom bolts in from the kitchen and hugs me, practically lifting me off my feet.

"This is the best Christmas ever! My baby is home, and I'm a bestseller!"

Oh, Magnus Heron.

You thought you were helping, but you've created an author-monster.

"Congratulations, Mom. And I come home for Christmas every year."

She pats my cheek. "Oh, I know you do, because you're the best daughter ever. Aren't you pumped for my big win with *Farm Love*? Everybody adores Sir Oinkswell! My next book is gonna sell even more!"

She scrunches up her nose and makes this obnoxious pig noise.

Moms. Gotta love 'em, right?

I hug her again. "I know, and I'm so happy for you. But I'm just saying...don't be surprised if it's a while before you hit the list again. They can't all be blockbusters."

"Well, since I hit the list, I've been selling like a hundred more copies per day! And the reviews don't lie. The people want sexy Marines taking down evil clowns and winning the girl." Mom moves away from me and claps excitedly.

My smile falls. "You're selling that many?"

Oh, crap. Heron, what the hell are you doing?

Because I haven't been buying them. I find her book on my phone, and the reviews look genuine enough...

I'm just as surprised as anyone this boost might've been the kick she needed to hook a real audience. And if it's all thanks to my beast of a boss, I have all the more reason to thank him.

She smiles so huge her face lights up. "Some of my other books are trickling in sales, too. The backlist is fired up and catching readers. I'm a real author, Brina. You're going to see my stuff on Netflix and cable someday! It's so exciting. I've been at this for twenty years."

"I know," I say stiffly. Yes, it's so nice to see her happy, but I still can't help feeling a little dishonest. "You deserve it, Mom, and so does Sir Oinkswell. Every last dollar."

I oink back at her and she laughs. I'm just trying to squelch the firestorm in my head.

Also, I can't decide if I want to crucify my boss or kiss him to death. But since the latter's off-limits...

I go to my room to drop my bag down and text Mag where Mom can't see.

Sabrina: Quit buying my mom's books. She thinks she's on her way to movie stardom or something, and I can't buy enough books for her not to be crushed. I'm just your EA. You wanted it that way. Plus, I'm sure you've never purchased another assistant's mother's books.

Magnus: Don't get your panties in a twist. I haven't bought her books since we were in Arizona that day. It was a one-time thing.

Uh-oh. Worst hopes and fears confirmed.

But how do I know he's telling the truth?

Sabrina: Then how, pray tell, is she still selling 50-100 copies a day??? I add a lady shrugging emoji.

Magnus: Sales beget sales, Miss Bristol. Marketing 101. Let your dear old mom be a lesson.

Maybe he's right.

Maybe.

But I'm still not sold on her freaky hot Marine-prize pig-serial killer clown thing screaming success.

Sabrina: Yeah, okay. Funny how I always bought her books, and that never got her sustained sales.

Magnus: You never put her on a list. Visibility is king with these online retailers. Books are the same as every other product. Research the algorithms yourself and leave me to enjoy my scotch.

Sabrina: Your poor liver, snarlypants. I add a smiley face with its tongue hanging out.

Magnus: Don't worry about my liver. You're just my EA, remember?

I don't point out that only one of us got a choice in that.

Dear God.

No one infuriates me like this walking trope of a man.

In the morning, Mom piles the table high with all my favorites: cinnamon apple pancakes, sizzling bacon, and homemade hot chocolate.

My favorite part of being home might be the company, but the food's a close second, and so is the nostalgia.

She used to do this every day of Christmas break when I was a kid. And just like then, Dad sits next to me, the newspaper open with a heaping gas station cup of black coffee at his side.

I keep the comments about caffeine and his heart to myself, filling my belly up and planning on being rolled out of here when my phone goes off.

Heron flashes across my screen.

Mom clears her throat. She hates me having my phone at the table.

"It's my boss," I whisper, smiling sheepishly.

“He bothers you over the holidays too?” Dad grumbles, looking up from the news. “Jackass.”

“Nolan, no.” Mom’s voice is warm and excited. “He’s not *bothering* her. He’s just keeping in touch.”

I haven’t even gotten the message open yet. I glance at Mom over my phone.

What the hell does she mean?

“Honey, you call me at least three times a week and mention him by name every time. I know he’s not just your boss.” She takes a bite of her pancake. “You can be honest with us.”

“He’s *what?*” I echo back, distracted by a photo in my messenger. It’s Mag’s hand, holding a steaming cup of coffee, and it fills my screen.

Magnus: It’s no Heron blend, but it’s good.

I smile helplessly.

“*Seeee?*” Mom whispers.

Dad chuckles, hiding behind his paper.

I groan. I’ll set them straight in a minute. But for now...

Better than your scotch? I type back, breaking into a blush.

Magnus: No. But it’ll do since it’s the wrong time of day for scotch. Thank you, and Merry Christmas again.

I giggle, my heart doing this wibbly swing.

I power the phone off and look at Mom. “He’s my boss. Nothing more. I promise.”

“Sweetheart, you smiled bigger than I do over my books when you saw his text.”

I sigh. “Mom, you live for love stories. This isn’t a romance. I work for this guy and he’s kind of a demanding ass...I just need to keep my job. Staying on good terms is part of it. Besides, he’s a shameless workaholic. He isn’t interested in anything else.”

“Oh?” Mom asks, quirking an eyebrow.

“Oh, what?”

She shrugs and purses her lips. “How do you know he’s not interested in anything else unless you’ve talked about it?”

Oh my God. That red sunburst on my cheeks burns hotter.

I shake my head. “Drop it, Mom. Please?”

Her forehead creases. “I’m sorry.”

Thankfully, she goes back to her pancakes, and I’m left alone with my thoughts of the sexiest and most insufferable billionaire mogul in the universe.

~

CHRISTMAS MORNING COMES and we all gather around my parents’ tree.

Dad hands me a heavy box to unwrap.

I tear the paper off and lift the lid.

“Wow, nice!” I pull out a leather briefcase. “Thank you so much, guys. I love the retro look.”

“It’s even got a built-in pocket for your laptop or your art,” Dad tells me with a smile. “Looks like you’re ready for Wall Street.”

“There’s one more this year.” Mom hands me a gift the size of a shoebox.

When I open it, I scream.

“Oh my God. *Oh my God*. How did you afford these?” I take out one of the red-soled shoes and stare. Even Paige doesn’t own a pair like this.

“The books have been selling so well,” Mom says quietly. “We couldn’t help you as much as we wanted to in college, so ___”

“And I hate that you have all those goddamn loans,” Dad adds.

“But we’re so proud of you, Brina. You landed this high-powered job on your own, and it’s sad that you had to borrow shoes from your friend when you started. Next year’s gift might not be so good, but you deserve this,” Mom says.

I love my parents so much.

What would they think if they knew I only got the job because I spit on a grumpalicious stranger in the park?

“I have something for you too,” I say.

I pick a white envelope off the tree and hold it out.

Mom reaches for it first, so I hand it to her.

She tears the envelope open.

“What is it?” Dad asks.

“A receipt...for the property taxes?” Mom says, bewildered. “Paid in full. Even the back taxes we owed the county...”

They both look at each other and then stare at me wide-eyed.

I grin and shrug. “I’m getting paid well now, and my expenses haven’t really gone up, so—” If anything, they’ve gone down because I’m always at work. “I thought I’d give you guys something you deserve, too.”

Dad gets up, stomps over, and hugs me so hard I shake. “Thank you, Brina babe.”

There’s nothing more satisfying than feeling like you’ve been able to give your parents something that counts.

Christmas dinner is just as wonderful, and I stay for one more pancake breakfast. When I leave, my parents rush out to the car and watch me drive away. Mom wipes tears from her eyes. They wave at me from the gate, and I wave back.

It’s all a little overdramatic. I’m just going into the city not even an hour away, but...I’ll miss them hardcore, and I know it’s mutual.

Back at the apartment, Paige greets me from the couch. “You’re home early! And it’s not even midnight—I thought you’d be right back at the grind. What do we owe this honor to?”

I shrug. “Heron kind of insisted I take the week after Christmas off. There’s only a skeleton crew at the office. So, are we getting Chinese or Italian today?”

“Chinese,” Paige says, bolting up. “I need a break from the Christmas sugar rush.”

“Okay, but it’s on me. You paid last time.”

Paige bounces up and puts her shoes on. “Good. Christmas broke me, and so did the studio. Turns out, four people wanted brand-new sculptures in time for presents. I barely had a week to get them together. Now I know what it’s like for you, minus Mr. Scary Hot.”

I giggle at her latest nickname. She’s a bottomless pit.

“The seventy-hour workweeks are tough,” I say. “But I’m glad I don’t have to worry about being broke anymore. I’m so glad you’re home today and free from art hell!”

We go out the front door, and Paige pulls it shut behind us.

“Hey, when we get in the car, I have to talk to you about something,” I tell her.

She locks the door and looks up, squinting. “Oh, just tell me, Brina.”

I follow her downstairs, scanning the area. The coast is clear, and even if it wasn’t, I know I’m being ridiculous for assuming anyone else would care about our drama.

“What? What is it?” she hisses, tugging on my arm.

“I’m just kind of mortified. I don’t want anyone overhearing,” I say.

“Ohhh,” Paige says, her eyebrows flying up. “This has to be good...or terrible.”

Once we’re in her car, I take a deep breath.

Here goes.

“I kissed him,” I blurt out, feeling the instant punch of red-faced shame.

“Whaaat?” Paige laughs, clapping her hands to her cheeks comically. “See? I knew this would be juicy. Who did you kiss?”

Crap. It isn’t obvious?

I stare out the passenger window, my throat tightening.

“Heron.” I have to push the word out and even then it’s barely audible. “In Arizona on that conference trip. I...I kissed ___”

“Heron? Like *the* Magnus Heron? King of pissing you off and robbing you of sleep Magnus Heron? Holy—you kissed the flipping boss? You freaky little girl!” She draws the last three words out and bursts out laughing, bouncing in her seat. “Sorry. You know me. Joking! But *go on.*”

“Well, technically, I kissed him back. He started it,” I say into the window. “It was so sudden. He kissed me hard and I wanted more. When he pulled away, I shook, Paige. But that was a month ago in Phoenix. He said we’d never speak of it again, and he’s ignored me ever since. Up until this week when we swapped presents...”

“Insane. Is Zen Garden okay?” Paige asks, shaking her fist at a van that cuts us off in the traffic so hard her gold locks bounce.

“Perfect,” I say. “I need something yummy enough to forget I ever told you.”

“Aw, c’mon!”

She laughs and we travel the last few blocks, then pull into a parking place. She kills the car and turns to look at me. “Brina, if he said you’d never speak of it again and just ignored you...forget it. He’s playing you, and it’s a huge pain in the butt when regular guys do it. When it’s a billionaire boss? Screw *that*. Who needs drama with dudes who already think they’ve got it all at their beck and call.”

I turn away from the window and meet her eyes.

“You’re right, and I wish it was that easy. But I can’t get him out of my mind. It’s crazy, intense, and yes, I know, dumb. It sucks that I have to see him.”

She lets out a breath. “Yeah, he’s your idiot boss, and you need your job. Hmm. You can’t really distance. The problem is, he’s got you working so much you aren’t dating anymore. You’re probably lonely and he’s a jerk of jerks for stringing you along. We’re getting on Tinder and getting you laid.”

Her eyes gleam like she’s on a mission. I love serious Paige so much my laughter makes me bang my head off the back of the seat.

“You don’t get it, Paige. It was the best kiss ever. Getting laid with some rando won’t get my mind off Magnus Heron. It might even make it worse.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Wanna bet? Getting laid will *so* get your mind off Boss Killjoy. But if you doubt me, there’s only one way to find out. I’ll even leave you the apartment to yourself on Friday night so you have the perfect chance.”

“It’s been more than a month since Arizona. I’m still riled up about it and the mountain of work that’s always there doesn’t change it. I’m not sure a close encounter of the sexy kind will help.” I sigh.

Paige smiles and does this funky chest pop from side to side.

“What are you doing?” I ask, side-eyeing her.

“Dancing until you let me work my magic. You convinced yet or should I plan on doing this all night?” She sticks her tongue out, wiggling a brow.

“Seriously. Why do I take advice from you again?” I laugh, knowing full well what her superpowers are. If there’s one thing she’s good at, it’s raising the mood through the silliest, most embarrassing antics ever.

“Give it a chance,” she insists, flopping back in her seat.

What can I say? If her bizarre fix works, I shouldn't turn her down.

We spend our whole time over noodles and wantons with her showing me the ropes. Every trick in existence to land a perfectly hot date to knock Mag off his growly pedestal.



I GO BACK to work on Friday, the last day of work before New Year's Eve, which is kind of awesome.

Despite having the entire week clear, I don't want to get buried.

I'm there by five for one day and then have several more off. The date Paige helped set up is right after work. So I've come dressed in a low-cut, skin-tight red dress and the shock and awe heels my parents bought.

When I bring Mag's coffee in, he's at his desk.

Surprise.

I set the coffee down with an audible thump.

"Since when are you at your desk this bright and early? It's a slow time of year."

He looks up from his laptop, a notepad at his side, holding a pencil. "With virtually everyone out, I don't have meetings. It's been nice. I can actually get vision work done for the new year." His eyes saunter up and down my body, narrowing before resting on my face. "That's a bright damn dress."

I run my fingers down it. "Too bright, you think?"

He swallows, his throat moving.

"No, no, I was just...surprised is all." He shakes his head, tapping his pencil against the desk. "You're a striking woman, but you know that."

"Is that a problem, Mag?" I ask, fluttering my fingers against my chest in mock-worry.

"Hardly," he snaps, looking at my neckline with eyes like pointed daggers before meeting my gaze again. "It's simply

not as conservative as your usual style.”

He clears his throat.

I grin. “Actually, I have a date when I’m out of here today, and your eyes say this was the right choice. Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Date?” Those hell-blue eyes go electric as his eyebrows arch.

Today, King Grump definitely fits his name.

“Since it’s the holidays, I won’t berate you, but here’s a reminder,” he growls, still glaring. “You’re at work, Miss Bristol. When we have a full crew again, I expect you to show up dressed professionally.”

“Mr. Heron, I read the dress code three times this morning. I’m not infringing anything.”

There’s a loud *snap* as the pencil breaks like a twig in his hands.

“You’d better hurry up if you want to make your date. Just because we’re low on work doesn’t mean you’re here for nothing,” he grumbles.

I walk away with a saucy switch of my hips.

God, does it feel good to see Magus Heron jealous.

Predictably, he hides in his office most of the day, and I get caught up. The emails trickled in slowly, luckily. At four o’clock, I order a grilled chicken wrap with pesto and an heirloom grain salad from his favorite deli and go knock on his office door.

“Yes?” he calls.

I walk in. “You’re right. With no one here, it’s easy to get work done. I’m caught up from vacation and heading out. I ordered your dinner. It should be here at six thirty as usual. See you Monday.”

He glances at the clock and then me. “You’re really leaving early?”

“Yes,” I say. “You gave me a week off, remember? Have a good night.”

I’m almost out the door when he calls after me again.

“Where’s this boy taking you?” Mag growls, not a hint of real interest in his voice.

Hello, Mr. Hyde.

His chest heaves, his nostrils flare, and I can hear him breathing.

Nice to know he remembered my plans.

“I’m not sure yet. We’re figuring that out soon,” I lie. “Goodbye, Mr. Heron. Have a peaceful, productive evening.”

His face hardens like stone, and I can feel the brimstone shooting out of his eyes on my back, fiery as smelted metal.

I grab my coat and leave, humming to myself.

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WOLF BOY (MAGNUS)



Damn Sabrina Bristol and that sizzling red devil's dress. This is my fault. I shouldn't have avoided her after kissing her. Making out with her.

No matter how many times I tell myself, it wasn't just some random kiss.

I haven't been able to pry it out of my fucking skull for a month. Every night since Phoenix, I've clenched my teeth and wrapped my fist around my cock, feverishly wishing it was *her*.

And now she's out with someone else.

Some kid her own age, probably, who won't know what to do with her.

Damn it straight to hell.

Ruby comes strolling in through my office door, interrupting me mid-brood.

"What are you doing here?" I snap, then sigh, running a hand over my face. "Sorry. Holiday stress."

She turns her face up and gives me a cutting look. "Holidays. Really?"

I don't answer.

"Did you at least see my email about the new marketing hire for our PPC campaigns? I don't think it's going to work out. He's failed the blueprint courses three times and he's

showing up late. I've documented enough to get rid of him now, if you'd like. Since the manager, Trudeau, isn't in this week, I thought I'd bring it straight to you."

I have no idea what she's even talking about.

Not cool. It's my job to know what's going on.

"Whatever you think, Ruby. Throw him out the door, give him more time, put him on probation...or wait for Trudeau."

"Jesus." She crosses the room and sits in front of my desk. "What's wrong, Mag? You've been distracted for weeks."

"Nothing," I say coldly. Maybe if I can sell her, we'll both believe it.

"You haven't read any of my emails today, have you?"

She's known me for so long, lying to her is pointless.

I meet her eyes. "I'm sorry. I've been locked away planning our January initiatives."

She shrugs. "Don't apologize to me. It's your company paying dead weight, which I know you hate. It's not like you to overlook things. What's eating you?"

I walk over to my wall of windowpanes and look out at the sprawling Chicago skyline. Skyscrapers stab above a freezing fog drifting off the icy lake, like Jack Frost blowing his bitterest winter kiss through the streets.

"You already know. This time of year, with my family shit..." I swallow hard for effect, hoping she'll buy it.

She follows me across the room and stops two steps behind me.

"You must mean your *other* family, I assume. What's new with them? I know you don't talk to Baxter."

I say nothing.

This was a bad cover story. Now that I'm thinking about it, a depressing weight punches me in the gut.

"Pardon my language, Mag, but why don't you grow a pair and talk to them?" Ruby asks sharply.

I turn, wondering what's gotten into her.

No one ever gives me advice on this, not even Ruby Hunting.

"Excuse me?" I growl, my brow furrowed.

"Stop with the anonymous rich uncle stuff, I mean. You've been taking care of that kid for years. Just talk to them," Ruby says, her face tightening before it relaxes. "Sorry. I didn't mean for that to come out so harsh."

"You know better than anyone why I've sworn to stay the hell out of their lives and try to make things right the only way I can. Jordan Quail shouldn't carry around Baxter's sins. It's bad enough for me," I snarl, my jaw clenching like a vise.

"But you don't, Mag. You can't do this Atlas thing forever, holding up the world. You're two different people. You've made your own choices, and they've been very different from his."

Have they?

If only she knew how similar they were. If only they knew Miss Bristol—Brina—is all I think about, jerking off in the shower and under my sheets like a smitten dolt.

I stare out the window because I don't have a response. Where do I even start?

I kissed my fucking beautiful, smart, and too good for life EA in the middle of the Sonoran desert, and I enjoyed every second of it.

Her moans are branded on my grey matter. They still raise the hair on my arms like a wild beast, and if I hadn't realized how close to that evil bastard I was behaving...

...things wouldn't have stopped there.

"Look, Mag, I'm sorry. This is a weird time of year, not just for you." She lets out a hefty sigh and takes a step back. "I've been digging around my own family tree. Turns out, I had a lost sister. I found some records that came out recently after that big bio-tech company fell apart out west. Galentron or whatever? I guess she spent her life in this freaky espionage

thing before she disappeared, and...I'm rambling. Forgive me."

"Do you need anything else?" I ask, raising an eyebrow. "I wish I could help with your sister."

"Forget it." She clears her throat. "Are you sure it's just Marissa and the kid you're upset about?"

"Positive."

"Because if you're upset about someone else, someone in this office...I don't think you should be. I don't know what happened with you two, but a talk could probably clear it up."

Fuck. Has she noticed?

"Who are we talking about, Ruby?"

Her lips twist sourly.

"No one. I'm just going to get back to work. Happy New Year to you, too."

She can't know what really happened in Phoenix.

If she did, she wouldn't have told me, I'm not like my old man.

Ruby finally gets the hell out of my office, and I plod back to my desk and sit down. My computer shows the time. Twenty minutes after four.

She's only been gone for twenty minutes.

Who is this guy taking her out? What's he like? Does she like him?

That dress says she plans to.

That dress says she wants to *fuck* his brains out.

Who cares?

Me, apparently, because I'd need a hole through the head to stop my fingers from pulling up her contact and punching out a message.

We're pitching Arrowpoint Airlines next week, I type. I need five ideas to keep Hugo's concepts organized ASAP.

Your next bonus is riding on this.

No answer.

I try five or six more times before I see my scowling reflection in the screen.

Whatever. I'll text one more time, but this is it. I'm not this goddamned desperate.

So what if I even write ***Urgent!*** at the beginning of the message?

She's ignoring me, and I deserve it.

I did the same thing to her after Phoenix.

If only I knew it feels worse to be on the receiving end.

I CLIMB in the town car, almost tripping over my phone, throwing my briefcase down with a *thunk*.

“Whoa, boss, you should've told me you needed a hand. Where's the fire? You're heading out early today,” Armstrong says, looking back with concern.

It's not even five yet.

I'm usually here half the night.

“Take me to Sweeter Grind. It's in the shopping center across from the park where we did the Jazzle Razzle shoot months ago.”

“You drink cheap coffee now? Did I miss the four horsemen?” he chuckles. “Is everything okay, Mr. Heron? We're not going under or anything, are we?”

“I'll *never* drink cheap coffee. It hasn't come to that.” I laugh. “Everything's fine with the company, so don't worry.”

Everything except my sanity, I mean, spoiled by one wicked woman in a cursed red dress.

I'm going to hell for this. I don't even know if she'll be there, it's just a hunch.

It's not like she said she was going to Sweeter Grind. If she'd just answered my texts, I wouldn't be resorting to this.

Armstrong parks in front of Sweeter Grind a few minutes later.

I scan the large windows at the front of the shop, trying to catch a glimpse of her, when my eyes catch on soft curves sheathed in scarlet red. She's at a table, just inside, glowing like the firecracker she is.

By herself?

A thousand pounds lift off my chest.

I don't know why I care.

Until a twenty something blond punk in shorts, a jersey, and a scraggly beard struts up to the table and hands her a cup.

A cinnamon latte, no doubt.

He grins at her like a wolf ready to pounce on its prey. His lanky, muscular build only deepens the impression.

If I had three wishes, I'd burn one on flamethrowers for eyes.

What the hell does she need with a fuckboy in gym shorts? And who wears gym shorts to a coffeeshop in the dead of winter to take a girl out? Did he even shower before he crawled out of the gym to meet her?

Put some thought into it, you little prick.

Wolf Boy's mouth never quits flapping.

Sabrina rests her elbow on the tabletop, planting her chin into her hand.

Good. She's bored.

Why do you care? a voice inside me screams.

"Armstrong, you want a coffee?" I ask, my voice pure frostbite.

He looks up, his forehead wrinkled, and lets out a nervous laugh. "I wondered if you were ever getting out of the car. Sure, boss man, that'd be great."

I nod. “Regular with heavy cream?”

“I’ll take a sugar free cinnamon latte,” he says.

“You drink cinnamon lattes too?”

He nods. “Brina bought me one the other week. They’re pretty good, and since they have sugar free syrup, I can have it.”

“You call her Brina?”

“She told me to, man.” He laughs, flashing me a whimsical look in the rearview mirror.

Damn. Since when?

Has the whole frigging office been calling her Brina while I’m still dancing around Miss Bristol, hell-bent on keeping that stick up my ass?

I’m such a fool.

She told me I could call her Brina before the kiss, but with the way I’ve ignored her for the past month, I’m sure that offer was revoked.

I slip inside unnoticed since she’s facing the other way.

After ordering a sugar free cinnamon latte and a regular cinnamon latte—I’m going to find out what the big deal is about this drink for myself—I sit down in the empty chair behind Wolf Boy.

Sabrina’s eyes are glazed over. She looks like she’s about to fall asleep in her drink, nodding every so often like she has invisible puppet strings attached.

Poor girl. She’s so bored she can’t hold her head up.

“Why did it take you so long to message me back?” Wolf Boy asks with a shitty grin, smug and punchable.

“I’m usually busy running around for my asshole tyrant boss,” Brina says, catching her face as it slouches in her palm.

The movement shifts her eyes, though. I love the spark of recognition, turning them into burning wood circles.

I wave so she can see me.

She perks up, alarmed, back straight, head up, but her lips are a savage line.

Her eyes are alert but not friendly.

“Surprise,” I mouth, hoping she can lip read.

Is she happy I’m here, or pissed? Or maybe she’s just embarrassed because she practically called me an asshole tyrant to my face?

“*What’re you doing here?*” she mouths back, shaking her head.

Her college boy turns around to find out who she’s looking at, raising an eyebrow when he spots me.

“Dude,” he whispers with mixed curiosity and annoyance.

I extend my hand.

He shakes it limply.

“Magnus Heron, CEO of Heron Communications.” I use my full title with great pleasure. “The asshole tyrant boss Sabrina works for.”

“Heron? Oh. Oh, shit!” He drops my hand and slides closer to the table. “My dad used to work there, in the mail room.”

“Ah, I thought I recognized you. Who’s your old man?”

“Joe...” He trails off, looking at Sabrina. “Uh...sorry to cut this short, but I just remembered I need to let the dog out!”

The kid damn near runs out the door, leaving his coffee on the table.

I smirk. “Where’d you find that winner?”

She rolls her eyes.

“Tinder. My roommate helped.”

“You two sure know how to pick them.”

“You know, you’re right.” She cocks her head. “I have pretty bad taste in men. I did let you kiss me, after all.”

I glare at her.

“We weren’t supposed to mention that again,” I growl.

“True. But I also don’t recall inviting you on my date. Did you have to go all stalker?”

“Funny. I didn’t know I needed an invitation to save you.”

“Save me from what? I was having a good time.”

“Of course you were. People in the morgue are livelier,” I tell her. “And you weren’t answering my urgent texts. Part of the reason your salary’s so high is because you’re always on call. You understand?”

“Are you a doctor?” she asks, twirling her hair, strands of cinnamon in the light.

“What?”

“Do you stop people from bleeding to death for a living?” she asks.

I narrow my eyes. Where’s she going with this?

“No, of course not, I—”

“Are you an attorney, Mag? Do you request emergency stays on death row convictions or get kids out of abusive homes?”

This has to be a trap.

“No.”

“Okay, then there’s nothing at that office that can’t wait a couple hours for me to have a life on a Friday night right before the calendar flips over. Got it?”

I stare at her, magma in my veins, so hot it’s intoxicating.

“You realize I’m the boss, right?”

“Sometimes. Right now, you’re acting more like a crazy stalker.”

I ignore the remark.

“I’ll give you a ride home.”

“Nope. I’m so pissed at you I’d rather walk home in this zero degree weather. But these heels are killing my feet, so...

maybe.” She shrugs and looks me straight in the eye as she stands. “You’re actually clueless, aren’t you? You have no idea how big of an asshole you are. That’s the worst part.”

I stand. “Most people wouldn’t say that to their boss. Let’s go.”

She follows me out the door.

“And most bosses wouldn’t follow their freaking assistants around on dates.”

“I need to know your thoughts on the airline campaign.”

She surveys the parking lot and pokes me in the chest. “You’re such a bad liar. I was at work the whole day and you didn’t ask once. You had hours to pick my brain. You don’t give a shit what I think about that campaign, you just want—never mind.”

I don’t say a word because she’s got my number.

She turns to me slowly with a pained look. “Let’s get something straight right now. I do your filing, make your phone calls, check your emails, and execute your contracts. I bring you coffee, clothes, and whatever the hell else you need during business hours. No part of that gives you control over my love life.”

“I did you a favor with that boy. He almost shit his pants when he saw me. He ran off without his coffee. Who takes a girl to a coffee shop on a first date anyhow?” I bring the regular cinnamon latte to my mouth, take a big gulp, and instantly spit it out on the pavement, where it steams in the winter air. “My God. Now I get why you spit on me—it’s sugar milk. How do you drink this stuff?”

She laughs, puffy white wisps of dragon smoke curling out of her mouth.

“Does that mean I can have it? It’s the least you can do.”

“Will you still be mad at me?” I grumble, holding the drink out of her reach.

“Yes, but I might not kick you.”

“Kick me, and I’ll fire you on the spot.”

She holds out her gloved hand, and I slide the cup in it.

“Firing me will punish you, not me,” she says, taking a longish sip.

Damn, she’s figured too much out.

I’m screwed.

When we reach the car, I open the door. “Get in.”

“You win this one, I guess. My date didn’t hold my door open either,” she says, sliding in.

I get in behind her and shut the door.

“You’re a lucky woman. If I hadn’t shown up, you could’ve died from boredom.” I pass Armstrong his drink as the privacy screen goes down.

“So if coffee shops aren’t first date material, where would *you* take a girl?” she asks, chugging her latte like it’s beer.

I look at Armstrong with a raised eyebrow. He puts the screen back up.

“Somewhere nice. An exotic restaurant with an unpronounceable menu. I’d share my tastes in refined food beyond Taco Colita. I can’t see how a bad cup of coffee convinces any girl to see a man again.”

“Newsflash: *You’re* supposed to convince her. Not the coffee or food so expensive you’d scare any normal gal.”

“Adventure is priceless,” I say. “And without adventure, love hits a brick wall.”

She snorts. “If you paid thirty-seven dollars for bite-sized appetizers and raw fish, and I had to make a burger run afterward, I’d so drop you.”

I chuckle. “I’d order for you like a gentleman, and pay the head chef for his very best. You wouldn’t need fast food, believe me.”

“God, you’re undateable. Do you know how many women hate it when guys order for them?”

“I don’t order for girls, Sabrina. I said I’d order for *you*—key difference—because you don’t do a good job of ordering for yourself.”

She purses her lips and settles back in the seat.

“You can’t even deny it,” I say, feeling a smirk digging at my face.

“Tell me this. Why do you feel this insane need to go somewhere expensive on a first date?” she asks. “It’s nothing but pressure.”

“Hm. No one’s ever asked before.” I shrug. “It’s the experience that counts, and money often buys experience.”

“You’re dating the wrong women, Mag,” she says, rolling those chocolate silk eyes.

Not possible.

Frankly, I can’t remember the last time I dated anyone.

Soon, Armstrong pulls up to Brina’s apartment.

“That was a quick ride,” I say, sliding out so I can hold the door open for her. “I’ll walk you up.”

I know Wolf Boy wouldn’t have purely from the goodness of his heart.

She shifts the keys back and forth between her hands as we stand in front of her building’s main door. “I’m not thanking you for the ride after you interrupted my date, but...it could’ve been worse. I guess.”

Yeah.

I could’ve stolen you away and found somewhere dark to kiss until you moaned my name.

“It’s cold,” she says. “I’m going in.”

“Since I’m here, we might as well talk about your ideas for the airline project. The creative pitch with Hugo isn’t far off.”

She rolls her eyes. “Cool. Because there’s nothing I’d rather do on a Friday night.”

“Well, someone slipped out at four to go on a bad date. We’re usually still at the office right now.”

“Come on,” she says with a sigh.

An invitation. I’m shocked.

Once we’re upstairs and inside her apartment, I look around the place. Her décor is a weird mashup of cat posters and artsy images of sculpture parks.

“Would you like a glass of wine or are you happy gawking at how the little people live?” she asks.

I glance at the bottles on the counter, perched in a corner.

“How about something stronger? Bourbon?”

“That’s Paige’s stuff, and from the label, it looks expensive.”

“Paige?”

“My roommate.”

I take out a fifty and throw it on the counter. “Paige can have a whole new bottle as long as I get to drink from that one.”

She laughs. “I still feel like making you drink cheap wine just to prove the world doesn’t revolve around you, Mag.”

She pours her wine into a dainty glass.

“I’ll be less demanding with bourbon,” I tell her, clenching my teeth.

She takes out a glass four times the size of a shot, fills it, and hands it to me.

I can’t blame the liquor because I haven’t taken a drink yet, but the way that innocent, beautiful woman looks at me makes my blood roar.

Forget the airline talk.

I’m already in full flight, and it’s not just a bad fucking pun.

My entire body tingles below my waistline. It isn't the bourbon I want. Seeing her with that college prick made me regret walking away after our stolen kiss in the Phoenix sunset.

Her chest rises and falls, and with each breath, her breasts bubble up against her crimson neckline and flutter down. Calling me. Taunting me.

They bob against her neckline again like they're aching to be free.

My dick hurts, spiking this physical ache through my whole system, like a man deprived of what he needs most when it's right in front of him.

I'm done with this torture.

Setting the glass on the counter, I close the space between us, dropping an arm around her waist. I steal her wine glass away with my other hand, and then before she knows what's happening, I press my lips to hers so hard she moans, melting in my arms.

Fuck.

She tastes like cinnamon and red wine and everything I shouldn't want.

Of course she does.

What little prayer I ever had of pulling away goes unanswered the second her leg winds around mine. Brina's tongue flicks against my bottom lip.

A low, animal noise falls out of me like approaching thunder.

Snarling, I trace my finger over her neckline, just enough pressure to ease her top down.

I've developed a sudden hatred for her red dress when it's concealing everything I want to ravage.

Thankfully, I don't have to push much against the strained cloth to release one plump, warm tit into my palm, her nipple perked against my hand.

I break the kiss, suck in a harsh breath, and chuckle with lust.

“No bra?” I growl, drawing a circle around the edge of her areola, bringing my finger in closer until I’m brushing against her nipple.

“Oh,” she moans, her shoulders rolling with this seductive little hiss. “*Mag.*”

Sweet fuck.

The way she whimpers my name says she already wants this as bad as I do.

I can’t *wait* to get my tongue inside her, to fling her legs apart, throw her against the wall, and eat her delicate pussy until she’s nothing but a wet, simmering mess of pleasure.

She draws in a breath, then moves her lips back against mine. My tongue sweeps inside her mouth, desperate for another taste of her, but she tilts her head back, chin up.

So she wants to play hard to get? Happy to oblige.

I push my face forward, kissing down her neck, adding a stinging nip of teeth at the cusp of her cleavage.

She falls back, and I pull her forward in my arms, holding her up as her knees weaken. Then I take that rosy nipple in my mouth and make her sing.

Soft, almost lyrical need floods the room, echoing off the walls, igniting new fires in my blood.

Her hand flies into my hair, her fingernails rake my scalp, already begging for every hot, bestial thing on my grand list of fuckery. A list I’ve etched in stone *only* for Sabrina Bristol.

The leg around my hip tightens, and her other leg tucks behind my ankle.

Shit.

My cock jerks, lurching against my zipper, screaming to be deep inside her, wrapped up in shuddering curls of this woman driven to rapture.

Growling, I pick her up, grinding her warmth over my hard length, making her *feel* every seething inch of me.

Goddamn.

I've wanted this for so long. I've been starved for ages. I'm barely even human as every potent kiss makes me want to shear off her clothes, flip her over, and fuck her until her eyes roll white.

I blink my eyes open and spot a couch. With our lips still locked, I fling her up in my arms and carry her across the room.

Her lithe body bounces against the sofa as I lay her down and stretch over her, careful to keep my weight off of her as my fingers fly below my belt to my zipper.

She pulls away from me as soon as the unfastening buzz breaks the silence, breath ragged, one hand still tangled in my hair.

"Brina?" I whisper, my eyes so hot I'm sure they glow.

"Mag." She cups my face in her free hand. "It can't be like last time. Not like Phoenix. You can't just do this and then say —"

No.

I cut her off with a feral kiss, sinking my teeth into her bottom lip. My tongue glides against hers, rubbing the inside of her mouth until she moans, and then I pull away.

"I promise you, it won't happen. No more second guesses. No more retreat."

For a second, our eyes are fused.

Hers are amber-brown whirlpools, so dark with desire and heartache.

"Then kiss me again," she whispers finally. "I'm...I'm yours."

"With pleasure," I rumble, tearing at her dress, setting her other breast free as her eyes go wide. "You didn't say where."

I close my mouth around the new pink nipple, lashing it with my tongue, teasing her with my teeth, sucking her until I feel her toes curl against my ankle.

My shaft strains against the hole in my pants, raging to be freed, but she'll come for me at least once before we get that far.

When I leave tonight, she'll be as desperate for the next time as I am.

I slide a hand under her dress, hoping to find her as bare as she was on top.

No dice, but of course she's fucking soaked. I swear, I can feel her pussy throb for me under her silk. I trace her panties delicately with the tip of my finger for several seconds before I flip the cloth back to tease my fingers against her entrance.

She moans, pushes her hips into my hand, smearing her hot slick need against fingers eager to make her mine, mine, and also *mine*.

I draw more vicious circles around her nipple with my tongue, holding my fingers just out of reach below, gingerly exploring her inner thighs and the slit I'm about to claim.

"Mag...please!" She arches up and down against my hand, her breath hitched, begging for every unspoken promise offered in teeth and fingertips.

My cock throbs so hard I almost lose it on the spot, coming in my pants.

Then my phone rings.

I pull my mouth away from her breast. She whimpers, staring up at me through lidded eyes.

"I'll put the bastard thing on silent." I move my hand to my pocket with a grin. "I know how bad you need this, baby. Hold on."

I plan to power the damn thing off and get back to what matters, but the words *Memorial Hospital* flash across the screen, catching my eye.

What the hell?

Slowly, I back away, leaving her red-faced and gorgeous and exposed.

Damn if it isn't the hardest thing I've ever done.

"Sorry. I need to take this." I stab at the talk button. "Yeah?"

"Can I speak with Magnus Heron?" a bubbly voice on the other line says.

"Speaking," I grind out. "Who's this?"

"I have you listed as Marissa Quail's emergency contact."

My gut sinks and confusion whips through my head like a gale.

"Emergency contact? Is this some kind of goddamn joke?" I snarl, turning away from Brina's questioning look as she sits up.

"No, sir, I have you listed as Marissa Quail's emergency contact and—"

That's interesting. I thought she wanted nothing to do with me. Is this about Jordan?

"Repeat that back to me?" I ask, my mind wandering.

"I said, unfortunately, if you don't pick up her son soon, I'll have to call protective services until she's able to care for him," the voice continues.

"No! Don't do that. I'll be right there. Is she okay?"

"We can give you more details about her medical condition once you arrive. For now, I can tell you it would be best to pick up the child. She won't be discharged from this hospital tonight."

Shit.

When I turn around, Brina's already made herself presentable again, but her eyes are glued to my face.

"What's wrong?" she mouths, her big brown eyes staring.

I shake my head and end the call.

“I have to go,” I say.

“But—”

I duck my head down and kiss her. “This isn’t like Phoenix. I promise you, it’s a real emergency. We’ll talk about it later.”

Yes, I’m aware I’m walking out of her apartment with a hard-on that could be considered a deadly weapon, but the frigid Chicago air will remedy that by the time I’m in the town car.

So will the sharp boulder in my throat, and the lead heart pounding in my chest.

I don’t understand what the fuck’s happened.

I’ve got to get downtown ASAP.

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THE KID (SABRINA)



R *at.*
Bastard.

This is the second time he's kissed me—okay, it went a lot further than kissing—and he acted like it was nothing. He went from a hundred miles an hour to zero in point six seconds like that Ferrari in Arizona, leaving me gasping for air and wondering what just hit us.

And the worst part? The very worst?

I wish—or at least my body wishes—we'd reached the final destination.

What am I doing?

I almost had sex with a guy who left me high and—well, definitely not dry—without giving me the simplest reason.

Not to mention the fun fact that he's still my boss.

A caveman in a suit who never learned to speak emotions.

And after this shitshow tonight, I'll *still* have to see him again come Monday morning.

What's our score again? It must be something like:

Unpredictable Sexy Boss McGrump: 10.

Girl who gets her heart kicked around: 0.

I'm so stupid. That stunt in Phoenix tried to warn me.

Paige isn't home. She left me the place for tonight, so I can't even vent. Or maybe I can. I grab my phone and send her a text.

Hey, I wish you were home. You have no idea what a ginormous buttwipe my boss is.

She pings me a minute later with a laughing emoji. ***Yes, I do! You've told me! But I thought I was out of the house so you could get laid? Why are we talking about your asshat boss? Get laid!***

I don't have the guts to tell her I came very close to getting laid with a normal, if boring guy, and then my "asshat" boss and almost-booty buddy turned into one in the same.

You don't have to stay out if you don't want to. No laying tonight, I text back.

A few seconds later she sends back an angry face and ***Why? What? Brina Bristol—get laid!!!***

Thirty minutes later, I flop down on the couch in front of Netflix, stuffing an overcooked frozen pizza into my mouth.

I wish I had a picture of Magnus Heron and a dartboard.

I should start applying for other jobs soon. But where do you find other jobs with my pay? I don't want to see the screwball again, but I also don't want to give up six figs a year.

Three episodes of *Schitt's Creek* later, a lot of angry pizza chomping, and so many bad thoughts, my phone rings. I grab it without looking, thinking it's Paige.

But Magnus Heron flashes across the screen.

God, I'm so tempted to ignore it.

But he did get an odd call before he left, didn't he? Also, I've never heard him use the word *promise* until right before he bolted out the door.

What if he has a real excuse?

I want to smack myself in the cheek, wondering why I'm lending him the benefit of the doubt.

I take the call anyway. “What?”

“I—I’ve sent Armstrong to pick you up—” His voice is gravelly, strained, this low scraping like he’s been beaten and dragged raw.

I’ve never heard him like this.

I sit up straight. “Are you okay?”

He sighs into the phone. “I’m fine. But I need you, Brina. Right now. It can’t wait.”

“For what?” I’d assume he just wants to finish the hookup, if only his voice didn’t sound so...odd.

“Just be ready as soon as Armstrong gets there, and I’ll see you soon.”

“Maybe you won’t,” I say.

“What?”

“I never said I’d be there. After what you did—”

“Brina, goddammit, this is serious,” Magnus growls. “We need to talk.”

My heart flutters. I haven’t reverted back to Sabrina or Miss Bristol again.

Then my brain tells my heart to shut up because this guy has left me hanging twice. But I also can’t parse this sudden strange emergency that’s gotten him so keyed up.

“Fine, let me get my coat. I’ll wait outside, so I can hop out and head over as soon as he pulls—”

“Don’t. It’s snowing, and it’s dark. I can’t handle more catastrophes tonight. Stay inside in the warmth of your building with your door locked until he calls.”

What the?

This sounds serious.

“Mag, what happened?” I ask, blanking on even a guess.

“Just get here when you can.” He hangs up.

For a second, I sit there staring at the screen, this dark pit deepening in my stomach.

One thing's for sure: I'm not going out in the snow in this stupid dress again, and if he wants to summon me at any hour he pleases, he can deal with bad fashion choices. So I throw on sweats and put my hair up in a messy bun.

I look nothing like the girl he left on the couch, and I don't give a damn.

Maybe he'll find me repulsive and finally stay the hell away from me. I'm probably not strong enough to do the same with him.

Appearances aside, he left me with one fierce memory I can't push away.

The fire coursing through my body when his mouth was on my nipple and his hand was under my dress lingers like a burn.

With every single breath I take, I can still taste Magnus Heron's lips.



I OPEN the back door of the town car and climb in.

“Any news, Armstrong? Is this some kind of prank?”

“I don't think so. He was pretty frantic when he called,” Armstrong says slowly, his eyes gazing back at me in the rearview mirror.

“Frantic? Since when does Mag get frantic?”

“I don't know, but he was as close as he ever gets,” he says, this tightness in his normally warm voice.

Okay, now I'm doubly worried.

“What the hell happened?” I whisper.

If Snarlypants wants to be forgiven for skipping out, it better be good.

“I don't know, exactly. Bossman just said ‘I have a personal emergency and need my assistant ASAP.’ I told him I'd pick you up,” he says.

“Personal emergency?” I echo.

“He wouldn’t say more,” Armstrong says with a shrug. “Your guess is just as good as mine.”

“Jesus. I mean, you’re *sure* he’s not pranking us both?”

Armstrong shakes his head.

“Nah. He’s not the kind to punk. Not like this.”

“What have other personal emergencies entailed?” I ask.

“He’s never had one till now. The boss must really trust you, Brina,” he says with a sigh. “I don’t think he’d call anybody else for an emergency.”

I let that sink in, chilled to the bone, even in the toasty car.

“We’ll see, I guess,” I say.

“Are you two fighting?” Armstrong asks.

Crap. Does he know something?

“Um, no,” I say. “Nothing out of the ordinary. Mag just thinks he owns the world, and we’re all his pawns. I’m sure he thinks he’s having an emergency, but it’s probably something ridiculous like he can’t find his TV remote or something.”

Don’t be so harsh, Brina, I tell myself. He sounded desperate on the phone. He could be hurt.

But I have a new question for Armstrong.

“If you knew this was some kind of sick joke, you’d tell me, right?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be involved with a prank between two folks I have to work with,” he says with a smile. “I’ll tell you one thing, he’s never used the word emergency before in all my years working for him. I’m worried about the kid.”

Kid? What kid?

My stomach sinks with those words. He could be talking about Mag since Armstrong’s an older man, but I’ve never heard him use that term.

Weird. I just don’t get it.

As pissed as I am, I don't want Mag hurt.

Technically, I don't want Magnus harmed at all unless I'm the one doing the harming. A nice swift kick to the balls is probably warranted after everything he's put me through.

The car stops in front of a luxury building close to the office.

Armstrong pulls out his wallet and hands me a white card. "His penthouse is on the top floor. You'll need this to get in the elevator, but I'll need it back the next time I see you. Security protocols, you understand."

I nod. "Thanks, Armstrong. Have a good night."

The building has a doorman, who nods and opens the massive glassy door like he's been expecting me. I'm not sure why I expected anything less.

The place looks like a palace reaching into the sky. The floors are granite and the lights are crystal. I flick the white card in front of the electronic box on the elevator, and it opens. A panel of glossy buttons faces me. I hit forty-seven, the very last number.

It's only then that I realize Armstrong didn't give me an apartment number.

Crap. I pull out my phone to text Maggot—after this stunt, I think Paige's name for him was appropriate—but there's no signal in the elevator.

Awesome.

Once I'm in the hall for the forty-seventh floor, there's only one set of double doors.

Silly me. I don't need an apartment number because he owns the whole floor.

I knock on the door, and Mag pulls it open a second later.

I barely hold in a gasp.

The man looks like he's been through a war zone. His tie is undone, hanging around his neck. His shirt is untucked, wrinkled, and the cup in his hand isn't The Bean Bar. Harsh

lines cut through his handsome face and shadow the sharp, bony edges of his chin, and those brilliant blue eyes seem more like dim stars drowned by the city lights.

“W-what happened?” I stutter.

He takes my hand and pulls me across the threshold.

“Inside. We’ll talk about it in here.” He closes the door.

“Don’t touch me,” I say, my voice hard, giving him pause.

He doesn’t drop my hand; his fingers just tighten around mine.

“Are you upset with me?”

