



PERFECT GRUMP

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PERFECT GRUMP

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

NICOLE SNOW

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ABOUT THE BOOK

I've caught a raging case of boss-hole.

Signing on as a company driver for Brandt Ideas felt like a dream.

Big-girl salary. Stellar benefits. Glorious people—minus *one*.

Nicholas Brandt was put on Earth to drive me insane.

Of course, he's my bossman.

He spent the first month mistaking me for a dude.

Then he "apologized" with the grace of a drunken moose.

A perfect grump with a brutal reputation.

A heart-thief sculpted like a fallen angel.

A master at making me question all of my life decisions.

Why is it always the terrible ones who make a girl tingle?

The longer I'm stuck with Satan in endless Chicago traffic, the faster he wears me down.

When he needs a "date" at this rich-people charity dance, I crack.

I say *yes*.

I kiss my incurable, broken, off-limits boss—and God help me, I like it.

I invite disasters fated to rip my heart out.

And just when Nick Brandt can't cut my life into tinier confetti, the unthinkable does.

Guess who wants to save me.

Now guess how much barbed wire I've got to keep Mr. Anti-Perfect in exile...

LOSING SLEEP (REESE)



“**R**eesee, you can’t keep blowing money on Millie like this,” Abby tells me over the phone as I’m weaving through busy Chicago traffic at rush hour.

“Why not?” I whine back. “It’s my money and my niece.”

“Um, that last doll you bought her came with a convertible and her own high-end makeup kit. Like, better than we can afford in our non-plastic lives. *You* need your money. Besides, she’s getting spoiled.”

I toss my head back and laugh.

Maybe she has a point, but I wonder...why complain now?

I’ve been buying my adorable bumblebee stuff for years, and my sister never minded. Why does she suddenly care? It’s not a contest. Everybody wins when you’re lavishing a smiley little girl with gifts.

For once, it doesn’t strain my purse, either.

But I guess that’s what older sister single moms do.

They worry.

“Don’t worry, sis. I told you; I got a new job that *pays*. It’s not like the other places stiffing drivers left and right. I’m making ninety-freaking-thousand per year plus benefits. Big girl Chicago money.”

“Congratu-freaking-lations, Miss Big Shot.” Abby laughs. “I mean it. Your last gig barely covered rent. I’m happy for you.”

“I think it’s going to be good. I mean, nothing’s ever perfect, but—”

“But? You’re already finding flaws in a job that pays that much?” Abby laughs again.

“Well...so you remember that architect lady I picked up a few weeks ago? The older one who designed that insanely cool cabin-like building on the lake? She basically insisted I come in for an interview to drive for her permanently. I wasn’t expecting much, especially when I found out she’s kind of a big deal...I definitely didn’t expect a job offer. But I got it, and yeah. A woman could get used to not being poor.”

“That’s awesome! But driving downtown Chicago in rush hour?” I swear I can hear my sister physically wince over the line. “Yuck. They’d need to add another zero to that salary if it were me.”

“Oh, Abby, it’s nothing new to me.” It’s my turn to laugh. “I love driving for her. Beatrice Brandt’s an angel with badass wings. Sweet, whip-smart, and classy. Surprisingly down-to-earth for a billionaire artist. She’s kinda like the grandma we never had.”

After a brief silence, Abby says, “Yeah. I guess that’s nice. So all you do is drive her around all day in hell-traffic?”

“Almost.” I swallow at the image trying to invade my mind. A maddening image of a very annoying man who’s built, tall, sexy as sin, and—no. I will not let it in. *Not. Today. Satan.* “Look, if she was the only person I had to chauffeur around, this job would be paradise—”

“Oh. But it’s never that easy, is it?” Abby asks.

“I chauffeur her two grandsons around, too,” I say with a sigh. “One of them is ice-cold, growly, and has an entire tree stuck up his ass. Everybody calls him the Warden—”

Abby giggles. “What? Why?”

“Oh, his name’s Ward. But he’s not so bad if you stay on his good side, which isn’t that good...”

“You mean, the other guy’s worse? How?”

“The other guy, he’s...” Even though I’m in a locked town car with the windows up, I look around to make sure no one’s in earshot.

Where do I even start with describing the enigma that is Nicholas Brandt?

How do I explain what happens when ice-cold arctic air impacts a tropical front, and the storm settles into an emerald-eyed beast-man chiseled from pure stone?

“He’s hot, for one,” I venture. “Abby, I mean, really, really hot. Think GQ model meets Instagram fitness freak with lasers for eyes.”

“And that’s a problem?” she asks.

“Looks, no. He’s just weird. Hot and cold with everybody he works with, kinda reckless, unpredictable, armed with terrible jokes and brutal pickup lines. With me, he’s also almost *too* friendly.” I shudder.

“What, he’s trying to coax you into bed so you lose your job? Holy shit, tell me where he lives right now and I’ll show *him* reckless.” Abby’s tone goes stern.