“Does a porcupine have quills?” I snap. “Tell me what’s going on or I’m leaving.”

I jerk my hand out of his and place it on my hip. I cock my head and stare at him.

“I’m sorry I left you like that,” he admits, genuine sorrow in his voice.

At least we’re past playing dumb.

“Where did you go, Mag?” I ask, my voice softening. “And why did you get so serious all of a sudden? You look like you just got back from a freaking funeral.”

“I was at the hospital.” He puts a finger in front of his lips like he’s shushing me.

What. Is. Going. On?

I open my mouth, confused and sad and angry, sicker than I’ve ever been of games.

But he speaks before I can.

“Lower your voice. Please,” he whispers, running a hand over his tired face. “He finally went to sleep a little while ago. We shouldn’t wake him.”

“Wake *who*?” I’m not following him.

Is this some weird control thing? A test? Maggot needs to understand he’s not running anything, much less my mouth.

But as soon as I look past his broad shoulders, I spot *who*.

There's a boy. A teenager curled up on the huge leather couch with the same sandy-dark hair as Magnus Heron. His eyes are closed. He's wrapped in a blanket, lightly snoring, his arm draped over the side.

It's a gut punch that almost drops me to my knees.

Holy shit.

"You...you have a kid?" My voice is low now, because I can barely breathe. "You're a dad?"

"Brina..."

I hold up a hand, my lips trembling.

"And in spite of all our..." I pause, thinking of a word, "...entanglements, you never thought to tell me?"

I open my eyes again and study the boy. He's older for sure, maybe in middle school or a high school freshmen?

Jesus. Mag would've been a kid himself when he—

"I don't have a kid," he growls, sweeping me into his arms, those blue eyes coming back to life. "I have a half brother. He's the reason I asked you here."

There goes the world dropping out under me. I'm literally floored.

"Brother?" I whisper.

He shrugs.

What the hell?

"Let's go to my room, so we can talk without having to worry about Jordan waking up," he says.

I'm so lost.

"Um, not to make this difficult, but since when is *Jordan* part of my job?"

He shakes his head and scoffs.

"Brina, what kind of monster do you think I am? Don't you know me better?"

Ouch.

He's right. Whatever this is, it's clearly got him torn up.

So I bite my lip, close the space between us, and place a hand on his chest. "The kind of monster who kisses me and says forget about it. The kind that undresses me and leaves without telling me why—"

His lips attack mine, cutting me off.

He licks my lip tenderly, and I open my mouth.

So much for being strong.

He traces past my lips with his tongue, silencing me with the unrelenting glory of his kiss. Then he pulls away.

"I didn't forget about anything, woman. And I'm about to explain where I went and why, as if the kid on the couch and the word hospital aren't big enough clues."

He hugs me tight, kissing my forehead. Next thing I know, he takes my hand and leads me to his bedroom.

I know his intentions aren't mean-spirited. They can't be. He wouldn't have sent Armstrong to pick me up if they were. But God, for once, I *wish* they were.

Dealing with King Asshole is so much easier than handling Mag with his hangdog looks and a very vulnerable-looking child half his age.

Talk about surreal.

I flop down on the lush white bed in the middle of the room. Mag sits on the trunk at the end of it.

"I thought he'd be awake all night, Sabrina. He fought me. He didn't want to come here. He doesn't even know who the hell I am, and he was pissed he couldn't stay with his mom."

"He doesn't? What? Why didn't you let him?" I ask, shaking my head.

He crosses his arms in front of his chest. "The social worker at the hospital said he couldn't. Either I had to pick him up, or they were going to CPS. There's no next of kin."

“CPS?” I ask.

“Child Protective Services. She said they couldn’t have an unsupervised minor hanging out at the hospital past ten o’clock, and this doesn’t appear like it’s going to be a quick stay.”

“Is his mom okay?” I ask, dreading the answer.

“I’m not sure. The woman’s in a coma. I need a few days off to deal with this,” he says.

I nod, slowly taking this in.

“Sure. Time off. It’s no big—”

“Brina, you don’t understand. I’ve never taken a day off since I became the CEO. Ever. A lot’s going to fall on your shoulders,” he says.

Oh, crap—I can barely handle the executive assistant thing.

“Like what?” I ask, trying to ignore how my gut tightens.

“You’ll have to lead the airline presentation yourself. Ruby can handle personnel issues, but you need to know about it if anyone else in senior roles tries to get away for New Year’s. If you think it’s excessive or bad timing, veto it. Keep the creative and marketing teams on track, and make sure Hugo doesn’t submit any damned black-and-white concepts while I’m out of the office.”

I laugh, remembering the last artwork debacle with the pet food.

“Give Hugo a break. Everyone has a bad idea now and then.” I shake my head. “Mag, I can’t exactly—I’m not you. I’m barely an executive assistant. Ruby didn’t even want to hire me.”

“She agrees you’re the best EA I’ve ever had. It’s second nature to you.” He gets off the bed and comes to lie down beside me. “If I didn’t think you could do this, I’d either put Ruby in charge or hire a nanny. I *know* you can do it, Brina, and I’m counting on you.”

I nod limply, unsure what else to say.

“One more thing,” he says.

I laugh. “More than playing CEO?”

“Not more work, but you’re brilliant and you’ve done an amazing job. I want you to be more confident. That’s going to make a huge difference in your career. You do any task I dump on you with flying colors, but you need to think beyond it, too. Now, did you bring your laptop?”

I shake my head.

“Okay, I’ll get mine, because I’m going to have to walk you through logistics. You have access to my schedule, of course. You’ll need to attend all my meetings. You’re in charge of negotiations, but I’ll leave you my notes. You don’t need my approval unless something sounds off, though of course I’ll have your back. I’m going to send Ruby and all the department heads an email to let them know you’re carrying out my wishes.”

Oh. My. God.

Fear grips me like an iron vise. He’s practically turning the company’s biggest decisions over to me.

“You said I can veto any employee time off, right?” I ask. “If I need extra help?”

“Absolutely,” he says.

“Please tell Ruby no senior employees are taking time off until you’re back,” I say. “I’m going to need all hands on deck.”

He nods. “You don’t want to approve it?”

“It takes one thing off my plate, and...honestly, I’m still not sure if I can handle this.”

“You can, and you will,” he says, brushing his sandy hair back, his blue eyes shining like moons. “Confidence, remember?”

I give him a tight, strained smile.

Fine, I'll try, because I don't have another choice.

~

WE SPEND hours going over so much info I think my head might explode.

Mag floods my inbox with what he calls pertinent information. Notes. Personal strengths and weaknesses of everyone I'll be dealing with outside HeronComm.

He shows me how he keeps track of all the meetings and different contracts, and he outlines his strategy on sealing the deal with Arrowpoint Airlines.

"Don't forget, I'm always just a phone call away," he tells me.

I'm not so sure.

"You don't think you'll have your hands full?"

"I'm not going to feed you to the wolves, and even if I were, a lot of people's livelihoods depend on the decisions from the top down. If you have a question, call me," he says, glancing at the time on his laptop. "Fuck. It's two a.m. You need to go to sleep."

"Yay. I only have to get up in three hours." I spin my finger around.

I wasn't planning to head into work tomorrow at all, but under these circumstances...

"Forget the five o'clock hell hour. You don't need to be there until seven," he says. "It's Saturday and almost New Year's. The real work won't start until after the holiday."

"You don't have to do that, Mag. You've made me no stranger to late nights and early mornings."

"It's been a long day. I need you well rested, especially with everything you're about to take on. Sleep here tonight." He rakes a hand through my hair and slides off the bed, moving near my feet.

There, he gently removes my shoes.

It's sweet how much care he takes doing it.

And yeah, I'm exhausted. If he's offering me five full hours of sleep, I'm not turning it down. I crawl to the head of the bed and drop my head on the softest pillow I've ever touched, pulling the thick duvet up around me.

"Your bed feels like heaven," I say, letting out a yawn.

"Such a shame. I always thought I'd hear you say that, but I expected it under different circumstances," he grumbles, giving me a wry grin.

My cheeks flush at his words and that lady-killer smile.

"Behave," I whisper, tangling my fingers around his.

"All joking aside, are you okay with me crashing here too?"

I laugh, stunned at how considerate he's being.

"Who would've thought the jackass was a gentleman? Sleep here in your bed. You've already seen the goods."

He laughs, climbs into bed beside me, and spoons me so close I sigh.

"You're hardly just any 'goods.'" He kisses my hair before whispering, "And don't think I've forgotten about that other piece of unfinished business."

"What business?" I lift my brows, exaggerating.

Yes, I'm going to make him say it.

Consider it revenge for the last two incidents.

Big mistake.

"The business that involves you fused to me, ruling you with my hands, my mouth, and every last burning inch I've got. Mark my words, Sabrina, you'll come so hard for me you can't walk," he growls, lightning in his eyes, tracing a finger down my back until I shudder.

Oh, God.

"That piece," he whispers. "Soon."

Holy, holy hell.

Even though his finger lingers outside my shirt, a shudder runs through me like I've just stepped into the Chicago winter.

But then that roaring fire in my body sparks instantly.

"You could make a sailor blush," I murmur.

"You asked. I told."

"You're so bad. How am I supposed to sleep now?"

He chuckles and kisses my hair again. "Good night, sweetheart."

Aaand I'm melting.

It's the first time he's ever called me sweetheart, and it's a tease. Part of a lame joke.

His proximity definitely makes it hard to sleep. I can't help but wonder what would've happened if his phone hadn't interrupted us.

If instead of running out of my apartment, he let me unbutton his shirt and stroke my hands across his chest.

If he'd let me taste his skin the same way he tasted mine.

If he buried himself in me, what would that be like?

It's probably for the best I didn't find out.

Because if I had...I'm not sure I'd ever have a sane thought again after basking in all his smarmy, infuriating, and yes, *addictive* glory.

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RICH PRICK (MAGNUS)



A soft dark glow oozes through my window, pushing through the blinds.

I glance over at Sabrina, sprawled out on the bed, her head on my arm, cinnamon hair splayed on my pillow.

She's fully dressed, except for her bare feet.

Not ideal.

I choke down a lump of frustration in my throat. A crash course in executive management isn't how last night was supposed to end. There are better reasons for her to wind up in my bed, preferably naked, and I need to rectify that soon.

Since I'm up, though...

Blinking the sleep from my eyes, I disentangle myself from her and grab my phone. Maybe there's an update on Marissa, some miraculous recovery. Good news to give Jordan would go a long way toward smoothing things over, even if I'm not a believer in miracles.

I know better.

His mom was mugged and beaten to a pulp on her way to the bus stop yesterday. Street hooligans looking for easy cash and an easier target. When I showed up to bring him home, the poor kid thought I was some mob boss sent to kill them.

He doesn't know me.

Marissa never wanted him to, and she was right to be leery.

I can't blame the kid for being petrified of going home with a stranger the same day someone put his mom in a coma. I was shocked, too.

She doesn't want me in their lives. I've begged to know if they ever needed my help. Money, resources, contacts, *anything*.

But she's never let me do more than send a few cheesy gifts each year and pay for his tuition.

Now, I find out I'm her emergency contact.

I glance at my phone, waking the screen, and hold my breath.

Aside from a dozen early morning company notifications, it's blank.

No missed calls. No news.

Damn.

Given the shit my old man caused, sticking his dick in employees, I should be relieved Marissa's assault kept me from making a mistake of my own.

Surprise—*I'm not*.

This thing with Brina isn't a casual fling.

I want to take it further. I want her so bad I could split myself open and let her see the real me, not the snarling savage of a boss she already knows.

She intrigues me in a way no woman ever has. I knew it the second she baptized my shoes in cinnamon latte.

That call came at the worst time. I could've handled this crisis better with Sabrina Bristol out of my system.

But a voice in the back of my head asks, *would she really be out of your system after one night?*

I scoff at the thought, already knowing the answer. She's no ordinary woman, and I'm not my old man with his endless hunt for warm, disposable flesh.

Frankly, the answer fucking scares me.

I smile down at her sleeping figure and pull the blanket up around her shoulders. As much as I'd love to linger here all morning, it's time to face the one-kid teenage firing squad.

I still haven't told Jordan we're related, and heavy steps on my wood floor tell me he's already pacing around in the living room. The steps become more distant and the pacing ends.

What's he doing now?

I exit my bedroom and head into the living room.

"Jordan?"

He's not there, and if he hears me, he doesn't answer.

Frowning, I walk around the common rooms looking for him, and finally find him in the heated sunroom attached to the balcony, staring out at the frosty Chicago skyline still bathed in darkness.

He sits on the floor, hugging himself and staring up at the first pinpricks of sun over the horizon.

Hell.

How do I do this? Just waltz in and tell the poor torn-up kid I'm the missing big brother he never knew he had?

I should get him ready for school and drop him off.

Only, it's Saturday, for fuck's sake.

There's no school today.

One less thing to deal with, I guess...and a lot more to deal with face-to-face with my broken little brother.

"Hey. How're you holding up, Jordan?" I ask in my most non-CEO voice, approaching slowly. I don't want to scare him. I save that for underachieving employees.

He turns his head and our eyes connect.

Then he shifts around so he's facing me and stands.

"I'm...I'm fine, I guess. Where's my mom?" he asks, fidgeting in his seat.

“Still at the hospital,” I say, digging my hands into the pockets of my slacks. “Do you want to get something to eat? I’ll take you anywhere. Well, anywhere that’s open at this hour.”

“I’m not hungry. When will I see my mom?” he asks, a sharpness in his tone.

Who can blame him? He’s only been here overnight and he’s already had it.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly.

I plan on giving him more, eventually. Being in the loop with what’s going on might help him feel less upset, but I can’t answer questions I don’t have answers to.

“You can’t just keep me here. Take me to my mom!” He crosses his arms in front of his chest, his blue eyes seething, just a shade paler than mine.

The boy has the Heron stubbornness, that’s for sure.

“Let’s get some food in you, first, and then we’ll talk about it. It’s easier on a full stomach,” I tell him.

“Dude, I don’t want your food. Your fucking money doesn’t give you the right to hold me captive, you know. I don’t even get why I’m here. Who *are* you? Take me to my mom!” Jordan snarls, circling me without taking his eyes off me.

Damn.

I’ve tried to be nice, but this isn’t working.

“Visiting hours don’t start before nine. The hospital’s rules, not mine,” I tell him, my voice getting stern. “Your mother needs her rest. I’ve flown in the best surgeon in the country to take care of her. She’s got a first-class medical team with consultants from Johns Hopkins. She’ll be—”

“Oh my God.” Jordan puts his hands on his head and turns away from me. “I can’t believe this shit. You’re him, aren’t you?”

Him.

One word like a shotgun blast to the face.

Who does he mean? I have one good sickening guess.

“Young man, who do you think I am?” I ask softly.

He spins around so he’s facing me again. His eyes are like the bottom of two Bean Bar cups, but wide and full of hot fury.

“My mom told me all about you. The stalker weirdo who shows up a couple of times every year and always with stupid gifts. Mom freaks out whenever you do it. You should just stop, jackass.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think you—”

“You’re my fucking dad, aren’t you?” he growls, shaking his head “You have a kid and never see him. Mom gets all weird about it...but because you feel guilty, you throw me these crumbs in secret instead of manning up and talking to me face-to-face. You’re a loser.”

My jaw tightens.

Note to self: he’s scared, he’s not thinking, and he’s truly clueless about his real father.

Goddamn. I’m trying to be patient, but comparing me to Baxter Heron makes me lose my shit.

“You’re wrong.” I slap my head into my hand, trying not to snap and just breathe. “Listen to me, Jordan. I promise you, I’m not your father. I’m...I’m your brother.”

My hand slides down my face.

For a second, we just stare at each other.

The hatred boiling in his eyes fades, replaced with confusion.

“B-brother?” he whispers, like a foreign word he doesn’t grasp.

Christ, I need to sit down. Saying it out loud makes me dizzy.

“Your half brother, to be precise. Can we get breakfast, now? You might not need food, but I do.”

He crosses his arms. “I’m not taking a bus if I don’t have to today. It’s cold as balls out there.”

I smile. Can’t blame the kid for that.

“Lucky for you, I don’t take buses.”

“Yeah, no reason to deal with the riffraff if you don’t have to, huh?” he snipes.

Dear God. He makes me sound like my dad.

“The stops take too long and time is—”

“Money,” he finishes. “Gotta love rich pricks.”

“What do you like for breakfast?” I ask, ignoring his sledgehammer sarcasm.

“To see my mom.” He meets my glare with a hard one of his own, folding his arms.

I get it.

He’s upset about his mom, his life, and secrets he was never meant to know.

I felt the same way once, but I’ve already told him visiting hours start at nine.

“We’ve got four hours before we can see Marissa. If you want to go at nine, I’ll take you.”

He stares at me, his face hard.

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Fair enough.

“Well, what do you like to eat? There’s food here, probably, even if I can’t remember the last time Armstrong made a grocery run...” I rack my brain, trying to figure out what I can make, but I’m no cook unless it involves eggs.

Jordan shrugs and lets out a heavy sigh.

“If you’re my brother...why did she never tell me?”

I wish I could say, but the full truth would destroy him on the spot.

“I wasn’t sure what you knew about me, if your mother told you anything,” I say slowly.

There. It isn’t exactly a lie, but it’s enough. I’ve always assumed Marissa kept her mouth shut and he didn’t even know I existed.

“But Mom had to know about you, right?” he asks. “She’s always been weird about you snooping around, sending me presents.”

“Yes. She listed me as her emergency contact, but—”

“So why are you so quick to defend her? What’s with your weird guilt trip?” Again, those blazing young eyes land on me, too much like my own for comfort.

My hand tightens into a fist. “Look, who the hell do you think you are, asking all these questions, kid? The district attorney? I’m trying to *help* you.”

“Apparently, I’m some rich prick’s kid brother,” he mutters, a cruel smile curling his lips.

Touché.

“Your mom’s a saint,” I bite off, my own hot frustration seeping through.

His eyes narrow. “What do you know about Mom, anyway?”

“How old are you?” I narrow my eyes.

He’s quiet for a few seconds, like he isn’t sure what that has to do with anything. I’ve stumped the brat like I wanted to since I already have a good guess at his age.

“Fourteen,” he whispers.

Just like I thought.

“Yeah, your mom’s an angel. You’ve made it to fourteen and she hasn’t killed you yet,” I say, flashing him a comical asshole smile.

He rolls his eyes. “Ha ha ha. So you’re a *funny* rich prick, too.”

I try to find my patience again, staring out at the winter smoke coiling through the cityscape.

Be nice, I remind myself. Everyone he loves is probably dead, he's never had a dad, and his mom's in a coma.

“How would you feel about eggs Benedict this morning?” I ask, only half sure I remember how to make it.

“I don't even know what that is, but it sounds *gross*.”

Think, Mag. What do kids with attitudes bigger than their heads eat?

Hell if I know.

I'm racking my brain for more suggestions and clear my throat. Oatmeal, then, with apples and cinnamon. Fuck, do I have all those things?

Jordan shakes his head, his mind clearly not on breakfast from the way he drops the bomb. “So where's our dear dad, anyway? I'd kind of like to give him a piece of my mind.”

I groan.

Good fucking luck, kid. Go ahead and he'll toss it away like everything else in his life.

This is why I wanted to go out for breakfast.

If I could just get Jordan shoveling food in his face, he might shut up and stop bombarding me with questions that'll only make this worse. And I wouldn't have to cough up a brutal lie.

“He's dead,” I say coldly.

Again, not a total lie, even if it's bending the truth.

He's been dead to me for years, and everyone else at HeronComm.

To Marissa, he's Satan incarnate.

From what Jordan says, he doesn't even know his name.

“Mag, are you okay?” Brina's voice flutters toward us, sweet as honey, but it's bad timing.

“Go to work, Miss Bristol,” I mutter without looking back at her. “We’re talking.”

Jordan moves his eyes to the doorway where Sabrina stands, and he glares. “If my dad’s dead, why didn’t Mom just tell me years ago? Why this big secret?”

“How the hell should I know?” I whisper, a frantic scowl stinging my face. “Look, some of these questions are best saved for your mom when she wakes up.”

“How convenient, since she can’t talk. And you don’t know when she’ll wake up, do you?”

Damnation.

What does this boy want from me? Grump is my state of being, even if this voice gnaws at the back of my brain, wishing I could do so much better for him.

For *everyone*.

Brina, undeterred, walks in and stands beside me then.

“Are you guys okay?” she asks again, her voice so soft, her eyes so haunting.

It breaks me as I look at her, this venom in my heart rupturing like a boil.

“I told you once, we don’t need your help. Get your ass moving and do your job like we discussed! You’re my EA. I need you at the office. Not here at home.”

It’s like an out-of-body experience, watching my grief, my pain, twist me into this distorted monster barking shit at her.

She blinks several times, stunned, her sunny face losing its color.

For a second, I think I see tears.

I don’t know what I’m going to do if she cries, knowing it’s my fault.

I’ll find some way to kick my own ass.

But this is Brina Bristol, and she doesn’t cry. Not after the many, many times I’ve unloaded on her like a brute.

She just puts her hand on her hip, leveling an ice-cold glare.

“You summoned me here after dark. You made me work until after one on a Saturday morning. And then you have the nerve to attack me for asking if you’re okay? I’m going to the office with one request, Mr. Heron...since you’re so sure you don’t need my help at home, make sure you don’t ever bring me here again.” She starts for the door.

I’m about to follow, to chase her, to throw myself down on my knees and *maybe even grovel*, but I don’t get that far. My angry little shit of a brother speaks first.

“Damn, she told you,” Jordan says, smirking, amusement in his voice.

Lovely. They’re double-teaming me.

I side-eye the kid and look at Sabrina again.

“Where are you going?” I yell after her.

“Outside to wait on Armstrong,” she says. “Where else?”

“Brina, wait, don’t—” I start.

“*Miss Bristol*,” she says, sharp as a knife.

“Doghouse!” Jordan quips behind me.

I glower.

Marissa Quail deserves a peace prize.

I sigh. “Miss Bristol, don’t wait outside. It’s cold and a woman was just mugged last night.”

She retraces her steps and stops in front of me again, this time with a finger pointed in my face. “I’m your assistant, remember? You don’t need my ‘help at home.’ Which, by the way, most days you wouldn’t eat if I didn’t order your meals—and I don’t need a damn bodyguard. So don’t worry about where I wait for the driver.”

“Stay near the door,” I warn her, fury lashing through me like a current.

“Magnus Heron, you do *not* need to worry one iota about what I do unless it’s business-related. Bye.”

As she walks away, I realize she’s still in the messy bun and ruffled sweats from last night. “At least have Armstrong stop at your place so you can change!”

She spins around and daggers me with those sinful brown eyes. “Wrong words. I’m not stupid, and I don’t need you monitoring my wardrobe, too.”

Brina storms out.

It’s just Jordan and me in the sunroom again, sharing a quiet winter hell.

“Wow, you’re a real prick, *bro*. You shouldn’t have talked to her like that,” he says, wincing as he shakes his head.

I’m momentarily caught off guard by two things: the fact that he just called me “bro,” and that he’s right.

Marissa Quail may be a saint, but that scene with Sabrina wasn’t Jordan’s fault.

It was mine.

“Do whatever you want for breakfast. Can I just go back to sleep?” Jordan asks, yawning into his hand.

“Yeah, sure. Do you want the couch or a guest room?”

“Can I just, like, stay on the couch and fall asleep to the TV?” he asks. “You have Netflix?”

At first, I’m about to tell him no, he needs a bed. Then I remember all the times I fell asleep to cartoons when I was his age.

I lead the way to the living room.

“Tell me—how horrible was I to Brina?” I ask. “Scale of one to ten?”

“Dude. My buddy talked to a cheerleader like that once,” he says.

“Yeah? What happened?”

“She poured a chocolate shake on his head after the game.”
He snickers at the memory.

Great. More to look forward to.

Jordan passes out on the couch in under thirty minutes. I head for the kitchen, open the pantry, and then the fridge. Everything is in its place, sleek and untouched.

I rarely eat at home. There’s not much food in the kitchen, mostly snacks in the cupboards, keto butter and heavy cream for coffee, and some eggs.

When I got to the hospital last night, he’d already been there for several hours. I don’t think the kid ate since lunch yesterday. I’ve got to get some food in him today.

I stare at my phone, wishing Brina would call or text. She doesn’t, though, and I can’t blame her one bit.

I’ll have to come up with a real apology.

Flopping down at my home office, I Google “kid food,” “food for teenagers,” and “young adult nutrition.” Hamburgers, hotdogs, nachos, and pizzas pop up.

Yeah, not for breakfast, or when I’m light on antacids.

I’m not young enough for this shit anymore. I try “teenager breakfast food.”

The links show sugary cereals, donuts, pancakes, and French toast.

Ordering food is something I can handle. I pull up a delivery app and order two pancake breakfasts and an orange juice from my favorite cafe while I start brewing my Kona coffee.

When Jordan wakes up, breakfast sits in the brown paper sack on the coffee table, and I’m on the phone with the hospital.

“How can I help you?” the operator asks.

“I need Marissa Quail’s room, please. I think it’s four fifty-three,” I say.

“I’ll transfer you right away, sir.”

Jordan sits up on the couch and stares at me with a clenched jaw.

The phone rings in my ear seven times before the operator picks up again. “How may I help you?”

“I was transferred to room four fifty-three, and it bounced back to you,” I say. “Could I speak to her nurse? I just want to make sure she’s okay. I was hoping she’d be doing better this morning.”

“Do you know the patient’s unit?” the operator asks.

“ICU,” I tell her.

The phone rings in my ear again. I mute the call for a second.

“Jordan, I ordered pancakes if you’re hungry.” I slide the package closer.

He doesn’t answer but his eyes don’t leave me.

“ICU, this is Nurse Becky. How can I help you?”

I take a deep breath. “I wanted an update on Marissa Quail’s condition.”

“Can I ask who’s calling? I need to make sure you’re on the approved list,” she says.

“Magnus Heron, her emergency contact.”

The clicking of computer keys fills the phone. Then the nurse sighs.

“She’s still in a coma. Stable. She could wake up any time.”

“But we flew in that surgeon overnight—”

“Right,” she says. “And that’s why she’s no worse off. Traumatic brain injuries are precarious. She sustained multiple direct blows to the skull. It could go either way right now, but we’re all rooting for her. I’d recommend coming in to visit.”

“And your visiting hours start at nine?” I ask, aware of Jordan’s eyes riveted to my face and his white knuckles from

the grip he has on my couch pillow.

“That’s right.”

“In your experience, with comas...you’re thinking she could be there for a while?”

The nurse sighs again. “If she goes home, it’s not going to be for a while.”

The word *if* hangs in the balance. *If* she goes home.

Fuck.

I study the kid—my little brother—perched on the couch. We need to find a way to bond, or at least co-exist, because he’s going to be here for who knows how long.

Shit. I hope his mom pulls through. Jordan has already lost so much, and now he’s in a world of trouble. I know what it’s like having Baxter Heron for a father.

Jordan thinks he’s been deprived because he’s never met our dad. I *know* he’s better off.

“Eat breakfast and we’ll go see your—”

“Is she okay?” He doesn’t let me finish the sentence.

“She’s in a coma,” I tell him as calmly as possible. “But she has the best medical team money can buy, I assure you.”

Jordan jumps up on his feet. “We don’t have time to eat. It’s almost eight thirty. We have to go see Mom.”

I’m exhausted, slumped in an overstuffed chair, thinking what to say. The boy has to eat some time.

“Dude.” He looks at me expectantly. “I meant like *now*.”

The kid drives a hard bargain.

“I’ll call my driver.” I go to the kitchen and pour my coffee into a cup with a lid.

Yet another reason I hate myself for flaying Brina so raw with my words.

I won’t survive this day without a whole heaping lot of coffee, and now I’ve got to supply my own dumb ass.

~

WE'VE SPENT the last hour in Marissa's hospital room in total silence.

The poor woman looks awful. She's pale with bruises on her face, her skin swollen. I can tell from Jordan's expression that he's about to lose it. His lower lip keeps trembling, like he's trying to put on the brave face a man carries around like a mask, but it can't hold up forever.

"Do you like sports?" I ask.

"Huh?" Jordan looks up from another world, dazed.

"You're tall. Do you play basketball? I did when I was your age."

He shrugs. "Sometimes."

"Are you on the school team?"

He shakes his head. He hasn't said two words to me since our last confrontation this morning, and he doesn't look like he wants to talk right now, either.

"What, are you being shy? You weren't so shy around me this morning."

He shrugs, sullen. "I'm not shy. I've got other things on my mind. Take a hint."

Right. If only surly teenagers came with handbooks...

Holding in a rough sigh, I look at his mom in the hospital bed with IVs and monitors hooked to both arms and stitches across her head.

"You still haven't eaten," I say quietly. "Would you like something from the vending machine? Or cafeteria?"

"I'm not hungry," he grinds out, shaking his head.

Yeah. This isn't working. The kid's a brick wall, just like I'd be in his position.

"I'll give you a moment alone," I say.

I leave him at his mom's side, his head bent so he's practically resting it on the side of the bed. I walk into the hall and pull out my phone, then check to see if it's working.

No calls or texts from anyone.

Just this eerie silence.

What the hell? How can it be that there are no fires to put out at HeronComm? Sabrina must be handling the news of my temporary leave, but I knew she would.

A nurse approaches just as I'm about to go back into the room. "We're going to take Marissa for more tests. We're investigating how much of her brain activity was affected by the trauma and what areas it's localized to."

I nod and follow her into the room. "Jordan, they need to take your mom for some scans. We're going home, okay?"

He stares at me, a scowl breaking out on his face.

"There's no point staying. If we don't come back today, we'll return tomorrow," I tell both him and the nurse.

"Today. We'll be back later today." He gets up, kisses his mom on the cheek, and walks out the door with me.

I slow down so he can catch up, but he's intentionally walking three steps behind.

I stop and turn, and he pauses, too. "I'm ready for lunch. Do you want to go somewhere? Or would you rather pick something up on the way home?"

He shakes his head. "What the fuck is it with you and food? I told you, I'm not hungry."

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TEMPT ME (SABRINA)



Since it's the Saturday between holidays, we're a skeleton crew.

My role—or Magnus' role by proxy—is mostly being around to put out any fires and make sure teams meet their end-of-year deadlines.

It's remarkably chill.

Most of the team already knows what to do—keep the ship running without his presence.

I'd say he has it easy, but I know he was the one who whipped them into shape.

The jackass doesn't call or text. Probably for the best.

I don't want to talk to him, and I'd bite his head off if I had to.

I'm able to start working on things I would've had to do Monday, like the prep work for the airline pitch after New Year's. Having something important to do keeps my mind off last night.

Off the way he kissed me and touched me and blew up my world.

Off the way he left without a word, and then held me so sweetly all night.

Off the way he chewed my head off this morning.

Hell yes, I'm glad I'm busy.

My phone vibrates with a message. Ugh, is it him?

I tap my phone.

Ruby: Have you heard from Mag today? We all got cryptic emails from him and no one's seen him in the flesh. I'm worried. He's never missed work before. I would've expected him to call and check in fifty times by now.

I don't respond to that.

If he wanted her to know more, he'd have told her.

But it makes me smile that he confided in me about his surprise half brother, and no one else. Still, everything about yesterday was wrong.

He can't keep going hot and cold, and I can't keep putting up with it.

Ruby's right, too. He's a natural control freak, so it's odd that he hasn't called to make sure the building isn't burning down without his holy presence.

That's how it goes all day. When everyone finally leaves the office, Armstrong is parked by the curb, waiting on me. I open the door and collapse into the leather seat. I'm completely spent.

"Take me to Mag's place," I say reluctantly.

I know I'm not supposed to set foot in his penthouse again, but...

If even Ruby is worried, I should check on him.

At the building, the attendant holds the door open, and I go to the elevator. I fish around in my purse for the white card.

Crap. I gave it back to Armstrong this morning. Retracing my steps to the double glass doors, I find the attendant and say, "I forgot my entry card."

He nods. "Certainly, ma'am. You have two options. You can go get it, or if you use the row of buttons outside the elevator, you can call the person you're here to see. They'll buzz you in. You just put in the apartment number."

“I don’t know the apartment number, but it’s on the forty-seventh floor,” I say.

“Ah, yes, Mr. Heron. That’s number four seventy.”

My feet burn like hell as my red-soled heels carry me back to the elevator. I buzz Magnus. The speaker rings until it goes dead. I try again and again.

I’m just about to text him something horrible when a gravelly voice comes across the speaker.

“Yes?”

“It’s me. Can you buzz me up?”

He doesn’t say anything else but there’s a *ding* and metal doors slide open.

On the top floor, I bang on his door until my hand hurts. When this jerk opens up, I’m going to tell him where to shove it.

Mag answers the door in flannel pajama pants...and nothing else.

Oh, God.

Of course, I’m staring like a lunatic, baked into place by his muscular good looks and freakishly normal attire.

Of course, his hair is disheveled, and his raging ocean-blue eyes are ringed with dark shadows, but screw it.

He may be a devil.

He may be ridiculous.

He may be a colossal, overbearing pain in my butt.

But this man has the most gorgeous torso perched between two broad shoulders I’ve ever seen, hands down. Lean muscle, corded biceps kissed by ink, abs so shredded I think they might singe my fingertips if I had the lady-balls to touch him right now.

He’s a walking, scowling fitness magazine made flesh.

Mr. Grumpalicious of the century.

Why does he even bother wearing a suit? If I was a guy, I'd walk around buck naked, all the time.

"Brina?" His eyes flicker when he says my name.

"Who are you again? Where's Magnus Heron?" I ask, unable to stop staring.

He's so exhausted he looks like he might fall over when he rolls his eyes. His hand cups the doorframe and he rests his head on his outstretched arm.

"What do you need? Did something happen at the office?"

"I just...call me an idiot, but I came to see if you're okay? Ruby was worried," I lie.

I was worried.

He sighs. "I'm fine."

"Are you?" I bite my lip. "You look like you just escaped a torture chamber."

Something about him looking so worn, so haggard, so *unsure* makes me want to take care of him.

"Thanks," he says darkly.

"Tell me what's really going on, Mag?"

"Only if you tell me why it matters. I already had to bullshit to the one person I never wanted to find out anything. It's going to crush him." He shakes his head. "I spared him as many details as I could."

"What truth?"

"Get in. This isn't a conversation for the hallway."

Even though this is his hall, technically, I follow him into the living room. He collapses on the couch, and I sit beside him.

"The fire feels nice," I say, watching orange and blue flames leaping up behind the glass in a hearth that goes to the ceiling. It's like something out of a castle.

Heavy steps echo behind the couch. I glance over my shoulder and spot Jordan walking to the kitchen. His eyes are

wide, his mouth partly open.

“Hey, there. Have you eaten today?” I call out.

I know I’ve asked the wrong thing when he growls and bangs his head on the wall.

“Jeez, lady! Not you too.”

“He won’t eat,” Mag tells me, leaning over to my ear.

The hot rush of breath against my skin sends needles through my blood.

I focus my gaze on Jordan. “You need to eat. What would you like?”

“Scrambled eggs.” The words are barely more than a whisper.

He’s in luck. I go to the kitchen and stare into a mostly empty fridge bigger than three of me combined. I see sports drinks, cheeses, an egg carton, some butter, and heavy cream.

I pick up the egg carton. It’s so light I hope it’s not empty, and I have no idea how old the eggs are. Flipping the top, I find four eggs left.

Someone needs groceries.

He can’t keep a teenager here without any food in the house. I figure butter will work as well as grease to cook eggs, so I grab that too and search for a pan and utensils.

I cook up all four eggs and pile them onto a plate. A couple of my cousins are his age, so I know how teenage boys can eat. I set the plate on the counter for him.

“Dinner’s ready, Jordan! Come and get it,” I call.

He plods in and sits on a stool in front of the bar, and his stomach roars like a bear before he takes the first bite. Poor kid. He’s starving.

When he finishes the eggs, he brings his plate around to the sink, turns on the water, and picks up the sponge.

I pat his arm. “It’s okay. I’ve got it. Your mom taught you well.”

“Thanks.” He gives me a quick smile.

As I wash the plate, Jordan takes off, his heavy footsteps drumming on the floor.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I like the sunroom. Even at night.”

Sunroom? Oh, right, that must be the room with all the crazy glass windows I found them in earlier. I nod at him, then follow him out and veer off to the living room.

“Mag, if I make you a cup of peppermint tea, will you drink it?” I ask.

“Do I have a choice?” He smirks.

“Not tonight, and I’m thinking you should get some sleep soon, too.”

I find a gooseneck kettle with M.H. engraved into it, and when the water’s done, take a peppermint tea bag from my purse and drop it in, then carry the steaming cup to him.

He curls his fingers around the handle and places his other hand on the side of the mug.

“Thanks, Brina. Did he actually eat?” Mag asks.

I nod happily.

“He ate all four eggs. Scrambled. It’s a start.” I pause, unsure how to approach the next question. “How long will he be here?”

He looks at me.

“Jordan. How long is he staying with you?”

He shakes his head. “I’m not sure. A couple of weeks. Maybe longer. The medical team can’t estimate when she’ll wake up yet.”

My lips tighten, and it happens then while I’m studying him, staring into his icy, worried eyes.

God help me, I feel *sorry* for Magnus, king of the jerks.

“I’m going to order a few groceries. You can’t keep a kid in the house with no food. I know you’re used to eating all your meals at the office, but that’s not going to work for this.”

“Good thinking,” he says. “I owe you again.”

“You’re welcome.” The response is automatic for me. But then I realize Mag isn’t one to say thank you often, much less several times in one night. “Umm—for what?”

He gives half a laugh and finally takes a sip of tea.

“Getting him to eat. I’ve been trying all day and failing hard. The groceries should help, too. What are you ordering?”

“Well, do you cook?” I ask, grazing a finger against my chin.

“Not if I can avoid it,” he says.

“Okay. So it’s frozen pizzas, chicken nuggets, taquitos, and chips,” I say. “All the best things in life for a growing boy.”

He gives me a smile that makes my heart twitch.

“We’ll find a way to get some vegetables in him, sooner or later. I’m a lucky man. You accomplish any task I hand you without fail. I wish I’d known that includes taking care of a minor.” He takes a sip of his tea. “At the door, you asked what I had to break the truth about...”

My breath stalls, and I sit down next to him.

I nod. “Yes. If I have to play CEO so you can babysit, I should at least know why.”

“Of course,” he sighs.

Mag stares down at the warm cup in his hand for a long time, and at first I think he’s not going to say anything.

“I already told you Jordan’s my little brother. My half brother.” He closes his eyes. “He’s the product of a wretched move—if you could even call it that—my father made. A terrible fucking mistake.”

A chill sweeps up my spine at the smolder in his voice.

I frown. “I’m not sure what your dad did, but Jordan seems like a sweet kid. It’s not the end of the world that you got an adorable half brother out of the deal. What’s the big—”

“My mother was dying from terminal cancer when the puke I called dad cheated on her. I knew he was doing it for years, stepping out on her, but he swore he’d stopped after I came back to Chicago from the military.”

It’s like a shot through his chest. I can’t even breathe when I look at him, gazing into the harsh, furious shine in his eyes.

“God, Mag. I’m sorry.” I want to reach over, throw my arms around him, and just hold him, but from the way he looks, I’m scared he’ll push me away.

“He not only fucked around on her till her dying day, he got his fling pregnant,” he growls, raking stiff fingers through his messy hair. “Then he bullied her into silence.”

I drop my head against the couch because I can’t reach out, can’t comfort him behind that unreachable stone wall. “Oh, Mag...”

“As of this morning, his mom’s still in a damn coma, lying in ICU. Jordan’s going to be here indefinitely. He refused to eat until you came, and I still can’t get him to say more than two words. He calls me a rich prick.”

If it weren’t for the tortured look on his face, I’d laugh at the last part because it’s too true.

But I play the words through my head several times, trying to come up with the best way to say this. However I phrase it, he won’t like it, so here goes.

“I mean, your outburst this morning probably didn’t help. I know you were stressed, but...”

“I know,” he says, shrugging. “I tried to be congenial the best I could. Turns out, I’m just not very good at it. Jordan didn’t deserve the shit flying off my tongue and frankly, neither did you, Brina. I’m sorry.”

Gutted.

That's exactly what I am when he looks up again, the angry blue moonlight in his eyes dimmed to a mournful winter. A deeply regretful one.

I smile.

"You'll get the hang of Jordan." He sips his tea and I stare at his face. "I've never seen you so exhausted. You should get some sleep."

"I'm okay," he says.

"Mag, you need sleep. Have you slept at all?"

"I have to wait until Jordan's in bed in case he needs anything."

I laugh. "He's fourteen. Not four. If he really needs something, I'm sure he'll manage, but I'm also here."

"You're going to take care of my brother while I sleep?" he asks. "After this morning, I'm amazed you came back here."

"I'm a believer in second chances." I nod. "Let me put away the groceries. I'm still helping you at work if I'm helping you here. I take care of everything else for you anyway, even if you don't need my help at home."

"Sad, but true. I'm just overwhelmed right now."

He sets the mug down on the coffee table with a loud *clink*, pulls me into his lap, and closes his huge arms around me.

"I don't deserve you," he whispers, kissing my neck until I bristle.

It's so hard to keep my hands to myself, but if something happens now, when he's in this state?

Bad, bad idea.

"You're right." I lean back and whisper in his ear, "You should go to bed."

"You're getting rid of me?"

The vulnerability he's shown since I came back from the office makes me bold.

“No. But if you kiss me like that again, I’m not sure you’re getting any rest tonight.”

His teeth sink into my neck. “Don’t tempt me, woman.”

I let out a laugh that ends in a grin and wiggle out of his hold.

“Go to bed, Magnus.”

“You’ll be here when I wake up?” he asks, more like a possessive demand than a serious question.

God.

Does he *want* me here? Or is he just saying stuff he’ll regret later due to stress?

“Of course I’ll be here,” I tell him.

What I don’t say is, *you’re the one who always leaves.*

“Thank you.”

My heart sings to hear those two simple words again. He’s getting soft with all of these thank yous.

Magnus slips off to his room, and I go find Jordan.

The penthouse is huge, bigger than several of my parents’ houses put together. It takes time to navigate the strangely beautiful, sleek, and modern corridors, but eventually I figure out how to get back to the sunroom. Jordan sits on the floor in the dark, hugging his knees, staring at the snow falling lightly out the window with the city’s lights twinkling in the distance.

“Hey, guy. Are you okay?” I ask.

He turns and looks at me. “Yeah. What’s up?”

“I’m going to order some food, so there’s something in this apartment besides coffee. Got a minute to help me fill up an online cart?”

He gives me a curious look, his lip curled. “Why do you need my help?”

“So I know what you like. Mag usually eats at the office. If you wait for him to buy groceries, you’ll starve.”

“What is it with you guys and food?” Jordan rolls his eyes, almost the same beautiful shade as his big brother’s in the darkness.

I shrug and grin. “We like to eat.”

He presses his lips together.

“So you’ll just buy whatever I want?” His voice goes up an octave.

I nod.

“But why?” He seems confused.

“Because your brother wants you happy here, and so do I. I know this is a tricky situation. We’ll make it as easy as we can.”

“Thanks, I guess,” he says before going quiet. “So if I wanted sour gummy bears, marshmallows, and hot chocolate?”

“We can definitely get those things, but you’ll regret an all-sugar diet pretty fast. How about some protein and veggies, too?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

He pops up off the floor and follows me back to the couch.

“What are some of your favorite meals at home?” I ask, pulling out the laptop.

“Meatloaf, pasta, beef stew, fish and fries,” he says without hesitation.

Crap. Magnus may need a chef.

Pasta, I could probably handle. The rest of that’s beyond me.

“Your mom cooks well,” I tell him.

“Most days.”

“What if Mom works late? Then what do you do?”

“Oh, did you mean you wanted me to pick frozen foods?”

I nod. “Well, no one here really has the skills to cook from scratch, so I was thinking of things you could make your—”

He pumps his arm in the air and brings it back down.

“Yes! I want mini pepperoni pizzas, frozen burritos, insta-chicken—”

“Whoa, whoa. Wait. Insta-chicken?” I ask.

“Like boneless wings that just get microwaved. Oh, get a big bottle of ranch,” he says.

Okay. So the kid likes his snacks.

“I have a better idea.” I hand him my phone. “You fill up the cart, and when you’re done, I’ll approve it, okay?”

He’s all too eager, grabbing the phone away. He sets to work filling up the shopping cart.

Twenty minutes later, he hands it back to me. “All set.”

I scan the long list of frozen junk food, hot chocolate, marshmallows, candy, and popcorn.

“One condition: you have to tell me some fruits and vegetables you like too.”

“Aw, I’ll eat any fruit. Vegetables, I only like carrots and cucumbers,” he says.

“That’s easy enough.” I add some basic supplies in case someone feels up to cooking, confirm the order, pay with the company card, and set up delivery. “You can have hot cocoa before bed tonight.”

“Cool.” He gives me the first real smile I’ve seen.

I study the boy. I need to try to break the ice for Magnus.

“So how are you doing with—everything?” I venture.

He shrugs. “All right, I guess.”

There’s a but in there somewhere, I think.

“But?”

He lets out a long, sad sigh.

“Will you be straight with me? Is my mom gonna be okay?” he asks, staring at his sneakers.

I hold in a breath before answering carefully. “I think so, but I honestly...I don’t know. I’m not a doctor. I’ll see if I can get more info, though.”

“You’re nice,” he says, his eyes beaming in the darkness.

I smile. “I try.”

Jordan releases a breath so hard his body slumps forward, palms resting on his knees. “It’s weird having a half brother. Or maybe the half brother part isn’t that crazy. It’s having a half brother I didn’t know about until Mom got attacked. It kind of freaks me out.” He looks around like he’s making sure we’re alone.

“Mag’s asleep,” I reassure him.

“I don’t like this place. Feels like a fancy hotel where I’ll break something without even trying. I want to go home,” he says in a cracked voice.

“Well, I don’t think that’s a possibility until your mom heals up. You’d be alone, and the state has rules—”

“Yeah, stupid ones. I’m fourteen. Pretty old.”

“Wait until you’re twenty-three and tell me how old it feels,” I say, leaning against the wall.

“Is that how old you are?”

I nod.

“Jeez. It’s not even a ten-year difference. You just get to drink and drive. Uh, hopefully not together.”

I laugh at the cute blush on his face.

“I know. But ten years ago, you were only four. That’s a big difference with life experience.”

“Maybe. So why has he stayed away all this time?” He meets my eyes, searching.

A question I can’t answer.

“I don’t know, Jordan. I don’t have a lot of details about what happened with your family. But the important thing is, he

cares about you. Magnus Heron can be gruff, demanding, and kind of a Jerk Store special—”

The kid looks at me with his brows raised.

Yeah, I’m not making this smoother.