I giggle. “No, no, not like that. He’s not coming on to me or being gross. You don’t have to worry. The guy’s just...well, oblivious. I think I’ve chewed bubblegum that’s more perceptive than this dude.”

“What does that mean?”

“He won’t leave the privacy screen up whenever he’s in the car. I feel like he’s lonely because he keeps talking my ear off.”

“Okay. So? Last I checked, lonely rich guys weren’t invented yesterday.”

“You don’t get it, Abby. He’s treating me like his confidant because he...he kinda thinks I’m a guy.”

That’s not quite accurate, but it’s close enough.

Technically, I think confidants carry on actual conversations.

Definitely not the kind of hilariously one-sided ego monologues I've heard since the day my boss slid into the back seat.

“Wait. What?” Abby pauses. “No way. There’s nothing manly about you. Is he blind? Deaf? *Both?*”

My stomach tightens.

I can't decide whether I want to laugh or cry at how incredibly stupid this is.

“Try telling *him* that. The dude talks to me like I'm a frat boy. He runs his mouth so much, I never get a word in edgewise. I doubt he's ever heard my voice. I think he's probably one of those bosses who needs to be every employee's best friend. I mean, the less said, the better, right? If people are mistaking me for a guy, maybe I should wear some makeup and business skirts. Nix the bulky coat. But it gets so flipping cold this time of year, even with the heat on. Spending all day roaming the streets gets frosty even with the heat cranked up.”

“Nah, don't need to get rid of your coat for this clown. Mistaking you for a guy? He needs to get his eyes checked.”

I look up from where I'm parked and see movement.

My heart jumps in my throat.

Here he comes.

There's no mistaking his toned silhouette. He's stuffed in a sleek black suit with silver pinstripes and a green shirt under his blazer that matches his piercing eyes far too well.

“Speak of the devil. I'd better go,” I say, already hoping he just needs a quick hop across town and not a forty-minute trek to his brother's lakeside estate.

“No problem. Talk to you later. You should have some fun with this!”

Easy for her to say.

Nothing about driving for a self-absorbed egomaniac falls under *fun*.

Millie squeals in the background, forcing a smile from me.

“Reese, are you still there?” Abby asks.

“Yep. Ten more seconds.”

“Millie wants to say hi. Do you have a second?”

Not really—Captain Oblivious is like five paces away from the car—but I’m not turning down my three-year-old chatterbox niece.

“Make it fast,” I say.

“Auntie Reese!” Millie says in her adorable baby voice.

“Hey, baby. I’ll see you soon, okay? Be good for me.”

“Otay.”

“Love you. Bye-bye, bumblebee.” I cut the call and toss my phone in the seat beside me before she says anything else in her adorable babble that hooks me into a conversation.

Just in the literal Nick of time, too.

Bossman’s built frame approaches like a snow leopard, stalking the cold streets, focus shining in his eyes. I wonder if this man only checks his sharp brain when he climbs in my car.

God.

For the briefest second, my eyes strain like they wish they had X-ray vision.

Does he carve that lethal muscle in the gym or is he a military man like his brother? Either way, it’s breathtaking. I can’t look away even when every nerve I have screams *bad idea*.

He circles around and touches the handle of the back passenger side door.

Lose the thought, Reese. It’s none of your business where he builds his body.

I wish it was that easy.

Oh, but it gets easier the second he opens his blackhole of a mouth.

“Reese Halle! Get pumped. We’re going to have ourselves a great fucking time tonight,” he chuckles, slapping his slacks the second he’s seated.

Umm—we are? Awesome, now a whole other set of seedy images starts flashing, unbridled, through my head. Him, me, and whatever “great time” actually means in Nick-speak—

Stop it. Really.

I force a nod, knowing I don’t need to verbalize before he belts out the rest of whatever asinine thing he has planned.

“We have to head to the airport to pick up Jorge, then we’re going to take him to the coolest nightclubs Chicago has to offer. You know how many clubs this guy owns back in Brazil? I promised him Brandt Ideas could one-up any of Chicago’s finest. Tonight, I seal the deal.”

Yay!

Lucky me.

I’m going to have a great time, all right.

Stone-cold sober, cabbing Nick and his client around all night. Probably trying not to stab them when I imagine the bosshole he could become with endless booze plus a need to impress a foreign club owner.

Ugh.

Nodding again, I pull onto the road. I can’t stop my eyes from flicking back at him.

He flashes his best bad boy smile in the rearview mirror—annoyingly handsome, and an orthodontist’s wet dream—and says, “This guy has a reputation for living life large. Things might get a little crazy tonight. Don’t worry, though. I know where to draw the line. I think we’ll get by without a defibrillator.”

Sweet Jesus, no.

No.

I'm starting to hope I never hear the phrase "great time" for the rest of my life. This colossal jackass talks like he can barely handle himself, let alone a drunken club hop with a guy who might just stage an international incident.

"You know how the press loves to sniff around, especially that Osprey dickhead and his minions from *The Chicago Tea*. It comes with the territory when you're a billionaire and a Brandt. We may have to make some quick exits if they follow us—but you rock at that, right? Tactical driving or whatever? Grandma says you can do anything. That clown just won't get off my ass."

I roll my eyes while I move my head in something resembling a nod for him.

Then I have to stifle a laugh.

Nick Brandt, refusing a chance to talk about himself until he's blue in the face? What gives?

Sure, he's pretty fabulous and all, and he knows it. He also never knows when to shut up and spends half his time outside the office inserting his polished shoe halfway down his throat.

I feel sorry for Granny Beatrice and Ward.

"How far do you think we are from the airport?" Before I can answer, he taps his phone. "Never mind. Looks like twenty minutes or so. So, how are you liking the job so far? You started—what? Two weeks ago? You're probably over the moon. Everybody loves Grandma. You know what my bro says about this place? 'If it's not made by God, then it must be a Brandt.'"

Inwardly, I groan.

That slogan would be the height of suit-and-tie arrogance if it wasn't true. Brandt Ideas really is that good at what they do. Beatrice Nightingale Brandt would be worshiped in sermons around the world for her designs, if she'd let the masses do it.

Sadly, with her grandsons, the apples fell too far from the tree and rolled in mud.

I love how I don't have to open my mouth when he gets into his nonstop rambling. He's already on the phone with someone, boasting loudly about how he's going to need a stretcher for his Brazilian client tonight.

I nudge my hands together over the wheel, muttering a silent prayer that he doesn't mean it literally.

"...what? Ward, go to hell. There's a reason Grandma let me take this bull by the horns. With you, the dude would be asleep and heading back to Rio with another firm's contract." He pauses. "Like hell. Everybody *loves* my stories—just ask our buddy Halle here."

He leans forward, tapping the back of my headrest.

Seriously.

Don't let me get my hands on any sharp objects tonight, or I'm walking away with a pink slip in handcuffs.

Ignoring the mega-idiot in the back seat, I focus on the road, and level my breathing.

It's not all bad.

Driving has always been my stress relief. I love making decent money doing what I do best. There's a certain peace in every mile of traveled road, the same inner calm other people get from watching a rolling river or burning through a blistering workout.

After Ward hangs up on him, the conversation is all-Nick, all the time, all the way to O'Hare International. And when I say conversation, I mean *monologue*.

Every question he asks me, he auto-answers for himself.

We approach the airport, and I'm about to ask which lane I should be in. I open my mouth, and the second I do, he starts pointing.

"Go to international arrivals," Nick says sharply. "We're looking for Brazilian Airlines. His flight's coming in straight from Rio. I know the nightclubs here can't compete with Carnival there, but I'm going to blow his hair back with a

good time. You ever been? I'm telling you, last time I went down there...wild times."

Oh, no.

No, no, no, and also no.

Now he's telling me about these triplet dancers he met with ginormous assets, who didn't understand a word he said, but gave him the best body shots he's ever had, with glasses balanced off their—

I swerve into the lane for commercial cars and shuttles, behind an airport bus, praying it saves me from the rest of this twisted fairy tale.

My phone buzzes from the passenger seat. I pick it up and tap it once.

"Hey, don't text and drive," he calls from the back with a laugh.

Probably the most intelligent words I've ever heard him say.

But we're parked and the text is from Beatrice Brandt—the whole reason I'm currently trapped in this well-paid torture session.

Reese, hello. A quick word about tonight—Jorge Franca is a major partier, and so is Nick. Will you keep an eye on my grandson tonight, please? Don't let him fall in over his head. It's so easy when he gets carried away.

Yep. A tinge of guilt strikes.

For Beatrice Brandt, I'll play chaperone and chauffeur for this cocky, intense man with more energy than my three-year-old niece and possibly worse decision-making skills.

I guess that means I might have to get out of the car at some point, but I doubt he'll notice.

After a round or two of bottle service, he'll probably be so lit he'll still think I'm a dude.

But Beatrice Brandt offered me three times my old pay with Cadillac benefits. If anyone's truly stuck with the Brandt

boys' antics, it's her.

I just have to suffer with them a few times per week.

I'm getting off easy.

Setting my jaw tight, I nod to myself.

A job so good it finally feels like a real career has to be worth a nuisance or ten, right?



I YAWN, slapping myself lightly on the cheek.

It's almost one a.m. and I'm in a holding pattern. Nick and this big, bald, loud-mouthed business guy are still in the nightclub. I officially hit the bonus pay Beatrice promised in another text before midnight.

I don't mind because the money will make it easier to help Abby and the bumblebee.

Even so, instinct doesn't go down easy. The one thing this job lacks sometimes is a normal sleep schedule.

Right now, with winter's dark, frigid days, I'd do anything to be asleep and warm.