“But he’s not a bad guy!” I sputter. “Honestly. He’s surprised me many times with his kindness, and lots of people agree. He’s done amazing favors for people like Armstrong, his driver. Try to give him a chance, okay?”

Dang. I can hardly believe what I’m saying.

I’ve turned into Armstrong, defending Magnus against skeptics who think he’s the worst.

“Whatever. He sends me presents a couple of times a year,” Jordan says, turning so he can stare back at the wintry Chicago night.

“See? That’s nice of him.”

He shakes his head. “They’re lame gifts. Always. The last thing he sent was like these stupid journals and pens just because I won a contest in some dumb writing group my mom signed me up for.”

I wince.

“My mom’s a writer,” I say with a smile. “If she heard you call writing dumb, she’d have a heart attack.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean...” He trails off, looking genuinely upset at hurting my feelings.

“Just kidding. It’s no big deal. But why would your mom sign you up for something you hate?”

“She said it’d look good on college applications. I do a lot to keep Mom happy, because it’s always been just us. And she tries her best with me.” He stares back into the night, a new sadness filling his eyes.

I smile at him. “You’re a good kid, Jordan.”

“Can I tell you something?” He gnaws on his lips.

“Anything,” I say softly.

“This whole thing just...it creeps me out,” he whispers.

“Why?”

He wipes his hands down his arms, as if suppressing a tremor.

“That bad, huh?” I laugh softly. “Shaking off the heebie-jeebies?”

“Basically,” he throws back.

“What’s got you so freaked out?”

“Being here. Staying with a brother I didn’t know I had. There’s something really wrong with that dude—”

“Hey, he’s not a total lunatic. I’ve spent enough time around him to know. The only thing wrong with Magnus Heron is that he’s a workaholic. He runs a huge company with a lot of clients, and he’s awfully good at it.”

“Oh.” He puts up a hand and turns to me. “Sorry, lady. I didn’t mean to insult your boyfri—”

“Boss!” I don’t let him finish the thought. “He’s my boss, not my boyfriend.”

“Whatever. I’m fourteen, not four. Remember?” he mutters under his breath.

Savage.

For a second, I’m speechless, and I try to remember he’s just a kid going through some seriously rough times. But the point remains.

Mag is not in any way, shape, or form my boyfriend, and rather than continue that conversation, I figure it’s best to move on.

“Call me Brina, Jordan. Lady just sounds funky.”

“Okay, Brina. Cool. But level with me a little, okay? You have to admit it’s kinda weird that he doesn’t see me, but sends gifts for years. Even for a workaholic gazillionaire or whatever he is, he has time to find lame gifts. Dude’s like a vampire.”

Well, there's no denying that. Whatever Mag sends him must be personally selected.

I sure didn't buy any journals.

And Jordan isn't done.

"If you say nothing's wrong with him...then why does he send me stuff all anonymous? I don't like it, and I don't think Mom does either, and—oh. Oh, shit." His eyes grow wide like saucers.

"Jordan?" I take a step forward.

"He...he was at a writing conference a few months ago, back in the fall. I just remembered. He didn't even talk to me. He's been around a few times, I think. I remember once or twice when this fancy black car followed Mom around, too, usually when we were changing apartments..."

Oof. I can only imagine he's telling the truth.

It sounds *exactly* like what a commanding, overprotective control freak like Mag would do, but why? I can't make excuses if I still don't have all the pieces.

So the elder Heron cheated with the boy's mom and made him...but what the hell else happened to cause such a strange, distant non-relationship?

"Did he say why he was there?" I ask, trying to keep my voice level, free from curiosity.

Jordan shakes his head. "Dunno. Think he said he's an alum or something."

"Oh, well, he's probably an alum then. Nothing too crazy about that."

"But if he knows I'm his half brother, why wouldn't he just talk to me? What's his deal, Brina?"

For a moment, I'm rendered speechless by this boy's sad blue eyes and hurt puppy expression.

"I don't know." I admit. "Honestly, there's a lot I don't understand about this, but I promise you he's not a monster. Even the rare times he acts like a big dumb stalker, he's trying

to help. Deep down, he's a good guy. If you give him a chance, I'll do whatever I can to make this better."

Jordan nods loosely, and I leave him be, still wondering if there's anything I can ever do to help.

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THE VIEW WITH YOU (MAGNUS)



My brain hammers my head into the pillow.

It hurts so bad, I'm afraid to open my eyes. I groan, reaching for space in the bed beside me, expecting warmth and soft curves.

My hand falls on flat cotton.

Damn. Where did Brina sleep? Or did she decide not to stay after all?

Who cares? I don't have time to chase around a grown woman, who's doing an A+ job of handling everything I throw at her.

Snarling, I grope around on the nightstand for my phone. It can't be too late yet. It's still dark out.

Shit. It's eight thirty.

Why is it so dark? Apparently, without the office, I've forgotten how miserable pitch-black Chicago winters can be.

Not that it matters. Why should today be different from the one before?

Jordan Quail is going to be pissed.

I promised him we'd be at the hospital at nine, and there's no way that's happening now.

Ignoring my bad hangover-like headache, I jump out of bed and bolt for the shower, stripping along the way. I'm usually picky about how my clothes are kept, but not today.

If I don't get my ass in gear, I'll give my brother a new reason to hate me more than he did yesterday, and it was hardly a bromance then.

I turn the faucet to screaming hot, and when the shower feels nice and steamy, I jump in. The steam erases the stress pain in my head like the sun hitting a snowbank.

Once the headache subsides, I fling the glass door open and towel off.

I can't give that kid more reasons to hate my guts. I need to bridge the gap somehow.

Bursting through the bathroom door, I plan to throw on my slacks and dress shirt and hoof it.

An unexpected surprise stops me in my tracks.

Sabrina sits on my bed, running her hand through her long dark chestnut hair. I wish like hell it was *my* fingers combing those locks, fisting them, showing her how sweet it'd feel to be pulled when we—

Her mocha-brown eyes interrupt my filthy thoughts, trawling the length of my body.

Her soft heart-shaped mouth moves, forming a tiny "O" of surprise.

My hand flutters shut as her teeth clamp down over her bottom lip.

Who knew a staring contest could be sexy?

Even wet from the shower in the middle of January, my cock hardens at what that mouth could do.

The rose-red flush on her cheeks helps nothing. She gazes into my eyes, and then her eyes crawl lower, straight to my hardness at full staff.

She likes what she sees.

No question.

Women always do, but with her, fuck.

I back up into the bathroom without turning around and grab my robe.

“If you’re checking out my package, it’s nicer to say hello first,” I tell her.

I pull the robe on and fasten the belt. It’s not completely closed, but screw it.

“Oh, no!” Her blush goes from deep red to almost purple, and she throws her hands up in front of her face. “I just came to check on you, Mag. You didn’t look so hot earlier.”

She’s flustered. It’s adorable. I smirk.

“Do I look hotter now?”

“Yes—I mean—”

I hold up a hand. “It’s okay. Good to know.”

“If you’re hungry, I made dinner. I added enough real food to cook a few meals to the shopping order.” She smiles, proud of herself. “You may not like it, though. It’s just chicken hotdish. I don’t know how to make your fancy food.”

Dinner. Eight thirty *p.m.* I’m not late. I’m really early.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Casserole’s fine. I may be rich, but I’m a Midwestern boy, born and raised. Jordan has a meal plan now?”

She crosses her legs on my bed, and when she shifts to do it, the movement exposes the skin of her thighs.

Standing in front of her in nothing but a robe is *torture*.

“No. I helped him grab groceries from a delivery service. Now you have a stocked kitchen. You’re welcome.” Her tongue flicks out for a second, amused at the asinine questions I’m asking.

You’re killing me, woman.

“Where is he—Jordan, I mean?”

“He’s in the guest room now. He was in your sunroom for a while; think he likes it there,” she says. “On his phone like any other teenage boy.”

“What kind of miracle worker are you?” I growl. “I couldn’t get him to step one foot in *a* guest room, much less settle in. And I gave him his pick of five rooms.”

She shrugs. “He took the one off the sunroom. I had Armstrong pick up his games, too. That probably helped. He’s eaten twice now. I think he’s feeling better. His mood’s improved and he’s not so sulky.”

I sit down on the bed beside her. “How are you so good at this? Do you have a secret baby I don’t know about?”

“Nope, but Mom’s done that plot like a dozen times!” She laughs. “I don’t know, Mag. I guess dealing with grumps like my dad gave me a lot of practice.”

“Is your dad grumpy?” I ask, curious. This urge hits me, and I want to know more. I want to know what makes this woman tick. “I thought you had a good relationship with your parents?”

She beams like the sun. “I do, but that doesn’t stop him from being grumpy.”

What am I doing with this high school shit?

Here I am, almost naked next to a beautiful woman on my bed, blundering around for words. There are things I’d much rather talk about than her grumbling father.

I slip an arm around her waist, coating her cheeks with a new splash of balmy red.

“Mag?” She smiles at me. “Are you hungry? If you want I can go warm you up some—”

“Not for food.”

She giggles into her hand, and I love that fuck-hot heave of her chest as she catches my drift.

I brush my lips against her cheek, down her chin line, scraping her soft skin with my scruff.

“Well, since I was so busy cooking, I didn’t get a chance to sample the goods.” She winks at me and stands. “Come on. Let’s eat before we both starve.”

Fine.

If I don't eat baked hotdish, she'll be offended. I'll do it because the CEO of HeronComm never disappoints. But damn, this is the part where I'd walk away from a client—not that any client has ever turned my dick into a blueberry sausage like her.

“I'll have dinner with you, sweetheart, but first you're feeding my other appetite.”

She stands in front of me, her knees against mine. I drag her between them, diving for her lips. But she turns her head at the last second, and our foreheads press together, our breath synced in hurried, shallow rasps.

“Say please,” she whispers.

“Touché.”

“Not the magic word.” She raises her eyebrows. “Say it.”

“You're stunning, but I'm not begging for a kiss,” I growl. “You'll be begging by the end of the night, Brina. I promise.”

“I'm stunning?” she asks too innocently.

“You know you are,” I throw back, every inch of my skin electric, so done with these games.

It must be the right thing to say.

She moves closer between my legs, clasps the back of my head with her hands, and gives up her lips.

I fucking devour her, flicking my tongue gently over her lips before I take the full plunge.

As long as I live, I'll never experience another woman who tastes this good, this right, this much like a forbidden fruit I'd die for.

She opens her mouth and slips out a moan just as I slide my tongue in.

“Mag,” she whines, so ready even her voice sounds wet for me.

That moan undoes me.

In a flash, I pull her on top of me. Her knees dig into my hips. Her tongue traces the inside of my mouth, and my fist twines through her hair, giving it a delicious pull.

My other hand falls, clasping her ass, pinching one delectable cheek until she squeals.

Fuck.

She pulls away then and sighs with a playful slap against my arm.

“Behave. I told you, dessert comes *after* dinner.” She pushes herself back to a standing position. “That was nice, though.”

“It’s going to get a lot nicer. And then not nice at all.”

Her mouth falls open and she grins.

Sweet hell, I can’t wait to ruin her.

This night is nothing like I ever imagined the run-up to our first time would be, but I’m past caring.

Before the dawn comes, I’m going to fuck the soul out of Sabrina Bristol.

I DRESS in sweats and an old Marine Corps shirt and follow her into the dining room.

The casserole smells like savory, cheesy goodness. A throwback to times with my grandparents outside the city, who always insisted on home cooking.

My stomach rumbles like a quake. I was so entranced with Brina’s sweet body I didn’t realize I’m ready to gnaw off my own arm.

An aluminum baking dish sits on the table and half of its contents are gone.

Sabrina gives me a strained smile. “Jordan attacked it first. He’s a big eater—or maybe he was just starving because he skipped so many meals.”

She scoops a huge chunk of casserole onto a plate and hands it to me. I hope I like this. She takes an equal portion and digs in the instant she joins me at the table.

The aroma smells like heaven—if God needs comfort food—and I can't remember the last time I had something this simple.

I shovel a forkful in my mouth and fall back against my chair, smiling as I chew.

“Mag?” Brina calls out, a hint of worry in her voice.

“It's...yeah, you outdid yourself. Best thing I've eaten in ages.” Mainly because it tastes exactly like a guilty, creamy hotdish full of cheese-slathered noodles should.

Brina grins. “Have you had it before? I know I'm not the best cook.”

“Only a few times,” I say. “My grandmother used to cook like this when I'd visit Geneva, Illinois. I thought I'd lost my appetite for casseroles years ago, but you just resurrected it.”

“You're welcome.” She laughs. “What a relief. I wasn't sure you'd like it. It's kind of simple for your tastes.”

I look up, swallowing another heaping bite.

“You make me sound like an arrogant douchebag,” I grumble. “Dinner doesn't have to come from a place pecked over by half a dozen food critics for me to enjoy it.”

She doesn't say anything, and the silence speaks volumes.

“Come on.” I smile, setting down my fork. “I can't be *that* horrible.”

“Not when a person gets to know you,” she says. “But you're a hard guy to get to know.”

I don't like that last part.

Hell, I don't want to be hard for her to get to know, and I also shouldn't care.

Her heels tuck around my leg. The outside of her foot runs up my ankle, sending a flash of heat through muscle.

My hand drops under the table and I circle her ankle with my fingers, luxuriating in her soft skin. Across the table, her eyes twinkle with hot starlight and she smiles.

“You’re pure evil,” I tell her. “You’re the one who dragged me out here for this decadent meal, remember?”

“Did I, now?” she purrs. “I can’t possibly be crueller than you.”

This girl.

I have a terrible vision of *Sabrina’s flirting* listed as my cause of death on some starched county document.

“I was more than willing to settle our unfinished business. You insisted on dinner,” I mutter. “That’s downright heartless.”

She blushes, laughs, and takes another bite of her food.

Ten minutes later, she finishes her plate and her legs are still in the same spot.

I’m not letting go, damn her.

“If I can have my foot back, Mag...I’m going to check on Jordan and respond to a few quick emails. Why don’t you rest?”

Rest is the last thing on my mind.

Still, despite the size of this place, it would be prudent to make sure the kid goes to sleep before anything else happens.

I haven’t finished dinner yet, either, but that could be because I’m mighty distracted caressing the ankle and calf I’m holding hostage. I glide my hand up to her knee, squeeze, and draw small circles with my thumb until I feel her shudder.

“It’s Saturday night. You don’t have to check your email. The airline work won’t hit its stride until January second.”

Her eyes close.

“You’re wrong. See, my boss is a huge tyrant...” Her silly line sounds more seductive than funny when the words come out so light.

“Check your email in my room?” I make it a question on purpose.

She hesitated earlier, and if she truly wants to change her mind, I’ll give her the chance. But if she doesn’t...she’ll have a better chance wrestling a grown tiger than keeping me off her.

“Sure.” She bites her bottom lip.

My eyes follow her lush, full ass the whole time as she gets up, walks over, and puts her plate in the sink, then heads around the bend in the hall to check on Jordan.

She’s too sweet for life.

Brina’s convinced him to do normal fourteen-year-old things like *eat*.

Everyday necessities I couldn’t get him to do no matter how hard I tried.

I might be glued to her ass, her legs to nirvana, her palm-sized breasts, and those bottomless brown eyes, but let’s be real.

She’s a fucking godsend, and I meant every word when I said I didn’t deserve her.

I practically inhale the rest of the food whole, and then scarf down what’s left in the pan. I need my strength and I’m ready to be sealed in my room with Brina all night.

Alone.

When I get there, she’s sitting in the window seat, typing away on her laptop. I sit down beside her and kiss the crown of her head.

“Was he okay?”

“He’s fine. His mom is all he has, you know? This is just hard for him.” She goes quiet, bites her lip, and then says, “But she doesn’t have to be everything. He has you. You’re family, even if you’ve just met.”

“He hates me,” I point out, trying to hide the fact that I care.

She shakes her head.

“No, Mag, I don’t think so. You’re just new and it’s a huge shock to find out you’ve got a missing older billionaire brother. Jordan’s overwhelmed. This is pretty serious stuff. He’s only fourteen. His feelings aren’t written in stone.”

“I’m trying. I just wish he didn’t want to hack my head off every time we’re together.” My jaw tightens, and I wonder, can I blame him one bit?

I should’ve introduced myself sooner. Should’ve tried harder to convince Marissa to let me into his life, but after what that sadistic fuck-bag did to her—

“He doesn’t want you dead.” She looks up from her laptop. “He just doesn’t know you yet, and you’re hard to get to know, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah.” I flash her a tight smile and then relax my face. “You’re a bonafide angel. Somehow, you make everything better—including my doubts over ever seeing eye to eye with this boy.”

“Wow. A girl could get used to you acting nice for once, you know.” Her smile hits my heart like a shot, especially when her long lashes flutter. “Oh, and I forgot to tell you. The creative team is ahead of schedule with the airline stuff. Their concepts are ready, thanks to Hugo shutting himself up in his room. His wife dragged him to Florida for the holidays and he can’t take the heat. I gave it my approval, but I emailed it to you in case you wanted to make any last minute notes before Mon—”

Enough.

Taking a step forward, I close her computer, pull it from her hands, and set it aside.

“Brina, I don’t want to talk about work. It’s almost New Year’s Eve. I don’t even want to think about it. If you like the mock-ups, then I know they’re stellar.” I pull her into my lap and shift our weight so we’re looking at the skyline. “Tonight, I’m enjoying that view with you. Then we’re going to spend

the day together and ring in the new year with everything a little less shitty, you read me?"

She trembles in my grasp.

The effect I have on her only makes me want her more.

"Okay. Sounds nice," she whispers shyly.

I turn her in my lap so her lips will be easier to reach. Then I cup her face with my hand, tilt her head back, and bring my lips to hers.

She wraps her arms around my neck and presses her body closer, teasing every bit of my skin where I can feel her.

Fuck.

The want firing in my brain makes me delirious.

Growling, I kiss her so hard her mouth opens, and I deepen the kiss, claiming her like I've always wanted with no doubts, no distractions, and no nerves. Her hands saunter from the nape of my neck upward, into my hair. Fingernails dig at my scalp, and I don't mind.

My grip on her tightens, my pulse hammers, and I press her even closer to my chest, folding her around me, needing her right now like my lungs need air.

She wriggles in my hold, comes up on her knees, and straddles me. Through her panties and my sweats, raw heat tickles my shaft, teasing me with how wet she is.

She arches her back and presses down with force over the ridge in my pants.

I let out a sigh and pull myself together, remembering what she liked the night the phone call ripped us apart, the night she should've been mine.

A nuclear bomb isn't tearing me off her tonight.

I ease my mouth away from hers to speak, even though it's torture.

"I have to kiss you again," I snarl.

Her eyes are wide. She nods.

Just like that, her lips are on mine again, sticky and sweet as a ripe strawberry. Her tongue digs at my mouth, matching my hunger, begging to be taken.

I'm so fucking happy to oblige.

In a rough jerk, I bolt away from her lips, trailing hot breath and frenzied kisses down her jawline. I taste every bit of her, exploring every nook and twist of her with my tongue.

"Mag," she breathes.

"I love that sound." I kiss the top of her neck where it meets her jawbone, and she shudders, grinding her hot pussy against my raging steel through the fabric.

"Sound?" she moans.

Yeah. That one. Right the hell there.

"Your voice when you say my name with *need*." I kiss slightly lower then, making her arch, running my hands down her spine.

My lips attack her neck again, this time with raw hunger, with teeth, with a promise of everything I'll do to her tonight.

I open my mouth and draw a small circle in the middle of her neck with my tongue.

"Oh. Ohhh."

Every breathless murmur she makes is my reward.

I kiss down, down, down to where her neck meets her collarbone, massaging the delicate skin with my tongue, painting my lust on her flesh.

She grips my hair with her fingers and whimpers again.

"Magnus!"

Fuck.

I trace a hot, messy line from her collarbone to the top of her cleavage with kisses.

She presses her soft warmth into me again.

The clothes need to go, but I can't fucking rush this.

Not when I already know I'm about to have the best sex of my life.

She brings a hand to the top button of her dress, like I need another reminder. Covering her hand with mine, I push it away from her clothes.

“But—”

I silence her by unclasping the first button and pressing my lips to the skin underneath. My fingers trail down, popping the next button open. She moans when my fingertips brush the hint of skin slowly being revealed.

One. Two. Three more buttons and I'm staring at a pale blue lace bra.

I stop, awestruck and staring at the perfect mounds encased in baby blue.

“Um, why'd you stop?” she whispers.

“A dilemma. I can't decide if I should keep going with the buttons so I can splay this dress open and worship your body. Or if I should slip my hands behind your back, destroy that piece of lace, and devour you.”

With a sinful smile, she decides for me.

Her hands slip from my head to behind my neck, and she brings my head to her breast. I kiss and lick just outside the lace, enjoying the way she writhes, grinding against me harder.

My hands slip behind her back to undo the bra clasp. I work the straps down her soft arms one by one, and when my tongue flicks across the hard point of her nipple, she groans real sweet for me.

Covering one breast with my hand, I gently caress it with my pinched fingers, and the other with my mouth. Her breaths fall hard and ragged, urging me to lick, to suck, to please until she comes undone.

Goddamn.

I've wanted this ever since that first day she was in the office. I can't fathom how I held out this long. I slide my hand

down to open the next button and use my mouth to massage where it just left off.

“Are you—umm—will you—” She sucks in a breath. “Are you going to make love to me tonight?”

I trace her nipple with my tongue—what’s supposed to be one last time but winds up being more because it’s that addictive. Then I pull away from her.

“No, sweet girl,” I say, loving how she blinks in surprise. “What I’m about to do doesn’t fall under something as gentle as ‘making love.’”

“I want you.” Her voice is tortured, her eyes lidded, heat flowing through her and pouring out her eyes.

There’s my Brina, always to the point.

I move my hand down to the next button and caress newly exposed skin. Then with my lips near her ear, I whisper, “You know something? You’re going to want it a lot more before we get there.”

A husky laugh falls out of her, so sweet it makes my balls ache.

I can’t help but kiss her lips again, an animal hunger in my blood.

She brushes my bottom lip with her tongue, and soon we’re lost in another long, winding kiss. My cock wants me to rip her clothes off, haul her to bed, and sink into her balls deep this very second. But another part of me wants to stay right here.

Arms locked around each other, tongues tangled, so close I can feel her pulse.

My fingers trail down on a mission.

One.

Two.

Three more buttons, and I’m done.

Bringing both hands to her shoulders, I slide the dress away from her body.

Finally, I give in, pick her up, and carry her to bed where I lay her down gently in a splash of sighs and tossed hair.

Instead of climbing in with her, I'm stricken, staring, soaking in the fresh creamy skin giving my bed a new soul.

Damn it all.

Her body seems so tense her abs move when she breathes, waiting for me, fully open to every wicked thought in my mind.

"You coming?" she whispers, her bottom lip quivering.

I wish she knew how fucking close I am.

Still standing beside the bed, I reach over, hooking a finger under the lace of her waistband. She covers my finger with her hand.

"They match," I say darkly, my throat scorched with desire.

"What?"

"Your panties. They match your bra. I thought it was worth noting before they're gone." My hooked finger moves, pulling that lacey waistband down, but the hand that covers my finger stops me with a firm grip.

Fuck. I hope it's not cold feet. I don't blame her. I'm probably going to hell for this, but I need her so badly I'll break if we stop now.

She surprises me as always.

Brina swats my hand away from her panties and comes up on her knees. "Play fair. I'm down to a flimsy piece of lace, and you're still dressed..."

She trails off, this hot, playful redness glowing on her face like a halo.

I grin.

"If you want this off, you need to be naked," she whispers.

Lucky for her, I can handle that rule.

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SWEET PERFECTION (SABRINA)



“**Y**ou’ll be the death of me,” he says, staring down at me with eyes so hot I think I’ll walk out of here with a sunburn.

How did I even get here?

On my knees. On my boss’ bed, wearing nothing but my panties.

I swallow hard.

Because I know it’s not my boss. Not King Asshole. Not anymore.

It’s just Mag, and what was unbearably wrong just became right.

“Then you’ll enjoy your last moments on earth,” I whisper, my voice husky, unlike any tone I’ve ever heard.

Holy hell. This is what he does to me.

And he leans down then, bringing his savage mouth back to mine. The passionate kiss makes me frantic, and I slide my hands under his shirt, moving them up and down.

He sighs.

I walk my fingers down his chest, under the waistband of his boxers, tracing circles into his bare skin. He’s a slab of a man, skin like velvet stretched over solid rock in all the right places.

My eyes go to the huge pulsing bulge in his pants. It looks like it'll rip through the flimsy fabric in a second and claim me.

My fingers push to the top of his pelvis, stroking faster circles from one hip to the next, making me hotter and wetter by the second. Every touch forces me to think about what the power in those hips could do to me.

Can I even take him?

“Sabrina, fuck.” He chokes on my name, two words dragged across sandpaper.

Hearing him so aroused, so drunk on me, sends a tremor down my spine. I walk my fingers back up, teasing his skin, edging my fingers deeper in his flesh, into rock-hard muscle.

When my hand falls down, grazing the crop of hair below his abs, I gasp.

“You weren't supposed to stop,” he growls, moving his hand over mine, holding it to his body.

Clasping a fist around my fingers, he leads me down, and wraps my hand around every unseen inch of him.

He's hot, alive, and throbbing like a piston.

Mag's hell-blue eyes drill into my soul as I feel him jerk in my hand, flexing, making me imagine what he'll do once he's deep inside me.

Oh, hell.

It's hard to even breathe.

All I can do is pull back, licking my lips, eyeing the hot sauna pools whirling in his eyes.

I need a distraction, so I wrap my hands around either side of the cotton t-shirt he's wearing and yank it over his head, then run my hands down his bare chest. He brings an arm behind my back, pulling me closer, kissing me with the force of an angry god.

Call me shameless, I don't care.

I'm past worrying about how I moan, collapse, and melt in his arms.

Especially when our tongues dance a mad ballet, and when he traces my bottom lip with the most sensual groan I've ever heard in my life. Several rough fingers hook inside the waistline of my panties again.

Mag!

"Not yet," I sputter, breaking off the kiss, gasping for air.

He presses his lips to mine, tasting the inside of my lip, a quick and fleeting kiss.

"I'm not fully dressed anymore. We had a deal," he reminds me.

I shake my head, forcing back a smile.

He looks so deliciously grumpy I want to laugh.

"No way, mister. You're still wearing too much." I loop my fingers around the waist of his sweats and pull them down, then shove him against the bed.

Well, I *try*.

He pretends I can actually move him and falls back, flopping down, grinning up at me.

He laughs. "If we act like you're in control, will you get the hell over here and fuck me?"

I suck my bottom lip, lost for words.

"Brina. *Get over here,*" he snarls again, reaching up in a flash, wrapping his hand around my hip.

He tumbles me against him, hoisting my hips up to connect with his. The last thing I ever imagined was Magnus Heron having a playful side—*in bed, no less*—but I'm already in love.

I lean over him, clasping each of his massive shoulders, lightly rubbing his skin with my nails. Once I know he's holding me up, my hands move from his shoulders, arcing

down his chest, frolicking across his canvas of granite muscle and the wild ink on his arm.

He presses me against him, taking one breast in his lips, sucking my nipple. He leaves me no choice but to clench helplessly, digging my nails into him.

“Oh, God.” The moan escapes my lips. “Mag, yeah.”

For him, those words are magic, pure sorcery.

He nibbles, caresses, and sucks as I massage.

I shift to the side so I can rub down the length of his arm, admiring his strength. His hand comes up to cover my other breast.

I’m on fire, but I want to tease him the way he torments me.

I want him to want me like he’s never desired anything else.

It takes all my willpower not to grind against him, not to slide my panties off and throw his boxers across the room, not to *impale* myself on the dangerous hard-on I feel against my thigh.

Not yet.

I need him to quench this raging thirst.

Closing my eyes, I sigh as his thumb rolls over my nipple.

“You really enjoy these, don’t you?” I ask.

“They’re the finest pair of tits I’ve ever seen, touched, or sucked. A perfect handful and perfectly natural, but what I love most is the sound you make when I go to town. No question.”

Yep. I’m done for.

It’s a miracle his blue-eyed hellfire doesn’t set the whole room ablaze.

I smile and sigh, rubbing my fingers into the meat of his palm, between his fingers. I move back to his torso, rub his abs

down to his briefs, slide my fingers under the elastic, and glide off his lap so I can finally remove them.

His thick manhood springs free, just as insane as I thought it'd be.

I take it in my hand, ready to tame the beast.

Mag works his fingers down my belly while I'm still standing. A sultry rush knifes through me when he fists my lace, jerking it past my knees.

"Fuck," he whispers, his eyes riveted between my legs, his nostrils flaring like he can smell how wet I am.

Dying.

I may not survive this. But if that's the way it goes, tell everyone Brina Bristol died in ecstasy.

Mag pulls me in so we're face-to-face, then throws me on the bed, shifting us so we're on our sides. He strokes the inside of my thighs, rough hands on silky skin, up to the crease where my legs meet.

He traces both sides, worshiping my inner thighs, before his fingers are *in me*.

"Oh!" I scream, legs shaking, then cover my mouth because I don't mean to be so loud. "S-sorry."

"These walls are thick. The boy can't hear us so far away," he says, a wicked smile turning up his lips.

His finger pumps in and out again, stroking against fragile, insanely sensitive places I didn't know I had.

I'm reeling. Wrecked. Thoughtless.

"Mag, we shouldn't—"

"You worry too much. Let me help you stay quiet." His lips seal mine shut and his tongue chases me into delirium.

Am I still breathing? Because this is heaven.

Skin-to-skin with Magnus Heron, and the tenderness of his kiss stuns me.

I never thought he had it in him to kiss like he cherishes me, shifting his thumb against my clit, winding hypnotic circles until my head rolls back.

I hate to pull away, but his hands aren't enough.

I need more.

So I wrap a leg around his, try pushing him on his back, but he holds firm.

“Not our first time, sweetheart.”

First time? Is this something that's going to happen again?

Oh. My. God.

But I can't contemplate it too long because my body burns with every pulse. Plus, I've just landed flat on my back.

His face hovers over mine, all hot breath and midnight-blue eyes so bright I think I'm blind.

Our lips brush as he lets out a carnal growl.

He possesses my mouth with his tongue, pushing his hand back between my legs, taking me to a place where there's no more fight, doubt, or resistance.

His fingers claim my pussy with a roughness, a quickening pace that makes me tighten around his digits, sending me over the edge so embarrassingly fast I feel a full body flush coming on.

Oh, no.

He's possessed *all* of me.

I'm twisting now, writhing against him, staring into a gaze that hasn't softened, that only reaches down inside me and ignites a bigger fire by the second.

“Come for me, woman,” he grinds out, his throat so tight as he watches me. “Fucking shatter.”

I do.

On command.

Fully, helplessly, madly.

This fireball explodes in my belly, so deep and resonate, lifting me up and slamming me down. My fingers catch the sheets, clutching and tearing, desperate to hold on as those terrible—*terribly awesome*—fingers of his work me to a manic frenzy.

I'm coming so hard I can't even help it.

Coming with my head thrashing, my teeth bared, and Mag flipping Heron watching the whole time.

Halfway through, he leans down, still stroking me to bliss. His lips attack mine, this time with a feral growl, and I'm done.

My lips are so full of his that there's no chance to scream.

Just shake.

Just breathe and whimper and dig my nails into his back as he pumps into me, turning me into an exhausted mess.

He stays propped up, his weight gently pressed against me, stroking the same devilish fingers through my hair as my eyes flutter open.

"Welcome back, sweetheart. I should've known you'd come your soul out," he whispers with a smirk.

I can't believe I'm not spent, a boneless mess, but somehow I'm still wet. Still aching for this man and his dagger tongue to give me what I need at the deepest, primal level.

"Fair's fair. Now I get to see you," I tell him, reaching for his cock.

How can I not adore the sparkle in his eyes when I squeeze his shaft, stroking up and down, feeling his hot pre-come ooze across my hand?

He makes another sinful, growly noise as my fingers leave his dick, crawling down his back to the tight skin of his oh-so-firm ass.

It's so nice in my hands. Round and warm and hard as a rock.

I wrap my legs around his, arching up as he pushes down.

“Enough torture. I want you so bad,” I say, flicking my tongue across his lips.

It’s all he needs to take my mouth again, reminding me who’s boss, tormenting me a little longer as his tongue strokes in and out, a hint of everything he’ll do to my body.

I fight my way out of the kiss. “Mag, I need more.”

With thunder in his voice, he shifts back on his knees, gripping the base of his cock, lining it with my entrance.

“Once we start, there’s no going back,” he teases, rubbing the swollen, angry tip of his length against my clit. “This won’t be as gentle as I kiss.”

“Lucky you, I don’t want gentle.”

His eyes flash, blue heat tinged with lust, a visible twitch in his face.

“Fuck, Brina, I—I need a condom.”

Just as he starts moving, I pinch my legs around his.

“I’m on the pill. I’m clean. And you work like a monk, so I’m guessing you are too,” I whisper, my voice shaking. “No more games. Take me, Mag. Take it all. Take me over.”

I slide my ankles against his, clamping down, begging him to do everything and more.

The look he gives me is equal parts gorgeous as hell and barely freaking human.

With a deep breath, he rolls his hips forward, feeding an inch in at a time, and then pushing faster, harder, when he feels how wet I am.

My boss plunges deep inside me in one feral stroke, and I gasp, feeling his balls against my skin.

His breath hisses like a crackling fire as he pulls back, gliding into me again, this time without mercy.

I arch up as he presses down, meeting his pace, turning his twin blue flames into blistering suns. He’s growling as he

hoists me up, fusing us together, shoving my thighs around his waist and sinking his fingers into the flesh of my ass.

I feel like a doll being ravished by a giant as those whipcord muscles move him like the wind, splitting me open, battering against me so hard there's an audible slap of our skin.

Holy shit.

Unholy thrusts.

And soon they're possessing every last bit of me, his hips colliding so hard my breasts shake, a possessive groan in his throat promising he won't be undone until he brands me with another searing O.

I'm all moans, hair spilling down around me, desperately trying to meet his thrusts, blood rushing to my extremities in a raging torrent. He torches me every time he slams down harder, deeper, wilder.

I'm already on the edge when I feel Mag's forehead on mine, hot bone through his skin, the bed creaking with his punishing strokes as his pubic bone grinds on my clit.

"Oh-oh-oh, Mag!" I graze my teeth across the skin of his face, inhaling the breath spilling out of him.

"Come for me again. I know you want to. Give me the whole night," he rasps, his eyes these pinpricks I can't ignore.

I don't even have a prayer.

My hips lift up with his before he crashes into me again, grabbing my wrists and pinning me down, the world's most willing captive as a tidal wave release splits me in two.

This time, I'm too breathless to even scream.

And he's intent on hammering me through it, his hips slashing harder, mashing us together so I'm absolutely full of him.

God!

My pussy convulses, coming so hard on his cock, making me a total mess of hot want and spastic ecstasy. I don't think

the O ever ends, only lightens, as he goes to work again.

This time with a mood that swings between tender kisses and delicious growls, relentless thrusts and teasing caresses.

Yeah, I'm not on Earth anymore.

He's taken me to this dark wonderland ruled by a broody king with a staff like pure steel. A place that becomes a little more enchanted with every fierce thrust, every sweet ruin he pulls out of me, every breathless whine of his name.

“Brina,” he sighs, rooting himself in me. “I'm going to come inside you like mad. Just like I was always meant to.”

Holy hell.

My mind goes blank as his hips move again. His strokes come faster, deeper, and more deliberate, eager to claim me from the inside out.

Somehow, I hold on through several more minutes, trying to stave off coming again because *I want to go off with him*.

The urgency of his thrusts quicken.

Faster.

Harder.

I meet them every time.

The minutes blur, the seconds condense, and then every muscle in his body goes electric and tense as granite. I see his gorgeous face whip back, his teeth bared, a rough sound tearing out of him that may be a guttural curse—or my name.

Whatever it is, it's the only warning I get from Magnus Heron.

He gasps and I feel him swell, fully in me, stretching me apart.

My body clenches around him.

Movement stops.

Then I'm filled to absolute perfection with dense, hot ropes of his seed.

I come with him, swallowing a scream, and everything goes white.

The feral groan he makes when he empties his essence etches on my brain, and I'm just as sure his release burns his initials inside me for life.



I WAKE UP, far too comfortable for my lumpy bed.

After I blink several times, I realize I'm under luxurious white overstuffed linens with a full view of the Chicago skyline.

I'm so sore it makes me smile.

No earthly clue what time it is, but it's daylight. If I'm playing stand-in CEO, I should get to work.

I glance beside me, where Mag still sleeps like a bear, his huge chest heaving softly with these growly sounds that aren't quite snores. Good.

He needs the rest.

I wrap myself in the sheet and pull it off the bed with me so I can collect my clothes. I find my panties first on the floor near the bed.

My dress and bra? Who knows. They're totally MIA.

We were on the window seat the last time we did it, the blinds open to the night, Mag driving into me from behind. My butt still burns pleasantly from the crisp strike of his hand as he made me come, adding this biting heat to our last release.

"Where are you going?" he asks, cracking one vivid blue eye open.

I turn to answer and realize he's sitting up. My eyes are glued to a chiseled beast who can't be mortal.

Sweet memories flood my mind and heat pours into my cheeks. We went hard at least seven times over the past forty-four hours, if my memory is accurate.

I'm torn between wanting him inside me again and just wanting to cuddle him.

Magnus Heron doesn't strike me as either a morning sex fiend or cuddle bug. Though he did hold me for hours last night, after we screwed each other senseless.

That's how we spent our New Year's Eve, barely stopping for visiting hours with Jordan at the hospital and fixing him some food. He's been sleeping a lot, too, whenever he's not holed up in the sunroom with his phone, video games, and all the frozen snacks a teenager can eat.

Whatever else I expected on January second, it wasn't waking up in the Twilight Zone.

Lucky me, this isn't the kind where the Earth is falling into the sun or everybody has pig faces.

"Brina? Are you okay?" he asks. "You look frazzled."

Oops. I was so busy gawking I forgot to answer.

"Holiday's over. I should get to the office," I say, shaking my head.

He looks from the skyline to me with a sad expression that breaks my heart, and nods.

"Right. No one out there can see you, FYI. We're too high up—"

"We're only on the forty-seventh floor," I say. "The buildings out there are way taller."

He grins.

"Whatever you say, Miss Modesty. You certainly weren't worried last night when I held you against the glass and made you watch yourself coming on my cock."

Instant butterflies.

Until him, I didn't even know they could be dirty butterflies, either.

He walks to the nightstand beside the bed—completely comfortable nude—picks up a remote, and the curtains close

across that glass wall. “You don’t need the sheet, sweetheart. I’ve already seen you, and you don’t need to go to the office today.”

Oh—so maybe the ruler of the world is into lingering mornings?

“But it’s the first day back. All the staff should be piling in, ready to go after a long holiday.”

He moves to the window seat, picks up my dress and bra, and brings them over to where I’m still crouched on the floor. He holds the garments out, and I take them. Then he picks me up.

“Where are we—what are we—”

He lays me on the bed and slides in beside me.

“If you think people are raring to go, you don’t know anything about how miserably slow the first week of January can be. The notes for the airline presentation are done. I approved Hugo’s creatives while you were napping after we fucked the first two times yesterday. There’s nothing pressing there. Spend the first real day of the year with me. January first doesn’t count when everybody’s still hung over from champagne and ham dinners. Stay?”

Whoa. That’s one request from my boss I never saw coming.

“I don’t know. My boss can be a cyclops-sized asshole,” I say, scratching my chin in mock-thought.

“If you try to abuse the classics like that again, I’m chaining you up and reading you Homer.” He puts his arms around me and holds me tight. “And if your horrible boss tries to be a jackass again, let me know. I’ll kick his ass.”

I can’t help but giggle, and blush because *he might be serious* about that Homer thing. You never know.

He runs his capable fingers through my hair, soft strokes reminding me what they can do.

“What are you thinking? You look mischievous. I didn’t think a day playing hooky would make you so thrilled,” he

whispers.

Yeah, now I'm smiling so hard my cheeks burn.

"I'm just amused. You admitted you need me at home," I tell him.

He glares at me, boss mode activated.

"You're an evil woman."

I've got my arms around him now and hold on tighter. "But do you really need me?"

He sighs. "Yes, Miss Bristol, I can't manage to get through a single day without you."

I kiss his jaw and then up his chin, ending with his lips.

"Glad you can admit it. That's progress." I slap his chest. "Let's get up. I'll make you breakfast."

"Hold on. I have to check the time. If it's too late, we may need to grab something to eat at the hospital. Jordan has to be there at nine when visiting hours start, just like yesterday. I can't let that kid down. He already despises me enough."

So much for the playfulness.

I lay my hand on his face. "He doesn't hate you, Mag. I promise. He just needs to warm up to you."

He kisses my shoulder and picks up his phone. "It's after eight. We have to shower and get out of here." He stands, walks toward the bathroom, looks back at me, and shakes his head.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I almost suggested we shower together to save time, but of course it wouldn't *save* time," he says with a scowl.

I smile. "Go. Before I jump in with you."

Mag showers first, then heads out of the room. I shower and get dressed in yesterday's clothes, which are still pretty clean because I spent so much time naked.

I bite my lip as I exit the bedroom. When I get to the living room, Jordan sits on the couch fully dressed, sneakers on,

ready to go.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I hope I didn’t make us late.”

Before Jordan can answer, Mag steps up beside me and hands me a warm, disposable cup. “You’re fine. Here’s a pick-me-up. Sorry, I don’t have cinnamon.”

“No problem,” I say, slurping the coffee. I swallow the acrid brew and my face puckers. “No sugar either, huh?”

He fails to suppress a laugh.

Jordan jumps up. “Okay, Mag makes bad coffee, breaking news. Can we go now?”

“Sure,” I say, sizing him up.

His moods can be volatile and I wonder what today will bring. He seemed a bit lighter yesterday, but I wonder if it was looking forward to a shiny new year.

Jordan walks out of the door ahead of us.

“I told you. He’s going to kill me,” Mag whispers in my ear.

“You’re very patient with him,” I say encouragingly. “You guys will be fine. It’s just going to take time. Big changes.”

I’m not wrong about the last part. All three people in this penthouse have had their worlds flipped upside down over the past week.

How long can this go on?

How long until some new disaster sends us plummeting into the abyss?



AT THE HOSPITAL, a doctor comes out of Marissa’s room just as we get to the entrance.

He stops and looks at Mag.

“You must be Mr. Heron.” He holds his hand out.

Mag shakes it with a fierce glow in his eyes. “Yes, and you’re Doctor Bahkta? From Johns Hopkins?”

“Yes.” His gaze drops from Mag to Jordan before returning to Mag. “Do you want to talk for a minute, alone?”

Magnus nods. “Of course.”

“No,” Jordan says, tensing.

We all look at him for a beat.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I’m her son. Not him.” He looks at the doctor. “You’re not telling him anything you can’t tell me. He shouldn’t be making decisions for my mom.”

“Jordan—” Mag starts.

“Mag?” I say quietly, laying a hand on his shoulder.

He looks at me, his harsh eyes softening.

“He’s fourteen,” I say, remembering other conversations.

“Exactly. Too young,” he growls.

“He deserves to know,” I hiss back.

Magnus goes quiet, thoughts leaping back and forth in his eyes.

“I’m sure you’re a wonderful son,” Dr. Bhakta says. “However, as a minor, I’m not allowed to provide you with information unless I have—”

“It’s okay,” Mag cuts in. “He’s old enough to hear the truth. Tell us all.”

“You’re sure?” The doctor raises his bushy eyebrows.

Mag nods.

“Well, the good news is she has a lot of healthy brain activity. Odds of survival are overwhelmingly in her favor...” His voice trails off.

“But?” Magnus snaps.

“Sir, with a coma like this, there’s no way to pinpoint when she’ll wake up. Fortunately, I don’t think it’s a question of *if*. I just don’t believe it’s going to be soon. We’re giving

her anti-inflammatories to bring down the swelling. We could be looking at a week or two—” Dr. Bhakta stops.

Jordan lets out an audible sigh.

“You okay, big guy?” I tussle his hair with my hand.

He smiles. “Yeah, weeks aren’t so bad.”

“I wasn’t done,” Dr. Bhakta says reluctantly. “It could be weeks, or months.” His eyes move away from Jordan and he looks at Mag. “Or years, I’m afraid.”

God. I think I can hear poor Jordan’s heart smashing in his chest like fallen glass.

We sit at the hospital for hours. Jordan never says anything to his unresponsive mom, but he never wants to leave the room either.

He won’t go to the cafeteria to eat, and when I offer to bring food up for him, he refuses.

If his bleeding weren’t totally invisible, I’m sure it would look like a crime scene.

“Jordan, we’re going to have to go soon,” I say, lowering my voice.

He nods like his head weighs a ton.

“If we went out for dinner, what’s a place you’d like?” Magnus asks, stepping up next to us.

“Hell if I know.” Jordan shrugs and sighs.

“I know you like pizza.” I smile at Mag. “I could go for a nice warm pizza tonight.”

“Where at?” Mag asks. “I know a place downtown.”

“Oh, no.” I shake my head. “I’m picking the place. We’re not doing fancy pizza.”

He snorts. “How can pizza be fancy?”

“Even his pizza’s fancy?” Jordan asks. “Jesus.”

Mag lifts an eyebrow. “Thanks, Brina.”

“Sorry,” I say. “I just meant you probably do something crazy like put imported pineapples on it.”

“Gross!” Jordan mutters.

Mag’s eyes dart around helplessly as he says, “Please, I’m a civilized man. I do *not* put fruit on my pizza.”

I fight back a smile.

“How ’bout Pizza Shack? The reviews are great and it’s tasty without being weird and experimental, but it’s a little bit of a drive.”

“Armstrong doesn’t mind,” Mag tells us.

The Pizza Shack is closer to my parents’ house than downtown, and the drive takes over half an hour. Mag makes a few awkward attempts to talk to Jordan on the way, but he doesn’t get more than one-word grunts back.

When he gives up at last, he places his hand over mine in the dark car.

I enjoy his touch, and my heart aches for him as hard as my body does.

He’s trying so hard. Jordan just isn’t giving in.

Stubbornness is definitely a Heron family trademark.

At Pizza Shack, we plop down in a teal-green booth with a big lamp hanging over our heads. The server comes for our drink orders and scurries off to grab them.

“Just like home! My parents used to bring me here once a week sometimes,” I say, inhaling the delicious scent of fresh baked pizza, garlic, and everything good in life. “They’ve still got the arcade, I see. Mom and I would team up on Dad and fight over tickets. I always got to choose what the tickets bought.” I laugh.

“I had play dates at the golf club so my dad could close deals with my friends’ parents,” Mag says, taking a long, irritated sip off his water.