Ward gets up before dawn, though, and he'll want to get to the office immediately. My late night hauling Nick around is no excuse.

Why couldn't the two of them be twins? This week is going to be murder on my sleep.

"Bossman, it's ridiculous a man as old as you has to party this late," I whisper.

I stare at the neon lights of *Dazzle*, the club they went to, which looks like a back-alley drug den, from the outside. But in fairness to thirty-something-year-old Nick, Jorge looks twice his age and parties like a bull moose.

What are they doing in there?

I can hear the booming bass from across the street, inside a car with all the windows up. Every now and then, the beat vibrates the vehicle. So do the joyous screams erupting from inside the place.

Forget “great time.”

This sounds more like it might cause a small disruption in the Earth’s tectonic plates.

Should I go in and try to convince Mr. Brandt to leave? I purse my lips, mulling it over.

He probably doesn’t want to take orders from his driver, but I promised his grandmother I’d keep an eye on him. Then again, he’s as much my boss as she is, and I don’t want to piss him off either.

Despite his incessant self-centered rambling, at least he talks at me.

Sometimes.

A self-absorbed jerk, yes, but at least he does more than grunt at me like his brother.

This is the third club they’ve hit tonight, and every time, they’ve come back louder, drunker, and rowdier. I’ve been trying to figure out if Jorge’s club will be in Vegas or Chicago from the thundering chatter flying back and forth, but no dice.

They’ve also been demanding some really awful techno music, too. I think my ears are bleeding. It’s probably for the best if I keep my mouth shut.

I’m just the driver, after all.

My phone buzzes.

I almost jump out of my seat and then laugh.

When I pick up the phone, I see a thumbs-up emoji from Nick and a message. At least he’s still sober enough to text.

Can you pull up to the door? Not sure how far we’ll make it, Halle, my man. LOL. You should have come in. Plenty of girls damn near throwing themselves at anything in business casual.

Yummy. That's exactly what I need. Drunk girls and their drama.

And *Halle*, my man?

Kill me.

I can't believe this doofus still actually thinks I'm a guy—and apparently some kind of pathetic frat creature just as hellbent on partying it up as he is.

“Ninety thousand dollars,” I mutter to myself like I'm saying the rosary. “Ninety-K a year. That's food, shelter, comfort, and fun.”

I pull up to the front door.

It's dark, but I make out Nick's tall silhouette staggering toward the car, hanging on to a bulkier, tipsy load. With each step, he sways back a bit more.

At the car, he throws open the back door, and the light illuminates him.

He's holding Jorge the client like he's shepherding a drunken hippo.

Also, they're both covered in sweat and *shirtless*?

What the actual hell?

Before I can belt out a panicked question, my eyes catch on man-bait I'm convinced was planted by the devil himself.

Holy Ohio.

Nicholas Brandt has immaculate abs.

I want to reach out and touch them, but I'd probably get fired. He's beyond beautiful, his whole body tight like a corded whip, his fierce pecs glowing in a sheen of sweat.

Is that a tattoo on his shoulder? He's sporting one hulking, sculpted chest I'll never unsee.

But I told Beatrice I'd watch out for him.

Staggering to the car drunk and shirtless can't be a good thing for Nick or the company.

I look into the rearview mirror, catch Nick's brilliant green eyes, and raise a brow.

That mischievous bad boy grin covers his face again, peeking out around a halo of dark stubble.

God. How is this guy single?

It's by choice, I think to myself. Obviously. If he wanted a girlfriend, all he'd have to do is raise a finger and he'd have half the bachelorettes in Chicagoland lined up around the corner.

"It's a done deal, Halle. Brandt Ideas is locked and loaded for Jorge's first American club. We're building this man his very own Eden with a liquor license," he says, loudly slapping the big man's back.

Jorge sputters out a messy laugh, groans, and then slumps over in the seat. I have to study him to make sure he's still breathing, suddenly wishing I'd picked up a defibrillator just in case.

Holding frustration in my lungs, I pull out of the parking lot.

"Jorge is at the Palmer House. Drop him off first," Nick says, gingerly rubbing the man's brow as Jorge smacks his lips.

It'd be kind of adorable, Nick playing caretaker to a guy who's even wilder than he is, if only my boss didn't look like he just walked off the set for a bad X-rated film.

Where. Is. His. Shirt?

I want to ask the question so bad, but with a client in the car, I'm better off keeping my mouth shut.

So, I give Nick the only communication he's come to expect from me.

I nod.

This time, when Nick grins back in the mirror, it's sheepish. He throws his damp white shirt over his shoulder like a workout towel.

Is he feeling a hint of shame? Does Nicholas Brandt *do* embarrassment?

“Uh, since you’re probably wondering...there was a dance-off. I couldn’t just leave Jorge hanging. I had to jump in and help him.”

Okay. That explains the sweat and Jorge’s near coma, but why are they shirtless?

I raise an eyebrow. It’s all the encouragement Nick needs when he can only see my eyes in the mirror.