I smile. It’s easy to see how he comes across as arrogant, ever the stuck-up suit, but that’s not who he is.

He's kind and generous with Jordan and takes care of his employees.

When push comes to shove, he lets his inner asshole guard down, and a good man steps out.

"Howdy, folks, all set to order?" The server brings drinks to our booth and sets them down on the table.

Jordan looks at Mag, blinking like he's unsure.

"Can we get a buffalo chicken pizza?" he asks.

Mag nods. "A large pepperoni and a large buffalo chicken pizza. Please."

I'm beaming. He remembered the p-word.

"Chicago style?" she asks.

"Is there any other way to eat a pizza in this town?" I fire back.

"Not a sane one." She scribbles our order down and disappears with a laugh.

"I'm glad you got pepperoni," I say.

"Classic choice." Mag smiles. "I had a feeling."

"What, how?" I ask, tripping over my words.

"You strike me as a pepperoni kind of girl. Simple, plenty of heat, and..." He leans into my ear. "Utterly delicious."

I tremble, pressing back into the booth, trying to hide how my face heats. From anyone else, it would almost sound lame, but from Magnus Heron?

I'm grinning like a fool.

"Pepperoni should be a nice contrast since Jordan likes fancy pizza," he says, looking at his little brother.

"Dude. It's just buffalo chicken on pizza. Two of my favorite things," Jordan says.

"I like buffalo wings as much as the next guy," Mag says. "But not on my pizza."

"Yeah, well, you're old," Jordan grunts.

Mag's eyebrows go up. His smirk could cut something.

"I'd like to think one foot in the grave is a long ways off, but I guess to a fourteen-year-old, I probably am *old*." Mag picks up his cup and takes a drink like he has to rinse his mouth after saying that word.

Jordan stares at the arcade across the room.

"What's your favorite game, Jordan?" I ask.

"Eh, I like racing, the street fighter games..." He surveys the selection. "Oh, and Whack-A-Mole. Haven't seen that in ages."

"Too funny! Did you know Mag loves to hit things too?" I say, nudging my lover-boy boss in the side.

"Huh?" Mag perks up at the mention of his name. I don't think he was following the conversation before. "I do?"

I nudge him harder with my elbow and flash him a strained look that says, *I'm trying to help. Don't mess this up.*

"Oh, right, Whack-A-Mole. Sure, nothing like clubbing mechanical rodents."

I smile. "If the two of you want to go play a quick round or two, I'll wait here and grab you when the food comes."

Jordan grins. I think it may be the first time I've seen the kid smile wider than my thumb.

"How 'bout it? You want to prove you're not ancient?"

"You're on, kid," Mag says, unbuttoning the top of his shirt and shuffling out of the booth.

Jordan pops up and starts for the arcade room.

"Thank you," Magnus whispers in my ear over his shoulder before following his brother.

I spend the rest of the time sipping soda and trying to spot Mag flailing around after moles from the booth. I can't quite get a good look, but it's something I'd pay good money to see—uptight beast-man CEO whacking robo-moles for fun.

When the pizzas come, they're still gone.

Unable to resist, I head over to the mole game, expecting to find them.

Nope, they're missing.

I find Mag on the other side of the arcade, throwing baseballs through numbered loops, and doing a pretty good job of hitting his targets. The machine keeps going wild, spitting out tickets.

Wow. So he does have a fun side?

Not only that, he's amazing. He doesn't miss one. Jordan holds a bucket full of tickets, and he smiles when he sees me.

"Hey. We're trying to win you a Pizza Shack Beaver," Jordan says.

"You are?" I'm confused.

"Yeah, but Mag's more coordinated, and taller than me. He can get tickets faster."

"Don't worry, bud. We're a team." Magnus stops throwing balls to give Jordan a high five.

"Okay, *team*," I say, feeling a big case of smiles coming on. "The food's come, so you might want to eat before you worry about the beaver."

Back at the table, Mag and I reach for the pepperoni at the same time.

Our fingers brush against each other on the pizza stand, and I giggle like a schoolgirl.

He smiles at me with the same magnetic look that leaves my panties in flames every single time. My breath catches in my chest, and yes, God help me, I blush for the millionth time.

What a strange year so far. It feels like I'm destined to live out one of Mom's goofy novels.

"Can I try a slice of your pizza?" he asks Jordan as soon as he's cleaned his plate.

"Thought you didn't like wings on your pizza?" Jordan looks up and snorts, his eyes disbelieving, but not angry.

Mag smiles at him. “I thought I’d see why you’re so obsessed.”

“Whatever, man. Go for it,” Jordan says.

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HAPPY NEW YEAR (MAGNUS)



“Here we go, guys!” Armstrong says, pulling up in front of my building.

Christmas music still pipes softly through the car. The man’s a fiend for holiday music, and I know he won’t give it up until late January.

Jordan jumps out ahead of us. I step out and hold the door open for Sabrina.

She makes no effort to move, looking at me with a raised eyebrow. “Shouldn’t I head home? I really have to work tomorrow.”

I hold my hand out for her.

Her fingers tangle up in mine so easily.

“Only if you want to,” I say.

She smiles at me and lets me help her out of the car.

As soon as we’re inside, Jordan goes to the guest room and comes out fifteen minutes later in pajama pants with fluorescent balls painted across them. “About tomorrow... Seth’s mom—he’s my friend that got the milkshake dumped on him for being dumb—usually takes me to school, but I don’t know if she’ll want to drive downtown to pick me up before we go back to Winnetka.”

His face is so serious. I wait for the next line.

Will he suggest he can’t go to school tomorrow? Or does he doubt I’ll get him there in one piece? With winter break

over, it's time for him to return, just like Marissa would've wanted.

"And?" I say, bracing for a rumble.

"I can't miss tomorrow. I have a chemistry test," he says.

I relax, putting my hand on his shoulder.

He doesn't flinch or jerk away. Maybe, just maybe, his disdain for me is fading.

"I'll take you to school tomorrow."

"You?" He raises an eyebrow. "It's almost an hour away and could be a lot longer in traffic."

I laugh. "I know. I went to school there, remember?"

"But I thought time was money?" he asks.

"I've got plenty of both. I'm not really working while you're here and we're waiting on your mom to wake up," I say.

Jordan looks at Brina skeptically.

"He's making me do his job," she says with a sassy face. "Big shoes to fill, but I'll do it with heels."

"That's crazy. Whatever, then, if Mag doesn't mind, I don't either. Good night, guys." Jordan says, flashing one last look over his shoulder before he retreats back to the guest room.

I chuckle once he's out of the room, relieved there wasn't another dustup.

"He thought I wouldn't take him to school."

"See how right I was?" Amusement dances in her gorgeous brown eyes. "I told you, once he got to know you, he'd warm up. You bonded over baseballs and robo-moles. Congrats."

"What would I do without you?" Even though I roll my eyes at her, it's too real a question. "Want a glass of wine? That's the one thing missing with our pizza."

"Sure." She goes into the living room and lets out a dramatic sigh as she falls back on the couch.

“What was that about?” I ask.

“Just tired,” she whispers, yawning again.

I hit the kitchen to pour a glass of wine and something harder for myself—a scotch, maybe.

“Drink your wine,” I tell her once I’ve returned with our drinks. “It’s a nice sendoff to pleasant dreams.”

Her fingers curl around the stem of her glass.

“Thank you,” she says. “For everything this weekend, Mag.”

She pulls herself up, so she’s no longer reclining across the couch. Now she’s sitting up, sipping her wine, bringing back memories of that kiss I stole in Phoenix.

I drop to the couch beside her.

From the way her dark hair encases her ivory face to those big brown eyes, she’s beautiful.

Mind, body, and soul.

You’d have to gouge my eyes out to get them off her.

Brina’s eyes meet mine, too. Neither of us look away.

“What’s with the staring contest?” She laughs finally. “You’re freaking me out.”

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

“Funny, I don’t believe you.” She brings a hand to her face and pats her chin and both cheeks. “Do I have something in my teeth?”

“No, you’re just fucking ravishing.”

She melts on the spot, leaning forward and drawing in a deep breath. “Thank you. I’m not sure it’s true, but thanks, charmer.”

She finishes the wine, sets the glass on the table, and lays her head on my shoulder.

I move my scotch to the other hand and slip an arm around her.

No denying there's something so cute and innocent about her tucked under my arm that my lips are drawn to her head. I plant a kiss in her hair, inhaling her scent, amazed at how sweet she still smells despite a long day at the hospital and that lively pizza shop.

She looks up slowly. Truffle-dark eyes gaze into mine.

Brina tilts her chin up like she's waiting. Expecting. Needing.

"We shouldn't be doing this." I don't break our shared gaze.

"Why?" Her brow furrows.

"We work together," I say. "Whenever things get back to normal, we'll have to explain—"

"Then don't do it," she whispers. She bites her bottom lip, reminding me how juicy it is.

"Tease." I allow my lips to find hers.

The last thing I'm going to do tonight when I can savor her again is worry about office fucking code.

Her tongue traces my bottom lip, coaxing out my inner beast, and then it's all liquid warmth in my mouth.

I swear to God, I could kiss her until the sun goes out.

I'm that addicted to Sabrina Bristol.

Cradling her face with one hand, I let my other hand catch in her hair, loving how different shades of soft brown flicker in the dim light.

Apparently, I'm not the only one getting a second wind.

She comes up on her knees and wraps her arms around my torso with such force, she pushes me backward. One knee swings over me.

Settling into my lap, her legs twine around my waist, fused to me. Her limbs are tied around me like fleshy ropes, and I can't think of any damn place I'd rather be.

“Brina,” I growl, running my hand down her neck as she leans down for a kiss.

Her lips are on mine, the side of my face, running down my neck.

My dick shouldn’t even be functional after how hard we went at it the past two nights, but it’s back with a vengeance, stretching my trousers.

Every time the soft slick heat of her mouth runs over my skin, the ridge in my jeans she’s pressed against becomes harder, longer, more insistent.

God. I’ve wanted her the whole frigging day.

Why?

This isn’t the man who rarely comes back for seconds, much less tenths.

Fucking hell, I need her, and that smile digging into my lips tells me she knows it.

My arms close around her back, kneading my fingers into her.

She presses the core of her body over that ever-growing hardness, whimpering when she feels me.

“Oh,” she sighs.

I pull her closer. Her breath moves her body against mine. I lock her into place with my arms.

“Brina?” I whisper, letting out my own guttural sigh when she grinds into me again.

“Hmm?”

“You’re ready for the bedroom,” I say, digging my fingers into her angelic ass.

“Only if you promise to do evil things to me,” she whispers back, giving me another forceful peck.

This woman. I wonder which one of us will keel over first if this keeps going.

I move one arm away from her back, running a finger down her cheek.

“I don’t know about evil,” I growl. “What about slow? Tender? What if we let our souls do the fucking tonight?”

Slow? Tender? Who the hell have I turned into with these flowery words?

“Please take me to bed—I mean, your room,” she says.

My lips brush hers again, thick with sheer desire. Our tongues mingle, and I press her as tight to my chest as I can.

“What’s so wrong with my bed?” I ask, giving her a wink.

“Nothing, I just didn’t want to say it. Your assistant, begging you to *bed* her...”

Leave it to my Brina to be completely blunt, and worried over nothing.

I laugh, kissing up her neck in a line that ends in a nip of teeth.

“Pretend I said it first because that’s where I want you. Badly.”

This time when she rocks into me, I arch up, grinding against her hot wetness through my pants.

“Oh,” she says. “Oh, God. Then let’s get moving. Fast.”

Placing both hands under her lush round ass, I stand with Brina still fused to me. Her legs lock around my waist, and she clings to me with her hands around my neck.

I carry her into my room and kick the door shut behind us. I lay her on the bed, planning to undress her like a late Christmas gift I want to savor.

Most years, Christmas is a flicker that’s quickly forgotten.

The one that just passed might have been the darkest yet, but there’s one present I know I’ll want to keep.

My plans are foiled when her hands frantically grab the bottom of my shirt, pull it over my head, and then drop to the button around my waist.

My slacks fall, and I shake them off my ankles, only to haul her up with a bristling hunger.

I need her fucking naked, right fucking now.

Her shirt flies across the room.

I'm about to lock my arms around her back and tear off her bra, but it's too late. By the time I register the thought, she's shed it, and it's already airborne behind her.

I lock my lips over hers, claiming what's mine, letting my hands roam the bare parts of her body. These fingers still want to memorize every inch, every ripple, every soft convulsion when they're in her, feeling her come like a fever.

Sabrina pushes to her knees, works her panties off, drops them to the floor, and urges me on top of her.

"Not yet," I whisper, holding back.

"Why?"

"You're wearing too much."

I slide my hands behind her back, unzip the skirt, yank it down, and toss it on the floor.

"Nothing between us. Not tonight." I sound goddamned crazy, but then this whole thing breached sanity a long time ago.

I'll plunder every last inch of her skin. I'll worry about who I've turned into when it's over, when Brina's in my arms still trying to breathe, her sex-hair tickling my chest.

"How sweet," she says, rolling her eyes playfully.

No. I'm anything but sweet right now.

Then again, I'm not going to argue about it when I could be slamming her into the mattress instead, making her shudder.

She wraps her legs around me, crawling them up my back.

Her warm, wet heat molds against the hard shaft, desperate to sink into her, to pump her full of me. She's leaking on my cock and it's driving me insane.

Still, I want something else first. I lower my lips to hers, caressing her tongue with mine.

She touches my face, runs a hand through my hair, and returns it to my face.

I match the long luxurious strokes of our tongues as I slide into her, a bestial rasp grinding out of me.

We go on like that forever, this standoff of desire.

Slow movements of our hips, intoxicating strokes of our tongues, until Brina pushes herself up into a bridge position and arches into my thrusts, engulfing every inch of me.

Fuck.

I match her pace, and then overtake it, reaching up to pull her hair. Her head snaps back for a proper conquest, and I sink my teeth into her bottom lip.

“Mag!” She hisses, the instant I let her go with an upward thrust of my cock.

There’s a glorious shock in her tone with volume I’m not sure I’ve heard before. But then, I’ve never had her sinking down on my cock, on top, nailing her silky walls from an angle bound to leave her undone.

“Hold on, sweetheart,” I whisper, pushing my forehead to hers, even fucking her eyes with my gaze. “We’re riding hard tonight.”

I’m a man of my word, clenching her ass, assisting her movements to sync perfectly with every frantic lunge of my dick. It doesn’t take long to shove her over the cliff, and I devour her lips when she comes, enjoying every wicked second.

Yes, we do slow and tender, but only with our lips.

Yes, I take her with the fury I swore, storming into her.

Yes, I do evil things.

I’m buried in my own madness watching her come the first time, and then the second a few minutes later, driving into her hard while I fist her hair and yank her head back. I hold her

prone like she's mine for life, making damn sure she tastes the man who's making her come like July in January.

Shame that fucking Sabrina Bristol like tomorrow's the apocalypse has its price.

I'm desperately close to the edge and trying to hang on, eager to steal a third bruising climax out of her.

Her body clenches around me, and she's panting, scratching my neck and shoulders raw with her nails.

Keep it coming, kitten.

I'm not even that big a freak, but I'm so fucking gone for this woman, I don't mind it one bit if she hurts me, if she scratches ribbons down my back as long as I'm exploding inside her so hard I see her eyes go white.

Thank fuck I've made my peace with it because I can't hold back any longer.

Not when her hot cunt contracts a third time, wrapping around me like a puckered mouth, demanding every drop of heat and life and rage from my balls.

I explode inside her with a vicious grunt.

My spine turns into a fuse, and when the hellfire in my swollen dick hits my brain, I'm on a new high I never thought possible.

Of course, she's right there with me.

Flinging herself up and down on me, over and over, stealing my heat, two warring storms of release like clashing lightning.

I can't even remember what the hell I am by the time I shove her face into the nook of my neck, and we're both gasping for dear life.

Once I catch my breath, I roll us onto our sides, flop down on the bed, and cradle her against me.

"One fine day, I'll take you where I want to most," I tell her.

“Oh? And where might that be?” Her curious little smile slays me.

“My desk. I might have to see if the insurance policy covers total loss by hurricane-force fuckery, but...”

She bursts out laughing, silencing my insanity with more sticky kisses.

We fall asleep together, drained and content.

I can't remember the last time I slept with a woman in my arms.

Likely because it never happened.

A noise like a distant waterfall pulls me from a dead sleep. Brina steps out of my bathroom at four thirty sharp. She searches my floor for her clothes and starts getting dressed.

I stare at her perfect form.

“Go in later,” I say, still drugged with sleep. “And I'm getting you more clothes for here, dammit.”

“Can't,” she says. “Airline pre-pitch meeting is this week, and I have to make you look good.”

I chuckle and swat at her cute little ass, missing in my groggy state.

“I admire your dedication, but you'll be fine.”

“Maybe so, but what about Hugo and Dave from Sales?” She's in her panties and bra, pulling her shirt on now. “Hey, you didn't call Armstrong yet, did you? I think I want to Uber today.”

“No. I don't like the idea of you in a car with a driver we don't know,” I say. “It hasn't been a week since Marissa was attacked.”

She pulls her skirt up.

“Marissa's attack has nothing to do with me.” She bites her lip and sighs. “I'm—I don't want Armstrong thinking I'm spending every night here.”

Her words hit me like cold water.

Shit. What will the others think when they catch wind of us? But I knew playing with fire only ends one way...

“Don’t worry. He won’t talk.”

She frowns at me. “I don’t think he would, but he’ll think I’m—”

“He doesn’t think shit, woman. He thinks you’re helping take care of Jordan because I told you to. And he’s right. Without you, the boy would still be starving on the couch.”

She smiles and walks over to the bed. She leans down and kisses me, this chaste peck that still makes me rock-hard.

I pull her back into bed with me and close my arms around her. “You’re waiting right here until Armstrong calls.”

“Joy. Lucky for you, there’s no place I’d rather be,” she says, smiling in the darkness.

I like the sound of that.

My throat tightens, and I wonder if she really is an angel disguised as my EA, and now something more.

I say nothing because I won’t have her thinking I’m a raving lunatic.

Instead, I just kiss her forehead, relishing every breath of this maddening woman I get.

~

JORDAN HOPS out of the car, grabs his backpack—something he only has because Sabrina thought to tell Armstrong to fetch it from home—and scurries toward the academy’s column-flanked entrance.

I watch him disappear through the double doors.

“Take me to the office,” I say. “I can’t waste a whole day without making an appearance.”

“You’re the boss,” Armstrong says with a wink in the mirror. “I wondered when you were going back to the captain’s seat. Everything okay, Mr. Heron?”

“Yeah. But playing daddy—” I stop, frowning. I don’t like the sound of that. I’m thirty-one and no parent.

“Boss?” Armstrong glances back.

“Big brother, I mean—” I stop again. Big brothers don’t usually keep younger siblings indefinitely. I struggle to find the damn words. “Okay, playing brother’s keeper to a fourteen-year-old gets draining. I need normalcy, and showing up in person will keep the crew on their toes. I probably won’t stay the whole day. Someone has to be with Jordan after school, and we’re due at the hospital again this evening.”

“I can pick him up and drop him at your office, if you’d like?” Armstrong studies me in the mirror.

Do I really look so frayed?

“No, I’ll be along to pick him up, even if you’re doing the driving.” I’m not treating Jordan the way my old man treated me, like an annoying appendage of his life, tended to only by servants.

Before I know it, we’re downtown, and I’m taking the glassy elevator up to HeronComm.

I pass the creative team’s cave on my way in and stop. Mainly just to check in and make sure everyone’s still working. They look up and stare, a few people waving as I walk past.

Damn. Are they *that* shocked I took a day off? Or does this have to do with Brina?

At Ruby’s office, I pause and knock on the door.

“Come in!” she calls.

She looks at me like I’ve risen from the dead as I take the seat across from the desk. “Surprise, I’m back. Just for a few hours. How’d it go while I was out?”

“It was a couple days, and a holiday at that. Sabrina remote-managed everything perfectly, but there wasn’t much to manage.” She pauses. “I was worried about you, Mag. I’ve worked here for twenty years. I think I deserve more than a

cryptic text the first day you decide to skip work. You didn't even do it after—”

“I know,” I snap, then lower my voice. “Marissa Quail is in the hospital. I'm keeping Jordan at my place.”

She's quiet for a minute, her eyes huge.

“Holy crap. Why are you whispering?”

“I don't want anyone else re-living the scandal that jackass caused. Morale around here doesn't need to suffer. Besides, I know a few people were here when shit went down, but anyone who wasn't here for it doesn't need to know.”

“You didn't tell your EA?”

I glower, hating how it hits me right between the eyes.

“I told her enough. Brina knows he's my brother, and my father had a hideous affair. I don't think she needs to know more than that to do her job.”

Ruby purses her lips. “Maybe not to do the job, but... what's going on with you two?”

“Excuse me?” I raise a brow, ice water in my veins.

She stares into my eyes with raw sarcasm.

“Seriously, you're playing dumb? You should hear her. Every time someone says your name, she blushes. Look, I'm not some young chickadee.” She shrugs, twisting her gaudy red lips. “But I've been around the block enough times to know what that means—smitten.”

It's hard not to wince. That word is a slug to the gut.

I think of Brina, blushing at my name, and can't help the smirk that carves itself into my face.

Ruby doesn't need to say more. I get the message, loud and clear.

Where there's smoke, there's fire.

“Don't read too much into this. Her mom writes romance novels. Maybe she's read one too many little red riding

secretary and the big bad boss wolf books and has a little crush. So what? You're the HR Director, not her counselor."

I stand up and stalk to the door, knowing her mouth is opening with a quip like a missile silo.

"Or mine, Ruby," I throw back. "So hold your thoughts. Do your job and kindly stay out of it."



SABRINA STROLLS in from the airline prep meeting a couple hours later.

If you think having had her under me would make me less of a wolf, less eager to see through her clothes to the soft contours of her body, you'd be dead wrong.

She sees me through the frosted glass window between our offices, does a double take, and then waves. I hit a button under my desk and the glass clears its distortion—a cool electronic effect I had custom installed when my office was refurbished.

With a clear view, I beckon her with my hand.

She comes through my door, closing it behind her a second later.

"I thought you were a ghost! I didn't expect to see you here today."

"You think I could stand another day without working? Bah." I pivot in my chair and smile. "Jordan's at school so I figured I'd make the most of it."

She laughs. "Why am I not surprised?"

"How's the airline pitch going? Ready as it'll ever be, I trust?"

"The contract is printed and ready for them to sign. We're confident we can seal the deal at the meeting." Brina holds up the draft.

I give her a high five.

“Want to look everything over one more time? I sent you the full presentation, but I figured you’d be too busy to dive into it.”

Old Mag would’ve said *hell yes* and began counting another digit in the company coffers.

New Mag struggles to care about anything except shedding his assistant’s dress.

“Nah. Let’s go for a walk through Millennium Park. It’s actually warm enough right now for a stroll without risking frostbite,” I tell her. “I’ll put my signature on it when we get back so it’s ready for Arrowpoint Airlines.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” She blinks slowly. “Wait. Why are we walking through the park again?”

“It’s lunchtime. I’ll buy you a hot dog. They’ve got this new polar dog popup over there for winter.”

“Polar dog popup? Are they serving polar bear meat?” She puts a hand on her hip. “You don’t strike me as a hot dog kinda guy.”

“I’m not, but it seems like Brina food to me,” I say with a wink.

“And what does that mean?” She holds up her hands. “Forget it. Don’t answer. You’re right. I love Vienna franks.”

It’s the middle of a weekday in winter’s grip. The park isn’t packed like it would be during summer, but it isn’t empty either. We walk past the tourists taking selfies at the Bean, and head for the little food truck by the skeletal trees. I spot an area with no one else around, grab her hand, and move us toward a bench there.

“Before we eat...I need to let you in on something,” I say just as she sits down.

I stand, my nerves zinging.

“Okay? What’s wrong?”

“My father was our last CEO—”

She waves a hand. “I know. Paige cyber-stalked you before I took the job to make sure it was legit and I wasn’t getting punked.”

Of course. I huff out a breath, but it was fair game, wasn’t it?

“Regardless, Jordan’s mother worked for him before he pressured her into bed. Their affair was toward the end of my stint in the Marines, when I only came home to see my mother before she died. When he found out she was pregnant, he fired her, and strong-armed her into signing a NDA. He tied her paltry severance pay to the contract with some child maintenance—something I doubt was even legal. I didn’t find out until much later...” I shake my head. “About eight years ago, I went into my dad’s office. Marissa was cowering in a corner, and my fuck of a dad was shaking a fist at her and screaming.”

I hold my breath while Brina gasps. Her hands reach for mine, stroking my fingers so gently. I watch my breath smoking out into the cold air.

“Mag, I’m sorry.”

“I almost killed him on the spot. He kept saying she shouldn’t have had the ‘nerve’ to come back asking for more after he’d given her a settlement,” I say, my voice colder than the winter air.

“Settlement for what?” Anger rises in her voice. “She was the victim.”

“Yeah. It took me a minute to realize they were talking about a kid. My father had a secret child with his intern while my mom—his wife—fought cancer every day until it chewed her into nothing. And all he wanted to do was hide the truth from me, from the company, to cover his lying ass.”

Her mouth forms an O.

“I couldn’t take it. So I snapped, rushed over, broke his nose right in front of Marissa. She screamed and ran out of the office. I told the bastard to get the fuck out, effective immediately. I dragged him by the arm and got his blood all

over my suit. Everyone in the office at the time saw it. I told him to leave HeronComm and leave Chicago, or I'd destroy his company, his house, everything."

"Jesus. How did you go from that to Marissa's emergency contact?"

"I followed up with her. I had to make sure she didn't need anything. I'm glad I did, because she didn't want to ask my dad for anything. Naturally, she hated him. She only came back to the office to confront him because her house burned down. She barely made it out alive with Jordan, and he couldn't even help them with fucking rent for his son. The more we talked, the more I realized she'd never been interested in my father. Later, I found out he threatened to fire her if she didn't give in to his advances. He all but raped her while my mother was at home, dying, and I was off at war."

The color drains from her face.

I hope she won't be sick.

"Oh, my gosh." Brina covers her mouth with her hand.

I've never discussed this shit with anyone. A few people at the office figured it out, but they know not to run their mouths.

I don't talk about my problems.

I don't show weakness.

I don't even know why I'm telling her this, or why Ruby's comment felt like toothpicks under my nails.

But when Sabrina stands and puts a hand on my face, I don't flinch.

"Mag, I'm so sorry you had to go through all that. Especially so young, barely out of the military. If I lost my mom, I don't think I could handle it. If I found out my dad was cheating as she died, I'd probably kill him."

"If only I had," I growl.

"I'm proud of you for helping Marissa and Jordan." She looks up, her eyes bright.

“What else could I do? The way she was hunched in a corner, crying...I’ll never forget it as long as I live. My father savaged her, hurt her so bad she was hell-bent on doing everything herself. If it wasn’t for him, she might not be out cold in a hospital room right now. And knowing my goddamned dad...”

“No. Don’t you *dare* beat yourself up, Magnus Heron. You stepped up where he didn’t for his mess, his crime. You’re taking care of Jordan and doing a good job.”

“Thank you,” I say. “But I’m not taking care of everything I should—not if I’m anything like him.”

I look at her slowly, wondering if she understands.

The blank look on her face says *no, she doesn’t*.

“We have to come clean, as soon as this is dealt with,” I whisper, my voice ragged. “I can’t hide what we’re doing. I’ll bring it to Ruby, you and I. I’ll find some way to do this by the book, ethically, and announce it to our staff. We have to be transparent. Leave nothing cracked for rumors.”

She doesn’t remove the hand from my face. She just smiles so wide I feel warm, even in the frigid afternoon.

Her hip touches mine, closing any space between us.

“If you’re willing, of course,” I say. “I shouldn’t presume ___”

“You aren’t him, Mag. I promise you aren’t,” she cuts me off. “And if you’re saying you want to explore whatever this is? Of course I’m game. You’ve given me some of the best days of my life, and the worst, too. But even the bad times taught me so much. I *want* our whatever. I want us.”

My heart damn near crashes through my ribs. I seize her hand, draw her leather glove off, and kiss the back of her fingers.

Her giggle falls out like this strange music echoing across the snowy park.

If I had to pick someone to tell my deepest, darkest secret, I’m glad it’s her.

She's the right person to tell. She belongs in my life. She makes my withered heart beat like it's alive again.

Hell, what am I doing settling for the back of her hand?

Tugging her closer, I brush my lips on hers.

"Let's get the grub before I freeze my balls off," I tell her, sliding my fingers through her hair. "But first, hang tight."

And just like that, I'm kissing my EA in broad daylight in the middle of Millennium Park.

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BLACK CAT (SABRINA)



I've fallen so far down the rabbit hole that the next few weeks pass by in a blur.

Mag had Armstrong bring some clothes to his place, so I'm no longer doing the sex-hair walk of shame every morning. We sit around a massive wooden table Mag never used before with Jordan every night, and I'm at the office before the brothers are out of bed every morning.

If you'd told me a few months ago I'd be swept up with some billionaire bad boy and his teenage ward, I'd have rolled my eyes and told you, *not on your life*.

But I have to admit, it's been a sweet, strange Wonderland.

One lazy morning, on my way out, I stop at the kitchen to tell Mag goodbye.

He beckons me in and I come, where he holds a cup of coffee in front of my face.

I grab for it, and he moves it up higher and pulls it back, just out of my reach. Smirking the whole time, the dick.

As I step closer, I laugh and reach for the coffee, lifting up on the balls of my feet.

He seizes the opportunity to throw an arm around my back and pull me in.

He kisses my forehead, and his lips turn up from a wise-ass smirk to a full-on smile. How freaking cute is he?

“You’re taking the weekend off.” His voice is gruff and sexy. “The frontline data from the Arrowpoint Airlines campaign will still be in your inbox on Monday. You should be with me and Jordan. Right, J-man?”

“I don’t care what she does,” Jordan calls from the living room. “Your nicknames are so frickin’ lame, Magnum.”

I can’t help but laugh at how the kid turns his business moniker into the most uncool word in the universe.

“I see he’s got your back,” I say, pulling at his collar and then smoothing it back into place.

Mag kisses my cheek, then my lips, sweeping a hand down to my butt for a not-so-subtle squeeze.

“Good help is hard to find, and your asshat boss requires your assistance at home. He’ll fire you, if you don’t assist,” he rumbles in my ear.

“Bad news: I’ve figured out my asshat boss’ bark is worse than his bite, and he’d be lost without me.”

Mag sets the coffee on the counter. His other arm closes around me.

“Yes, he would. However, his beautiful pain-in-the-ass EA would be marooned without this.”

He kisses me so freaking hard I melt on the spot.

God. Some of the things he says makes my heart want to burst like a worn drum. I frame his face with my hands, bringing his lips to mine.

All the better to give back what I get.

First I devour his bottom lip, outside first, then move deeper until I hear his breath thicken. I taste his tongue and let out a sigh.

He pulls away and leans down.

“Save it for tonight.” He straightens up. “It’s almost Valentine’s, after all.”

My face goes hot for so many reasons.

The promise of a mind-blowing horizontal tango.

The rush of so much teasing to come.

The fact that I'm bedding my underwear model *boss* for V-day, and not sharing ice cream and wine with Paige in loveless solidarity.

"Brina?" His voice is low.

"Yes?"

He whispers, so Jordan won't hear, "It's been over a month and I still love how you blush every damn time I hint what I'll do to you."

He's too good at this. My face feels like a glowing stove.

"So that's why you waste so much time on talk when you could just do it?" I tease.

He snorts. "I *did* tell you not to leave."

I take a step back. I have to before I can't.

"Goodbye, Mag." I stop near the door and blow him a kiss.

"You're still going into that damn office?" he growls, his brow falling in the most grumpalicious way ever.

"I'm going to see Paige for a few hours, and then I'm coming back," I say, trying not to add *holy crap* because he makes the office—previously his favorite place in the world—sound like a dungeon.

His face brightens and he steps forward, handing me my coffee.

"Don't forget this. Have fun with Paige, sweetheart."

I take it. "I'll be ho—*back* soon!"

Uh-oh.

I almost said *home*.

I was t-minus two seconds from telling Magnus Heron I'd be home soon.

He doesn't seem to notice, but I sure do. The realization shakes me to my core the whole ride to my apartment.

Paige is in the kitchen, drinking a Coke when Armstrong drops me off and I go in. She puts her drink down, throws her hands in the air, and screams, bounding over as she tugs on her hair.

“What’s with you?” I ask, straightening before she bowls me over.

“Oh my God. *Oh-my-God!*” She covers her mouth. “I’ve seen a ghost! My phantom roommate. Where the hell have you been? Do I need to book an appointment now if I want to see you? Is that how you roll now?”

I’m about to tell her that’s crazy, but she’s right. She freaked out over text when I asked her to brunch, too.

“Sorry. It definitely gets crazy filling in for Mag at work meetings, and it’s busier than usual.”

“Wait—you’re covering for the CEO? I hope you got a pay raise. It’s a ginormous step up from EA to CEO.” She quirks an eyebrow. “You better dish, lady. You’ve been sending me nothing but crumbs for weeks. Not that I mind you paying last month’s rent for both of us, or having the extra space to work on my pretties without you around...”

She steps aside, revealing a...thinking cat sculpture?

It’s the only way I can describe it.

A big chubby life-sized meower sits on its haunches, one paw held up human-like to its head, pondering the meaning of life—or maybe just what’s for dinner.

“I see you’ve been busy,” I say flatly. “Glad you’ve taken up the mantle of crazy cat lady art, though, since I couldn’t carry the torch.”

Paige walks over and rubs the statue’s head with a maniacal grin.

Oof. I hope she’s not losing it for real since I started spending so much time away.

“Enough about me. I want to hear about you and Heron,” she whips out, bouncing back over.

“It’s a long story. I’ll explain, but I need carbs first.”

“Italiano?” Paige asks.

“Hell yes.”

Half an hour later, we pull up to Mattarello’s Italiano.

“We should invest in this place,” Paige says as we get out of the car. “Although we don’t come here as much as we should.”

“And I suppose that’s the Phantom Roommate’s fault?”

“I don’t know who else’s fault it could be.” Paige laughs.

The hostess seats us by a window glazed with the recent February thaws and vengeful refreezes, leaving behind a basket of warm bread and olive oil.

I grab a piece, tear it in half, and stick the smaller half in my mouth.

“Oh my God, this is good.” The words are out of my mouth before I’m done chewing it.

“They’re starving you too?”

“Nah, dinner’s just usually the only real meal I have time to eat,” I tell her.

“Maybe you should talk to Maggot or at least HR about that. You should be able to eat, Brina.”

I grin. “Don’t call my boyfriend Maggot.”

“Boyfriend?” Paige’s jaw drops. “You mean you...and him...holy *shit*. So that’s why you haven’t been home? I should’ve guessed. You look different.”

“Different how?” I scan the dining room to make sure no one else is paying attention to us. “Lower your voice. It’s kind of a secret.”

“I don’t know. Your face looks like...someone who gets a lot of screaming orgasms?” She bats her eyes.

I give back a death glare, even if she’s right on the money.

Her face grows serious. From the furrow in her forehead, I know I'm not going to like what comes next. "He's your secret boyfriend, though? Whose idea was that?"

The server comes to our table. Thank God.

I have a few seconds to form a response, but let's be real, there's only one that makes sense.

"What are we drinking today?" the server asks.

"San Pellegrino, please," I say.

"Make it two," Paige chimes in.

"I'm ready to order," I say, buying precious time.

Paige picks up the menu and studies it.

"Do you have lunch right now or just brunch?" I ask.

"We have brunch and the lunch menu," the waitress tells me.

"Fettuccini Alfredo with a Caesar side salad," I say.

"I'll do French toast with Italian cream," Paige says, licking her chops.

"Perfect, I'll be right back with the drinks." The server walks away.

"Where were we? Oh yeah—whose idea was this secret tryst?" Paige asks again, not skipping a beat, leaning forward with her chin perched on her hands.

I purse my lips. "I—well, the relationship just happened."

She nods. "Of course. You wanted him from the second you met."

"Did not! I spit on him, Paige, remember?"

She raises an eyebrow. "Did your mama ever tap the enemies to lovers trope? That's you and Mr. Sex-In-A-Suit. You hated each other's guts and now you're knocking boots. How'd you reel him in?"

I roll my eyes so hard it hurts.

“I didn’t seduce him in the office like a bad adult flick if that’s what you’re thinking. I played it cool. He actually pissed me off to the core for a long time after that Arizona kiss...”

“Dude. You have no cool.”

I laugh at her deadpan delivery.

“Okay, well, it just happened. Organically. We tried to keep apart, but it was magnetic...then this big crisis came up, the one I mentioned to you before, and after that...” I trail off, my mind reeling.

How do I even explain my whole universe shifting in just two months?

“Blah blah blah, crisis. And then?” Paige asks.

“And what?” I squint in confusion.

The waitress comes back and sets a bottle of sparkling water next to each of us, and this time, I really hope she’ll distract Paige. I’m done with the interrogation.

I can’t help thinking I’ve done something wrong.

“Can I get you anything else?” she asks.

I shake my head.

“We’re good,” Paige says.

“Your food will be out shortly.” She moves to the table behind us.

“So you slept with him when he was all wounded beastie. That’s hot.” Damn. The girl has a mind like a steel trap. “Was it like, a one-time thing?”

I glare at her. “I wouldn’t have said *boyfriend* if it was a fling. Going to his place was all necessity, at first. He needed me.”

“What? That kid you mentioned?” Her eyes go wide.

“Yeah. Mag’s half brother’s mother was attacked. She’s been in ICU the whole time, in a coma. We’ve been taking care of his little brother, and I’ve been covering for him at work.”

“And covering his dick at home?”

I scowl at her.

“I mean, really. You take care of him at work and at home. I hope you’re getting paid double in more than just Romeo dick,” Paige says, her smile telling me her fantasies are off the hook.

“It’s not like that. He’s coming into the office most days now. He just leaves when Jordan gets out of school, which I understand. I only had to be him all day for about a week, and my salary is two hundred thousand dollars a year, so I’m okay with stepping up.”

“You’re basically living with the guy and taking care of his kid—”

“It’s not his kid,” I say. “And it’s temporary. His mom’s waking up at some point...so they say.”

A knot tightens in my stomach. Every week that passes without her snapping out of the coma worries us a little more, and worries the doctors, even if they don’t say it.

What if this is forever?

What if Marissa Quail never comes back?

“It might as well be,” Paige insists. “He feels responsible for the mess, so he brought his little brother home, and you’re taking care of him now. I hope the—” She notices people around us and stops mid-sentence. She forms an O with her right hand and pokes the index finger of her left hand into it several times. “I hope it’s worth it. Is he good?”

“Paige! That was so eighth grade.” And I should know because I live with an eighth grader. “Yes. Mind-blowing. Everything you can imagine and more—and you’re gonna be stuck imagining because a lady doesn’t kiss and tell.”

“Aw, you’re no fun.” She flicks her blond hair behind her ear as she scowls. “So, why the big secret, then? You two sound happy and right on track to wedding bells. Except for the coma thing, I mean.”

Her question hangs between us.

“You promise to keep a secret?” I put up a hand, waiting until she nods. “We have a plan. So, Jordan’s mom was an intern at the company a long time ago. It caused a huge scandal, and Mag had to rebuild everything. He wants to avoid future scandals and he’s a stickler for HR policies he helped design. Once Marissa, Jordan’s mom, wakes up from her coma, I’m going to move to a consulting role. I’ll no longer be his direct employee, and everything will be out in the open then. It’s getting serious.”

I think.

I hope it’s as serious as I want it to be.

“Wow,” she mouths silently, before her face shifts neutral. “Magnus Heron wants to avoid a scandal? Since when? He bats around the press like a cat with a mouse.”

“Yes,” I say. “But not this kind. He’s been seriously burned by his dad’s bad reputation and doesn’t want it happening again. Never, ever.”

She closes her eyes, lets out a breath, and blinks her eyes open.

“Paige? What’s wrong?”

“So, I really don’t want to be the one to do this, but it’s probably better you hear it from me...Brina, maybe you should go back and read that influencer’s posts online. Remember that whole big fake engagement lie? That was low. And dirty. And just plain wrong. Your Magnum man doesn’t really seem like the sorta guy who avoids scandal unless he has something to gain.”

My eyes dip to the table.

“Who knows,” I mutter.

Deep down, I think she’s wrong. I saw how hurt he was when he opened up about the past, about his abusive prick of a father leaving so much wreckage in his wake.

“Will you be home tonight?” she asks, staring at me like a puppy.

“Not sure. I said I’d be back at his place later and...well, maybe I should at least talk to him about it.”

She shrugs. “I hope he’s honest.”

Our food comes. The fettuccine here has always been my fave, but her words won’t leave my head. Today’s scrumptious fettuccine is tainted by the ugly possibility that Paige could be right.

Mag did lie about being engaged for good PR.

Why did his fake fiancée, Mariska Crista, call him King Asshole after they parted ways? Was she that scorned, thinking it was real?

So many questions stab away like spinning knives.

For all I know, his interest in me could be a front for dealing with Jordan in the easiest way possible. It’s no secret I’ve gotten through the kid’s wall in ways he can’t.

But he kissed me in Phoenix before Jordan was an issue.

And then he told me to forget about it.

Shit, I’m confused.

“Are you okay?” Paige asks, frowning.

She can’t help but see the game of *he loves me, he loves me not* playing out in my eyes.

I look up, realizing I’ve been quiet for too long.

“You’re not talking, but you’re not eating much, Brina.”

I look down at my bowl. I’ve been swirling my fork around for a good while. I meet Paige’s eyes again. “I’m fine. I’m just not hungry.”

“I thought you were starving?” she asks.

It’s not argumentative at all, but worried, and it annoys me to no end.

“Is this about boss boyfriend?” she asks. This time, I let her have at her silly nicknames.

My phone vibrates loudly, saving me from having to answer.

Paige rolls her eyes. “Ignore it.”

Hugo’s name flashes across the screen.

“Can’t. It’s office stuff and Mag’s home with Jordan.”

I pick up the phone. “Yes?”

“Our airline exec wanted glossy brochures, but the image keeps pixelating on the gloss,” Hugo says. “Angie’s been trying to iron it out for hours.”

“Uhh—you can’t just fix it and reprint?” This is a junior level designer issue. *Come on, Hugo, give me a break.*

He sighs. “Changing the color scheme might do it, but they insisted on brand colors. Um, after the whole ‘art project’ debacle, Heron told me I’m not to communicate directly with customers. But our options are to change the color scheme or move to a non-gloss.”

“Hang tight. I’m on my way. I’ll see if I can tweak it with Angie,” I say.

Hugo grumbles into the phone. “I realize you’ve witnessed some misses with my work since we met, but I’m no puppy. You’re welcome to try, but I trust you’ll come to the same conclusion.”

“Pixelation is a resolution issue, not color scheme,” I tell him.

“Yes, and I’ve gone through six damn ink cartridges using higher resolutions. The color bleeds off the page with the high res image.”

I’m shocked, wrinkling my nose. Heron insists on the best of everything, and we don’t have a decent printer?

“We need a better printer,” I tell him.

“Custom orders for hardware like that can take weeks. So few people use print ads anymore. The boss felt we could get by with a medium line. Trouble is, the airline’s a flying

dinosaur, and they still want non-digital marketing from the year 2000.”

I can't disagree there.

“I'll be there soon to make a decision.” I end the call and look at Paige. “Sorry, I'm going to have to cut this short.”

“Mag?”

“Nope. The company.”

“Same difference.” She looks hurt. “You need a ride?”

“Sure!”

We don't talk much on the drive to HeronComm. Mostly because I'm on the phone with every stupid print shop in the city. I find one with super high quality printers and send Hugo to print the test piece there. If it passes quality assurance, we'll do up everything there. It costs more, but the airline contract is so lucrative it hardly matters.

If that doesn't work out, though...I'll be contacting the airline CEO and eating crow.

When I end the call, we're at the office. I thank her and reach for the door.

“No problem.” Her eyes connect with mine, her blond hair hanging loosely as she looks at me. There's something on the tip of her tongue.

“Paige? What's up?”

She grimaces, then gives me a strained smile. “I hope you come home tonight, Brina. Don't let that rich boy use you or demand your whole life.”

“I'll think about it.” I give her a quick hug, shut the door, and step on the sidewalk.

Then it happens.

A black cat darts between me and the door, no doubt a stray searching for warmth in the February cold. The little beast stops and stares me down with its back arched.

I stay stock-still. I'm in no mood to be clawed, let alone poisoned by bad luck, even if my rational side says I should call a shelter and get the animal picked up.

After a standoffish minute, he relaxes and trots off around the corner, into an alleyway before I can do anything.

Ugh.

Such bad luck.

Not what I need more of today.

I head into the lobby, thinking of Paige's words. I could just ask Armstrong for a ride to my parents' place later.

Magnus is expecting me, but I need to think about what Paige said.

I get that he wants to avoid conflicting interests and do things by the book.

But he's Magnus freaking Heron.

If our relationship could close a deal—and it has with the airline—it wouldn't be a secret.

My phone pings.

Mag: I haven't heard from you the whole day. Is everything okay?

I ignore him and step into the elevator. I haven't responded ten minutes later when my desk phone rings. Probably Hugo letting me know how the test turned out.

"Is it good?" I say as soon as I've picked up.

"Why are you at the office?" Mag snaps off.

"Oh. There was an issue with the airline brochures, but I think we've worked it out. How did you know I was here?"

He's quiet for a minute.

"I checked the security cameras when I didn't hear from you all day."

"What? It hasn't even been a whole day." My phone buzzes. "That's Hugo on the other line. I have to find out if the

test piece worked.”

“For the brochure?” he asks, this growly doubt in his voice.

“Yes. If it didn’t, I have to go back to Arrowpoint with more options.”

“Armstrong’s on his way to pick you up. Why don’t you come over and fill me in on what went wrong? If the test piece isn’t up to snuff, I’ll call the CEO myself,” he says, trying so hard to brighten the mood.

Sigh.

My heart sinks. He knows something’s wrong, but I can’t even get a handle on what it is myself.

“Because you don’t think I can handle it?” I whisper, trying to sound bantery.

“Because I don’t think you *should* have to handle it, woman. You help creative, not fix their messes.”

He chuckles, a sound I love so much, and it makes me wonder if I’m being ridiculous.

“You gave me this project. If the CEO needs a call, it’s mine to make, isn’t it?” I bite my lip.

“Fair enough, but make it from here?” I can hear him smiling, genuinely wanting me back at his place.

Sweet Lord, what was I thinking?

This doesn’t sound like a man playing games, eager to smash up my heart. And good luck ignoring his magnetism.

Armstrong waits outside when I step out, as promised. I ride there in silence, staring out at the city lights, thinking of what Paige said. *Don’t let that rich boy use you.*

Is Mag using me?

As I lay my keycard on Mag’s door, my phone pings.

Hugo: Test worked. Brochures will be printed and delivered to the office Monday afternoon.

A huge sigh of relief steams out of me.

Good. One less thing to worry about.

When I walk into the penthouse, Mag and Jordan are playing chess on the living room floor. Neither of them notice me, which gets a heaping smile.

It's kind of adorable.

Mag has transformed, every part the doting big brother. My heart swells.

I don't care what Paige says. I get why she wonders, why she's looking out for me, but Magnus isn't using me.

He may be ruthless in the boardroom, but he isn't nefarious enough to keep our relationship a secret for the wrong reasons.

Those searing blue eyes look up from the game.

He's wearing little spectacles, and it gives him this Professor McHottie vibe. My core tightens, already thinking about tonight.

A smile spreads across his face as he removes his glasses.

"Jordan likes chess," he says. "I haven't played for years."

I come in and sit down on the couch. "Looks like you two are having fun."

Jordan slides a Rook across the board.

"Checkmate. I win again," he snickers.

Mag scowls. "I let you, of course. I'm not that rusty."

"Right." Jordan belts out a laugh, skimming his fingers through his wavy hair. "You said that the other three times, too."

With a hapless grin, Mag joins me on the couch.

"The test piece worked out fine," I say, holding up the new picture on my phone.

"Perfect." He nods, but he looks at Jordan. "Go back to your video games, bud. I'll clean up the board."

"Thanks!" Jordan takes off to the back of the penthouse.

Those intense blue eyes land on me now. “I’m glad our little crisis was averted, but I’m worried about my girl.”

“Careful.” I smile. “You just called me yours.”

“Did I?” He quirks a knowing eyebrow.

“No take-backs.” I shake my head.

“What is this, middle school?” He chuckles, and once again, I’m falling a little harder for this man.

“Might be. Paige is stuck in eighth grade.”

“The sculptor friend. Is that what’s got you so riled up? She’s not making you a bas-relief, is she?” He pulls me into his lap. “You seemed upset earlier.”

“Nope. Paige’s art is way too whimsical to make me look cool.” Laughing, I shake my head. “And I’m fine. But, Mag?”

“Yeah?” His hand strokes my arm.

“Why were you checking the security footage?” I ask, carefully choosing my words.

His huge shoulders roll as he shrugs.

“It’s an app synced to my phone. I do it periodically when I’m away. I like to make sure my office is safe and sound.” He brings his fingers to my chin and tilts my face softly, bringing me into those sharp blue eyes.

“News to me. So you’re able to look in on the zoo even when you’re not there?”

“I was checking the office, not you. The cameras only cover my office and the main work areas. It’s not like I spy on everyone’s desk. Still, seeing you there was a relief,” he says, then his fraught smile sinks. “I’ve been paranoid ever since Marissa got attacked, I’ll admit. I need my EA safe.”

“You called me yours again. Oops,” I tease with a small smile, burrowing into his chest.

“You’re reading way too much into it,” he growls.

I look up, loving how he turns away. “Hey, I thought it was sexy, but if I’m reading too much into it—”

“No.” His eyes snap back to me and he slides a hand under my shirt, finding my nipple, making me sigh with the roughness of his fingertips. “We’ll stick with sexy.”

~

TWO WEEKS LATER, I’m in the town car with Jordan perched between Mag and me. It’s actually warm enough for a light jacket with March right around the corner.

For the first time, the boy doesn’t have his earbuds in, and he’s taking in the sights as they pass by, a big question mark on his face.

“Guys, c’mon, where are we going?” he asks for the tenth time today.

“It’s a secret,” Mag answers, zipping his fingers across his lips, also for the tenth time.

“Brina?” Jordan asks, his adorably frustrated face turning to me.

“Sorry.” I hide a smirk, studying my nails.

“Aw, this is stupid. At least, give me a hint.”

“You’ll like it,” I say. “There. That’s your clue.”

He lets out one of those prized middle-schooler huffs, complete with droopy shoulders, but I can tell he’s excited, even if he’s trying to play it cool.

“That’s the hint? Is it pizza again?”

I laugh. “It’s too early for Pizza Shack.”

Mag takes my hand and we spend the rest of the trip fending off Jordan’s questions until we stop in front of a wide flat brick building. A sixty-foot neon-red sign above the parking lot says Dreer Pharmaceuticals.

“What’s this place? A pharma company?” Jordan asks as he climbs out. “I’m not here for a flu shot, right?”

Mag steps out of the car, grinning as he helps me out.

“No needles, I promise. What you should know is, everything’s negotiable,” Mag says matter-of-factly. “First rule

of business. Will you remember that, J-man?”

“Dude, why?” Jordan asks, irritation flaring in his voice. “Just hold your big speeches and tell me why we’re here.”

Mag turns, bathing me in an excited look before facing Jordan’s impatient gaze again.

“Because. I negotiated a full tour of the chem lab into the contract with our client here. I’m supporting your future career in science. You’re welcome.” Mag gives his brother a proud smile.

“You—what? Whoa.” Jordan’s eyes become huge and he grins. “We’re touring a lab? Like, a real one?”

“Yep. I wouldn’t waste your time with a fake.” Mag winks.

“Finally something cool!” Jordan yells, pumping his fist in the air.

A man lets us in the building and shakes Mag’s hand. “Are you the Heron party? Welcome.”

“Yes.” He motions to me. “My EA, Sabrina Bristol.” He motions to Jordan. “And this is my younger brother, Jordan Quail.”

“Pleasure to meet you both. I’m Grant Dreer, the owner of this company and grandson of the founder.” He nods to me, then Jordan. “Follow me.”

We walk through a long off-white hallway and stop in front of a heavy blue door. “This is the lab we’ll be touring today, but you’ll each need to grab a jacket and safety gear first.” He points to hooks on the wall where white lab coats hang.

We each grab one and pull it on.

He moves deeper into a nearby closet and frowns. “Sorry, looks like we’re one short. I’m going to get goggles, but I’ll need you all to stay right here until I’m back. I can’t let anyone in the lab without safety goggles.”

“Why?” Jordan asks.

“Liability reasons,” Grant says with a benevolent smile in the boy’s direction. “If you get hurt in a chem lab wearing goggles, the insurance policy covers it. If not, the shareholders do, and they get mighty upset about that.”

He goes behind the door and comes back with goggles for each of us. “You interested in pharmaceuticals, son?”

“Yeah. Sort of.” Jordan nods, more eager than I’ve ever seen him, but trying to play it cool.

“I’m going to get helmet hair,” I groan, pulling the goggles over my face. The rubber strap in the back bunches up my hair.

“So tragic.” Mag puts his goggles on. “You’re cute as hell with helmet hair.”

Heaven help me, I blush.

“Gag,” Jordan whispers.

Mag laughs and we all follow Grant into the lab. He points out the different chemicals in the lab and what drugs they’re used in before explaining the bewildering production process. He doesn’t flinch when Jordan bombards him with questions.

Grant points to a cabinet of vials filled with bright liquids. “Those are used in chemotherapies. The only reason they aren’t fatal is because each one gets mixed one part to a hundred with more neutral compounds.”

“So if I just grabbed a bottle—” Jordan starts.

“If it got on your skin, it would likely do damage similar to carpet burns. If you ingested it, you’d die. So you’d be wise to keep your hands to yourself.”

“Wow,” Jordan says, and it’s his turn to blush. He’s quiet for a minute. “Do you have anything to, like, wake a person up from a coma?”

We both freeze.

Grant frowns, looking at Mag for an explanation, but he doesn’t give one.

“Hmm, we have a couple drugs to induce—put people into—comas, but nothing that reverses the process. With our drugs, when you stop administering them, they’ll often wake right up. Intravenous anti-inflammatories can sometimes help with brain swelling caused by non-medically induced comas...”

I’m not listening. I just step forward with Mag’s hand on my shoulder, and hug the kid until it hurts.

“She’s getting everything she needs. I promise.”

“Listen to Sabrina,” Mag whispers, roughing up Jordan’s hair.

After a few moments, Jordan says in a very quiet voice, “Thanks, you guys. I mean—not just for today, but for taking care of Mom.”

My heart breaks a little before I pull it back together.

Mag looks over, only for a second, before smiling at his younger brother. “No problem. That’s what families do.”

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ON THE DESK (MAGNUS)



Brina's nimble fingers clack away on her keyboard on the other side of my desk, a thoughtful look on her face.

On the scale of sweetheart to siren, she's a perfect ten dick tease when she's entranced with her work, innocent and oblivious to how bad I want to disrupt her.

I keep glancing at her over my laptop, wondering when she'll look at me.

No luck.

She's that focused, and it's fucking sexy as blazes just like everything she does.

It's a cool night in March, just past dusk with the stars beginning to shine through Chicago's light pollution. The days are getting longer.

Jordan's sleeping over at his friend's place since it's Friday night, leaving us a chance to work late on our old stomping grounds. Hugo was the last person in the office, and he left over an hour ago.

That means we're alone. A rarity and a reminder.

Months ago, I made her a promise, and my cock pulses so hard I almost pass out when it hits my brain.

I'm a man of my word, and an electric tingle flares through me.

Tonight's the night.

After what feels like an age, Brina looks up from her laptop with a smile like the sun.

“Okay, I just submitted the report. Unless there’s something else you’re working on, I think we’re finished.”

I shake my head.

“We’re not done. Close your damn computer and come here.”

She snaps her laptop shut and slides off the chair obediently, then stands next to my desk. There’s a sly smile on her face, like she’s trying to figure out what I’m up to, but she’s game for mischief.

I stand, straightening to my full length, undoing my tie as I walk around to her side, closing in on her.

My movement backs her up. Her plump ass to die for brushes the edge of my desk.

She’s cornered now, and her wide eyes tell me she has no idea how hard I’m about to fuck her through the floor.

That’s okay, sweetheart.

You’ll find out soon enough.

“Mag?” she whispers.

Stalking over, I seal a finger against her lips, harder than diamond with the heat of her breath on my skin.

I stretch an arm behind her, leading her to my side of the desk. Then I grab my legal pad, lay it on top of my keyboard, and close the laptop over it.

I lean forward, giving her even less space.

She makes no effort to fall back, but she doesn’t lean into me either. I move the laptop from the desk, pull open a drawer, and shove it inside.

With one hand on each hip, I place Brina’s delectable ass on my desk, desire coursing through me like a wolf on the prowl.

She’s figured it out.

I can see it in her eyes.

They've gone russet-brown with tension, with pleasant shock, with need.

"Wh—what are you doing?" she asks.

"It isn't obvious?"

I lean down, my lips hovering just over hers, but I don't dare brush them. If I do, she'll be on her knees a second later, my cock buried deep in her mouth.

I need to know she's aching, throbbing from head to toe like I am.

When her mouth moves on mine with a hunger, I'm convinced.

Her arms close behind my neck. Her kiss tastes urgent and sweet.

"Wrong question," I snarl, pulling away. "You mean what are *we* doing?"

"Keeping promises? I think I remember a very specific one you made that first weekend, around New Year's..." She blinks, her eyes like chocolate syrup I want to drown in.

Damn her, she can't say it—we're fucking in the office—and it makes me want her more.

"Number one rule of sales," I say, pressing my forehead to hers. "Don't tell when you can show."

Then I claim her mouth, sinking my teeth into her plush bottom lip. My palms drop to the smooth exotic sandalwood of my desk with the edges of my hands digging into her firm ass, claiming what's mine in my kingdom.

The kiss goes on longer than I intend and so damn deep I taste her soul.

When I've had my fill of her mouth—when I'm finally able to break away like a human being again—I kiss down her jawline, her neck, raking my short beard against her skin.

She fucking *mewls* for me, this shuddering high-pitched gasp, soft and needy and intense as ever.

I kiss back up her throat to her lips, taking her mouth again, this time with my tongue on fire. My hands roam the sides of her body, straight to the hem of that purple sweater dress.

Fuck me.

It's the same one she wore that hellish day we met. I clutch the purple hem in both hands and start yanking it up, with half a mind to rip it right off her.

She pulls away from me, moaning, but throws a hand up.

“Mag, wait! Stop.”

Damn. Did I read that wrong?

I let go of the dress and straighten up.

As soon as my breath isn't ragged, I ask, “What's wrong?”

She raises an eyebrow, looking up at the corner. “The security cams.”

I snort. “My dear little suburbanite.” I plant my hands on the desk and kiss her forehead. “I thought I'd upset you when I was mauling your dress.”

“No, but—I don't want anyone to see us,” she says. “Shouldn't *you* be careful?”

Smiling, I say nothing, just comb my fingers through her dark, lush hair.

“Why did you call me a suburbanite?” she asks, frowning.

“Because.” I chuckle. “City girls know no one watches the security camera, and no one cares. Half of them are AI now, a human only looks when the system detects an unfamiliar face up to no good.” My lips brush her hair. “But since I don't want anyone seeing you either, I turned the cameras in this room off an hour ago. The app lets me control that, too. You're for my eyes only.”

Her eyes pop, she grins wide, but her face turns bright red.

“Dick! You had me worried.”

I shake my head. “No, ma’am. I’ve wanted you here since the first time I saw you waltz in to torment me, and I’m not missing my chance. Believe me, I’ve thought of everything.”

“Really? What if I had a headache?” she asks.

“You don’t,” I growl, and my lips are on hers again. I break the kiss long enough to say, “But if you did, I’d cure it with a good Heron fucking. I hear that always get the blood pumping for relief.”

She laughs, playfully batting at my chest, and then kisses me back.

And this time when my hands clutch the hem of that damnable purple people eater dress, she doesn’t stop me. It sails over her head, and I work like a man possessed, unclasping a darker purple bra, edging it off her bit by bit.

My lips are hunters, trawling down her neck, her cleavage, and finally I take a rose-pink nipple in my mouth while I roll the other nip in my fingers.

“Oh—fuck,” she whimpers, her face twisting beautifully.

Her legs swing back and forth wildly as she collapses against me.

She kicks me once or twice, feeding the appetite in my blood.

Fuck yes, I’m going to have this woman for all seven courses, if I don’t have a goddamned heart attack first.

I push her back gently onto the empty space of my desk with a growl.

Guess we’ll be finding out if this thing’s really as well crafted as they promised.

It’s hard not to chuckle at that, even as hot fury thickens my blood.

I take one last suck of her tit, bend away, turn her so she’s sideways, and then help position her in front of me.

Grabbing her legs, I pull her closer so her ass is at the edge of the desk, her legs dangling down, ready for my hungry mouth.

With my fingers tucked into the waist of her pantyhose, they skim down her long legs. I remove them so her feet are bare as I kneel, pressing a kiss to both of her ankles.

Her toes curl as my lips stamp a trail up her legs.

I'm torturing her, and I love it.

I'm also mapping every last bit of the forbidden, the first of many nights I'll fuck her in this office.

I inch upward with hot, feral kisses, then up her shin to her knee, and up her thigh to her hip. When I come to deep purple fabric just like the bra, I press my face against it, tongue out, forcing her panties into her wet, steaming center.

I swear to fuck, I'll eat her out until she screams so loud it breaks glass.

"Mag..." Her thighs tighten around my neck. "Oh. Oh, shit!"

If my mouth wasn't full of her panties, if my tongue wasn't carving my name into her slit, I'd grin.

If there's one thing I love, it's riling her up so much she drops the nice girl pretense.

Let her swear like a sailor and beg for every inch of me.

Let her go full, unadulterated carnal for each slash of my hips.

Let her call me all the fucking names in the book—with her, I deserve them, too.

Pushing deeper, I sink my teeth into the purple panties, grab hold, and yank them off, before kissing down again.

Now there's nothing between her opening and my plundering tongue.

She quivers. A full body ripple that makes my balls hurt like burning coals.

Hell no, I don't need to linger. One stroke of my tongue on her wetness tells me she's ready.

I love her taste more than I love a billion dollars, and I inhale her scent like a man starved.

My face digs in with even more gusto, lapping harder, tongue delving deep, listening to her sweet sounds, holding her body still as she tries to writhe, but can't.

Not when she's under my control.

Her soft body tenses as she whimpers, begging me for more, reaching up to bite her wrist.

"Tell me what you want," I growl into her pussy, digging my chin into her so she's forced to ride my beard.

"You. Inside me. Now." Her voice is tortured.

Oh, we'll get there.

But first, I can't resist bringing her over the edge. I suck her clit between my tongue, holding it prisoner, while my tongue lashes her into a release so intense she's slapping my desk.

This liquid heat pours out of her, against my face, and I drink in my reward. There's no small pride that I'm the first man to make her squirt.

I'll also be the last.

The thought of anyone *ever* having this pussy I own just makes me bring her off harder, my tongue slashing in jealous waves, helping her ride the high, gliding back to Earth.

Normally, this is where I'd give her a sixty-second breather before licking her to heaven again.

Not tonight.

Not now.

Not when my balls are so blue I think they've already won a state ribbon.

My belt slips off in a hiss. My pants drop to the floor, and I stumble out of my boxers. Then I grab each thigh, anchoring

myself to her.

Her eyes are narrowed, amber-brown pools in the soft yellow lamplight. So fuck-hot I could die as I align the tip of my raging length and thrust into her with one fierce stroke.

Fuck!

Her hand flutters to her face, pushing a scream back into her mouth.

I almost lose my load right there, a roar in my throat.

“Dammit, Brina,” I sigh. “You do that again and I’ll tie you to this desk. I’ll find a way. I’m not losing my shit before it’s even started.”

She smiles, her eyes still glowing like gemstones.

I throw my jacket off and take a firm hold of her hips, the better to hold her in place, and hold her down in case I need to stop a premature explosion.

But I let my hips do all the talking, thrusting hard and fast, grinding her *deep*, raking her clit every time with my pubic bone.

Her legs fold around me. Brina leans into ecstasy.

My movements come in savage bursts.

She tries to match me thrust for thrust, and it’d be adorable if it wasn’t so sexy I have to fight back my release the first time she comes on my cock.

I hope to hell the cleaning company listens and doesn’t send any nighttime janitors, per my instructions.

If they do, they’ll think there’s a crime scene happening in my office from the way I make her shriek. And I love it loud, I love it dirty, I love the crescendo when her sweet pussy fuses to my dick and tries to suck me off.

I just love the fuck out of her.

Did I just think that? Love?

I don’t have time to ponder. Her legs climb up my back as her body takes me deeper, ankles pressed into my ass, insisting

I give her half my soul when I give up my load.

She's shaking, her whole body a full, seductive vibration.

"Mag, Mag, *Mag!*"

It's the last time that gets to me in my frenzy, slamming into her, rattling the desk—hell, maybe the whole building—with deep, controlling strokes that almost edge her womb.

"Brina!" I belt her name back and my unfastened tie falls over her neck.

The weird, possessive splash of color reminds me how far gone I am, how I'd give up my fortune to spend every damn night inside her.

Fuck yes, I explode.

Magnificently.

The surge of my seed sends her off again, and we spend the next few minutes quaking in rapture, entangled, our bodies locked as I empty myself until she overflows.

My desk is properly christened by our sex when I finally pull away, giving her one last kiss, watching the hot mess I've left behind leaking out of her.

I scoop her up off the desk and seat us in my chair, her on my lap, cradling her so close I feel her heartbeat under her skin. I find my jacket on the floor and fold it around her bare shoulders, leaving us skin-to-skin, with nothing else between us.

"Thank you." She drops her head to my shoulder.

I chuckle. "For what?"

"How I feel right now." Her voice is still low, her words one soft moan.

I hold her tighter.

"That's not something to thank me for. You were an equal player." I kiss her. "Besides, that was primal and savage. You also deserve sweet kisses under city lights."

And I do exactly that, laying a heavy kiss on her lips, turning her chin softly to look out the window.

I'm almost expecting fireworks any minute, the whole city of Chicago celebrating our fuck. Or, more importantly, the moment I dared to think I'm in *love* with this woman.

"Fine, give me all the kisses," she giggles. "I'm not sure how that could've been better."

I don't know either.

The L-word confession lingers on the tip of my tongue as I stare into her eyes, but just when I'm about to say it, my phone goes off.

I glare at the screen.

"Shit, sorry, sweetheart. I better take that. It could be Jordan."

She stands so I can find my pants and fish the phone out of the pocket.

The call hits me like an arrow through the chest.

It's amazing I can even pull up my briefs before the phone disconnects.

I drop the cell on the desk, my fingers numb.

"Get dressed," I say, hating how her curves tempt me even now, and hating that I hate it.

"Mag?" She plucks her clothes up off the ground, a worried crease in her face. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Maybe? I don't know," I say. "Marissa Quail just woke up. We have to get Jordan now and go to the hospital."


"Holy crap!" Her eyes go huge and she grins. "That's fantastic! He's going to be so—"

"Excited? Let's hope so." I pull my pants up and fasten the belt like my life depends on it.

What I don't tell her is the sudden dark gut punch of worry that hits like a premonition. Apparently, I'm outdoing Miss Superstition tonight.

Still, I can't relax until I see Marissa alive and well, with her brain intact.

Anything could go wrong.

WHEN THE ELEVATOR OPENS,  Jordan runs ahead with Brina and I trailing behind him. He darts into Marissa's room before we catch up.

She looks at me. "Are you ready for this?"

"It's now or never." I take Brina's hand. "I'm glad she woke up. If everything seems normal, it'll be a huge weight off Jordan's shoulders." I squeeze her palm, tracing a circle on the top of her hand with my thumb. "And it also means we'll be talking to Ruby soon."

She beams up at me.

We're a few inches from the door when Jordan pops his head out.

"She's asleep?" he asks, wearing a deep frown.

"Hit the nurse button," I say. "They told me she was awake twenty minutes ago."

We step into the room together.

Sabrina sits in the chair and I stand next to Marissa's bed with Jordan. The boy hits the call button on the bed just as a nurse and doctor stroll through the door.

"Sorry, I guess we shouldn't have hit that," I tell them.

"No problem," the nurse says.

The doctor looks at Marissa, crumpled in the bed, totally inert and breathing slowly.

"You just missed her," he sighs, adjusting his glasses. "I was in this room five minutes ago, and Miss Quail was fully conscious and talking to us." He turns his head to face Jordan. "She asked about you. I told her you'd been here almost every day, and you're well taken care of."

"Why's she asleep again?" Jordan asks, thorns in his voice.

“She’s on a lot of medication, I’m afraid, and she’s been unconscious for some time,” the doctor says kindly. “It’s not like it is in the movies. Some coma patients can only stay awake for a few minutes, gradually recovering their stamina over weeks. In this case, some of her sleepiness is a response to the pain and medications in her system.”

He gives an encouraging smile, but I also want answers to the question Jordan asks a second later.

“But she’s okay?”

“She’s on the mend. Her vitals look great. The brain tissue doesn’t seem to be scarred. Of course, we’ll be able to give a full assessment when she’s feeling better. If she doesn’t wake up before you leave tonight, she’ll likely come around tomorrow,” the doctor says.

“Thank you,” I say, finally a bit relieved.

The doctor leaves, and the nurse checks Marissa’s vitals again, scribbling something on the digital board before she exits.

“We’ll hang out for a few minutes until the end of visiting hours,” I say. “But if she doesn’t wake up, we need to let her sleep and come back in the morning. She needs rest.”

“Damn, I just wanted to talk to her, but...I’m glad Mom’s okay.” An unsure smile brightens his face.

“Me too, Jordan,” I say with a smile.

For him, I manage, but I’m still not relaxing totally until I see how Marissa acts.

Thankfully, Brina’s smile in the corner is a lot more honest.

Jordan spends the next fifteen minutes at her side, doing nothing but watching her, gently muttering a few words.

I’ve never seen a kid his age more intent on anything that wasn’t a cell phone.

I hate to even walk up and lay a hand on his shoulder.

“Okay, bud. It’s time to go.”

Jordan stirs, almost as if he forgot we were there, and kisses his mom's cheek. "All right. I'm ready. I'll be back soon, Mom."

"Should we grab some ice cream on the way home?" I ask, searching for a happy distraction. "We all needed some good news."

"Yes!" Both Brina and Jordan say it together.

I chuckle at their shared enthusiasm. It's hard as hell not to kiss her right then.

Jordan goes out the door first, heading into the main lobby.

"Jordan?" A man calls his name.

A voice I know.

It can't fucking be.

I burst through the door, leaving Sabrina trailing behind me, hoping to everything holy I'm hallucinating.

I wish I were so lucky.

Baxter goddamn Heron sits in a waiting room chair, right by the door, a polished expression on his face I want to rip right off. He should be grateful this is a hospital.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I snarl, the hair on the back of my neck standing on end.

Sabrina comes through the door a second later and stands beside me, staring at the stranger she's never seen before. I've seen him, though, and damn it, I wish I never had.

"Mag, what's going on?" she asks quietly.

Baxter stands, straightening up, only a few inches shorter than I am. He looks at Sabrina.

His frigid blue eyes meet mine and a cocky grin crosses his face, heavy with a few more wrinkles than I remember.

"Ah, *both* my sons are here, I see. Perfect." A slow, serpent smile twists his lips.

My fist tightens into a rock.

“If you have any sense left, old man, you’ll shut the fuck up, turn the fuck around, and walk the—”

“I still check the company website from time to time,” he cuts in, his voice horribly calm. “She’s your executive assistant, isn’t she? I guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree after all.”

I’m going to strangle him with my bare hands.

His eyes flick past me to Brina.

Then he makes a tsking sound and shakes his head. “So hypocritical, but I do understand. She’s a delightful creature, and perhaps you’ll have a chance to make Jordan here an uncle very soon.”

The rage inside me goes volcanic, and I pity anyone nearby, because I know how this ends.

I’m going to jail. Right after I beat the ever-living shit out of this man right here on the hospital’s tiled floor.

“If you so much as look at her again, I’ll scoop your eyeballs out,” I roar, my voice ragged. “Call her delicious again, Baxter, and you’ll be having a second nose job. Good thing we’re in the right place.”

“How pathetic. Threatening me like the emotional little brute you are.” He waves a dismissive hand at me. “I didn’t come here to squabble over your whore of a secretary—”

Up until now, I always thought the expression *seeing red* was an exaggeration.

Not anymore.

I’m living it, seeing the world through such a neon blood-red crimson tint, I wonder if I’ve ruptured something in my head.

“Listen,” I bite off. “I’m using every bit of discipline I learned in the Corps to not break your face in front of a kid. Mention her again, and I’ll bounce your head off the ground until your skull splits. I watched you treat my mom like shit and then wipe your stinking feet on the women who worked for you. I’ll be damned if you talk to Sabrina that way.”

“Yes, yes, I heard what happened. That’s why I came here all the way from Saint Thomas to check on Marissa and my boy,” Baxter says, a cruel smile slowly dragging across his reprobate face.

Shit, shit, shit.

Why is he here? He never sets foot on the mainland since he fled to the Virgin Islands. I’ve kept tabs on him for years.

I look over at Jordan with another shot through my chest.

The wheels are turning in his head. He’s not an idiot.

“So you’re the infamous Baxter Heron? I thought you’d be taller,” Sabrina sneers. “Everyone at HeronComm hates you.”

She never minces words, but this isn’t her fight.

I put one arm around Brina and another around Jordan, trying to steer them both to the elevator.

Oh, I’ll be back.

I just don’t want them to see me assaulting Baxter Heron, plus the kid will have to stay with her and Armstrong if I get hauled off in handcuffs.

“Wait. Wait, wait, wait!” Jordan says, twisting, struggling away from my grasp. “Hold up…”

We all look at the kid as he draws a deep breath.

I reach for him again, but he swats at my hand.

“Dude. No. This is *bullshit*,” he growls, a hatred in his eyes that spears me alive.

“Jordan, ignore him. He’s a liar. Go with Brina. We’re going home,” I say, trying my damndest to keep control.

“Is your mom okay, son?” Baxter calls behind him, his footsteps echoing as he approaches. “It’s so good to finally meet you. They’ve tried so hard to cut me out of your life.”

Jordan glares hellfire at me.

“You…you fucking lied to me. You told me he was *dead*.”

“He *is* dead,” I snap, shaking my head. “You don’t understand what he is, what he’s *done*. He’s dead to us, and he’s caused your mother nothing but agony.”

Jordan takes a step back, still glaring, trying to figure out the truth.

“And he was just leaving, weren’t you, old man?” I jerk my head at my father. “Either you go, or we do.”

Jordan’s eyes don’t soften.

He still hates the shit out of me, and why shouldn’t he?

I had weeks—months—to spill more about our family. I didn’t.

Not when I thought it was keeping him safe.

Baxter shakes his head. “You always did think you were the boss. Sometimes I wish I’d taken you down with me, you sad, hotheaded brat—”

“Your shareholders don’t. But you didn’t have a choice, did you? You were about to fuck everything up. Remember, Dad?” I spit the last word.

Baxter’s gaze shifts to Jordan.

“You can’t trust this one. He was born with a forked tongue.” He gestures toward me. “He stole my entire company. Why, I bet he even told you I was dead, didn’t he, son?”

Jordan nods, his lower lip trembling. I think he might cry.

Shit!

“Jordan, listen to me. You’re fourteen,” I growl. “You’re not his son. He gave up the right to call you that years ago. Why didn’t he find you before now? When your mom could’ve held her own and told you the truth?”

Jordan meets my eyes, and for a second, I think it might be okay.

His hell-gaze swings to Baxter now.

“W-why didn’t you?” His voice is small, shaking, confused.

My demon father shakes his head. “I always tried. It just didn’t work out between your mom and me. She wouldn’t let me see you. Hell, she wouldn’t even let your older brother into your life. But you’re my son, and I love you, and now that she’s in a bad way...I’m here.”

Damn his lies.

Damn the fact that he’s breathing.

I want to shout the whole truth. *Your mom was sexually harassed by her sicko boss who tried to convince her she didn’t deserve her job or support for the child he created. Don’t go. Don’t walk away with Lucifer.*

But there’s no good way to explain that to a very confused, very upset eighth grader—especially to an eighth grader who’s been aching for a dad his whole life.

Not without flaying him alive.

I meet Jordan’s eyes.

“Look at me. I’m his son, too, and I wish to hell I wasn’t. I’d rather be an orphan, Jordan.”

Baxter moves between me and my brother, his back to me. I want to shove him away, but I can’t deliver his well-deserved beating now. Jordan won’t understand, and I’ll definitely be the bad guy then.

“Don’t listen to him, son,” Baxter hisses. “Come back to my hotel and have dinner? We’ve got fourteen years to cover that I missed out on.”

The prick has no shame, he can’t possibly think that’ll... work?

To my horror, Jordan nods, moving closer next to my dad. They start for the elevator, and I’m on their heels, catching a frenzied receptionist standing and watching us out of the corner of my eye.

“He’s not going anywhere with you,” I grind out.

Baxter grins. “Yes, he is, Magnus. You aren’t his guardian. Legally, there’s nothing you can do. He’s coming with me.”

He’s right.

Fuck.

“Jordan, don’t go!” I howl. “For the love of God, don’t—”

“You lied to me,” he flings back, turning, fists flung down at his sides. “Everyone always lies to me! Mom wouldn’t tell me shit and you outright lied.” Jordan’s eyes are so much worse than the familiar, untrusting, sullen look he wore when we first met.

Now, he looks like he hates me with a vengeance.

I can’t fucking blame him.

This day is pure trauma.

First his mom was awake, then she wasn’t.

Next his supposedly dead dad shows up here.

I never should’ve lied. A stupid mistake, and I’m paying the price as I watch them moving, and a man with a badge cuts me off from following.

“Sir? If you could please step back,” the security guard says.

Jordan gets in the elevator first, with Baxter right behind him. I’m still looking past them, desperate, willing Jordan to stop, come back, *think about this*.

“Bye, Mag,” Jordan says with a scowl before the elevator doors snap shut.

Shut him off from *me*.

I don’t know how the fuck I’m still standing and not falling straight to the floor.

Somehow, I stagger back, away from the guard who has one hand on his radio—if it isn’t a taser.

A woman’s delicate fingers touch the back of my arm near the entrance door.

“Mag...are you okay?” Brina asks.

I jerk my arm away from her like she’s poison.

“You should go,” I choke out, my whole brain on fire.

“But—” Her voice quivers like she might cry. “But, Mag, I...”

No.

I can’t deal with this shit right now.

I have to get Jordan home.

I’m afraid to even look at her.

“Are you deaf? I said *go*. Armstrong’s in the lot. He’ll give you a ride home,” I snarl, already sick at the scorn pouring out of me.

“But—” she starts.

“Sabrina. *Go*,” I say. “Don’t make me tell you again.”

“...you’re such a jackass!” She snuffles. “You shouldn’t have let him go.”

Thanks, Miss Obvious.

“I had no choice,” I mutter, suddenly feeling like the whole world’s tilting, spinning, shrugging me off. I pinch my eyes shut.

What the fuck is happening?

I’ve just lost Marissa’s son, my brother, to a monster. Now I’ve made an intelligent, kind, beautiful angel of a woman cry. I’ve given her this raw, scared look of betrayal.

I shouldn’t have gotten out of bed today.

When I blink my eyes open, she’s disappeared, leaving behind nothing but a bitter not-quite-spring wind whipping through the open glass door.

How long has she been gone?

Long enough to decide I’ve hurt her enough, apparently. A text comes through that has me stumbling against the wall, holding out a hand so I don’t topple over.

Sabrina: I can't do this anymore. Lose my fucking number.

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RED CONVERTIBLE (SABRINA)



I didn't want to do it.

I tried not to let him see me cry, but the tears were already streaming down my cheeks before I took off, racing around the corner, leaving him standing there like this pillar of pure venom.

Somehow, I held it in until I was out of sight.

I bit my lip until I was sure, and the second I was, I let out a long sob.

For Jordan. For Mag. And, of course, for me.

Winding through the hallway, I nearly collide with a young doctor.

“Are you okay?” he asks. “Are you hurt?”

Yeah, but you don't have a drug for this one, Doc.

“I-I-I'm f-fi-ne.”

God, it's hard to talk while sobbing.

He lays a hand on my arm.

“Did you lose someone?” he asks, his voice so gentle.

I nod through the tears as his words bolt through me. I'm not just his EA anymore, and if that scene back there is how he's going to keep treating me, we can't survive.

Yes, I've lost him. Hell yes, it's over.

The doctor squeezes my shoulders. “It’s okay. Everything happens for a reason, and there’s no grief that can’t be conquered with time.”

“With any luck, he’ll burn in hell,” I strangle out.

The doctor releases me and stumbles back, his mouth hanging open. It’s only then in my ruined state that I realize he thought someone died. I just meant they reverted back to their arrogant rich bitch self.

“Sorry,” I mutter, but the tears are less heavy now as I crawl into an elevator down the hall.

In no time, the elevator dings.

Thank God.

I want out of this elevator, out of this hospital, and out of this life.

I wander into the parking lot looking for Armstrong. I don’t see him here, but it’s so dark the town car could blend in. A steady cold rain sleets through the night, making it hard to see anything.

Just before I spot my ride, I shoot Mag a text, letting him know he can lose my fucking number.

I’m as done as I am hollowed out.

A horn honks. I glance up from my phone. The town car roars in right beside me.

In the back seat, I’m instantly assaulted with the earthy masculine scent of Magnus Heron. I burst into tears again.

“Brina, are you okay?” Armstrong asks, his eyes heavy with concern.

“Y-yes.” I spit through the tears.

He’s quiet for a minute. “Is Miss Quail all right? I thought she was getting better?”

I wipe a tear from my face.

“She...she’s fine.” I mutter.

“Are you warm enough back there?” he asks, confusion growing in those eyes staring back at me in the mirror.

I sniff. I hadn’t noticed before, but it’s fine.

“Yes. Nice and toasty.”

“All right. Say no more. I’ll get you to the penthouse as soon as I can.”

Torture. This is a bucket of killing ice poured over my head. The moment it becomes real.

“Take me to my apartment.” Another hushed sob flays me open.

Armstrong leaves me be but keeps looking in the rearview mirror. I want to stop, for his sake, but I can’t.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” he asks in a quiet voice, the only break in the light tapping of wet sleet.

I shake my head.

He drives in silence for a few minutes, then asks, “Is there anything I can do?”

Well, maybe one thing.

“C-c-cinnamon—” Sob. “Latte,” I whisper.

“I knew you’d say that! Hang on.” When I look outside, I realize we’re almost at Sweeter Grind, even though it wasn’t on the way. He parks and goes in for the coffee this time. When he gets back in the car, he shakes the rain from his shoulders and hands me a large cinnamon latte and a box of truffles. “Here. I used the company card. That’s the least the prick can do.”

“Huh? But I didn’t say anything about—”

“Call it a hunch,” Armstrong says with a wink.

It’s the last words we exchange before he parks at the curb in front of my apartment, the square building towering over the night like a mausoleum.

With a fortifying sip of latte, I drag my heavy feet up the stairs, into my room, and throw myself across the bed.

Sleep doesn't come.

Neither do calls or texts.

And that's fine.

For once, maybe Magnus Heron learned to listen to someone else.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, my head rings from all the crying.

I watch the pale yellow sunrise through the horizontal blinds in my bedroom, still buried under a pile of blankets. With winter bleeding into spring, it hurts when it reminds me of a certain Arizona sunset.

Another time when I thought I'd broken through, only to be Mag's doormat.

Never again.

A knock at my bedroom door yanks me from the depths of self-pity.

"Yeah?" I croak.

Paige opens the door, a slightly disgusted look on her face. She peers around as if she's expecting to see someone else here.

"Holy crap. Are you okay? You were making weird noises last night and I wasn't sure if you were fucking or crying—" Her eyes land on my bloated, red face. "Oof. So no sexy-times then." She sits down on the bed beside me. "What happened, lady?"

My eyes are so swollen I can't see, but I haven't been crying for a while.

"We broke up." My voice is small.

"Shit." I can tell she tries not to wince. "Because he doesn't have to take care of the kid anymore?"

I start to shake my head, but then stop.

“Oh my God. You’re right.” I sink lower into my bed and hug a pillow. “I never even thought about that. But it came down so fast, so sudden, and he didn’t really have a choice, Jordan just...”

I trail off, too sick at heart to relive that scene at the hospital.

Losing Jordan wasn’t Mag’s fault. Not after that horrible man showed up and torched everyone with his lies. But losing me? Giving up? Shoving me away in his darkest flipping hour?

Yeah.

No question who pulled the trigger there.

I stuff the pillow over my face. If I can just drown out enough light, then maybe my head will stop pounding like a construction zone.

“Brina, what happened? Don’t jump to any conclusions,” Paige whispers softly, laying a hand on my side.

“Like you just did?” I mumble from under the pillow.

“Come out of there and talk to me.”

Fine. So maybe it’ll help to bounce it off her.

I mean, just twelve hours ago, things were golden. I never imagined anything like the way he took me in the office, and hearing there was hope for Marissa...

It isn’t fair how fast it all went to shit.

I can’t even make sense of it. Not alone.

“We—uh—we were working late and wound up *together* on his desk,” I begin slowly, my voice shaky. “It was perfect. Then the hospital called and said Jordan’s mom woke up from her coma, so we rushed over. Their dad showed up at the hospital out of the blue. He’s not a good man, and he told a lot of lies to get the kid to trust him. Mag was devastated. I tried to make sure he was okay. He shoved me away, told me to go home. But you’re right. He doesn’t have to take care of the kid anymore, and now he doesn’t need me...just like you said.”

Hello, tears.

Paige pats my back. “I did?”

“At brunch that day. Remember?”

She nods. “I was worried, but I hoped I was wrong. Are you going to work Monday?”

“God, no.” I wince. *How could I?*

I don’t have a job, and I don’t have a boyfriend.

One night, and I’m right back at square one.

“I don’t know, honestly. I don’t even want to see him again.”

“I’m right there with you. I’ve got a date with my mom, but I’ll be home tonight.” She stands. “Are you gonna be okay?”

“I’m fine.” I settle into my bed and grab a big box of tissues. “It’s not like it’s my first breakup.”

“Right,” she says. She rocks from the balls to the sides of her feet and back. “Do you want to come with me? My mommy has a ton of spa credits. We’re getting manicures, and she always pays for everything.” Paige grins.

“No, no, I’m just going to stay in bed and maybe start job hunting. I didn’t sleep at all last night.”

“I’m not sure sulking alone will make you feel better. You haven’t had time for a manicure since you took this job. Just come on,” she begs.

I sigh. “I don’t need to sulk. I need to sleep. Did you miss the part where I said I was up all night?”

“Okay, take a nap. But then get up and do something. Go to Sweeter Grind. Hit the job sites. Adopt a puppy. I don’t care, but you can’t just lie here feeling miserable all day.”

I roll my eyes. “Paige, I’ll be okay. Go have fun.”

She stares at me for a long second, then finally nods. “I know, you’re too big of a badass to let this take you down. But

seriously, Maggot and his dumb rich ass isn't worth it. If I ever see the guy again, I'm kicking him in the balls."

I burst out laughing, imagining Paige making good on her promise.

"Thanks for reminding me why we're best friends. Go see your mom. If I don't sleep, I'm going to barf."

"Try to have a good day." She leaves my room, pulling the door shut behind her.

I tug the blanket over my head, and somehow, I must nod off, because seconds later, I'm on a plateau in Arizona. A beautiful man with sandy-brown hair and sparkling blue eyes kisses me like it's all he was ever made to do.

Then he throws his hands in the air and says, "I needed to calm you down."

Dream Brina is no pushover. She picks up a desert rock and pings it off his head. He bursts into a thousand sea-blue butterflies.

I run down the mountain in stiletto heels and cute shorts, jump into a red convertible, and drive away, laughing maniacally.

Hugo and Angie can eat their hearts out at the images my brain comes up with.

Then, somehow, I end up in Mag's bed. We're naked, breathing ragged, bodies tangled, his hands pushing me down into the mattress. He pulls me up while we're still entangled and presses me to his chest. He holds me like I'm the only thing that's ever made sense.

I'm back in the cute shorts and heels, free-falling through clouds spun with warm sun. I land on my feet in a room where light pours in through a wall of windows.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"I don't need your help, Miss Bristol." he says coldly. "You've worn out your welcome."

A pool appears. I pick up a foam noodle and whack him into the water. He turns into a blue dolphin and swims away from me.

Um, weird.

Then I'm back in my red convertible, driving through a dark tunnel.

No, not just any tunnel, a barely lit hospital hallway.

Mag stands between me and the elevator.

"Sabrina. *Go*," he snarls, two fatal words I'll never forget.

My heel breaks when I try to launch toward him. I stumble, catching myself in a crouch on the ground. When I look up, he's replaced by a stalking lion, which looks like it wants to tear me to pieces.

"No!" I scream, jerking up.

I breathe slowly, deeply, fitfully.

Seriously.

Screw dreaming.

But I don't need a date with a dream interpreter to make sense of that mess. The pattern is clear.

Mag oversteps, overreaches, hurts me, and then he runs away.

This isn't the first warning from the universe, either. The same day Paige warned me, a black cat stared me down in front of the office. It wasn't bad luck.

It was an omen, and I ignored it.

"*Please be wrong*," I pray, grabbing my phone.

No calls. No voicemails. No texts. No emails.

He just doesn't care. Or else he's walled in, beating himself up over Jordan, or maybe assembling a crack team of lawyers and former SEALs to rescue the poor boy.

Still. Not even a single freaking text?

A dark voice in the back of my head says, *you're out, and he's not letting you back in. How long are you going to wait around?*

But I'm not this time. I can't.

I don't even care if I get a termination notice. I can't deal with that man again.

I need an exit plan.

Sighing, I retrieve my laptop and check my bank account. In roughly six months at HeronComm, I've banked almost forty thousand dollars after taxes and living expenses.

So maybe I can keep myself and my parents afloat for a while.

On a whim, I check Mag's email and snort.

It's overflowing rapidly. He'll never be able to sort it all. Then I open my company email and begin typing.

To: Ruby Hunting, HR Director.

From: Sabrina Bristol

Subject: Down and Out

Hi RUBY,

DUE TO UNFORESEEABLE changes in my situation, I need to use my vacation days. All of them.

If you're unable to fulfill this request, then I'll put in my notice immediately and expect to be paid out for all remaining vacation days per the employee handbook.

Have a good day.

SABRINA Bristol

Executive Assistant to Magnus Heron, HeronComm Inc.

I DON'T CARE if I get a response.

I'll burn my vacation before I quit, or they can pay me for it later.

I'm not going back, and right now that's all that matters.

But I'm probably not going to have access to a town car and driver anymore, so I should start looking for a used car. Maybe a red convertible.

Making plans helps manage the heartache, a distraction from the tragic fact that I loved Magnus Heron.

I just wish all the self-empowerment in the world eased things permanently.

Huffing out a breath, I text Armstrong.

Sabrina: Is King Maggot keeping you busy today?

Armstrong: Hey, Brina! Not so much. Do you need anything?

For a second, I frown, right before disgust whips through me.

No way.

I'm not going to let myself worry over Armstrong sounding like he hasn't seen Mag today.

Sabrina: Any chance you could give me a ride to a car lot on the south side and maybe help me haggle? I'm thinking about new wheels.

Armstrong: Heck yeah! I spend enough time on the road to know a thing or two about what's good. Be right over.

I have to make a forty-minute trip in a car that smells like Mag, but I save cab fare and don't have to deal with the bus.

It's kind of incredible how fast it comes together.

Armstrong argues the salesman down to eight thousand dollars like a pro, and suddenly I'm the proud owner of a shiny

red convertible that seems like it was just waiting for me.

My first real car. A lifeline to escape the city if I can't get a lid back on my nerves.

When it's over, I grin at Armstrong. "Thank you so much. I owe you."

"Nah, she's a beauty," he says, beaming back a grin. "I'm happy for you, lady. Where are you driving her first?"

"My parents' place. I usually have to take a cab or bum a ride. It takes forever by bus."

"Have fun." He gives me a thumbs-up and starts climbing back in the town car. "Hope this takes the edge off...well, you know."

I smile bitterly as he gives me an apologetic look.

Oh, I know. And it's not his fault.

The only person who owes me a *sorry* is the awful perma-grump of a human being I used to call boss, the man I'm never taking back.

If my new wheels are freedom, then let them set me free from all things Mag.

~

LESS THAN AN HOUR LATER, I park the convertible in front of the old brick house.

Of course, the door isn't locked. Dad sits on the couch like he's superglued to it, watching a game.

"Welcome home, babe! I was starting to think you're just a myth these days," he says, throwing his arms out.

"Hi, Dad." *Don't sound sad*, I tell myself.

"Is that my Brina?" Mom calls from the kitchen, and I smile at her familiar catchphrase.

I start walking to greet her, but she stops in the doorway before I get there. "Oh, honey, what happened?"

"Huh?"

“Your face. It looks like you just came back from a funeral. Are you okay?”