“That place was overcrowded. Total zoo, packed wall to wall, and the heat was cranked up like a sauna. We were packed in like sardines and dancing gets pretty damn physical when you’re trying to win. So, we lost our shirts. That got a standing ovation.”

I glance into the rearview mirror to catch another glimpse of Jorge. His man boobs sag. One guess who the applause was for.

He flops over in the seat and snores.

Good luck getting him out at the hotel, boss.

At least Nick’s underwear model vibe saved the day. I’ve glanced at his Instagram a few times and there’s an obvious pattern in every photo where he’s on some tropical beach, all glowing muscle.

Likes, comments, and marriage proposals through the roof.

Whatever else he is, the man could give Hercules himself some brutal competition.

“I’m sure my dance moves will light up the tabloids by tomorrow, but whatever,” he says. “It’s nothing I haven’t dealt with before. Sometimes it’s the price of business, and I like closing deals.”

I nod.

Nick slumps back in his seat and belts out a laugh, still watching my eyes in the mirror.

“Dude, why are you always so quiet? Are you pissed at me? Does late-night driving like this keep you from a hot date or something?”

For a second, I bite my lip. He actually pauses long enough to answer. Long enough to blow my cover.

But Abby said *have fun with it*, didn't she?

I shake my head.

Driving him around reminds me why staying single feels like the smartest idea ever.

We don't inhabit the same universe.

He's made of drive, abs like Jason Momoa, and a splash of stupid. All he does is work his butt off and dive into debauchery the second he's off the clock—or in this case, still technically on it.

Nicholas Brandt is my new anti-date. The man has heartbreak written all over him, if we pretend for a second there's some whacked-out scenario where I'd ever wind up dating a man like him.

No way.

A drive with Brandt a day keeps Tinder at bay.

Also, I wish he'd put his shirt on. Stovetop abs aside, it's hella awkward escorting your half-dressed boss around.

“You're going to party with me one day,” he says quietly with a low growl. “I'm going to find out what makes you tick.”

I'm tempted to tell him I flat-out don't party with my boss. It would be beyond inappropriate, but he's drunk. I'm just hoping he won't remember this conversation in the morning.

I pull up to the Palmer House while Nick snaps out of his haze.

He taps Jorge on the shoulder. The big businessman doesn't wake up until my boss locks a hand around each shoulder and starts shaking him.

“Eh?” Jorge sits up, rubbing at his bleary eyes. “Huh?”

“We’re at your hotel, buddy.” Nick steps out of the car and holds the door open wider, ignoring the bitter Chicago wind sweeping over his naked back.

It’s a five-minute spectacle waiting for Jorge to move his feet just the right way to exit the car. He almost falls face-first in the dusting of snow.

Nick catches him, somehow—no easy thing considering his bulk. He’s lucky. Losing a client to death by drunken slip after closing a good-sized deal would suck.

“Jorge, what’s your room number?” Nick asks.

“Three...three thirty-five. I think,” he grunts.

Nick nods. “Can you walk?”

Jorge mumbles something in Portuguese I don’t follow, but it sounds like a litany of curses. He doubles over, then takes a step and tilts forward again.

Bossman laughs with a confidence I can’t believe he has, considering the situation.

“Don’t worry, man. We got you.” He peers into the car. “Halle, can you step out? I need a hand.”

Oh, boy. I signed up for babysitting as a favor to Beatrice, but this...this can’t be in the job description.

He wants me to help him drag a shirtless drunken man to his hotel room?

I stare at him with an open mouth, mentally tallying all the ways I don’t get paid enough for this, even with an awesome salary.

Nick shrugs, staring me down with this grumpy expression.

“I get it, it’s not part of the job description. I’ll remember this when the time comes for quarterly bonuses. Impress me, get paid, and we can get drinks on me,” he says matter-of-factly.

Yikes.

Yeah, no way is that happening. Not for any bonus. I do have principles.

I also don't drink with my boss, especially now that I've seen what happens when *he* drinks.

But he's waiting.

Giving me the sternest look ever as a shiver finally rolls through me.

"Idiot," I mouth quietly before climbing out of the car.

The bulky coat surrounds me like a cloak, hiding me and keeping me warm.

Thank God. Right now, I don't want this dumbass to figure out I'm a woman, and I appreciate the extra cloth between me and Man Boobs.

Nick hooks one of Jorge's arms over his own shoulder. I do the same, and together my shirtless boss and I drag his equally naked client through a fine hotel lobby, up an elevator, and down a hall to his room.

"Jorge? Where's your key card?" the boss asks.

Jorge leans against the wall and doesn't answer, grunting and batting his eyes.

Lovely.

"Do you have your key?" he asks again, his voice steady and surprisingly calm.

He's way too patient. I'm ready to slap this guy if he doesn't move his butt in the next three seconds. Then again, Nick's about to make a bazillion bucks off the big man, and I'm not.

Jorge says something but his speech is so slurred neither of us understand him.

"What?" Nick asks.

"Svbackic. Pocket."

"Huh?"

“Pocket!” Jorge snaps.

Nick might be a patient drunk, but Jorge isn’t.

His eyes connect to mine.

I shake my head. This is where I draw the line. No freaking way am I reaching into a strange man’s pants pocket to pull out his room key.

“I’ll give you a raise,” Nick bites off. “Do it.”

I shake my head. Lines have been drawn and I’m not crossing them.

“Damn,” he mutters. “Which pocket? Jorge?”

“Svbackic.”

“What?”

“B-b-back.”

Nick sticks his hand into the back pocket closest to him and rummages around.

“Not that one.” He reaches over, slides his hand into Jorge’s other back pocket, and his eyes light up. He pulls out a sleek white plastic card.

A second later, he waves it in front of the card reader. We both shuffle-haul Jorge inside and tumble him down on a California king bed.

“Our work here’s done,” Nick says, dusting off his hands.

I swallow a groan.

The worst part is how casual he is. Like he’s *used* to this sort of thing.

If this is a regular night at Brandt Ideas, I wonder what I’ve signed up for. Because we’ve already dragged this guy through a hotel, to his room, and my boss had to frisk him for the key.

I’m still marinating in the client’s club-sweat.

Yeah. I’m officially not sure how much more I can take.

Taking an hour-long shower the second I get home excites me more than any fat paycheck.

A chill rolls down my spine when I imagine how late it'll be *after* I scrub myself clean.

“Halle, you okay?” Nick snaps, shifting into no-nonsense mode. A hint of concern flashes in his eyes.

I sink my chin down into the coat, pull my cap down, and nod, following him out the door.

“Some days we really earn our pay, right?” he mutters, stabbing at the elevator button once we're inside.

Whatever you think, dude. I hang back, not even wanting to share oxygen with this prick.

I need this night to end.

The steel doors ding open, and we march through the lobby.

I try to forget I'm wasting my night away with a gorgeous bare-chested man who happens to be my boss, and who still thinks I'm a man.

I've gotta love the confidence boost. It's always been my dream to play mistaken identity. That's why I run my butt off every day, wear makeup, get my hair done.

All so this self-absorbed maniac can cut me down every time he cracks a terrible man joke or calls me by my last name like I'm just another guy.

I cross my arms in front of my chest as we head outside.

“You okay?” he asks again.

I'd be a lot better if you quit asking. Somehow, that doesn't seem like an appropriate line for your boss, but God, do I really want to chuck it at his head.

Ninety thousand dollars.

Ninety. Thousand. Dollars.

That's what I'm going to be chanting in an asylum with my arms pinned to my sides if I don't get home soon.

We finally make it to the shiny black town car, waiting loyally on the curb right where I left it.

“Is this yours?” the doorman asks.

I nod.

“You’re lucky. You already have a parking ticket. We were just about to have it towed.”

Yep. A stark white envelope sticks out of the windshield wiper.

Nick Brandt, you are such an idiot.

I pull the envelope from the wipers and hand it to him.

“Fuck, these traffic cop tattletales are so annoying. I’ll take care of it tomorrow,” he growls, wrinkling his nose.

I wish we could all be so carefree.

He climbs in the back seat and lets out a salacious groan when he feels the heated seat on his back. I try not to wonder if it’s the same sound he’d make in bed, sans the rest of his clothing.

I walk around the car and get into the driver’s seat. We actually move a few miles before his voice grates my ears like nails on a chalkboard again.

“Thanks for all the help tonight, man,” he says quietly.

Oh my God.

“You’re so not welcome, jackass,” I mouth to the windshield.

“I got desperate with the keycard. My bad. I’ll make sure you get a good bonus anyway, Halle. You’re good help and that’s damn hard to find.”

Can you make sure I get some sleep too? I wonder.

I glance at the clock on the console. Two thirty a.m. and I still have to take him home before returning to my apartment. Then, after the world’s longest shower, I can sleep for an hour before I leave to pick up Ward.

F-M-L.

I may have bags under my eyes tomorrow—not that it matters, since apparently I look like a dude regardless. I should just give up my straightening iron and cosmetics, 'cause they're not doing it. But at least I'll have a nice fat paycheck coming up to put toward my future man cave.

I almost pick up another ticket, speeding to Brandt's penthouse.

“Can you turn on some music? The XM?” he asks.

I mash the third button on the stereo for the satellite radio, pre-programmed as his station.

He lets out a low chuckle.

“You're such a quiet one, dude.” He flings his arm out like he's holding a whip in the back seat. “But I like it, man. I get it. Pensive. Mysterious. You're basically Batman.”

I *wish* I had millionaire superhero money. Then I'd be about as rich as my freak of a boss, and not regretting this joke of a day care job disguised as a corporate driver.