I nod vigorously, hoping if I shake my head hard enough, maybe I can cover up the obvious damage inflicted by one heartless man. I should’ve known there’d be no fooling her.

“You’re sure?” Mom asks, lifting a skeptical eyebrow.

“I just need some coffee. Long night,” I tell her, rubbing my eyes.

“Come sit down at the table. I just made a fresh pot,” she says, pulling me into the kitchen by the hand.

I flump down in a wooden chair, folding my arms over the table, and lay my head down.

She brings a cup of coffee and puts it down beside me. “What happened, baby?”

“Nothing,” I say, hating how she uses her mom-ray vision to see right through me.

“You haven’t just randomly shown up here in a while,” she whispers, her expression flat.

“Yeah, sorry. I’ve just been really busy and—”

“What did Magnus do?”

I look up as her question cuts me off. With me, she’s practically psychic.

“Nothing,” I try again, shaking my head.

“You’re not ready to talk about it. That’s okay.” She sits down in the chair next to me and I hear her pen scratching on a thick notepad.

Even with my head down and my eyes closed, I know she’s writing. My mom’s old-school and she outlines her notes by hand before diving into her books on the laptop.

I lift my head. “What are you working on now?”

“A sequel to *Farm Love*, because it sold so well.”

I give her a wry smile and take a heavenly sip of my coffee. It’s so sweet and cinnamon-y I almost pucker.

Apparently she knew I needed the sugar and spice rush today.

“You write romance. They were together by the end of the first book. What’s left?” I ask.

She laughs. “*Farm Love* was a romantic comedy with a twist of suspense, not romance. Don’t you remember? You read it.”

Um...not really, but okay.

“It seems like ages ago. There’s a difference?”

She shrugs. “There doesn’t have to be. Rom-com can go the women’s fiction route instead of conventional romance.”

“Uh—again, there’s a difference?”

“Women’s fiction focuses on the journey, the ups and downs, and the heroine’s growth is central to the story. The man *can* grow, or he can be replaced. If I went the romance route with that book, I’d be looking for a friend to write a story about. But I went the women’s fiction route and straddled the line so well no one will ever know.” Her voice goes up into a singsong pitch on the last few words.

“So what does that mean for the sequel?”

She looks at me without breaking eye contact. “It means life keeps happening after the happily ever after. The characters have to continue working on themselves and their relationships. Life is chock-full of new struggles.”

“I’ll take the bait. What’s your sequel about?”

She smiles and holds her hands out like she’s framing something.

“I’m calling it *Hog Fights Under City Lights*. Our lady got her life back and returns to the big city after a fight. The ex-Marine farmer man follows her and tries to win her back, but she’s not going to make it easy. He isn’t a city slicker. They’re too different.”

“How does he win her back?” I ask.

“Well, all the fighting leads to really good makeup sex, and then Sir Oinkswell—”

“Stop. Words I could have gone my whole life without hearing from my mother,” I grumble.

“You mean Sir Oinkswell?” She winks at me. “Our hero has to make some grand, heartwarming gesture, of course. Oh, and groveling. It ain’t a real knock-down love fight without plenty of that.”

“Grand gesture?”

“Hearts and flowers and tears. A life or death risk. I’m still working it out, but they’re going to have to learn to compromise. If only I knew what a certain assistant and her boss were squabbling over, I could probably help them compromise too. I just hope good makeup sex is part of the bargain—”

“Mom! You’re terrible, and I’m pretty sure that’s no longer an option,” I hiss, surprising myself. Like I *ever* wanted to let my romance writer mom in on my sex life.

“Aha—busted! Now do you want to tell me what happened?”

“No. I just came for cinnamon coffee.” My whole face warms.

“How much did it cost you to get here for coffee?” She laughs. “You should’ve just bought a cup of coffee. Don’t worry, baby, you guys will work it out.”

I sigh.

It’s not worth saying I don’t want to work anything out. Mom believes everybody deserves a happy ending, even in real life, and there’ll be no convincing her otherwise.

When I leave my parents’ house, I still have zero messages, no missed calls, and no response to my email. Magnus has already built up three hundred unopened emails.

I know because I check. He’s going to be buried alive.

When I get back to my apartment, I’m greeted with the scent of pepperoni, melted cheese, and...chocolate?

“Chocolate pizza?” I ask, turning my nose up into the air for a better whiff.

“I ordered pizza and made cookies. Netflix?” Paige asks from her perch on the couch.

“Sounds good to me. What are we watching?”

“No idea. You pick,” she says, sliding the remote over.

Great. Now I’m on the heartbreak outreach pizza party program.

“Okay. Just let me grab some food first.”

I make a plate and sit down on the floor. I’ve had enough self-pity for one day. But there’s also this sense that without HeronComm and the despicable Mr. Heron, my whole life grinds to a halt. I’m frozen in time with nowhere to turn but pizza and bad TV.

She grins and pats my shoulder. “Congrats. You just survived day one without the asshat.”

“The asshat is dead to me,” I lie, forcing a triumphant smile.

“It gets easier,” she whispers.

God, how I wish she were right.

All night long, I fight the urge to pack up my stuff, jump in my new car, and ride off into the moonlight where I’ll never have to think about Magnus again.

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SMART STICK (MAGNUS)



I'm stuck in office hell, trying to claw through four thousand emails, when my desk phone rings. Gavin Stuart and Associates flashes across the caller ID.

I groan. This guy never has good news.

"Heron," I snap.

"I've got an update on the situation for you. They're still in Saint Thomas. As far as my PI can tell, the kid is being cared for," Gavin tells me.

I shove the tip of my pencil against my desk so hard the end breaks off.

"Considering what I pay you and your investigators, I still don't understand how you failed to stop the jet before it left the fucking country," I snarl, pain crawling up my throat.

Rage is my permanent state of being since that night.

I still can't fathom what lies the bastard told Jordan to get him on a plane when Marissa would've woken up again soon.

"Mr. Heron, we've been through this," Gavin stammers. "There was no stopping the plane. You're not even a legal guardian, but I'm reviewing all options to force him back."

"Options. Right. Something I don't need to pay an attorney fourteen hundred dollars an hour for. I want action," I growl.

If there's one thing I despise, it's feeling rudderless.

“I understand your frustration, sir. The good news is, the Virgin Islands are likely to extradite him easily under territorial law. If he were on the British side, we’d be looking at a harder situation. Our best case is for the kid’s mom to get involved ASAP. If she’s the complainant, she can bring them back rather quickly,” he says.

“I told you, she’s barely out of a coma. She drifts in and out of consciousness. As soon as she’s in a position to help, she will. God only knows when that will be. The next time I talk to you, you’d better have a solution for me, Stuart, or I’ll be finding a new law firm.”

I leave it there because this bullshit isn’t his fault.

I’m the dumbass who let Jordan leave with Baxter Heron. I should’ve kept them at the hospital, even if it meant beating that jackass to a pulp and letting Sabrina take the kid home.

Fuck.

Brina. I’m not even ready to think of her name.

“With all due respect, Mr. Heron, most attorneys wouldn’t put up with you as a client,” he fires back. “I’ll call when there’s more information.”

Then the prick hangs up on me before I can do what I was planning—slamming the receiver down in dramatic fashion.

No fun today, apparently.

I scroll through my emails, looking for the coordinates the investigator sent, so I can plug them into maps and see where my little brother is. Sabrina quit sorting my email the night I sent her home from the hospital.

My inbox is swamped, and I can’t find a goddamned thing, even with search.

My door swings open a second later and Ruby bursts in. Her expression tells me she’s bringing more bad news. She doesn’t linger inside my door like she usually does, though, but walks around behind my desk and stops a foot from my chair.

A furious sting like a pissed-off murder hornet bathes my jaw in fire before I can even figure out what the hell is going on.

I just got fucking slapped by my own HR Director.

It's official. I've lost control of this ship and my life.

"Have you lost your damned mind?" I snarl.

"Nope. That was me hitting you with a smart stick. We'll see if I can undo the hundred stupid sticks you've already been whacked with. Someone has to knock some sense into you, and since Brina's gone, guess who gets the job. What the hell did you do to her, Mag?"

She folds her arms in front of her chest with a pout.

"Nothing!" I spit, her slap resonating through me.

Ruby shakes her head. "Bull. She always got here between five and six most days and usually left around midnight. She hung on your every word. Now she's asking for time off. So spill it."

"Give her the vacation time."

I at least owe her that.

"Oh, I will, but that's not the real issue." Ruby puts a hand on her hip. "Is she coming back?"

I hesitate because I don't fucking know.

And the thought that I'm the colossal asshole who drove her away, who made her quit, who chased her away hits worse than a thousand face-shearing slaps from Miss Hunting.

"What am I, her keeper? You'll have to ask her."

I know I certainly can't. Not after that last blistering text.

Lose my fucking number.

I'll be damned if I send her a message and make this worse than the nuclear dumpster fire it already is.

"I'll send an email soon. If she doesn't answer, should I put an ad out for a new EA?" Ruby asks tightly.

I look down at my desk. “If she comes back, the job’s still hers.”

The thought of replacing her, even just as my EA, makes me fucking sick.

Filled with pure, throbbing loathing for myself.

“I’m going to ask one more time, Mag, and if you won’t answer, that’s fine. But I hope you think about it and figure your shit out. What did you *do* to that woman?”

I don’t answer.

Ruby’s gaze bores into me like a blade. Her hands fall to my desk, and she leans over me.

“Listen, idiot. She’s the best EA you’ve ever had. I don’t have to tell you that even if I manage to find someone who doesn’t quit on you in two weeks, your life will be harder. Much harder. Because no one else will ever do what Brina does.”

“I hear you,” I grind out. “If you’re done with your rant, please—”

“No.” She shakes her head, her eyes narrowed like an angry cat. “No, Magnus. You think I’m just talking about business? She...she loved you. It’s been obvious to everyone in this office the last few weeks. It’s why she put up with your never-ending fuckery. Not only have you lost our best employee—you fucked things up with the only woman who could ever love you.”

Loved me?

Fuck it.

Another complication I don’t need.

“Admit it,” Ruby whispers. “You know how right I am, and it’s not too late to pull your head out of your—”

“Ass? Yes, you are, Ruby, and I’m done with it.” I tent my hands over my chest and lean back in my chair. “I won’t admit to anything. I’ve also got over a billion reasons in the bank

that say I won't have any trouble hiring cupid whenever I need his services."

Her whole face sours, bright-red lips twisting like an expired cherry. Then she heads back to the door.

"You're making it really, really hard not to slap you again. No fortune in the world is worth your attitude. You're so ridiculous you can't be honest with yourself. I get it. The crap with Jordan, you're hurt, and you're lashing out." She throws her hands up. "Honestly? I never thought I'd say this, but, Magnus Heron, you need to grow the fuck up. You're acting like your father. A man women literally *hid* from when they knew he was in the building."

"You watch your tongue or Miss Bristol won't be the only one handing in her resignation," I bite off, and immediately regret it.

That went too far, but so did she.

Frustrated, I stand, chucking the legal pad on my desk across the room. Ruby doesn't flinch as it smacks the wall next to her.

I never aimed to hit her. I'm not that insane. I'm just fucking reeling.

"Really?" Ruby glares, folding her arms.

"You don't get it. I broke things off with Brina specifically because I'm not my shitbag father. It wasn't any easier for me than it was for her. I can't be him. I won't. The incident at the hospital made me realize..." I trail off, the words stuck in my throat. My eyes land on the legal pad on the floor behind her. "Sorry. I didn't mean to throw it."

She nods slowly.

"Yeah, yeah, you were protecting her. I wish you would've just come to me. We could've figured something out." She looks over her shoulder at the paper pad on the floor and back at me. "I've never seen you lose it like that before. She really did a number on you, huh?"

My jaw pinches tighter than a drum.

“For what it’s worth, we planned on talking to you about it before Marissa woke up. I didn’t want anyone in the office finding out. I needed Brina free to take care of things here without juvenile rumors.” I suck in a deep, harsh breath. “Becoming a fourteen-year-old’s caretaker is harder than you’d think. I had to look after Jordan first, and I tried, but...”

But fuck-nothing.

“None of it matters now,” I whisper, turning my back, my shoulders dragging me down. “None of this matters.”

Outside, the city looks extra dreary, half the Chicago skyline obscured by thick grey fog choking out the sun.

“We all knew,” Ruby says in a tiny voice. “We knew that dried out lump of coal you call a heart grew several sizes thanks to her. The question is, what do you want to do about it?”

“Nothing. Getting Jordan home remains my top priority. As for me and Miss Bristol, I’ll take the amicable route. Move on with my life, let her move on with hers. If she comes back to work, the job is hers. If she quits, give her a generous severance package.”

But if she comes back to work, will I be able to keep my distance? Will I be my dad?

I don’t have an answer and it makes me want to fling my desk over the second Ruby leaves.

“That’s not a good idea.” Ruby shakes her head. “Severance packages are for when people are forced out due to circumstances beyond their control. I don’t recommend it. It opens you up to liability. It’s like an admission of guilt.”

And? I *am* fucking guilty.

“I’ll deal with it when the time comes,” I say.

She doesn’t say anything but makes no effort to exit my office.

“Yes?” I ask, glaring at her.

“Can I say something, Mag?” She hesitates.

“It’s not like you’ve ever asked permission before.”

“If you ended it ugly and then you give her severance for quitting, she’s going to be justifiably pissed. If you’re after an olive branch, this isn’t it.”

“Why would she be upset that I gave her something?” I ask, scowling.

Ruby laughs. “You’re such a guy. A severance package isn’t flowers or jewelry or an apology. It’s a kiss-off, and not a very nice one.”

“Bull. She can’t pay her rent with trinkets or words.”

Ruby looks at me.

“You know, I’m starting to see how a billionaire with abs stays single.”

“What the hell would you do then?” I roll my eyes right out of my head.

“If you’re asking your HR Director...you apologize. Then if anyone asks for a reference, keep it honest and glowing, but leave out the part where she abruptly quit. If you’re asking your friend, you still apologize for being a raging asshole. Next, you swallow your pride and make things right with your girl.”

Damn her to infinity.

She’s so right it hurts worse than another scorch-mark slap to the face.

“Ruby, I need to let it go,” I whisper, hating how fucking frayed I sound.

She shrugs. “It’s not my call. I’m just mad I have to replace an amazing EA.”



THAT EVENING, I storm into the car and throw my briefcase down. We’re already moving before I realize Armstrong’s usually warm greeting isn’t there.

“How’s it going?” I ask, looking up to meet his eyes in the mirror.

“Fine, sir.”

He’s not fine.

The drive home passes in grim silence. I get the feeling that he, too, would love to smack me upside the head with Ruby’s damnable smart stick.

I don’t care.

By the time he pulls up to my building, he still hasn’t said more than two words.

I put my hand on the door handle, ready to get out of the car, when Brina’s face pops into my head.

Is he still driving her around? I don’t want Sabrina lingering around bus stops after what happened to Marissa. If anything happened to her, I’d be tainted forever.

“Listen, starting today, I want you to check in with Miss Bristol to see if she needs a ride anywhere,” I tell him.

“No need, sir. Brina bought a car.”

“She—what?” My next words catch in my throat.

That speaks volumes. She’s truly done with me. And why in blazes am I hearing about Sabrina’s car purchase from my driver?

Because you told her to get lost in a hospital, you dumb fucking moose.

“Good. She’ll be back soon since she has a car payment now,” I say absentmindedly.

“She paid cash,” Armstrong tells me with a sigh. “I was there to help.”

Lovely. Now, not only do I suspect he thinks I’m a fool, I get the distinct feeling Armstrong is on her side.

“If she bought a cash car, is it safe?” That’s the question I ask, but what I really mean is, should I have the damn thing towed for repairs and then returned?

“I made sure it was, boss. *Someone* has to care for the girl.”

Yep. Suspicions confirmed. Armstrong has flipped.

Traitor.

“What did she say to you?” I growl out. “About me? About us?”

He looks into the rearview mirror so he can glare at me without turning his head.

“She didn’t have to say anything. When a woman climbs into a car sobbing and demands to go to an apartment she hasn’t slept at in weeks, you don’t have to be a love doctor to figure that one out. Now if you’ll excuse me, Mr. Heron, we’re starting to cause a backup...”

“Of course.” I exit the car with a sigh and head upstairs to my empty home.

I pace around the kitchen and reach for a scotch bottle, sloshing some out on the counter. Then I walk back to the sunroom, but stop short at the room Jordan stayed in.

All of his stuff is still here, left behind without answers.

I’ve been sucker punched.

My bastard father kidnapped my little brother. School isn’t out for another three months.

He’s going to ruin this kid’s life, and it’s all my fault.

If I hadn’t lied, if I’d told him the truth about the devil who made us both, he might’ve listened to me at the hospital.

Also, I miss him.

Goddammit, I do.

He was a good kid. I’ll never forget the look on his face when he realized that dirty old man proved I lied to him.

Idiot. I resist the urge to jump off my wrapped balcony.

“I’ll make this right somehow, J-man,” I whisper to my own reflection.

I wish I knew how.

Moving into the sunroom, I stare out at downtown Chicago with its silvery lights twinkling like tinsel. The penthouse has never felt so empty, so cold.

The worst part is, someone else is alone tonight because of my fuck-ups. I should probably visit her, only I don't have the guts to tell her I let her son leave with the man who defiled her life.

I down the scotch and then go back to the kitchen for a few more fingers.

When the second drink is gone, I change clothes, brush my teeth, and fall into bed. Sleep doesn't come.

It's too early for me. I'm only home because I couldn't focus, and because my inbox is an overflowing sewer.

Worse, I'm so addicted to Brina's body snug against mine that I can't sleep without her now.

My duvet still smells like cinnamon and vanilla and more sex I wish we'd had, and so do my pillows. This has to be remedied.

I grab my phone and text Ruby. ***Order me a new duvet, pillows, shams, sheets, the works. Don't care what it looks like. Tip yourself twenty percent.***

A second later, she replies.

Yeah, no. It's way too late for you to be texting me about your personal issues. I'm not your EA. I'm not even sure this is an appropriate task for an assistant. Stop being an ass in a top hat and beg her to come back to work.

Magnus: Without sleep I'll be harder to deal with.

Ruby: Sounds like a you problem.

Savage. I remember when my employees used to be scared of me.

Maybe she's right, though. Maybe I should beg Sabrina to keep her job.

I pull up her contact and start typing.

How are you? How's it going? Are you okay?

You had Armstrong help you buy a car?

***Did you have to tell me to lose your fucking number?
Brina, I've never needed you more.***

I can't bring myself to hit send on any of these trash messages.

Nothing I type seems right, and I'm not about to admit that I need her. That I'm dying without her, and I can't do something as simple as sleep without her, or as complicated as running my own company.

Magnus Heron, you have fucked this up.

I stalk her LinkedIn profile. It says she works at HeronComm. Maybe, if she isn't already pounding the pavement after a new job, she'll come back.

Right. She had to be *talked* into taking my job.

I scan her social profiles next. She's posting her mom's books and watching movies with Paige.

She's fine.

I'm not.

I text Ruby again. ***Where are we at on the search for the new EA? I don't think she's coming back.***

Ruby: I drafted the ads today. They'll go up tomorrow. She said that?

I hesitate before replying.

Magnus: No.

Her online activity speaks for her.

She's surviving better than me.

The woman bought herself a car and moved on.

Ruby: Don't send me stupid texts when you haven't even talked to her. I don't have the time.

I fight the urge to chuck my phone across the room, feeling like a kid who's just lost his first crush.

Outrageous.

I'm The Magnum. CEO. Billionaire. Time to start acting like it.

Magnus: How fast can we do interviews?

Ruby: Depends. You've hired and fired all the good ones in this city, remember? Your quickest path to an EA who can take the heat is to get the one you had back.

It's so much worse than that.

If I did any damn begging with Sabrina Bristol, it wouldn't be hounding her to return as my EA. I can find anyone to check my email, shuffle my schedule, and deliver coffee.

What I can't replace is *her*.

A few hours and a hangover's worth of scotch later, I finally fall asleep on the couch, swallowed by dreams.

Our bodies are bare, but my duvet covers us from the chest down. She kisses with a passion and a tease that drives me mad.

I grip her tighter, tighter, holding on for mercy.

"No," I grind out, my breath torn to shreds. "Not our first time."

I shift us so that she's flat on her back, under me.

"Oh," she breathes.

The most beautiful sound I've ever heard.

Being in her isn't enough. I need more, so I plunder her lips, shuddering when her nails rake down my back.

Suddenly, I'm sitting in my office chair.

Sabrina falls against me with my blazer tucked around her like a blanket.

The sex is over. I'm just holding her.

My idea, not hers, and I was always the guy who never cared about cuddling.

With her, I can never hold her close enough.

I can never drown myself in those kisses as long as I want.

I can never, ever find the time to show her what she means to me. I'll need the rest of my life, and maybe several more.

Before I can whisper those words torching my throat—*I love you*—a hell sound comes blasting in my ear.

The phone rings, ruining the moment, but I don't pick it up.

She kisses my lips. "Pick up, Mag. It could be Jordan."

I kiss her chin. "He can wait."

"What if he needs something?" she asks.

"It's taken me way too long to get my girl alone—"

"Uh-oh. You just called me yours again." Her smile is mischievous and her eyes sparkle, darker and richer than any Kona bean.

"I meant my EA."

"Liar." She shakes her head and grins. "I knew what you meant."

I bring her face back to mine, running my tongue along her bottom lip with a fury.

"I did," I insist. "Brina—"

"What if I'm already seeing someone else?"

"You're not, you little she-devil." I snake my hands up her sides and tickle her.

She giggles, shirking away from me.

"But what if I was?"

"He'd die a slow and painful death. A Marine never forgets certain tricks," I growl, jealousy igniting in my throat.

“So fighting a total stranger is easier than admitting I’m yours?”

I sigh. “Fine, you’re mine.”

“You don’t seem happy about it.”

“You’re pure evil,” I whisper, taking her lips again.

“Maybe, but you love me.”

I don’t even deny it.

Then the phone goes off again and rips me from the dream.

I grab at it, hoping it’s her, but it’s a dumb robo-call offering a free trial for a dating service. Almost like it knew I had the hard-on from Hades.

No missed calls. No emails. No texts.

Just a gaping silence.

It’s over.

I sit up with a hangover, my mouth so dry I feel like there’s a cobra lodged in my throat.

My father, snake that he is, might be a better man than I am.

At least he never pretended to be what he wasn’t.

If I wasn’t following in his footsteps—having an illicit relationship with an employee, giving her reason to believe that this could be more—I wouldn’t have hurt Sabrina so bad it kills me.

I wouldn’t have utterly ruined myself.

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BIKER BOYFRIEND (SABRINA)



I want to scream.

It takes the King of Assholery days to decide he wants to talk, and once he does, the texts are relentless.

Also, completely insane. They're uber-professional, like we totally didn't share a whirlwind relationship slaughtered by him chucking icicles at my heart.

Looking forward to seeing you at the office next week, he sends.

You're going to be very disappointed, Mag.

What a flipping bozo.

Magnus: How are you doing?

Delete.

Magnus: Have you reviewed the Palmer-Traficant Financial account? I'm eager for your feedback.

Nope.

I don't answer any of them, and it's kind of hilarious. I can almost see him breaking down the longer I stay silent. An hour later, his tone shifts to desperation.

Magnus: Sabrina, can we talk?

"No. You didn't want to talk when we had the chance," I mutter to myself.

Hours go by before my phone pings again.

Magnus: You won't let me apologize?

Ha. Nice try. I don't have to alleviate your guilt, Maggot.

I send Mom a quick text instead. ***Hey, my phone battery is dying. Don't freak out if you guys call and I don't answer. Love you.***

I power the phone off and throw it across the room.

Paige had more work than she could handle this week. She subcontracted me to help with a web design at the small museum where she's working now, while she follows up on what she's really after—a foot in the door at an architecture firm.

For now, it's as close as she can realistically get to doing art that pays a living wage.

The web design fee is a fraction of what I'm used to making. But that's the real world, not the cotton candy Heron wonderland where I can make two hundred thousand smackers annually, all while flirting with a certain hot, arrogant boss who's too good at ripping hearts out.

Fortunately, the web project helps keep my mind off Maggot.

Kind of.

He still crosses my mind like a thousand times a day, but at least instead of focusing on my pulverized heart, I can pour my energy into making kids' smiles on a cultural outreach thing look even prettier online.

Then the raw image of us looking out on the Chicago skyline from his office snaps into my head. It was back when I started. He told me that even the slightest puff of marketing hocus pocus helps dreams come true.

Yep, that's marketing in a nutshell. But Heron Communications focuses on making billion-dollar corporations more billions, rather than bringing dreams to life.

Honestly, I like helping these grinning kids and curators show off their sculptures more than helping rich shareholders of name brands get richer.

Oof.

I also decide that when I finish this, I'm going to overhaul my mom's site. Her sales have been shockingly decent since Maggot's last big purchase, and a high quality web presence might push her along. It's the least I can do.

"Did you see my text?" Paige asks.

Her voice makes me jump.

"Oh!" I look over my shoulder and find her in my doorway. "Uh, no, my phone's kinda...I had to turn it off."

"He's still obsessing?" Her eyebrows scrunch down.

I shrug. "Not sure if I'd call it obsessing. More like desperation. His inbox is full, he can't find an EA, and he doesn't know what to do about lying to Jordan, so he needs me."

"I'm proud of you for not giving in," she says with a smile. "Give him a deep freeze worthy of a penguin."

"He said he misses me," I whisper, wishing I shared her pride.

"Did you respond?"

I shake my head.

"Good girl."

"Anyway, what's in this text you came to ask about?"

"Our apartment building needs some work—"

"That's not news," I tell her, glancing at the miserable A/C unit that'll be straining against a baking Chicago summer soon.

She sighs. "Well, they're coming for repairs. The water's going to be off for the next two days."

"Ugh. What's the plan?"

"I'll probably go to my parents for a day, but I really don't want to be home for two whole days. It puts a cramp in my style." She strikes a silly glam girl pose.

I laugh. “Your parents give you everything you want. How could that be a bad thing?”

“They’re too up in my business, and if Mom gets started on meeting a good guy, watch *out*. Ever since that thing with Austin...” She trails off, looking down sadly.

“Say no more,” I whisper, flashing a sympathetic look.

The fact that there’s a part of my best friend reeling from a sour college relationship that ended years ago scares me.

Will I be her in a couple years?

Dating in a void, grieving a man who tore me to shreds, even if I deny it?

“Yeah, blech. Forget I said the name.” Her expression brightens again. “You want to come with me, Brina?”

A knock at the front door stops me from answering.

“Can you get it? I’m trying to wrap up that web design for you.”

“Sure!” she says.

The door’s old hinges squeak as it opens.

“Is Sabrina here?”

Oh, God. That voice.

I’m gripping the edge of my seat for support. Hearing Mag sends needles down my spine.

“I’m not sure. I just came home.” Paige’s voice is frigid. “Let me go check her room.”

The door slams shut.

I don’t get up. It would be too easy to talk to him if I move.

“That’s a good color scheme.” Paige stands behind me, her eyes dark with worry.

I look up. “Thanks?”

“Oh, and a certain Maggot is at our door with flowers... want me to tell him you’re not here?”

Flowers? Is she joking?

I blink back a hot rush of tears.

He's totally mad if he thinks I'll be wooed back by him sacrificing a few pretty plants. "Tell him I'm busy giving my new boyfriend a BJ."

"Nice!" Paige snickers, covering her mouth. "Are you serious? I'm so down for messing with this idiot."

"I don't know. It might be easier," I say. "Also, I don't want the flowers. Tell him to drop them off at a retirement home. They need pretty things more than I do."

"I already slammed the door in his face. With any luck, he's gone, but let me handle this." She walks out of the room.

I stop what I'm doing, my senses glued to what's happening in the front room.

The door creaks open.

I wait, listening intently. He's probably gone. He's a busy jackass with places to go, people to see, hearts to shred. I've never been more to him than a convenience.

"Brina's boyfriend says she's busy," Paige says.

Panic time.

So he didn't leave. And damn—she went there!

"Boyfriend?" His voice is strained, angry-jealous, but I don't think he buys it. "What boyfriend?"

"Dude. They're really *busy*, so this isn't a good time. I think a BJ might be involved, since she wasn't talking through the door, just making these hot gurgling noises."

Holy crap, Paige.

I'm spinning.

"Will you please give her these?" He growls, and I smile as I imagine him shoving a bouquet at her.

"Hmm, I dunno. Sabrina's not a big flower girl. I think she'd rather you donate them to a retirement home or something."

Pause.

“And how do you know that, if she wasn’t talking?” Mag growls, his eyes smoldering blue volcanic craters in my mind.

“We’re friends. Duh. With her, I know everything. Plus, her boyfriend finds gifts from other guys like her creepy ex-boss inappropriate, and...well, she just doesn’t like you. No hard feelings,” Paige practically sings the last part.

I’m soaring, biting back an awkward laugh. I can’t decide whether to laugh or cry.

So, I probably shouldn’t have given her ideas with the boyfriend bit. I didn’t expect her to take it this far.

“Does she hate me?”

Whoa. Insecurity in Magnus Heron’s voice? That’s a first.

Paige’s words are chipper. “Probably. I mean, I would.”

“This new man of hers—is he good?” He grinds out, buying just enough of the bait for his voice to waver with something I don’t expect.

Hurt.

I doubt Paige notices, he’s ever the growly ice-cold businessman, but I do. I hear it and my heart stops.

“He’s pretty freaking hot. If they ever break up, it’s my turn.”

“I meant good to her, you—forget it.” Mag is getting furious.

And this isn’t exactly funny anymore. I’m torn between coming out of my room to defuse the situation and letting Paige hand him his ass. It can’t be worse than what he did to me.

“No prob, already forgotten! I’ve wasted enough of my day talking to you. Ciao!” Paige enjoys this way too much.

She slams the door again and I hear both her feet land on the floor after a full jump.

She waltzes back into my room and falls on the bed.

“Sheesh. That was intense. Also, he’s effing hot. I see why you’re having a hard time getting over him. I should’ve had a turn at *him*.”

“Ha ha,” I spit back, my voice acid.

“Hey, just joking. Are you sure you don’t want to come to my parents?”

I shake my head.

All Paige has seen are Mag’s good looks and a hint of his legendary temper. She doesn’t know the half of it.

She’s never seen his employees turn protective when he’s been insulted.

She didn’t watch him take in a kid he barely knows.

She hasn’t felt his Lucifer lips brushing her skin, taking her to the depths of hell and then sending her to all seven heavens.

“I’m not having a hard time moving on. It’s just... confusing. It’s normal to be upset, isn’t it?” I whisper, somehow doubting myself.

“For sure. Bad jokes aside, you know I’ve got your back.” With a crooked grin, she gives me a quick air pistol shot and blows imaginary smoke off her finger.

I roll my computer chair away from my desk. So much for finishing any work today.

“I’d planned to go to my parents, but he might show up there, too. Maybe I’ll take you up on that offer.”

“Cool. You know, I’m surprised,” Paige says, sitting up. “He never struck me like the kinda guy who’d go full Romeo. You think he’d really show up at your parents’ house?”

“Who knows. I didn’t think he’d come here either and he’d just stick to bombarding my phone...were the flowers nice?” I can’t believe I’m asking, but here we are.

“Hmm, do you really want to know? Can’t see how that’s going to help this.” She tilts her head, studying me like I’ve lost my mind.

Maybe I have when I let out the next question.

“But were they?” I whisper.

She closes her eyes and nods. “It was a full bouquet. Birds of paradise, I think. They looked expensive.”

“Pssh.” I roll my eyes. “Ruby probably picked it out. Also, he’s a billionaire. He doesn’t buy anything cheap or dull.”

“The flowers were intricate. Some serious time and thought went into them, but it could be normal for high end florists.”

Another question scrapes at the edge of my heart. I’m afraid to ask, afraid to know, but more afraid to hold it in.

“How did he look?” I venture. The real question is more like *did he seem tortured and sleepless? Beaten to a pulp? Is Magnus Heron miserable without me?*

She shrugs. “He sure looked more worn than his fancy photos online, but I’ve never met him. I don’t have much to compare it to.”

“He usually walks around in a three-piece suit looking like a GQ model,” I tell her, shutting my eyes and trying to shield my brain from his perfect image.

“He was wearing jeans and a black sweater with a scarf today. Reminded me of a cowboy who got his butt kicked.” She pauses. “Why are you smiling?”

“I didn’t know I was,” I whisper, pushing a hand over my mouth.

Mag in cowboy jeans sounds like a recipe for searing me alive. But he has to be a tortured soul if he’s strutting around like he’s been in a saloon fight.

Not that it matters.

It’s over. Done. Epilogued.

I need to start acting like a sane person and *let the hell go*.

“Let’s get some stuff ready for your parents.” I bolt up, shutting my laptop, and grab my overnight bag to start

packing.

Who knows if Mag really would barge in at my parents' house, but he knows where they live thanks to his oh-so-thorough new hire check. And if a butt-kicked cowboy who's hotness incarnate shows up on Emily Bristol's doorstep begging to see her only daughter...

She's going to clap her hands together, make a high-pitched squeal, sell my ass down the river, start planning a wedding, and then write a book about it.

Mom would never get why I can't play damsel in distress to some rich jagoff. She'd insist he's just a scolded alpha hero who's learning how to control his Neanderthal impulses.

Yeah.

Paige's house is the safer choice, hands down.

“I LOVE LOGAN SQUARE.” I get out of Paige's car in her parents' driveway. “I have no idea why you wanted to rent a place smack in the middle of Chicago.”

I'd only been to this suburb a couple of times before college. I always swore when I landed a grown-up job that this is where I'd live. I'd get a house with an in-law's apartment so I could bring my parents over when I needed to, whenever I could talk Mom and Dad into leaving their decrepit house.

“Because it's right in the middle of Chicago,” Paige says. “Hello, convenience.”

“I always forget you're a bigger partier than me,” I say with a sigh.

“My parents won't be home for a few hours, so we'll go up and order some pizza.”

The house is beautiful for an affluent couple, but not beyond extravagant like Mag's or eccentric like my parents. It's a two-story brick house with a couple of peaks on the roof and plain pink rose bushes in the front yard.

“I like your parents' place already,” I tell her.

“You always say that,” she laughs. “Your folks’ is better with the whole Hobbit-vibe.”

“Oh, please. Theirs looks like something out of a Brothers Grimm story.”

It was nasty and leaky until Mag made sure it got fixed.

Paige isn’t joking, though. She has her own living room on the second floor. We sit on a couch and she orders pizza. Being waist-deep in good pie shops is one big strike in Chicago’s favor.

“*Schitt’s Creek?*” I say, my hand already on the remote.

“That’s like your favorite show.”

“More like a guilty pleasure. It’s kind of like scotch. It almost burns your throat raw going down and yet you still want more.” I laugh, stabbing at the buttons to pick an episode.

She raises a brow. “Wow. Since when are you the scotch connoisseur?”

“I’m not, but Mag is.” It’s out before I realize it.

Oops.

“Did he finally stop texting you?”

“I don’t know. I had to power my phone off to keep from responding.” I pull my phone out and turn it on. I’m not sure why.

I’m not hoping he’s still texting.

Definitely not.

It would be so much easier if he just gave up.

Yet I smile when I see my notifications. “Eleven missed messages.”

“All from him? Damn.” Paige smirks, and I can’t blame her.

“I haven’t looked yet.”

But I am now, scrolling down through several missed texts.

Mom: I'm sending you a new charger tonight for that stupid phone. What if you have an emergency, baby?

It's nice that she cares. But my warm and fuzzy Mom-loves-me smile turns into a frown when I look further down my screen.

Magnus: Why did your roommate lie to me? You're better than that.

What makes you think she was lying, jackass? Is it really that hard to believe someone else would want me?

"He knew you were lying," I tell Paige in a small voice.

"Oh, Brina." She rolls her eyes. "He hopes. The show I gave him could've won awards."

Mom: Brina, baby, did you get your phone charged?

"They're not all from him," I say, scrolling down. "Mom texted, too, worried about my phone."

Unfortunately, Mag wasn't done.

Magnus: I don't even deserve an answer?

Fuck no, you don't. I type it into the screen and stop just short of hitting send.

"Brina? Are you texting him?" Paige asks.

I sigh and delete it.

Not getting answers is obviously bothering him, and I want to keep that going.

"No," I say glumly, scrolling through more messages.

Magnus: Okay, maybe it wasn't a lie. If your boyfriend's real, I hope he deserves you.

You sure didn't.

"Oh, now he says maybe it wasn't a lie," I hiss out.

"See?" Paige throws her head back and giggles. "I told ya! He *hoped* it was a lie."

I just hope there's an end to these texts.

Mom: Honey? I haven't heard from you in hours. I'm starting to get worried.

Magnus: Your mother called the office looking for you. She seems worried.

“Crap. My mom called HeronComm thanks to my radio silence,” I say. My gut tightens.

“Too bad, so sad. Tell him you were having wild movie star sex with your biker boyfriend, who your parents don't approve of,” Paige suggests with a wicked grin.

“You're so ridiculous,” I tell her, stifling a laugh.

But these text messages totally aren't.

Mom: Brina, where are you? Text me back. You could be dead in a ditch somewhere! How would I know? And now I heard you randomly took a vacation from your job? What's going on?

Greaaaaat. I feel sick, and the bile only climbs up my throat when I see more from King Asshole.

Magnus: Sabrina, please call your parents.

Magnus: Also, if I hear from them again, I'm sending Armstrong out looking.

“Oh my God!” I belt out, ignoring the TV.

“What?” Paige asks.

“Now he says he's sending his driver to find me if Mom calls the office all panicked again.” I shake my head.

“Isn't that called stalking?” Paige blinks.

“It's because Mom called them, all worried. Her writer brain has me kidnapped by an evil mafia group or something, or maybe I'm in a coma waiting for a kiss from Prince Charming.”

Paige giggles. “Sorry, didn't mean to laugh. It was just—”

“I love my mom, but she's way funnier when you don't have to live with her.” I start to text back a reply to my mom before Armstrong goes on a wild goose chase.

“Are you texting him?”

“Nope, telling Mom I’m alive before she gives Dad a heart attack.”

Paige nods. “Good call.”

Sabrina: I’m alive and well, Mom. Please don’t ever call my office again.

Her reply comes back near instantly.

Mom: Yay! And you should call your office, honey. People are worried about you.

It’s not my office anymore.

Also, I refuse to count Mag among “people.”

He’s horny, overworked, scrambling after poor Jordan, and doesn’t know what to do with himself.

None of those things are my problem, even if my heart goes out to the boy.

Mag needs to find another outlet. It can’t be me. But I’m sure my mother already has visions of wedding bells, white dresses, explosions of flowers, and cute little party favors.

Sabrina: You can tell him I’m alive so he doesn’t send his driver out looking for me. If you tell him more than that, I’ll never speak to you again.

Mom: Oh, Brina. That bad??? I’m sure you can work this out.

Sabrina: He’s no romance hero and he’s not my boyfriend.

Mom: Hint-hint...I’m a pretty good judge of character.

Yep, she’s insufferable, but I love her.

Sabrina: Fine, Mom. He can be a hero, but this is not my story.

Mom: Okay, baby. I’ll drop it.

Thank God. This isn’t a freaking book you can tie up with a happy ending, Mom. Stay out of it.

All words that flash through my head but I'll never say out loud.

I won't let Mag's pain make me hurt Mom. Oh, and speak of the literal devil.

A new message lights up my screen.

Magnus: Thanks for letting your mom tell me you're okay. Are you coming back to work next week?

Nope. Buzz off.

"This is hopeless. Now he wants to know if I'm going back to the office," I say with a groan.

"No, loser!" Paige holds her hand up in an L on her forehead.

Magnus: Jordan left with my dad that night. I haven't seen him since. His mom is going to hate me.

Awesome, here comes the pulling on my heartstrings.

It's partly his own dumb fault. He let her son leave with a lunatic. Though he didn't have much choice.

We could have worked it out.

Maybe I could've snatched the kid while he took the old man down. Or just maybe—

Maybe he didn't want to talk to me.

He couldn't even look at me that night.

I hope Baxter Heron doesn't do too much damage, and maybe Jordan learning the truth about the last piece of his family will bring him peace. After everything his poor mother went through, I hope she finds a happy ending too.

But I won't be there to find out.

It's not my story and not my fight.

I don't have enough heart left for it to shatter again. If I let Magnus Heron back in my life, my dad and I will be sharing a prescription soon.

There's only one last thing left to do. It hurts, but it's time.

Paige watches me mash at buttons on my phone. “Brina, what are you doing?”

“Blocking Heron’s number,” I say point-blank.

I try not to wince when I hit the button.

Paige stays up serving me pizza and ice cream, watching movies all night, ever the supportive friend.

At some point, I go to the room connected to hers by a bathroom. I’m emotionally drained and need to rest, but sleep hasn’t come easy. I crash in a bed softer than my own, but just can’t get comfortable.

I miss having over six feet of solid rock and sculpted muscle clinging to me.

His absence is like a vast, empty chasm with a sea rushing through it, the waves rolling down, shoving me deeper into a dark abyss.

Yes, it’s agonizing and overly dramatic.

Yes, the tears come fast and furious and there’s no damn stopping them.

Yes, I cry myself to sleep that night with knives scratching at my soul.

Then I dream of him again.

We’re lying in his huge cloud of a bed, wrapped in Egyptian cotton sheets.

His arms are around me, and his earthy smell mingled with fragrant cologne makes me swoon a hundred times. My head rests on his shoulder—right where it belongs—and I can’t hide my smile as he runs a hand through my hair, slowly winding it around his fingers.

“Big news, woman. I love you,” he says, his eyes hot blue stars.

“That was my headline!” I whisper, kissing his cheek, his jaw, his chin. “I love you more, Mag. Now and forever.”

Then I start pushing the blankets down, so much warmth leaving my body.

His arms slide around my waist, cinching me to his side, yanking me back. “Where do you think you’re going? It’s Saturday.”

“The office,” I say. “The airline sent feedback, they need ___”

“Stay with me,” he growls, so fierce I’m taken aback.

The plea in his voice makes it impossible for me to do anything else. It also reminds me how deep our connection is.

I lean down and meet his mouth.

The kiss is slow and sensuous, but not the kind of heat that leads to more—just the kind when you *know* this person you’re kissing is part of you.

Except when I wake up, the kiss is a lie.

I never got the chance to tell him I loved him, too.

Because he never said it outside my tormenting dreams.

Not even once.

If he really wants to hunt me down, it’s all he’ll ever have to say.

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SIMPLY PERFECT (MAGNUS)



Another week of nothing.
Absolutely fucking nothing.

My attorney's private eyes keep watch on Jordan, but we haven't found a way to force my dad back to the States yet. Marissa flutters in and out of consciousness, but when she's alert, she's incoherent.

She doesn't even know that I let that jackass leave with her son. I've tried to tell her twice, and after a look of horror, she slips away and comes back the next day, her memory wiped.

Goddammit.

I can't keep torturing her, torturing myself, like this.

And yes, I know the clock is ticking.

Every second Jordan spends with our father, the more he's in danger. They could split the Virgins for places where I'll never get him back.

Sabrina hasn't taken my calls, of course.

I think she blocked my fucking number.

I can't get a response to my emails either—or maybe they're just lost in the mess of over ten thousand messages—and reading the Google Finance headlines this morning makes me want to stay in bed.

HeronComms' shares are down. Plummeting. Not that I give a shit.

I'm too busy pining over a battered heart like some lovesick boy to effectively run the company I rescued years ago. My own private hell, an obsession with a woman who despises me.

Fuck!

What difference does it make? What difference does anything make?

I pry myself out of bed with a snarl and dress in a jet-black suit Brina always complimented. I'm going to her apartment.

I'll stand outside her door in the rain until she decides to talk to me or call the cops. It's the only thing I can think to do. My last-ditch effort to save my sanity, and my woman.

But after today, if she has me dragged away in handcuffs, if she loathes me that much, I'll have to stay away.

Let her move on.

I'm sure it won't be the last I see of her.

She's brilliant. She'll still be at every conference and convention. She'll just leave with someone else. Some lucky bastard who treats her better than I did.

Twenty minutes later, I climb in the town car.

"The office?" Armstrong asks.

"No. Brina's apartment." I stare out the window, trying to think what I'm going to say if she'll even talk to me.

Armstrong doesn't answer, but his eyes flick to me in the rearview mirror, more than once. Eventually, he clears his throat.

"Yes?" I ask. "Something on your mind?"

"Mr. Heron, it's your business, but honestly? I suggest taking a gift."

I lean my head against the window. "The last time I tried she told me to deliver the flowers to a retirement home. And I did."

"Does she keep flowers around her desk?"

“No,” I say slowly.

“Hmm.”

I stiffen in my seat. “You think flowers were a bad idea?”

“I didn’t say that. I’m just not sure they’re right for Brina Bristol.”

How does Armstrong know this shit if I don’t?

Do I not care about her as much as I think I do, or am I really so self-absorbed I can’t pick out a decent gift for the only woman I’ve ever loved?

“What would be better?” I ask quietly.

A second later, I answer my own question.

“Wait. Take us to Sweeter Grind.”

Armstrong lets out a low, deep chuckle. “Now that sounds more like it!”

We make our pit stop, and soon I’m knocking on Brina’s door, holding a steaming cinnamon latte and a box of Clarissa’s Finest Truffles under my arm.

Her roommate answers the door in oven mitts, a perky, mischievous-looking blonde holding a pie in her hand.

“Hi, Paige,” I say, my voice level.

“You again? What are you doing here?”

“I brought Sabrina a cinnamon latte and truffles.” I hold the cup up. “Her favorite.”

“Ohhh, bad timing. She just went on a caffeine purge and a no sugar kick. I’ll tell her you stopped by, though.” Her free hand lingers on the door, and she starts to push it closed.

I jab my foot between the door and its frame.

“It’s decaf and almond milk. Can I speak with her please?”

“Liar, and no. Now move your foot before I break it.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” I snarl, but catch myself, forcing a fake-as-hell smile. “Sabrina told me about your sense of humor. I’m laughing. Inside.”

Paige frowns, her eyes snapping to the pie in her hand, before returning to meet my gaze.

“Are you done, Magnus? I’m pretty busy.”

My jaw clenches. I thought no one could be more blunt or stubborn than Sabrina.

“I need to speak with Brina,” I growl.

“And I need a million dollars but oh well! You need to get out of my apartment.”

“Or what?”

She looks down at the pie. “Dunno, but it involves you wearing whipped cream.”

I motion her forward.

“Bring it.”

She frowns. I knew I was calling her bluff.

“Well, or maybe I’ll just call the police and say you’re stalking us,” she tells me.

“It’ll take them an hour to get here in rush hour. I’ll stand here until then. You’re not her gatekeeper.”