It's a mercifully quick drive from the hotel to his penthouse. I feel better already.

If I'm lucky, I'll be rid of his assholery for a whole twenty-four hours.

DOUBLE TAKE (NICK)



Six Weeks Later

Halle's in the town car, waiting for me at the curb like the loyal monk he is.

It's strange, spending so much time with a driver who's taken a vow of silence. Usually, I can get anyone to talk to me.

Not him.

He's a closed book. At least the guy's always on time. Ready to rock and roll at the snap of my fingers.

He's steady. Reliable. And today, I can't get away from this damnable meeting fast enough.

My phone vibrates on the way to the car. I get in before checking it.

Of course, I know what's waiting.

More about my shirtless dancing escapades with Jorge Franca. I slam the phone down with an annoyed grunt as I slide across the leather seat.

“Can you believe they're *still* talking about this horseshit? It's been six weeks, Halle. Six fucking weeks and now we know nobody in the Chicago press has a life. They all have to obsess over mine. I mean, I get it. I'm rich and handsome and brilliant, but come on. I can't carry this whole city on my shoulders. I'm not Zeus.”

Halle clears his throat and mutters something that sounds like “Atlas.”

Hmm, quite the reaction for this guy.

I’m surprised he said that much.

“Yeah, whatever. Greek mythology was never my specialty. When you’re ripped and you can dance, I guess it’s par for the course. I know, I should shut up and take my licks and be glad that night went as well as it did. Too bad Grandma and Ward started clutching their pearls over it as usual. They’re fine with the half-billion-dollar deal I signed, of course. Jorge even sent me a thank you for the best night of his life. Ward should be groveling on his hands and knees for the next year. If I weren’t the black sheep, shit, he would be.”

I grit my teeth too loudly. Halle lets out this oddly shrill snicker.

If I’m making an ass of myself for his amusement, so be it.

Let’s be real.

Most of this crap would blow over if Roland Osprey—or Birdshit as I affectionally call him—and his pathetic little piss blog at *The Chicago Tea* would leave me the fuck alone. The guy lives to make us look bad—everybody named Brandt who doesn’t have a Beatrice in front of it.

I wish Grandma’s latest architectural masterpiece was all this city wanted to jack itself off to.

Ever since my parents scandalized themselves in a boating accident with America’s next heartthrob actor—and kinda sent the ship and the star to the bottom of Lake Michigan—being a Brandt has sucked more than wealth and fame ever should.

Thinking about it ignites my blood, and I gnash my teeth together.

“That jackass at *The Tea* never plays fair, you know. I’m sure you’ve seen his articles. He tweaked a few videos to make me look drunker than I was. Hell, I was almost sober by the time we were dancing, remember?”

“No comment,” a soft feminine voice trills with a sigh.

Whoa. Hold up.

It's almost...musical.

I glance into the passenger seat and lean forward to see if Halle's chauffeuring some secret little honey today.

Nah, it's just us. I look at him closer, trying to figure out what's going on.

It can't be him. It's me.

It has to be the stress.

Shit, I need to get my ears checked. I'm either hearing things or losing my mind or *both*.

I laugh it off, raking my fingers through my wavy hair.

"You're a wise man, keeping a low profile. You don't end up on trashy rumor blogs that way. I should start dressing like a sea captain too. Great disguise. I'd get a cool hat like yours, too."

Halle goes quiet again, his pale-blue eyes fixed on the road.

"Ah, who'm I kidding? Call me depraved, but I like the attention," I say coldly. "The spotlight's as drawn to me as I am to it. Nothing like an earthquake or two to shake things up in this cold-ass city. Don't you ever want to shake things up, man?"

I lean forward, waiting for his answer.

He gives me nothing.

Fucking Bat-man.

I bite back an amused grin.

Before I can throw any more crap at him, great sport that he is, my phone pings with the day's twentieth email. I scan over Ward's latest threat to string me up by my balls if I don't have a supplier by the end of the day for the glass palace Jorge wants to plop in downtown Chicago, and start typing furiously.

By the time I look up, Halle's pulling up to Brandt Ideas, and I rush off to my next meeting.



MOVE YOUR ASS. I hate these things as much as you do, but I'm here.

I'm sitting in my penthouse, trying to unwind and thinking how much I want to get laid tonight, when the text from my big brother hits me.

Oh, shit. I forgot. I grab my phone and reply, ***I'm there in spirit.***

Ward: You're not here, Nick. I am. Like always.

Bull. He gives himself too much credit.

My grandmother always loved these things more than anyone else. "For our greatest assets—our employees," she says.

Which actually means a little quarterly dog-and-pony show where we show up and gush about how much we love our team. The people are great. Don't get me wrong.

It's a morale booster, but I wonder how much more folks would like it if we just sent them home early with tequila? *If the goddamned legal department would let us.*

I hate these stupid company-wide socials just as much as you. Why does Grandma make us do them again? I text back.