“Wrong. She appointed me to be—”

“Look. Just tell her I’m sincerely sorry—ready to grovel even—and need to talk to her. Please.” I hate how my voice is already hoarse, pleading.

Paige glares. “What makes you so sure she’s here, anyway?”

“My driver helped her buy the little red convertible parked out front.”

For a second, Paige looks surprised, before melting back into that mask of brute sarcasm. “Maybe she’s with her boyfriend.”

“Liar.” I shake my head.

“Careful. Hate to break it to you, but she hates you so much she’d rather go back to work at that stupid pet place

where they talked trash about her designs than ever have to look at you again. I'm not bothering her with your shit. Show yourself out." She kicks against the toe of my shoe, trying to get me to move my leg.

Sorry, girl. I'm not going anywhere.

She frowns. "You're really not going to leave nicely?"

I don't respond.

"And you're not afraid of the cops?"

I didn't say that. Only that we have a while to wait if she calls them, and I'm holding out hope Sabrina might give me an inch to talk to her.

"How much do you like your fancy suit?" she asks.

"Excuse me?" The question catches me off guard. "Sabrina likes it just fine. Why?"

Paige nods slowly.

Before I can think, the pie in her hand comes barreling at my face.

There's a loud *slap* like a wet sponge hitting a cement floor.

Then I'm drowning in flavors I don't particularly like. Sweet-tasting cream and strawberries drip down my blazer and formerly starched white shirt.

"Bad move, buster. You interrupted my baking time," she snaps, a hellish smile on her face.

In shock, I drop the coffee I've been holding. Somehow, the lid flies off and scalding cinnamon latte splashes my leg. I wipe my hand over my eyes with a groan, slinging off strawberries and cream, just as my phone rings.

"Can I at least have a towel?"

"No. But I'll take those." I feel her reach out and yank the truffle box from under my arm.

Right before she kicks me in the shin again.

I stumble back, stunned and dazed from the pie to the face and my phone blaring.

The door slams.

The lock clicks.

Someone passing by in the hall smothers a surprised laugh.

This is not my fucking day.

I wipe my pie-covered hands on my trousers—this suit’s ruined anyhow—and answer the phone.

“Heron,” I growl.

“Mr. Heron, this is Nurse Becky from Northwestern Memorial. Miss Quail is awake and asking for her son.”

Fuck.

Just when I thought things couldn’t get worse.

“Again? What did you tell her this time? I’m on my way.”

“I told her I’d call you and see if you could bring him in.”

“My father left the country with the kid,” I grind out, hating everything. “I’m working on it. Is Marissa more conscious than the last few times?”

“I’m afraid so.” She takes a long, audible inhale. “You may need to request a social worker sit in on the visit. This kind of information could be too much for her to handle right now.”

So not only did I let Baxter Heron run off with Jordan, now I might just kill his mom?

This whole sick scenario is my fault.

I shouldn’t have given Baxter Heron the option of leaving almost a decade ago.

I wish I’d spared him nothing, outed him and burned everything he owned down to the ground. He wouldn’t have Marissa’s son hostage in the Virgin damn Islands.

“Does she really need to know right now?” I fire back into the phone.

“Well...the nurse in me wants to tell you no. But the mom in me is ready to slap you for trying to weasel out of telling that woman you let someone take her kid while she was in a coma. How could you?” She sighs. “Besides, she’s asking about him.”

“Uh—in fairness, I tried to stop him. I’m not his legal guardian, and your lovely security stopped me from getting physical with the flying monkey who carried him off.”

“Well. Talk to the doctor and see if he thinks she can handle it,” the nurse says.

It’s a statement. She doesn’t leave room for argument.

“I’m coming now,” I grumble.

I stagger down the building’s stairs knowing two things.

One, I have to get Sabrina Bristol out of my system, for both our sakes. I owe her space to move on, and I should be entirely focused on my company and getting Jordan home.

And more importantly, I have no fucking clue how I’m going to get through this next thing I have to do. Not without Brina’s kind heart there to help.



MARISSA QUAIL BLINKS several times when I come into the room. The last time she manages to hold her eyes open.

I don’t know what to say, or even if she knows who I am.

“Hi, Marissa,” I try. “It’s Magnus.”

“Hi.” Her voice is low and dazed. She sounds drugged.

I’m sure she is.

“How are you?” I ask, a stupid question.

She’s still got tubes and wires attached to her body. That alone doesn’t scream well.

She sighs and moans simultaneously. “It hurts. Everything just...hurts.”

“I’m so sorry for what you’ve been through.” Thoughts whip through my brain as I try to think how to help her. “Should I call a nurse? Maybe you could get more painkillers?”

“They told me...I can’t have more. Not yet.” She stares straight ahead. “Thank you for coming.”

I sit down in the chair near her bed, nodding.

“Has anyone talked to you?” I pause, hoping she’ll jump in so I don’t have to say more. “About Jordan?”

“The social worker came. She told me he’s with Baxter and you...you have more information?”

I’m so gutted I can barely speak.

“Baxter found out you were in the hospital. I don’t know how. I haven’t spoken to him in years, not since the day he threatened you, until he showed up here.” Guilt gnaws at me, and I look away, gathering the courage to face her again. “He told Jordan he always wanted to be in his life—the bastard liar—but you wouldn’t let him. It’s my fault—”

“Y-your fault? How is it your...” she trails off, uncomprehending.

Oh, boy.

I close my eyes and squeeze the back of my neck with my hand until it hurts.

“The night you came to the hospital, they called me to pick up Jordan. He was freaked out about leaving, he didn’t know me. I told him I’m his brother to calm him down the next morning. And when he asked where our dad was, I just...I told him he was dead. Never in a million years did I expect Baxter to show up in person. I thought Jordan was better off not knowing.”

“But I’m confused. What does that have to do with Jordan leaving?” She blinks and shifts in her bed. “He should know better.”

“He said you wouldn’t tell him anything and I lied to him. He was confused. He thought Baxter was the only person

being honest.”

The reality eviscerates me yet again as I narrate. How the fuck did I let this happen?

She doesn't speak for a long time. I can't tell if she's mad, but she should be.

“Where are they now?” she asks softly.

“Jordan will be back soon.” I rub my throat, my voice so raw. “I have a whole surveillance team watching him, and the best law firm in the country working on getting him back. Your son will be home soon, even if I have to go in with guns blazing. I promise.”

Her eyes narrow. She can tell I'm stalling. “Magnus, where are they?”

“Saint Thomas,” I say.

“Come again?”

“Saint Thomas. Charlotte Amalie, to be specific.” I sigh. “It's in the US Virgin Islands. But I'm working on getting him home. I know this was my fault—”

“Oh, my God. Is he safe? Baxter isn't the fatherly type, Magnus. You know that.”

Fuck, yes, I do.

“The private investigator tells me he seems healthy and in no clear danger, but I'm working like a dog to get him home. And now that you're awake, it'll be easier. The only reason I haven't already brought him back is because I'm not his guardian.”

“Tell your attorney I have full custody. Baxter has no rights. At all. I don't care what happened...”

My mouth drops. “My dad wanted custody?”

He never wanted to say two words to me.

She sighs. “He threatened it at first, when he knew I was pregnant. He wasn't really interested in Jordan. It was just one more tool to bludgeon me.”

That animal. My hand flexes into a fist.

“He’s controlling. Horrible. I was determined that he wouldn’t use Jordan to control me...that he wouldn’t turn my beautiful son into the kind of monster he is. So I went to the police right after Jordan was born, claimed he was abusive, and filed for emergency custody. By the time his lawyer tracked him down to let him know, they’d already missed a court date. I got lucky. The judge was a woman raised by a single mom. She granted me custody and gave him zero visitation rights. He didn’t contest it, because he didn’t want anyone knowing.”

“Marissa, you were twenty-two when Jordan was born.”

“Twenty-one. I graduated early.”

“You’re a smart lady,” I tell her, wishing like hell her brains were around to help this situation.

I wouldn’t have blown several lives to kingdom come.

There’s a long silence.

I’m about to excuse myself so I can go home and call the attorney. Marissa’s custody agreement should help us get Jordan back to Chicago. Then when I get off the phone, I can resume drowning myself in scotch because I’ve lost the best thing in my life.

I stand. “I’m going to call the attorney and—”

“Wait. Don’t go yet.”

“Okay.” I sit again.

“I just wanted to say thank you.”

I’m shocked. This woman has been in a coma for weeks, woke up to find I’ve lost her only son, and she’s thanking me? What the fuck?

“What for?”

She starts laughing and stops a few seconds later.

“Don’t make me laugh again, Magnus. It hurts.”

“Sorry? I don’t understand.”

“Thank you for taking care of Jordan and bringing him to see me. I know you guys were here almost every day. I’ll never forget it.”

I cock my head, unsure what she means.

“Jordan’s my little brother. I was happy to help. I’ve told you that ever since the day I found out he existed, and what my father did to you. It’s rough being an only child. And just between you and me...I always wanted a kid brother.” I smile.

Of course, I never expected said brother to come from my dad’s disgusting affair with his intern, but I’m being honest.

Even if J-man curses me for the rest of his life, I’ll never regret the time we had.

“How did you know we were here every day? The nurses told you?”

“Oh, I could hear you. I thought I was dreaming, at first, but once the staff convinced me I’m in the hospital and this isn’t a dream...I knew it was real. I missed some things, I think. I had a hard time hearing everything and it was hard to follow your voices. But I knew Jordan was here. I heard your voice and a woman’s. She was here a lot too. Did you finally get married?”

God. That’s like a punch to the gut. I wish.

The light in Marissa’s eyes kills me. Just like it leaves no doubt she heard us wishing her well in her coma.

And did I really talk to Brina like she was my wife? I must be even more fucked in the head than I thought.

“No,” I say slowly. “Not quite.”

“So she’s your girlfriend, then?” Marissa looks up with these hopeful eyes.

“She was my assistant,” I whisper, my throat so dry.

“Oh, wow. I was sure you were together. You seemed too perfect. It was almost like you were co-parenting Jordan. He sounded like he liked her too. He liked her a lot. I could tell.”

I laugh because it's the only thing I can do not to feel shredded. "You got all that from our visits, while you were in a coma? Damn, you're good."

"Funny thing about being stuck in bed—you get a lot of time to think, and you guys were my only entertainment except the gossipy nurses..." Her smile is all warmth, and it makes me fucking *abhor* what my father did to her.

"Brina and I weren't perfect together. We couldn't have been."

Though I'll admit it made me wonder...what would having a kid of my own be like? What would it be like with *her*?

"You couldn't be perfect because she's your secretary?"

No, because she dumped me.

"She's not interested," I say.

"I seriously thought she was with you. Her voice usually came from the same place as yours. I even thought I heard you kiss a couple times. Maybe I was dreaming."

"You thought we were perfect because we stood close together?" I stare at the floor, remembering one or two occasions when I stole a quick peck, usually when she was trying to coax Jordan away for the night and being so sweet about it.

"She just always seemed to know...when you needed space and when you needed her," Marissa says with a weary smile.

Damn it all. We should be talking about Jordan.

Still, I wonder.

If Sabrina was perfect for me, was I ever perfect for her?

"Forgive me, I think we'd better move on bringing Jordan home. I'll call the attorney about your custody agreement." I stand, heading for the door.

"Magnus?" she calls after me.

"Yes?"

“Am I seeing things or are there a couple of strawberries on your collar? I need to know for the doctors.”

I look down, holding in a growl.

Sure enough, there’s a shameful strawberry hiding under my collar and another tucked under my lapel. I pick them out and trash them. “It’s strawberries. Good eye.”

She laughs and then winces. “Oww! I’ve got to stop doing that. I just asked because they told me I need to let them know if I see anything funny.”

I have no idea what to say to that.

“Um, why are you walking around with strawberries on a three-piece suit?” she asks.

“My former assistant’s roommate pied me,” I grumble, immune to her knowing the truth at this point.

“Pied you? Oh my God. What did you do?”

“I left. What could I do?”

“No, I mean, what did you do to deserve a pie attack?”

“I—I upset her.”

“The roommate or the assistant?”

“Both. It’s a long story.”

Technically, not that long. Either we were really together and I was foolish enough to throw it all away or I had a fling with my employee.

No, it wasn’t a fling, and I know it.

I’d die for that woman.

And I’d rather die a thousand deaths than ever be the reason Baxter Heron and other filthy old men talk shit about her.

“You took care of Jordan while I was here...now I want to help you,” Marissa whispers. “She loves you. It’s that obvious even to a woman in a coma. Don’t give up on her, you hear me?”

I nod, stunned that I'm taking advice from this lady who's barely conscious. I'm even more amazed she's able to deliver it so poignantly.

"If you have to take two or three more pies to the face, do it. Fight for her. I think she's worth it. I realize I don't know her and don't know you that well. But she came to the hospital with you every day and did everything she could to take care of your little brother. That doesn't sound like an assistant. That sounds like someone who loves you. And whatever you did—people forgive almost anything for the ones they love."

"She blocked my number," I tell her for some unholy reason.

Why? Her issues vastly outweigh mine.

"Because. If she's really important to you, you'll find a way, Magnus."

I leave then, telling her I'll talk to her later. When I get to the parking lot, Armstrong is there in my town car waiting.

Marissa's words echo in my head.

You'll find a way.

"Armstrong, honest question...do you think Brina and I were good together?"

"Your personal life's none of my concern, boss."

"Sure, but did you?" I sigh. "Give me the truth. I won't chew your head off, I swear."

"Sir, I thought you were lucky she gave you the time of day." His voice softens. "But I'm sorry she didn't accept the latte."

"Her roommate never told her I was there." I huff out a breath. "How do I apologize if she won't see me?"

"Mr. Heron, I've been married for over twenty years. If my wife got mad enough to leave me, I'd put up more of a fight, pies to the face be damned."

He's right.

I didn't do enough to stop Jordan from leaving with Baxter that night. I stood there, numb and conflicted, while my whole world caved in.

I watched Jordan be led away by a pied piper's lies.

I'll be damned if I'll stand by watching Brina walk away, too.

Not when there's still something I can do about it.

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SKYWRITER (SABRINA)



Mom: *Come over for lunch.*

Sabrina: *I'm working, Mom.*

Mom: *You're unemployed. Just come! You can work here.*

Sabrina: *Paige helped me get a freelance gig. I'll bring it over if you're so lonely. (Eyeball emoji).*

Mom: *Don't roll virtual eyes at your mother, baby. Not nice.*

Sabrina: *It's not virtual, Mom. They're emoji eyes.*

Her point is clear though. I'm supposed to come over for lunch and not complain about it.

Before I even pull into the driveway, I know something's up. A giant card planted in front of the house spells out CONGRATULATIONS, EMILY BRISTOL!

What now? I let myself into the bungalow.

"Are you guys ever going to start locking your door?"

"Oh, good! She's here." Mom's voice is weepy. "Brina, baby, we're in the kitchen. Come on in."

"What's going on?" I yell into the other room.

"An incredible week. Are you going to come here or do I have to drag you in?"

I can't decide if Mom sounds high on life or just hyper.

My eyes bug out as soon as I plod into the kitchen.

There's this massive catered Italian buffet set up on the counter, rolls and cold cuts and eggplant rollatini and meatballs and pasta in vodka sauce.

Even Dad beams at me when he stops stuffing his face from a plate piled high.

Whatever happened is big.

I smile at Dad first. He's more likely to cut to the chase. Mom will try to give me the full story in her slow, dramatic, oh-so-writerly way. Right now, I just want to know what the heck we're celebrating.

"You guys look...happy," I try.

"Damn right, Brina." His grin stretches wider. "I'm going fishing in Sturgeon Bay for a week."

Suspicion creeps over me like a blanket.

"Oh, cool, you've talked about that forever! How, though?"

"I won a big vacation package. Don't even remember the contest. But your ma and me are staying at a cozy little bed and breakfast for a week. I get unlimited fishing with a free license and boat rental. She gets a spa package."

Oh, no.

No one wins packages from contests they never entered, and I *know* Dad didn't.

Because I remember my boss's little brother won lots of contests he never entered, too. All because Mag didn't know how else to stay involved in his life.

This is not cool.

My hands curl into fists. I want to go outside, call him, and scream into the phone, but talking to him will only make it worse.

But now he's sending my parents weird gifts, and I just have to let it go and let him play Creepy Bad Santa?

Yikes.

I take a deep breath and remind myself worse things could happen. Magnus is an arrogant douchebag, but he's harmless. Dad's happier than a lark with a vacation he's always wanted, and no one had to pay a dime.

But still...

Mom looks downright teary-eyed. Since when does she give a flip about a week in northern Wisconsin? There has to be more to it.

"What's with the catering?" I ask. "No one died, right?"

"Oh, Brina!"

"Mom?" I whisper, my heart racing.

"You'll never believe this..." She stands up, wiping her eyes, and smiles so big I can't see her pupils. "*Hog Fights Under City Lights* sold a million copies. I'm a USA Today bestseller!"

She's sobbing maniacally.

"Are...are you okay?" I ask, my voice so small, fear clenching my throat.

She wipes her eyes. "I'm so okay. It's just—I've waited my whole life for this, and somewhere along the way, I gave up. I didn't think I'd ever be here. Agents are querying *me* now—big names who do huge book deals."

Oh My God.

This is where I realize I'm going to go to jail, because if I ever see Magnus Heron again, I will *strangle* him.

When he quits buying her damn books, she's going to be crushed. Though I'm not sure crushed is the right word for making Mom a bestseller, and both of my parents insta-millionaires.

God.

I pivot on my heel and start stalking away.

"Brina?" Mom calls.

“Hold that thought. I forgot my phone in the car. I’ll be right back,” I say tightly.

“You don’t care? I thought you’d be proud of me...” She seems hurt.

Damn it, damn it, *damn it*.

With a suffocating sigh, I move in and hug her fiercely.

“I am, Mom. It’s amazing, but I’m always proud, whether you’re selling one book or one billion. You taught me how to walk and talk.” I kiss her cheek. “You don’t have to put Sir Oinkswell on a movie screen to impress me. I’m happy for you, though. Huge accomplishment.”

She hugs me so tight I can’t breathe.

“Aww, thank you, baby!”

“I’m going to get my phone now, so I can text Paige. She’ll want to hear the big news.”

It’s not a total lie, okay?

Paige has loved my mother ever since she declared herself the unofficial dorm mom. We’ll just forget that the first call I make won’t be to Paige.

I go sit in my car and dial a number I thought I’d never call again. Even though I’ve blocked it, I somehow have it *memorized*.

Whatever. I’ll reblock him as soon as I’m done.

My hand shakes and my stomach clenches as I unblock Mag’s number and hit Call.

He answers on the third ring.

“Brina?” His voice just about undoes me.

Stay strong.

“Stay out of my life and leave my parents alone,” I say, ignoring the fire raking my throat.

My eyes tear up in under a second, but I can handle this. I can—

“Your parents?” His heavy breath fills the phone, shattering my thoughts. “What did I do to them?”

“Oh, nothing big. Dad just miraculously won a dream fishing trip, and Mom sold a million copies of a book with a title I don’t know how anyone but you could afford. You’re setting her up for failure and I’m not okay with—”

“You said that when she made the Amazon bestseller list too, but her sales stayed steady. With a win like this, and a real agent, she can write whatever she damn well pleases from here on out and collect a nice advance—”

“Shut up!” I grind out, shaking. “You don’t get it. You’re...you’re going to kill her when she finds out, Mag, and I’m not having it.”

Amazing.

He’s quiet for ten whole seconds before he starts again slowly. “Brina. Has it ever occurred to you that maybe your mom’s books *don’t* suck? She never needed you to buy them. She needed you to market them, but then you wouldn’t be the unsung hero.”

I gasp. “I’ve always taken care of my parents, you dick.”

“Exactly. That’s why I did it,” he says, his voice that thick, sultry velvet that used to make me so wet I’d ache.

Right now, it makes me want to punch him.

“Why?” I throw back. “Why the hell would you—”

“You’ve always taken care of your folks. My behavior forced you out of your job—and my life—” His voice dips on those last two words. “I decided to rectify one wrong even if I can’t fix the other. You don’t have to support your parents anymore. You’re free.”

Hot tears stream down my cheeks, and my lip quivers.

“You’re making this worse, *so much worse*.” I break into sobs I can’t hide, blown to smithereens.

“You’re crying again?” His voice sounds urgent, strained. “Sabrina...forgive me. I thought I was helping. I wanted to get

the burden of supporting them off your shoulders so you'd—"

"No!" I scream. He's not finishing that sentence. "If you really want to help me, just stay the fuck out of my life and away from my family."

Pause.

"Can we talk please? Just hear me out, and then if you're still through with me, I'll stay out of your life forever. I give you my word, Brina," he says, his voice this brick wall.

You will anyway, I tell myself.

Then I hang up and block his number again. I stay in the car crying into my hands until Mom comes outside looking for me.

Just awesome.

She taps on the passenger window and I unlock the door.

She opens it, slides in, and leaves the door open and props her feet up on my window. "What's wrong?"

I shake my head, wiping at my eyes. "Nothing."

Her smile is gentle now. She reaches across the console and combs her fingers through my hair. "Brina, don't lie to me. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I hiss, even while my heart shears in half.

"I always cry when nothing's wrong too," she says with a small smile. "Does this have to do with you randomly quitting your job?"

"It wasn't random."

"I know."

There's a long pause.

"I cared about him—it—the job, I mean—more than I realized." That's not even true.

I knew how much I loved him.

It just didn't matter.

I was nothing but a game to him. Another property on the big board of life he conquered and won.

“You could always—reapply?” Her lips purse on the last word.

Yeah, we both know we’re not talking about jobs.

I shake my head. “I can’t, Mom. It’s a bad job with a dead end. It only cares about scoring big—uh, for shareholders—in the moment.”

“Most girls have a job like that once or twice. Sometimes when you walk away, he—the job—realizes your worth. And if that job doesn’t see the asset you were, you find someone—uh, something—you love more. Like a sexy machinist who doesn’t care that you wore tap dancing shoes and a tiara on a first date, or that he had to drive back to the coffee shop after it closed because you left your keys.”

I laugh and dry my eyes.

“Really? So you were always like this?”

She grins. “Of course. And if I weren’t—say, if I was very practical and maybe a little bit bossy, but still had a creative streak—any man who didn’t like practicality with a colorful streak in his life could go to hell. There are other fish in the pond even if they don’t all make millions. Money can’t buy happiness.”

I look out the driver window. “What if you weren’t sure if you could be happy with anyone else?”

She pats my back. “Then I’d have to weigh how much I need him in my life against his sins. Oh, and don’t forget the grand gesture! The bigger the sin, the more he has to pay to win you back.”

“Oh, Mom.” Rolling my eyes like mad, I smile at her. “You think everything’s a plot.”

“Yep.” She nods, guilty as charged. “The food’s getting cold and your dad’s on his third plate. Can we eat now?”

~

THE NEXT DAY, I force myself out of bed with the promise of a cinnamon latte and a bear claw.

The best perk of freelancing is my coffee break comes whenever I want it.

At Sweeter Grind, I place my order and find an empty table by the window. I plug my laptop in so I can work on a client's site design. I power it on and take a huge bite of the bear claw.

Ugh. It's as dry as sandpaper.

Then again, I haven't really enjoyed food in weeks. Maybe Sweeter Grind isn't suffering from quality control, and it's just me.

"Brina Bristol!" the barista calls.

I walk to the counter and get my drink. There's only one cup on the counter. It has my name on it, but it can't be for me. White foam spells out *I'm sorry*, and three little hearts float above the foam.

"Umm—sorry, but I don't think this is mine," I say.

"Hang on." The barista walks from the mini fridge over to the counter. "You had your usual, right?"

"I didn't order latte art so it must be a mix-up."

"Your boyfriend ordered it," she says with a smile.

"I...I'm single."

She shrugs. "The guy you left with the day you were here with the two dudes back in the winter? Sorry if he's bothering you. He told me he just wanted to apologize."

With a heavy sigh, I nod.

So much for staying the hell out of my life.

I stop by the condiment bar, take a stirrer, beat the foam to the sides of the cup, and slap a lid over it. The buzz of conversation and clinking plates seems louder than normal

today, but I guess that's how it is when the days are getting longer and it's starting to feel like early spring.

I'm never going to get any work done here. I grab my pastry and head to the park since it's just warm enough.

I plop down on the bench beside that stupid statue. The same bench I sat on the day I met Magnus Heron, watching his entourage prancing through the park.

Over on the walking path, a man about the same height as Mag has a brunette tucked under his arm. It's obvious even from my distance she's the only person here he sees.

With all the people swirling around the park today, she's also the only person I envy.

Someday, I want to be looked at like her.

And she's got a fine man, don't get me wrong. But my guy was taller, broader, better dressed, and his eyes flayed me open.

A plane flies overhead, its engine growling so loudly I look up. It's an older-looking machine, and weirdly low for being so close to downtown Chicago.

It takes me a moment to realize the puffs of smoke in the contrail are spelling out words, little by little. I gaze up, watching as the letters disappear, fully invested until I realize what it says.

When it gets to, *I'm sorry, B*— I'm done.

A skywriter? Really?

He hired a flipping *skywriter*?

Jesus. I'm going to Logan Square. Paige and her mom said I can use her old bedroom anytime I need to hide from the lunatic. That time is now, because I'm questioning my resolve.

Reaching for my laptop, I realize it's missing.

Great. I left it at Sweeter Grind. I hope like hell it's still there as I head for the crosswalk.

As soon as the Walk sign turns white, I dart across the street. A black town car pulls into an empty space on the curb.

Holy hell.

You've got to be kidding me.

I'd slap my head but I don't have time. I have to dodge a diesel truck barreling toward me and get across the street. Just when I'm winding up to spit hot latte in self-defense, it happens.

Jordan Quail steps out of the car.

Thank God.

They got him home. Big surprise. I never had any doubt Mag would save his little brother. He's the ruler of the universe and always succeeds, even if he had to confront his pond scum of a dad.

"Hey, Brina!" Jordan waves and flashes me a big smile. "Armstrong knew we'd find you here."

I step to the sidewalk and hold my arm out. "Hi, Jordan."

When he reaches me, we hug.

"I'm so glad you're home safe. How are you doing?" I ask.

His feet are planted firmly on the ground. Since he'll be sticking around for a minute and I need my laptop...

"Walk with me. I left my computer in Sweeter Grind and I have to find it," I tell him. "Are you glad to be back?"

"Hell yeah. Things got pretty crazy for a while, Brina." He follows me back to the building, matching my pace. "Turns out, my dad's a way bigger jerk than Mag ever said."

Wow. That's something considering Magnus wants to kill their father.

"He is?"

"Yeah. He told me we were going to his fancy hotel with an indoor pool and stuff until Mom could get out of the hospital, but then he took me to the Virgin Islands. I was

scared. I wanted to get off the plane when we were still on the runway, but he wouldn't let me."

Oh, God. My heart climbs into my throat and I'm shaking my head.

"He said I had to leave it all behind. Chicago, school, Mom...he said it was always meant to happen, and if I wanted to be rich like him, I had to let go," he continues. "Dude kept me under lock and key with bodyguards. Freaked me the hell out."

Inside the cafe, I spot my laptop still sitting on the table I was at with the messenger bag dangling beside it. A few pounds lift off my chest.

"I'm sorry, Jordan. That must've been awful. You were always in good hands. Your brother had some kick-ass people watching out for you. I knew he'd make sure you're safe." Whatever else he is, Mag isn't the kind of man who gives up on saving his kid brother.

"Yeah! I was asleep one night when they came charging in. These dudes who looked like a whole SEAL Team with guns and tactical gear. Baxter's guys backed down without a gun fight, and this dude I thought was one more SEAL...it was Mag!" Jordan grins at the memory. "He said they filed a legal order Baxter ignored, and he wasn't waiting around playing nice anymore."

I'm frozen, torn between empathy for him and the annoying thought of how hot Magnus Heron must've looked decked out for a rumble.

"That's wild! I can't even imagine," I say as I rush to the table, grab my laptop, shove it in the bag, and sling it over my shoulder.

We head back outside.

"I know. Mom's gonna sue Baxter Heron's balls off," he says with a lopsided grin. "She said she's taking everything, and Mag's paying like four attorneys. He's definitely going to prison for kidnapping. Mag came through for us big-time."

I look at Jordan's crystal blue eyes. I've only seen one other set of eyes with a similar shade in my life, and the thought of them tortures me.

"I'm sure he did. He'd do anything for you guys."

Jordan shifts his weight, his giddy smile melting.

"He'd do anything for you, too. You know that, right? He's really sorry for—you know. It was my fault that night. I'm the one who wouldn't listen to shit and triggered him."

My jaw tightens, but I'm not glaring at the kid.

Oh, Magnus freaking Heron, you're using a teenager now?

A flustered sigh escapes my lips. "Jordan, you're a sweet kid. I'll always be here for you, and I'll help you any way I can, but I...I can't work for your brother again. Ever. I'm sorry if that's what you're asking. I'm glad he's helping you and your mom. You have a great family."

"Not what I'm asking." The firm baritone voice behind me sends goosebumps down my arms.

I take a deep breath and dig my feet into the ground.

I can't turn around and face him.

If I do, any strength I have left will be gone.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and fire one word like a gunshot.

"What?"

"I'm not asking you to work for me, Sabrina. I agree it's a horrible idea. Just talk to me, please," Mag says.

"Brina?" Jordan asks, then grabs my hand.

Before I can answer the kid, he's spun me around, and I'm face-to-face with jerk-tastic billionaire heart-stomper of the year.

"We made a deal, remember?" Jordan whispers under his breath, slowly walking away. "Even if she dumps you, you're taking me to Pizza Shack, dude."

Mag smiles—his blue eyes dancing. “Fine, little bro, but there’ll be no dumping.”

Damn his confidence.

Jordan takes off, his feet hitting the pavement as he races back to the town car.

I roll my eyes and cross my arms, refusing to look at him, eyes leveled at the ground.

“You seem so sure of yourself. Did you forget? I already said we’re over.”

“I know, but you’re torturing yourself too. I see it in your eyes.” He traces a line under my eye with the tip of his finger. “Are you eating, Brina? You’ve lost weight.”

For a second, I seriously consider biting his finger off.

But of course—*of freaking course*—one touch melts me, turns me to stone, and a hundred more contradictory things. He’s always been an evil magician like that.

“No. I haven’t eaten right since you chased me home from the hospital that night,” I say slowly. “It’s a miracle I’m surviving, but I am.”

I expect some retort, but he just veers his head to the empty patio table in arm’s reach.

“Sit down and talk to me.”

I do. I might as well. My legs have turned to mush, and standing isn’t going to work much longer.

He drops an envelope on the table between us.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“Open it.”

“It’s from you. It could be anthrax.”

He closes his eyes tightly and then opens them, a smirk so gorgeous I hate it pulling at his lips.

“Brina, if you haven’t figured it out yet...I can’t live without you. The only way it’s poison is if I’m ready to off

myself, and that would be untimely. I still have billions to earn.”

I cock my head and plaster a huge fake smile on my face. “You always did know how to charm a girl.”

“Open it,” he orders again.

Sighing, I pick up the manila envelope and rip it open, just wanting to get this over with.

I pull out a card that reads “I’m sorry. So meow-y sorry,” in a thought bubble over a kitten with huge sorrowful eyes.

“Huh? I designed this, didn’t I?” It dawns on me as I look at him.

Intense blue eyes hold my gaze hostage.

“I know my girl’s work.”

“You just...you called me yours.” My voice is too high-pitched and the words tumble out before I know I’ve said them.

Crud.

He nods.

“I want you to be. Badly. It’s ripping me apart.” He reaches across the table, takes my hand, and strokes his thumb over it. “Sabrina, I *need* you to be mine in a way I’ve never needed anything else. Not money, not success, not fame, and not any damn coffee. I’d surrender it all in a heartbeat for you.”

My heart dive-bombs in my chest.

There’s something else in the envelope, too. I pull out a thick packet of clipped paperwork and start reading through it. Apparently, it’s for a startup marketing firm with a huge investment attached. The name of the company is Bristol-Heron Communications.

“A partnership?” I whisper, dumbfounded.

“Yeah. Notice how your name’s first because you have controlling interest with my backing. I’m banking on you, if

you will.”

I look up from the contract. “As far as grand gestures go, it’s not bad, but do you think—”

“Grand gestures?” He quirks a brow.

I shrug. “Sorry, I talked to my mom, the romance writer.”

“So you’re talking to your mom about me, huh?” He flashes that lady-killer smile. “That’s progress.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” I shake my head. “It’s nothing good.”

“But I’m in your head.”

Always. Unfortunately.

“Anyhow, it’s not a bad move, but do you think I’m just going to fall desperately in love with you and hang on your every word because you invested in my company?” I throw the contract back on the table. “I’ve been freelancing since before my vacation time ran out, and I don’t need your money to do it.”

“Brina, wait. This contract exists because I want to be your partner. I want you to help Hugo when I need you to. More than that, I want to be yours in every way. We can do this together. I’ve seen your web design work. I’m proud of how you got that started with no business training.”

“How did you know I’ve been freelancing?”

“I can’t tell you. You’ll be angry.”

I put my elbows on the table, lean forward, and rest my head on my hands.

“Try me.”

“Your mom told me,” he sighs.

“You talked to my parents?”

“I knew you talked to them and you were crying when you called. Armstrong and I went over. I told your mom I wouldn’t bother her or you. I just wanted to make sure you were okay, and if you left upset, I hoped either she or Paige were with

you. But your mom told me I should be the one to talk to you.” He holds up his hands like he’s apologizing. “The startup idea isn’t a grand gesture or whatever the hell you think. I promise. The latte and skywriter were that, and you weren’t impressed. So tell me, what does it take to wow you, woman?”

A hundred visions burst in my mind, and they all involve six feet something of this achingly gorgeous, hate-inducing man alone with me in bed.

Of course, that’s not what I tell him.

“Being home by six every night. Especially if I’m not at the office with you anymore,” I snap. Impossible conditions I know he’ll never agree to.

“Seven,” he growls.

“Six. Your work email turns off, and you only answer personal calls.”

His face twists. “I don’t even have an EA right now. The last one was awesome, but I’m not rehiring her. I won’t keep our relationship a secret anymore. I learned that the hard way.”

“Shame. Maybe we’ll talk again when you have an EA, then,” I say, batting my eyelashes.

“No.” He grabs my hand, lifts it up, and presses it to his lips. “Since I expect HeronComm will become a major client of Bristol-Heron, we could set up an office space in the building and work late nights together again.”

I smile. “I like the sound of that. But how do I know you won’t leave me high and dry?”

“I love you, Sabrina. I know I fucked up. Living without you has been hell. I won’t ruin this again.” His chest heaves and I stumble back, physically stunned.

Holy shit. The L-word?

But I can see it in his eyes.

I know he’s not faking it.

I see, right then, how much I mean to Magnus Heron.

“I don’t know how to convince you,” he continues. “Give me one more chance. One last-ditch shot to leave you anything but high and dry—ideally, you’ll be under me and so wet you’ll beg for a trip to the Sahara.”

God.

Heat cuts through me like a knife.

Tears threaten my eyes.

He’s a sales guy to the core, but right now, he’s all Romeo and I’m in pieces.

“Honey, if she won’t give you a chance, I will!” an old lady at the table across from us yells out with a smile.

He grins at her. “Help me convince her, ma’am.”

“If you ain’t convinced her yet, I don’t know how else. You’d better kiss her good.”

I throw my hands up to protest. It doesn’t do me any good.

He never lets go of my hand as he rounds the table and pulls me into eternity.

Strong arms encompass my waist. Hands I missed caress me so sweetly.

There’s no distance left between us. No missed beat in our pulse. No lingering doubt.

Mag’s lips brush mine and my mouth falls open. When his tongue moves in, swirling and claiming my bottom lip, I’m gone.

No longer on planet Earth.

Slowly, gently, teasingly he makes me his, and then with a fury, with a sigh, with one last heave of my soul, *I’m kissing him back.*

Holy hell.

“You still love me. Almost as fucking bad as I love you. It’s obvious.” He pulls away from me, resting his forehead on mine.

I struggle for breath. “Ass. I’m supposed to get to say that.”

“Actions speak louder than words.” One arm stays firm on the small of my back, and the other drops under my butt. He scoops me up like I’m lighter than air.

“Whoa. What? What are you doing?” I whisper, dizzier by the second as we lock eyes.

“Saving you from stumbling, just like in Phoenix.” He carries me down the sidewalk. “We’re going home.”

“My car’s here. I can’t just—”

His lips brush mine, silencing my protest. The town car dings when the door opens. Mag slides me in the leather seat, and soon he’s right there beside me.

“I’ll have someone pick it up tonight. I’ve been without you too long. You’re not getting out of my sight.”

God, I love the sound of that.

He asks me to stay that night. When I tell him I can, but I’m not falling into bed with him again just yet, he doesn’t even care.

Mag tells me he just wants me to be there when he wakes up.

The most important thing he could say.

True to our word, we don’t make love.

But the ecstasy of being in his arms after so long apart beats the stuffing out of every sweet dream I could possibly have.

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A MERGER (MAGNUS)



Sabrina sits in the passenger seat with her shoes on the dashboard.

Part of me wants to tell her to have some respect for the ride, my custom Tesla Model X. She's a beauty, after all, but if living without this woman the last few weeks has taught me anything, it's that she can do whatever the hell she wants as long as she's mine.

For her, I'll accept a billion scuff marks.

"Mom's agent wants me to market her whole backlist," she says with a sigh, flipping her gorgeous hair over her shoulder. "I didn't have the heart to tell her Mom's only a bestseller because my former bosshole slash boyfriend bought a million copies of her book."

I grin, loving how it makes her blush.

I'll love that look on her face until my dying day.

"No big deal. Publishers do it all the time, buying their own books to ram new hits down the market's throat. Careful that you don't take on too many starving artists now that your mom's singing your praises. It's not a good move for a startup. You should focus on national brands." I pull into a parking place at the marina on Lake Michigan.

"Oh, I'm not opposed to national brands, but those campaigns are heavy lifting, and...well, I'm a one-woman show. We're still a few weeks off from serious hiring. Besides, bigger brands put me in direct competition with the design

services HeronComm already offers. There's no sense in us chasing after the same clients."

I process her words.

"We make more money per client off the startup. HeronComm is a hungry, expensive machine with lots of mouths to feed and even more bonuses to pay. I profit when the company does, but we're joint owners of Bristol-Heron. Equals. We're the only ones profiting when that company makes bank. As for being a one woman show, I gave you the funds. You can hire whoever you need when you're ready."

Did I mention how goddamn adorable it is that she's still doubting herself?

I reach over, squeezing her hand, my faith in her abilities never stronger.

"Look at me, sweetheart. You've got this," I say.

She bites her lip. "Mag, I'm not like you. I don't think I can just waltz in and be Miss Big-Shot CEO. I don't want to be hiring, firing, and managing people constantly."

I laugh. "I don't fire *that* many people. They usually just quit because they can't handle—"

"I'm aware," she says, cutting in with a smile.

"I'm going to stay involved with our company as an advisor. I own half of it too and you're in good hands." I cup her face with my hand. "Well, forty-nine percent, technically, but I don't care if it's zero. I just want you happy. It's your baby to do what you want with. Forge an empire bigger than mine, or keep HeronComm as your only client. I don't care. And if you want to work for starving artists, then forget what I said and do it. We'll take a loss and a tax deduction."

She puts her hand over mine, brings my fingers to her lips, and kisses each knuckle.

"I love you, Mag."

It's too tempting to pull her into my lap and take her right here in the car like we're high school kids making time before curfew ends. Only, today's far too important for that.

“Love you too,” I whisper back. “We should get on the boat. It’s embarking soon.”

I go to the trunk to grab our supplies and she meets me behind the car. I take out a pack and a shoe box. “This is for you.”

She pulls the top off the box.

“Um...Thank you?” Her lips are puckered like she’s sucking on a sour lemon wedge. “Maybe I’ll just leave them in the car.” She starts for the passenger door.

I grab her arm. “They’re deck shoes.”

“Deck shoes?”

“Anchor shoes.” I tell her.

“Anchor shoes?”

God. This woman might just slay me yet.

“So you don’t slip on the ship and bruise your cute ass. This yacht is the only place I love as much as the office, and if you fall overboard, I’ll only find solace behind my desk.”

She puts a hand on her hip. “Is that so?”

I sigh.

Her face turns rosy. She skips toward me, closing the space between us as she tumbles into my arms.

“I love how you worry about everything,” she whispers, kissing my chin and then up my jaw.

I sling the pack over my shoulder to slip an arm around her, press her close, and let my lips find hers. I don’t have to urge her mouth open.

With a buttery moan, her tongue caresses mine, her teeth teasing my bottom lip.

I pull my face away from hers, leaving an arm around her, and slow my breathing until I can talk. “Somebody’s got to look out for us both, Brina, or you’ll be the death of me.”

“Hey, at least you’ll die happy.”

“No denying that,” I growl, sliding a hand to her ass and cupping what’s mine.

“Also, I love you, but these shoes are *hideous*. I thought yachts were all glitz and glamour.”

“Bah. I watched you almost slide down a mountain in those stupid flip flops once. You would have if I hadn’t been there to catch you.”

“And I wouldn’t have been on that mountain if it wasn’t for you!” she fires back, veering her face away before I can kiss her again.

“Wear the damn shoes, and we’ll order you a custom pair before we go boating again. Deal? It’s just us on the yacht today and a tiny crew. I don’t waste time staring at your feet. I promise you that when you’ve got plenty of other assets demanding my attention.”

She flashes me a devilish wink.

Hands tangled, we finally make it to the boat and set sail toward the sunshine over Lake Michigan. Before I know it, I’m lounging on a chaise with Brina in my arms, kissing her hair.

“Welcome to perfection,” I mutter.

“The boat? It’s pretty cool.”

“I’m glad you agree.” I run my fingers through her hair. “But I meant the calm waves and the girl in my arms.”

She kisses my shoulders, burying her face against me.

“I love you, but you already know it.”

The fact that I’ll never get tired of saying those words makes me hold her tighter still.

“Are you okay? You seemed kinda tense earlier and a little more—umm—urgent than usual.”

“Urgent?” I snort out a laugh.

She chews on her lip. “You’ve told me you love me more today than any other day I can remember.”

“It’s the nerves.”

“Whaaat?” She grins, her eyes going wide. “I didn’t know you got nervous. What for?”

I gaze into those russet-brown eyes, so vivid, so bright, so entirely my world.

“I don’t, usually, but I need to close a deal soon with someone who plays hardball, and there’s a lot to lose if it goes sour.”

“What? Is this that new gaming company you told me about?” she whispers, blissfully clueless. “You’ll kill it, Mag. And you won’t even have to threaten to eat cat food!”

We both fall together laughing, remembering that infamy.

How can it be so long ago? It feels like only yesterday when she was at my side at that meeting, testing my ability not to get hard every time I saw her.

“No worries. My counterpart on the other side isn’t impressed by those stunts,” I say.

“Still no luck on finding a new EA? I think that would help more than anything. As long as he’s a dude or an old granny. You get *one* sexy assistant for this lifetime, and lucky for you she’s still yours.”

“Don’t I know it, you little hellion,” I growl, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Trouble is, my last EA is impossible to replace, and for once I’m talking about her business skills. No one’s ever going to be as good as you.”

“Tell Ruby to expand her pool. You found me by casting a wider net, and I bet you’ll find plenty of other awesome candidates the same way,” she says.

I kiss her forehead. “Not a bad idea. Frankly, I only need half the EA you were to clean out my emails and follow me to meetings. You’re still around to make me my best.”

Her eyes look like molten amber, brown-gold in the light, and it makes my fucking heart pound.

“Yeah...kinda goes both ways. I can’t function without you, Mag.” Her lashes flutter.

This girl.

Wiggling my arm out from under her, I stand and come around the chaise to kneel in front of her.

She pulls herself up into a sitting position. “What are you doing?”

“Finishing this conversation,” I say, taking her hand.

It’s now or never.

We’ll see if I can close the biggest deal of my life when it truly counts.

“Listen, I can deal with finding a new assistant. I’m more interested in focusing on my new partner, and I want you to be mine in more ways than one, Brina.”

She doesn’t say anything. Not as the shock sets in.

Her eyes widen and her mouth hangs open.

I pull the velvet box from my pocket and flip it open.

“I propose a merger,” I tell her.

Her tongue curls under her teeth as she inhales sharply, hashing my words.

“Just kidding. I didn’t expect it to be that simple,” I say softly. “Here’s the real question. Miss Sabrina Bristol, will you do me the honor of being my wife?”

She nods emphatically, too stunned to speak. But she’s laughing and crying at the same time, and I hope that means yes.

I move beside her and pull her into my lap, closing my arms around her. “I never expected to see my girl laugh and cry simultaneously when I proposed. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“Yes, yes, Magnus, *yes!* I love you so much, and I...I’ve been waiting for this. I didn’t think it’d be so soon and, and—”

“Brina. I bought the ring the day I won you back, over a month ago. I knew you were mine, my forever, ever since you wouldn’t get off my bench.”

“*Your* bench?” She shifts in my arms so she’s facing me, her face mere inches from mine. Our lips mingle. Our tongues brush. The kiss is long and sweet, and when it finally ends, the absence of her pressure hurts.

Minutes pass as I cradle her so close. I can hear her heartbeat in the loud, heavy silence.

“I should call my parents,” she whispers, rubbing her face.

I hold her hand, drawing circles over it with my thumb. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m just trying to figure out how to break the news.” Her smile reaches from ear to ear. “Emily Bristol will be devastated if her only daughter received a marriage proposal without telling her first. Of course, if she gets the details, it’s likely to end up in a book.”

“I’m sure Mrs. Bristol already knows her daughter had a proposal coming. She might think you shot me down, though.”

Sabrina laughs, cocking her head. “How does she know that? And why on earth would I shoot you down?”

Given how feisty the tigress in my arms gets, I’m not sure how this will go over. “You’re close to your parents. I wanted to make sure we started off on the right track with them—”

“So?” She raises an eyebrow.

“So I asked your dad before I asked you. From what I gathered, he’s an old-fashioned guy.”

“...you did?” She blinks back tears.

I nod and this carefree smile cuts across my face.

“But why?”

“You love them, and they’ve been in your life longer than me.” I shrug. “I thought it was the right thing to do. If we have a daughter someday, it’s what I’d expect from the man who

marries her. If he told me no, of course, I would've proposed anyway."

She kisses me again.

Madly. Frantically. Beautifully.


"I got off easy and all the stars aligned," I whisper, my eyes dancing, reflected back in hers. "I was worried you'd be pissed. You're very independent and I love you for it."

"No way. It was sweet, and if I didn't want to marry you, you already know I'd tell both you and Dad where to go."

"I couldn't handle it if you didn't," I admit, sincerity in my throat so hot it scorches.

Her eyes narrow in bliss and her lips find mine again.

And just like that, my Brina is destined to be mine, forever.

WE DOCK the boat after the  longest, hottest make-out session of my life.

I help her off the yacht with every bit of me throbbing.

Back at the car, I toss the backpack in the trunk and open her door before getting in. "You're staying with me tonight. Don't even try to get out of it."

"What if I wanted you to stay with me? Paige is off at some big artsy design conference with her dad."

"My bed's bigger." I pull the car out and start heading home.

"So? Why do we always stay at your place?" She pouts.

"Because it's about to be yours, too. I've already scheduled a meeting to add your name to the title."

"You have?"

I nod. "Plus, I can fuck you in front of the entire city, pressed against the glass. Don't even pretend you don't like it."

Trying to hide a smile—and failing miserably—she turns her flushed face down.

“What if I’d said no, Crankyface?”

“I guess you’d still co-own my penthouse,” I tell her, smirking.

“C’mon, you knew I wouldn’t say no.” She giggles, her eyes shining so bright under the rising moon.

“I *hoped* you wouldn’t, Brina.”

“Then why were you so nervous?”

I take a deep breath. “I’m more open with you than anyone. You’ve never been intimidated by my shit. You’re also not always impressed with me.”

She grins. “It’s hard not to be impressed with you, Mag. You just have a tendency to be annoyingly driven.” She’s quiet for a minute. “But the way I feel about you is so intense. I knew you were the one.”

Right. She just summed up *my* feelings.

In no time, I park the car and we pass the doorman and go into the building. Once we get to the elevator, I sweep her up in my arms.

She’s laughing so hard she’s clutching her sides.

“This is so unnecessary. We’re not even married yet—it’s kinda early to carry me over the threshold!”

I kiss her. “We will be, and I’ll do it again then.”

Her lips lock around mine. Her kiss is so intense that I have a hard time opening the door. She starts peeling my shirt off before the door even swings shut.

“Damn. I’ve corrupted you so much, and I love it,” I snarl.

The only response is my shirt hitting the floor.

We leave a trail of clothes from the front door to the bed.

Brina’s knee brushes my bare hip as she straddles me. Her eyes are closed, mouth slightly open. This beautiful angel of

mine fully intends to lower herself down over me and wring my balls empty.

Not yet.

I need her fucking under me.

Drawing in a rough breath, I hook a thumb under her arms, and flip us over so her back is flat against the mattress and I'm poised over her. I find her lips and drink in a languid kiss, pulling a moan from her lungs.

“Not our first time engaged, sweetheart.”

She giggles and both her hands come to my face.

“We do this so often. I'm not sure how it could ever be mistaken for a first.”

I take her left hand in mine, bring it to my lips, and kiss the new ring.

“You're wearing my ring, sweetheart. I'd call that a first.”

She smiles. “It's important to you, isn't it?”

“You have no damn idea,” I whisper, thunder in my throat.

She leans up to find my lips. I take her mouth again, kissing her until she trembles with hunger. When I pull away, it's only so I can trace my tongue down her neck to the top of her cleavage.

“Oh—oh!” she gasps.

That's all the encouragement I need.

I kiss along the slope of her breast, coming to her nipple, lavishing my tongue over it in worship.

She sucks in a harsh breath so hot I almost lose it on the spot.

“*Mag-nus!*”

The sound of her voice, the way she says my name like two words—the hard ridge of my body strains, but I'm holding the fuck out.

I'll make this last or die trying.

We're going to remember this night, mark my words.

I pull her nipple deeper into my mouth, rolling my tongue across the tip, stirring her to pieces.

Eager fingernails dance through my hair and drag down my back, a call to pure fuckery.

My lips are savage explorers, kissing under her breast, down her belly, inhaling her scent and relishing the fever it brings.

“What are you doing?” She giggles.

“Nothing—” I plant a kiss on her hip bone. “You won't—” I trace my tongue across the seam where her pelvis meets her torso. “Like,” I finish.

“I need you so bad,” she whimpers.

I spread her lips open and find the pearl of her clit. She arches into my kiss, so I add pressure as I flick my tongue over it.

She's suddenly too breathless for words.

I go to town, lashing her nub with my tongue, sucking and flicking her straight into paradise.

Brina's legs dangle over my shoulders, and I adore how they shake.

It's all the encouragement I need. Running my tongue from that sensitive ball of nerves downward, I find her opening.

Her legs tremble as I press my tongue inside her.

God. She's *always* so sweet.

My body aches with every taste.

I want her—*need* her.

But she's arching into my caresses with a heat like the sun. Begging for more.

My need will wait.

Her body tightens, thighs locking my head in place.

Her legs shake against my back.

“Oh—oh—oh.” Her voice is a bit quieter on each staccato sound.

I can't take it anymore. Burying my face between her legs, I bring her off in a screaming mess, loving how she grinds against my face.

The instant her breath settles and her pussy stops convulsing, I reposition us so her legs pinch my waist.

Then her mouth is mine again as I sink into her wetness, a rough groan ripping out of my throat.

I'm buried to the hilt in my fiancée and my tongue holds her hostage.

Not enough. I still need more.

When my hips go to work, pummeling her into the mattress and I taste her first scream, that's when we're in the zone, right where we'll always belong.

We drive on, fused together, her matching my pace for a good, long while.

My body tightens like a spring with every stroke, a whipcord of muscle pistoning against her, rocketing us higher, upward, into *cloud fucking nine*.

I batter her as long as she can take, but the second I feel her tighten on my cock again, it's over.

She screams my name, digging her nails into my skin as she finds her release.

I roar mine, tugging at her hair.

Everything fragments into white-hot fury, and I'm coming so hard there's nothing left but stars.

Nothing but fire pouring out of me, deep into her.

Nothing but her flesh and mine, and this feral urge to mark her hard and deep, to plant the first seed of our family soon.

Fuck me senseless. An entire lifetime with this woman and ten babies won't be enough.

In the morning, when I open my eyes, still stiff from fucking half the night, she's staring up at me.

I press my lips to her forehead.

"How long have you been awake?"

"Awhile. You were right."

"Always. But about what?"

She snickers and kisses my chin.

"That was a lot like the first time, but better."

I draw her in, folding my arms around her.

"I love you," I whisper. "A little more with every breath."

"I love you too," she says. "As much as I'd like to stay here all day...I have to see my parents. Mom will be crazy to get started on the wedding plans."

"Let her have at it. Should I tag along? I'm eager to get started on being the best—and only—son-in-law she'll ever have."

Brina grins like a sunbeam. "Please? The more distractions from Mom-zilla, the better."

"Already done, sweetheart," I tell her, kissing her so deeply I know what'll always be the hardest part of our days together.

Letting go.

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SEA QUEEN (SABRINA)



Weeks Later

“HOLD YOUR BREATH!” Mom pulls the zipper of the trumpet dress up.

“This is so over the top,” I huff out.

“Brina, baby, I’m a writer. You have to indulge me. Plus, you have a way better body than I did when I got married.”

“For real, no one looks good in a trumpet dress,” I whine, hiding my face behind my hands.

“You do.” Paige sits on the bed of the cabin, holding my sea-foam bouquet and her pale-blue flowers.

“Really? I feel like a little girl playing dress up. Not the woman who’s about to marry the most eligible bachelor in Chicago.”

Paige giggles. “All because Emily helped me pick your bomb-ass dress. You’re welcome. I think if you were left to your own devices, you would’ve picked pajamas.” She drops the bouquets on the bed, comes over, and leads me to a mirror.

I stare into it. My brown hair curls into ringlets, piled on my head in a bun with tiny pearls nestled in. The dress is floor length with a poof of cascading train that starts a couple of inches above my ankles. It’s shimmering white on top, then fades into a pale pastel blue around the waist that becomes a

sea green at the knees, twirling into a cascade of bright whites, blues, and sea greens where the poofy train starts.

“See? You look like a mermaid ready for her prince,” Paige says.

The effort paid off, I’ll give her that. I look hot.

“My baby is a mermaid!” Mom beams and clasps her hands together, then she hugs me from behind.

I study Paige’s dress. It’s a high-low sea foam. The ring of flowers in her hair are even accented with the occasional shell or sea star. Mom’s is deeper blue with a sheer neckline plunging into blue sequins and longish sleeves. A green bow around the waist completes the look.

“If I’m a mermaid princess, you’re the sea queen,” I say.

“But of course.” She smiles and lifts her head a little higher.

“Do I even want to know what you’ve done to the deck?”

“Maybe, maybe not.” She looks at Paige and winks. “You got this, Paige? I’m going to go make sure everything’s ready out there.”

Paige smiles. “Yeah, we’ll come out when the music starts.”

“The head piece is in that drawer.” Mom points to a nightstand beside the bed. “I figure she’ll give you less hell about it than me.”

Mom walks out of the cabin, and Paige pulls a crown from the nightstand.

“Ta-da! Are you ready for this, duchess?” she asks, a grin that’s pure mischief on her face.

It’s legit beautiful, even if it’s also totally over-the-top, covered in seashells and pearls and two silvery chains that edge across my forehead on each side.

“Whoa. It’s pretty but it still feels like too much. She wants me to wear a crown?”

Paige sighs. “She sold Mag on the theme. That’s the only reason I went along with it, but your groom bought it.”

“He did?”

There’s a knock at the door. Something tells me to flip the lock which turns out to be a good thing when someone tries barging in.

“Brina, let me in,” Mag says behind the door.

“No way! It’s bad luck to see me before the wedding.”

“This isn’t something I thought I’d ever do. I need your opinion on my tux.”

“Nope. It was your idea,” I say. “Go to the deck and wait for me where you’re supposed to be before Mom goes into stage manager mode.”

“I can’t get one damn kiss before the ceremony?” he growls.

Heaven help me, I smile like a fool.

“I have my dress on already. Do you want to ruin our marriage before it even starts? Go.”

“Sabrina—”

“Mag, *vamoose*. You’ll see me soon.”

“Not fair,” he grumbles. “You know I can’t deny you.”

I’m still a little weak in the knees as I hear his heavy footsteps fading.

The music starts a minute later. I have Paige check to make sure the coast is clear so Mag can’t sneak a look before he should.

Showtime.

He’s standing next to the judge where he belongs.

Jordan walks Paige up the aisle and stands beside his brother. He’s getting taller by the month, and I think he’ll be slaying hearts left and right in a couple years. I love how he smiles, proud to be the best man.

Dad walks me up the aisle as the music begins.

“Take care of my little girl,” he whispers softly, leaning in to Mag, placing my hand in his.

“Already done,” Mag says with a smile so genuine it sets my heart on fire.

Someone—meaning Mom—has built an arch for us. It’s draped in glowing sea foam and pale blue tulle netting. A freaking chandelier hangs from the top.

Being married on Mag’s yacht was supposed to be a compromise.

He wanted something elegant that people—meaning the press and social media—would think was appropriate for a rockstar CEO. Mom wanted something over the top fit for one of her books.

I just wanted close friends and relatives and nothing else.

Dad wanted to pay for it, and I worried Mom’s ideas combined with my groom’s might bankrupt their newfound wealth.

But we decided Mag’s yacht, a beast he owns and pays for, would be a happy compromise with close friends, family, and Mom involved in everything else.

Looking at the arch with layers of silk plastered with seashells and coral, I smile.

Fair is fair.

Mom got her over-the-top dream wedding, and I got the perfect man.

My hand slips into Mag’s now, but I’m so nervous it’s more like he’s holding me up than just holding my hand. Then everything we rehearsed arrives in a giddy blur.

I manage to say, “I do,” at all the right times.

But the courage to get the words out comes from *him*.

“Now for the moment you’ve been waiting for—you may now kiss your bride!” our officiant announces.

Mag pulls me closer and meets my lips with this own.

His lips are all fire, leaving nothing but scorched happiness in his wake. His tongue pushes against my lips, tracing my mouth, etching our love into my being.

Sure, I'm full of sappy phrases today, but hey, what's a mermaid princess to do on her big day?

My arms wind around him tight.

He holds me tighter, bending me back, deepening the force of his tongue on mine.

A few laughs burst out from somewhere around us, but I can't even think.

We break away reluctantly, and the music swells with wild applause.

Mag straightens up, pulling me with him. I take several deep breaths before my lungs work again.

Our guests shift around, lining both sides of the staircase as we make our way. Birdseed scatters around us like confetti as we go down the stairs to the next deck for the reception.

Mom did an amazing job here, too.

Our wedding cake is three tiers and fades between aqua and seafoamy green. It's decorated with edible shells of rich frosting instead of flowers. The groom on top holds a paddle wheel and the brunette in the wedding dress beside him is a mermaid holding herself up on a curled tail instead of legs.

The groom's cake glows in royal purple and displays a picture of us at the Adzilla formal. I had no idea someone got a good picture before he charged to my defense against that creeper.

We do all the normal cheesy cake pictures with Mom making high-pitched "Awwws."

Whenever she's not snapping pictures like a paparazzi meth fiend, I mean.

I turn my back and throw the bouquet, glad I don't have to face the crowd.

“Move!” Angie screams, her hands flying out.

“It better *not* hit me,” Ruby hisses.

I laugh because even with my back to her, I picture Ruby jumping away from the bouquet like it’s lethal.

“Oh!” Someone sputters like she’s just been winded.

I turn around to find Paige clasping the ball of flowers, her cheeks rosy pink.

Magnus comes up beside me and pulls me closer.

“We need to throw the garter, too,” he says.

“Okay.”

Mom and the photographer push a chair over to us.

I look at my mom, confused.

“Foot on the chair, baby,” she says.

I have no idea why, but I do it.

Why are weddings so weird again?

Mag slips his hand under my dress. The slightest brush of his fingers still makes me tremble.

“Use your teeth!” the photographer says with a laugh. “It’ll make a better picture.”

I turn crimson at the words.

“If you do that, you’ll leave here alone.”

“Suburbanite, I love you,” Mag chuckles, shaking his head.

Mom slaps his arm. “Don’t tease my daughter for being a good girl.”

He nods to her and mouths “Suburbanite” again to me. Then he slips the garter off with a perfect grasp and tosses it over his shoulder.

“I got it!” Hugo yells proudly, holding it up like it’s a trophy.

Oof.

“Awkward. I always wanted someone I work with to have my undergarment,” I groan, unable to do anything but smile.

Mag’s arms slip around my waist. His lips brush my forehead.

“That’s okay. I can promise if you don’t want it mentioned, it won’t be.”

“*All of Me*” starts playing, and I smile at my husband.

“That’s our dance.”

Of course he knows. He picked the song.

Taking my hand, he leads me to the dance floor. His eyes are even bluer against the sea green of his vest.

“That color looks divine on you,” I whisper, burying my face in his chest.

He laughs. “Black?”

“No, your vest. The pale green.”

“Your mother picked it.”

I grin.

“What?” he asks.

“Oh, I knew she did. The whole wedding has a mermaid theme.”

“I thought it was cool, so I rolled with it. I picked your headpiece, so we’re even.”

“Yep. That’s why I’m wearing this ridiculous thing.” For a split second, I flick my tongue out at him.

“You don’t like it?” Mag tilts his head.

“It’s beautiful, but it’s way flashier than what I’d usually wear.”

“Newsflash: this isn’t an ordinary day, beautiful.” He kisses my forehead. “I wish like hell my mom could’ve met you. She would’ve loved you.”

“I wish I’d met her too, but I know she was strong and amazing. She raised you.” I glance over his shoulder. Even just

inviting close friends and family there are so many people here, mostly from my side. So many eyes on us. I draw closer, trying to hide my face in his chest.

“First dances are weird.”

“Because everyone’s watching you?” he asks.

I nod sheepishly.

“If we weren’t the only people on the dance floor, they’d still stare. You’re that stunning, and you’re also mine,” he says, giving me a possessive squeeze.

“You know, as half owner of Bristol-Heron, I think I propose that our first order of business after the honeymoon is a name change,” I tell him.

“And what would we change it to?” His blue eyes twinkle in the low light.

“Heron and Heron. What else?”

“Fuck, I like the sound of that.” He leans in and kisses me like mad.

We’re no longer dancing, really. Just standing in the middle of a dance floor, twisted together, making out like shameless teens.

“Get a room, you guys!” Paige belts out.

Magnus backs away from me.

“Sorry,” he whispers before turning his head to find Paige. “It’s my ship, and I own all of the rooms aboard.”

“All the more reason, dude!” Grinning, Jordan cuts in and throws Paige a thumbs-up.

We finish our dance, and then my dad taps Mag on the back.

“Can I cut in?”

“Of course.” He moves aside and Dad takes my hand.

“I didn’t think you’d dance with me. It’s the only reason I didn’t plan a father daughter dance.”

He smiles at me. “I didn’t think I’d dance with you, either, but seeing you all grown up and someone’s wife hit me like a truck. I’m proud as hell of you, Brina, and the man you married.”

Mom stands at the side of the room.

She’s smiling, but still I don’t like that she’s alone. Then Magnus steps up to her and says something.

I watch him lead my mother to the dance floor.

My heart floods with so much love.

Just when I thought it’d be impossible to adore him even more, I see my freaking husband dancing with my mom.



ONE WILD DAY and a couple of long flights later, we’re on our honeymoon.

“Do you like it?” Mag opens the door to his beachfront condo in Kona, just a few miles from the farm.

“Holy crap. It’s beautiful here, and it smells like The Bean Bar.”

He laughs. “I told you I bought the farm.”

“I half thought you were joking...or at least embellishing.”

But no. Even the Hawaiian breeze rolling off the sea kisses my face, welcoming me in this otherworldly place with a man I’m convinced isn’t fully mortal.

The condo looks sleek, white, and immaculate. The lower floor has a patio that opens to our private beach. The bedroom on the second floor has a huge balcony overlooking the ocean.

“What’ll it be first, sweetheart?” he asks as we unpack.

“I want to swim with the dolphins. Oh, and see turtles if we can!”

“That can be arranged. It just so happens I’ve requested the best turtle tour guide for us, Valerie Calum. She’s flying in from Oahu tomorrow.”

“Amazing.” I bite my bottom lip.

We might need to sleep first, though. That flight was so long, but it didn’t steal all of my energy.

Heading for the bathroom, I slide into the white lingerie I secretly packed.

When I step out, his eyes match the sea, full of sun and steaming with desire.

“I thought you were tired. That seems too luxurious to sleep in,” he says with a knowing smirk.

I walk to bed, lean over, and kiss him, laying my hand against his chest.

His urgency overtakes mine in no time, and he pulls me down on the bed.

My hands stroke down his bare chest and washboard abs, hooking under the band of his boxers.

Growling, he yanks the belt of my robe loose, letting it fall open.

“You’re the devil in an angel’s guise,” he whispers, his voice smoldering.

I straddle his chest, leaning down to his ear.

“You’ll like my sin. I promise.”

“Fuck,” he rasps, right before delivering a wildfire kiss.

The luxe lingerie doesn’t stay on me for long, but we’re both past caring. I think I’d go around in a paper bag for a year if it meant having his kiss, his groan, and those rough, thick hands roaming my body.

I throw my arms around his neck and sink down, engulfing every inch of him. The instant pleasure sends my head back, and I dig my nails into his skin, holding on for dear life.

“What have I done to that sweet, innocent little suburbanite?” Mischief dances in his eyes, and he’s trying so hard to hold back, not to thrust.

“You freed me,” I whisper, flicking my tongue across his lips to tease him back. “Now you get to deal with the billionaire hotshot’s wife.”

“Lucky me. I always wanted a woman who gives it back as good as I do,” he rumbles, crashing his hips into mine so hard I bounce on his hardness.

He kisses me again.

“I had no idea it was a power struggle,” I laugh, pulling my face away.

“It’s called evolving, Brina. I want my wife to become the best version of herself so she never, ever even thinks about anyone else.”

“You called me yours again,” I tease, touching a playful finger to his nose.

A fierce hand smacks my butt, and I jerk, loving how he’s always on point.

“You remember your place—the only one that’s non-negotiable.” He rakes his hand through my hair, his eyes incandescent. “You’re here, and you’re mine. Forever.”

A wicked current races up my back.

“The first time I saw you, I thought you were gorgeous, rich, and arrogant,” I whisper, brushing my lips on his. “The first day we worked together, I thought some smarter, prettier, better dressed woman would be here one day, and I already hated her.”

“Here in Kona?”

I kiss his bare shoulder.

“In your arms.”

“Never,” he growls. “Don’t forget I know my place, too. I’m so fucking yours forever, Brina Heron, and it’s the only place I was ever meant for.”

Our lips meet, mouths open, and a familiar dance begins.

My arms thread around his neck as my mind blanks, his hips meeting mine with every thrust.

His kisses sear. His touches blaze. His eyes flipping glow.

His mouth covers one breast and then the next, teasing my nipples into delirium. I drop my hand to his neck, holding him in place. My fingers slide through his thick sandy hair. He runs a hand between my thighs and his fingers trace up and down the seam of my opening, where we're joined.

God, do I shudder.

"I can't decide whether to make slow, sweet love to you on this honeymoon or fuck you like a madman. I just know I'm the luckiest man alive—"

"You don't believe in luck." I barely get the words out past the fire in my body as he thrusts.

"I do now. Things change, Brina, I've got *you*."

"Take me," I grind out as he thrusts again. "Mag, please."

I love this man and his playfulness, his gentle words, but right now, I'm only craving one thing.

With a low sigh, I spread my legs wider, taking him deeper, closing any last space between us.

One inked arm slides over my back. A firm grip I couldn't free myself from if I wanted to.

Guess what? I don't.

His other hand cups my face, tilting my chin up. His head cranes. Feral lips torch mine.

There we are.

Connected, complete, and so in love it hurts until his thrusts sweep me away like an island storm.

When it's over, I drift off to a boneless sleep in his arms and wake up to crystal-blue eyes staring at me like I'm the most precious treasure he's ever seen.

I giggle.

“How long have you been staring?” I pull a pillow over my head.

He fights it away, puts his forehead on mine, and then lays down the law on my lips.

“Never too long, sweetheart. You’re beautiful, you’re mine, and now you’re awake. I ordered room service and I thought we’d take it on the patio. We’ll head downstairs whenever you’re ready. What do you want to do today?”

“I don’t care. As long as it’s with you,” I say honestly.

His lips quirk up.

“I think you’ll enjoy the fact that you’re starting your day with a cinnamon latte, thanks to yours truly. Try not to get sick from all that damn sugar,” he growls, caressing my face.

“My hero,” I whisper, fluttering my eyes dramatically as he dives in for another kiss.

So maybe I’m far more than his assistant now, but let’s be real.

Magnus Heron will always be the boss of me.


THANKS FOR READING OFFICE GRUMP! Look for more lovable bossholes coming soon.

Curious what’s in store for Mag, Brina, and Jordan years later?



Have a peek at their lives long after the honeymoon in [this special flash forward story.](https://dl.bookfunnel.com/7w3r6ymurk) -

Then read on for a preview of another broody billionaire, Ridge Barnet in The Romeo Arrangement.

[OceanofPDF.com](https://www.oceanofpdf.com)

THE ROMEO ARRANGEMENT PREVIEW

No Place to Crash (Grace)

“Careful, Gracie. This snow’s getting to be too much,” Dad growls, his eyes flicking across the road.

“Just a little longer. There has to be something up ahead.” I bite my lip, hoping to every star above that I’m right.

And it’s hard to hope when the stars are walled off behind the dense, angry clouds intent on burying us for the last hundred miles.

Oh, I’ve got all the fire under my ass a girl could ever need, but I’ll tell you one thing—I’d *kill* for a touch of real fire right now.

I feel a mad affection for every human being who ever shivered, scowled up at the sky, and said *winter, bite me*.

If only winter was the end of my worries.

The loud, ragged cough coming from my father in the passenger seat has me more nervous than the heavy snow drifting across the highway in blustery white sheets. It’s been snowing for hours.

This old truck, which had seen better days long before we left Wisconsin, has already been working overtime to pull the horse trailer up and down the rolling hills.

I’m keeping the speed low so I can try to avoid any mishaps. They’re all too likely with the sort of luck we’ve had

on our journey thus far. We must've lost a good hour back in Minnesota, straining to change a flat.

Every time I glance at the old Ford's dashboard, I'm expecting to see red.

A check engine light. Low oil pressure. Battery, alternator, brakes, another broken thingamajig.

Nothing would surprise me.

Still, despite being rusted up and dented, no thanks to my teenage driving skills years ago, the truck soldiers on. It's almost like family, an old workhorse with the air of an immortal.

Only, the signs of aging are as impossible to ignore as its scabs of rust.

I know it's a cheap metaphor for my father, who hacks up another coughing fit next to me.

Ask me how much I care about metaphors right now.

The once robust Nelson Sellers, who used to practically juggle hay bales, has shrunken the past few months. It's not just his weight and musculature.

He slouches, even when sitting, something he always used to get after me for as a kid.

Dad's demeanor has changed, his energy flatlining as his body limps along. His once coppery-brown hair is dull silver, and that fiery shine in his blue eyes that made him Dad is just...gone.

All depressing signs of the crushing weight we've shared lately.

But deep down, he's still a Sellers. He won't stop, and neither will I.

As long as this old Ford trudges on, so will we, all the way to Montana.

Same with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—aka Rosie and Stern—the two horses riding in the trailer behind us in my

rearview mirror. I'm not sure who loves them more, Dad or me.

They were his pride and joy once, and my best friends growing up. Practically the only friends I'd had when we'd left the city for the small farm north of Milwaukee to raise pumpkins.

Yes, *pumpkins*.

Feels like an eternity ago now. I'd finished high school while living on the farm, moved out, went to college for interior design, and dreamed of covering pretty places in prettier ideas.

Sadly, pretty anything hasn't been in the cards for a long time.

I watched too many dreams get demolished on that farm. And then one day, when there was nothing left but smoldering ruins, we threw together our things and hit the road while we still could.

Someday, I'll have my freaking slice of pretty.

Even if it feels like someday might as well be in the next century with this dark, deserted road and white dunes that could swallow a person whole crowding every mile.

"Gracie," Dad says, breathing heavy. "It's getting damn near impassable. You're gonna have an accident. Pull over."

"I can't just stop here, Dad. There's nowhere to park." Not without potentially trapping the truck in an icy grave, and us with it. Believe me, I would if I could. Even in my boots, my toes are frozen nubs because the heater can't keep up with the cold air invading the cab. "I can't make out a shoulder, let alone how deep the ditches are."

It's the truth, but I don't need to say it.

Dad's eyes aren't that bad.

He can see the snow-covered road and the huge flakes swirling around in the beams of our headlights before splattering against the windshield and being swept away by frantic wipers.

“We’ll pull over as soon as I find a hint of civilization,” I tell him, scratching my cheek.

“There has to be a town somewhere. I checked the map a hundred miles back; I know I saw something,” he grumbles.

“Only *you* still read off of a paper atlas. Every phone has GPS that works most of the time, even when the service sucks.” I give him a teasing smile, but it fades just as fast when I see the look on his face.

I can tell how he’s trying to hold in another cough. It’s there behind the slight sideways quirk of his lips.

My heart hurts for him, and worry sours my stomach.

Congestive heart failure.

Probable.

That’s what the emergency room doc said last week. We didn’t get a chance to stick around for the follow-up with the cardiologist. Honestly, his ticker running out is the whole reason we’re in God Forsaken Nowhere, North Dakota.

As soon as we got the bad news, I said we had to go.

Leave.

Before it’s too late for him to find a little peace.

I’m still praying it isn’t. Nobody deserves to spend their last days on earth being hunted.

“Can’t believe how long this is taking,” he says, reaching up to wipe at his side of the windshield. “There has to be a pit stop up ahead, a gas station...*something*.”

“You’d think so,” I say, hoping to lighten the mood. “But I’m pretty sure there are more oil drills than people out in these parts.”

“Yeah, yeah. I heard all about the oil boom out here a few years back. Hell of an industry to be in,” he answers dryly, but with a hint of a smile. “Oil crews gotta eat, though. That means a town somewhere in this mess.”

“It’s coming,” I say. “And then we’ll stop for an overdue breather.”

“Not too long,” he reminds me, tapping a finger against his seat belt. “Just enough to take a leak and give Noelle a call. You said she left a few messages?”

“Right. I just haven’t had time to—”

Those words stop short in my mouth when I notice an odd purple flashing light in the swirling wintry darkness beyond the headlights.

My eyes narrow to a squint.

It’s almost like the purple light winks right back at me the harder I stare, holding the truck in what I hope is still our lane.

Weird.

I haven’t seen a patch of clear pavement or another vehicle for miles, and I’m almost wondering if I’m seeing things. Hallucinating out of desperation.

Nope.

Purple lights. Still there. Still pulsing.

I’m hoping it’s a business, not just some kind of derelict radio tower or utility site. My hands are cramped from white-knuckling the steering wheel for what’s felt like hours.

The tension in my shoulders and neck makes my muscles burn. It hurts to turn my head enough to glance at Dad again.

“You see that?” he asks. “That purple light?”

“Sure do. Glad it’s not just me.”

Coming closer now, I see the flashing light belongs to a sign. A tall one hoisted high in the sky. Between the snow and the distance, I can’t see anything below the sign, yet.

An old motel, maybe, but it could be something else, too.

“It looks like...a cat?” I whisper, trying to make sense of the round face outlined in bright royal purple with what looks like two pointy ears. “Definitely a cat. Meow.”

Now I can see the whiskers, the cartoonish grin, one eye winking as the sign flicks back and forth.

“Thank God. Hope it’s not just a snowmobile dealer,” Dad mutters.

I get the reference to a big brand in winter gear, but I’m pretty sure their logo doesn’t look anything like this. That winking face is actually kinda ridiculous, and by far the happiest thing I’ve seen all night.

“I think we’re in luck,” I say, smiling.

We’re close enough to read the name stenciled in curly lit letters under the cat’s face.

The Purple Bobcat, it reads. *Good eats. Beer. Fun.*

“Looks like a dive,” Dad says as the building comes into view. “Whatever, it’ll do.”

I nod, holding my breath for signs of vehicles in the lot. I don’t want to get my hopes up unless it’s still open.

The bar itself is a one-story wooden building painted bright purple. The owner must be a huge Prince fan or just hellbent on grabbing attention out here in the sticks.

Coming closer, the windows are lit up bright with beer signs. Looks like a few trucks parked in front of the building.

I exhale that breath I’ve been holding.

It may not be much, but right now a parking lot and a few walls feel like a luxury resort.

“It’s still open. Hope you’re hungry,” I say, easing my foot off the gas.

I refrain from tapping the brakes. It’s hard to determine just how much ice is packed under the snow.

The last thing I need is to send the trailer fishtailing across the lot and smack right into some good old boy’s favorite pickup.

Two little blue reflectors sticking out above the snow tell me where the driveway is. I slowly steer the truck between the

reflectors and pull up along what I'm assuming is the edge of the parking area where there's room to park without boxing in other vehicles. Plenty of room to make an easy turn when it's time to leave, too.

"Don't forget your hat," I remind Dad as I shut off the truck and stow the keys in my purse. "Go on ahead of me; it's freezing out here. I'll check on Rosie and Stern, then meet you inside."

Dad grumbles under his breath.

Something about being perfectly capable of looking after himself, but he puts on his wool-brimmed hat to humor me. I smile as he pulls the side flaps down over his ears, giving me a firm look that says *happy?* before opening his door.

I dig around on my lap and find my green-and-gold stocking cap, and then tug on my thick, fur-lined, made-in-Duluth Chopper mittens. The wind coming in through Dad's passenger door is so bitter it rips my breath away.

When I open my door, the cold makes me shiver from head to toe.

"Winter, bite me," I say, mostly to myself because I don't think Jack Frost is listening. And if he is, well, the sweeping chill he flings in my face is worse than a middle finger.

Tucking my chin into the collar of my coat, I pull the fur-lined hood tighter around my face to help block the wind. I hate every single big fat snowflake stinging my cheeks and catching on my eyelashes as I waddle past the truck in my boots to the trailer.

Thankfully, it only takes a few minutes to check on the horses. They must be freezing, but they aren't showing any signs of distress from the ride or bad weather. I feed them a couple carrots they wolf down like starving beasts before my own stomach growls.

If my lucky streak continues tonight, maybe this place will have something that isn't oozing grease. A girl can hope. It'd be nice to keep my blood sugar levels in the happy range where I'm not hankering to chew my own arm off.

By the time I enter the bar, I'm ready to call the weather a winner.

I'm chilled to the bone. The dense snow packed on my boots makes my feet feel like they're twenty pounds heavier. It's a workout as I go stomping through the door.

The Purple Bobcat isn't nearly so colorful inside.

Too bad.

It's smaller than it looked on the outside, dark and dingy, but fairly clean. No ripped-up seats or rickety tables or cracked tile floors. No ugly crowd of guys missing teeth or gals with their boobs hanging out of their shirts over pool tables, either.

The wood-paneled walls are covered with metal signs advertising retro beers and off-color jokes. Dad's found a table where he's parked himself to look over a menu.

One of the only occupied tables tonight, it seems.

If this place has regulars, or newcomers, or even long-haul truckers looking for a nightcap and a side of bawdy conversation, the storm has kept them all away.

Who could blame them in this blizzard?

There's an older man and woman in a booth near the frosty windows, picking at what looks like plates of gyros and fries. The table Dad chose is in the center of the room, surrounded by other empty ones.

At the bar, I count four guys on stools. A couple big blue-collar guys in stained coveralls—oil workers, maybe—plus two tall figures at the far end with several seats between them and the other men.

The maybe-oil-workers are quiet, focused on their tall beers, but the two on the opposite end are talking loudly.

Well, one of them is.

He's tall. Built. Ginormous. Loud.

A tiger of a man stuffed in a red-and-black flannel shirt. I'm a little embarrassed when he whips around with a smile meant for the bartender.

Maybe he sensed the weirdo staring, and with said weirdo being me, looking like Jack Frost just kicked my butt up and down the playground, I...

I can't hold it against him for wondering who the miserable, crazy lady is who just dragged herself in from the cold like a wet cat.

Am I still staring?

Maybe.

Because maybe I'm suddenly feeling a whole lot warmer taking in the handsome face perched on his wide shoulders, a jaw so defined it was cut by a mad sculptor, over six feet of defiant muscle that looks like it's ready to burst right out of that flannel corral barely holding it.

Maybe he's sporting *just the right* sandy-dark stubble to sear a woman's skin, like this otherworldly, beautiful freak who just leaped out of a fashion ad.

Oh my God.

Um, and maybe he's staring right back. Turning the most obscene blue-eyed lightning I've ever been struck with on my bewildered face.

It's a look that bites.

A gaze that's too intense, too assessing, too ready to reach down inside me and dredge up feelings I have zero time for and even less energy to give.

It's a fight to tear my eyes away. I stomp my boots on the rubber mat out front again, taking my sweet time, saying a quick prayer that the next time I look up, the tiger will have moved on to other things.

Oh, thank hell. I let out that breath I'd been holding in.

He's not facing me anymore, and he's back to telling his boisterous, animated story that's got the bartender laughing away. Seems they're two giant, steely-eyed peas in a pod. The bartender is also a wall of a man with a thicker beard and a rougher look in his eye.

The other guy seated next to Tiger, on the other hand...

He's just out of place.

Lean, older, and his button-down shirt and tie look far too posh for a bar called the Purple Bobcat. Whatever they're saying, he's just nodding along, looking bored out of his mind.

I flip my hood down while giving my boots one more good shake, then pull off my hat and mittens. I walk to the center of the room and sit down next to Dad.

"The horses are fine," I tell him, remembering how to speak.

"Figured they'd be. And what about you?" He covers his mouth as he coughs.

"Still kicking," I whisper, reaching to slide his menu across to me. "Anything good here?"

He can't answer while he's busy fighting his own lungs.

God. We've been on the road for over twelve hours, but with this weather, we still have a good four or five more to go to Miles City.

That concerns me a lot. Dad's beaten, worn out, drained.

It's hard to keep my eyes glued to the menu for the sake of being polite. But he hates it when I fuss over his health, even if I have every reason to.

With a soft sigh, I set my hat and mittens on the table while he takes a long drink of water.

"Listen...I think we need to call it a night. I'll check to see if there are any motels nearby," I say, pulling my phone out of my pocket.

"No, Grace. The horses can't stay in that trailer overnight. They'll freeze their rears off." He inhales sharply. "I...I ordered us both some coffee, and he's making a fresh pot so we'll have plenty more to go. We'll wait for the snow to let up and then press on. We can handle a few more hours. Noelle's place isn't far."

He's so wrong I bite my tongue.

Jesus, I'm not sure if I can even *handle* a few more hours, but if he's this determined...

I nod, but now there's a new reason to be concerned when I look at my phone.

Three missed calls and a flurry of texts. They're all from Noelle, and they say the same thing.

Grace, call me ASAP.

She's my cousin, my mom's side. I haven't seen her since Mom's funeral, but when I'd called in a nervous fit last week, she'd invited us to come to Montana and stay with her until our trouble gets sorted.

Our choices are pretty limited when we're low on money, and Noelle is the only family we know with a farm and plenty of space for us to bring along Rosie and Stern.

Too bad Miles City is hundreds of miles from Wisconsin. I swear, we'd be there by now if it wasn't for that stupid flat and this intensifying storm we hit past Bismarck.

She and her husband have a hobby farm a lot like ours, only instead of pumpkins, they sell eggs, homemade cheeses, and other goods. She's always wanted us to see it, and a small part of me was looking forward to being part of something like that again.

That pit in my gut deepens, scrolling through the missed calls.

She's been texting for hours.

With the snow demanding every bit of my focus, I hadn't taken a hand off the steering wheel to do anything except hit the blinker switch to pull in here.

Crap. Whatever it is, I don't think she's just checking up on our progress.

The coffee arrives, steaming and black. I reach for a sugar packet and tear it right open, hoping nobody notices how my hands shake.

I thank the bartender before telling Dad, “Be right back. I need to use the ladies’ room.”

Tucking my phone in my pocket, I spot the restroom sign above a hallway near the end of the bar. Purple, what else?

Of course, I carefully avoid another awkward stare-down with Tiger Sex Eyes. He must be quite the comedian—the bartender and the oil guys are still roaring at whatever he’s saying.

Probably some crude joke that’d be too fitting for a place like this.

The hallway is short. I shove open the women’s door and enter the small, two-stalled room, pull out my phone, and hit Noelle’s contact.

She answers after one ring. “Grace? Oh my God, finally.”

“Yep, it’s me.” Turning around, I lean my backside against the top of the sink. “What’s wrong?”

She goes deathly quiet. “Well, um...have you guys left Milwaukee yet?”

“We left early this morning just like we planned. Had to change a tire on the truck halfway through Minnesota, then this snowstorm we ran into...we had to pull over. But we’re coming tonight, just a few more hours and—”

“Oh,” she whispers.

Another heavy silence.

That one, innocent word kills me.

Don’t do this, Noelle, I think to myself, trying not to fall over with my heart frozen.

“I...I really hoped I’d catch you while you were still at home.”

My nerves are a jumbled mess, a little more frayed with every word she speaks. Noelle doesn’t sound like her usual bubbly self, and I’m scared of what’s coming.

“What’s up?” I force the question through clenched teeth. “Noelle...what happened?”

“Well, uh...God, I hate to say this, but...something’s come up. You and Uncle Nelson aren’t going to be able to stay with us after all.”

No.

My heart hits my stomach and shatters like a snow globe on cement.

“I’m so sorry, Grace,” Noelle says, sniffing like she’s on the verge of tears. “I hope you have somewhere else.”

Sure.

If we had *somewhere else*, I’d have never called her and wept with gratitude when she said we could come. It’s not like we were asking to move in.

We only needed a month or so, a few weeks, just enough time to check on Dad’s health and figure out our next move.

“What changed, Noelle?” I ask. Then, because she’s known to sugarcoat things, I add, “Tell me the truth.”

Her sad, heavy sigh echoes in the phone.

“I didn’t hear the message. James did. It was on the voicemail at the gift shop. It mentioned you and Uncle Nelson...something about not making everyone in the family sing the ‘Old Milwaukee Blues.’ It was menacing and it came from an untraceable number. James wouldn’t let me or the kids hear it. I’m...I’m so sorry, Grace. I hate this, but we have children. We can’t get involved in—”

“I get it,” I snap, rubbing at the awful pain in my temple. “No, you can’t risk it. You...you did the right thing.”

The words feel so numb, I have to keep repeating it over and over in my head.

But there’s a deeper question nagging me.

How did they know?

Dad hasn’t talked to anyone, and I sure as hell haven’t.

We've given that maniac everything. *More* than everything, but it'll never be enough.

Not for Clay Grendal. He's a flipping two-bit gangster, but in his mind, he's Al Capone and El Chapo spliced together.

"Gracie, I'm scared for you and Uncle Nelson," Noelle whimpers, her voice so low. "You need to call the police, the FBI, somebody. Get help!" she hisses. "Go to the law before it's too late."

My stomach churns, pushing angry bile up my throat. My head is pounding; I still haven't had anything to eat, and now with this bomb I've had dropped on my head?

Appetite, gone.

The police can't do anything for us. No one can. The time to risk something like that was years ago, not while my father might be down to his last precious days on earth.

Dad doesn't need even more stress, his hourglass running out under the gun. Literally and figuratively with constant interrogations. Maybe they'd even lock him up.

Years ago, while working at the railroad yards in Milwaukee, my father took on a side gig helping *transport* goods that weren't quite legal.

Actually, it was as illegal as it gets. Both the transporting and the goods.

"I just...I thought Uncle Nelson was done with all that mob stuff," Noelle says quietly. "I thought he got out when he bought your farm years ago? When you moved out of the city?"

My teeth pinch together so hard it hurts.

He had gotten out, or so we thought.

For a little while, life was good, until my mom got sick and the medical bills started coming fast and furious. Dad reached out to his old associates for a loan.

At the time, Grendal said it wasn't a loan, but a gift, for Dad's past services. Then the bad luck started, and Dad found

out fast what kind of strings came with accepting that gift—vandalism, a fire in the barn, and a string of other events that truly had nothing to do with random chance.

It left us destitute, barely scraping by on miscellaneous pumpkin sales plus Dad's railroad pension. Clay doled out more money, and this time he expected repayment—*with interest*.

We gave him everything we had, even offered the farm, but it wasn't enough. He insisted on his pound of flesh. I think even if we'd won the lottery, it still wouldn't have been enough.

He knew what he wanted out of this all along, and it has nothing to do with money.

“Grace? Are you still there?” Noelle asks. “I'm sorry. I know it isn't your fault. I didn't mean to bring back bad memories.”

My stomach revolts. The bitter taste of bile burns my throat, coats my tongue, and I swallow hard not to gag.

“Still here,” I tell her. Still hopelessly cursed. “Dad's out, just like I've told you for years. Don't worry, you aren't in any danger.” I'm certain of that. Clay Grendal only wants one thing.

I know because I had to face the devil himself, and I'll never, ever do it again.

“Where are you? Are you safe?” Noelle asks.

“North Dakota now. Don't know the town, but we're not that far from the Montana line.” I turn around, pacing the small area between the vanity and the stalls, desperate to get my head screwed back on.

“Oh, Grace. I'm sorry. I truly, truly am.”

“I know you are, Noelle. I understand. Family and little ones first.”

There's a long pause, then I hear her take a strained breath.

“What're you going to do?”

Boom. The million-dollar question I don't think I could pry a dollar from.

I don't have a clue.

Here we are, almost flat broke, stuck in the middle of flipping nowhere, while Mother Nature has major PMS.

"Don't worry," I say again. "We'll figure it out. I'll call you in a couple of days to check in."

"Oh, please do. I hate this again, Grace. If it was just me ___"

"I know, Noelle. But James is right. Listen to your husband. You have to think about your family." Which is exactly what I have to do, too. "I'll call you soon."

"Okay. I really am sorry. Do you want us to contact anyone if...if you don't check in?"

I rub at my eye, amazed at how hard it is to answer such a simple, but loaded question.

But if I'm not in any position to call my cousin two days from now, her running to the police won't help anything.

It'll just put her family in the crosshairs they're trying to avoid.

"No, don't bother. I know you mean well. Bye, Noelle." I click off, drop the phone on the counter, and hang my head over the sink.

What the hell am I going to do now?

Pushing myself back up, I pick up my phone, enter a stall and use the facilities, with my heart sinking lower and lower. There's nowhere else for us. *Nowhere*.

Exiting the stall, I wash my hands. As I reach for the paper towels, I see a candle sitting on top of the metal towel holder. Not quite up to normal safety standards but it's what's lying next to the candle that truly catches my eye.

A match. A spent one with its end charred black.

It makes me think of Mom, and despite the hopelessness inside me, a grin tugs at my lips.

If you've got a light, you've still got a wish.

She must've said that line a thousand times. I don't know if she stole it from a movie, a song, a book, a story her grandmother told her, or what.

Sometimes it haunts me, but right now, I know my wish like I know this sickly adrenaline hangover coursing through my veins.

I wish this wasn't my life.

I wish I could wake up in a cold sweat, toss back a glass of water, and get out of bed.

I wish I could start the day living a boring normal Wisconsin life. Not this lethal nightmare.

But it's not a horrific dream.

It's as real as can be, and this is a world where wishes rarely come true.

This is a life where I traded my faith in wishing to keep my sanity.

I stare at the blackened match for a few more seconds and shrug. We're not totally beaten yet.

My credit cards aren't quite maxed out, and I have enough to put us up in some cheap motel for a little while. So onward we go.

Walking out of the bathroom, I also wish I'd drunk my coffee before calling Noelle. It's sure to be cold now.

Lukewarm coffee has nothing on my insides when I reach the end of the hall and spot the man who's just walked through the door.

He's tall. Bald. A human brick in neutral colors. A mosaic of shapes runs up one side of his face, more like a sinister mask than a tattoo.

I've never seen him before, but my instincts tell me he's more bad news—what else?—even before his eyes lock on Dad and he's heading for our table.

It. Can't. Be.

I shoot around the end of the bar, and in my hurry to get to my father, I bump into the tall glum man dressed in business attire who's on his feet and making his way toward the bathrooms.

“Sorry!” I say and continue rushing toward the table.

Baldy has already arrived, though, and I can hear him snarling behind a nasty smirk.

“Never thought I'd find your ass in this storm. You finally ready to talk sense, old man, or what?”

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ABOUT NICOLE SNOW

Nicole Snow is a *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* bestselling author. She found her love of writing by hashing out love scenes on lunch breaks and plotting her great escape from boardrooms. Her work roared onto the indie romance scene in 2014 with her Grizzlies MC series.

Since then Snow aims for the very best in growly, heart-of-gold alpha heroes, unbelievable suspense, and swoon storms aplenty.

Already hooked on her stuff? [Sign up for her newsletter here](#) for exclusive offers and more from your favorite characters!

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Her website is nicolesnowbooks.com

Got a question or comment on her work? Reach her anytime at nicole@nicolesnowbooks.com

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