Ward: The employees like them. Get over here. How is it I'm the office snob and you're the fun one when you skip everything you can?

I snort and send back, ***Because I'm better looking, Wart.***

Ha. The next text doesn't come immediately so that must have shut him up for a while.

He's right. I do need to get to the office. My brother doesn't scare me, but Grandma will have my ass on a silver platter if I don't show up to her tea party.

Whatever. At least the food's usually good when we spend a small fortune pampering the people who keep our creations

rising like pyramids.

I text Halle. *I need a ride to the office.*

I'm putting on my tie when his reply comes. *Sorry. No can do. I'm already at the office and Mrs. Brandt doesn't want me to leave.*

Damn it, Grandma. She ordered me there, then told the driver not to pick me up?

My options are drive myself and waste an hour in traffic or walk. I glance out the window. A late winter storm whistles, sending white flakes cascading from the sky, turning the cityscape into a shaken snow globe.

Walking is out, and that's fine.

I'll just drive, which means, after looking for a parking spot, I'll get there later. Probably *much* later.

Yeah, I'm going to get hell for this, but I might as well be prepared for it.

I don't like hanging out with random strangers. I know the people who work on my floor but not very well really beyond that. Most of the folks outside the executive team who think they know me get their impressions from the usual gossip blogs and clucking online tabloids.

Hanging around people who expect me to bomb the party gets awkward, and unlike my grandmother, I don't see what it accomplishes.

Besides, I've been on Grandma's shitlist so many times, my name might as well be etched on her toilet paper.

An hour later, I stagger in and sit at a round table, sandwiched between Grandma and Ward.

I take a bite of the best salami pizza ever when a pixie at the table in front of us stands. I've never seen her before.

Caramel-dark hair, chopped into short curls just below her ears.

The black silk of her dress trails behind her, hugging a grippable ass that makes my palm ache. She damn near floats.

I can't see her face from here, but from the way the dress outlines her hourglass shape—obvious even with the denim jacket hanging over it—I want to.

“You home?” Ward waves a hand in front of my face, two fingers together, threatening to flick me between the eyes. “Wake up.”

I shake my head. Why *wouldn't* I be okay?

That's when I realize my pizza stopped at my lips. I took a bite and never moved my hand after I got distracted by the mystery woman.

“Who's she?” I ask, dropping the slice on my plate like it's turned into cardboard.

Ward follows my eyes with an annoyed look, then meets my gaze with a quipped brow.

Grandma's eyes trail to the table in front of us. She slaps my knee under the table.

“First of all, stop gawking,” she whispers. “You can't be serious. You see that lovely young woman every day and you don't recognize her? You have her number, Nicholas. You used it tonight.” I blink at her as she pushes a hand across her face. “God help me, I'm starting to believe *The Chicago Tea*.”

I roll my eyes. “Never believe a sewage pipe that gives fake news a bad name. Now, who is she?”

“I believe it because you see her every day and have to ask. Although, I agree her work attire doesn't entirely suit her.”

Who? Doesn't suit who?

I feel like I'm in a psychological thriller or something.

“Yeah, no. If I'd seen that sweet dream, I'd remember.” No question about it. I'd probably put in my two weeks' notice so I could lure her to my bed, guilt-free. Hell, it doesn't even have to be a bed.

A quickie in the coat closet, the elevator, or the back of a car would do me just fine.

“She drives you around every day, you dolt,” Ward snaps.

I hear the words, but they don’t compute.

Is this some sick joke? But they look so serious.

Fuck, maybe I should see a shrink.

Because I’m pretty sure all I’ve ever had driving me around is that mute, Halle.

“No way. You’re wrong, Ward. Since when did we hire two drivers?” And how do I get in the back of this one’s car? Why am I always stuck with Halle the superspy while this beauty queen hauls my brother around?

“We have *one* driver, dear.” Grandma sighs, pulling at a strand of her silver hair.

“What? I don’t—I—she’s never driven me, okay? I’ve just had Halle carting me around for over a month,” I growl.

Hell, Grandma probably arranged for him so she wouldn’t have to worry about me causing an incident with Miss Mysterio and HR.

Grandma and Ward both stare at me like I’ve sprouted a twin head.

“What?” I snap off. “Guys, you’re freaking me out. Just tell me how I get her to pick me up. It’s not fair that I’m stuck with Halle. If there’s another driver, I should know her.”

Ward cracks first. He actually laughs—a full-throated belly chuckle. Rare for a man who could stand in for a sleep-deprived grizzly bear.

“Sadly for her, that woman drives you, too,” he says, shaking off his smile.

I roll my head from side to side.

“Brother, you’re so full of crap. I think I’d remember—”

“Nicholas,” Grandma starts, cutting in.

“Don’t. Let him figure it out,” Ward says. “I’m having too much fun.”

“And if he never does?” Grandma whispers, alarm in her voice.

“One less thing to worry about.” Ward shrugs.

So, this is a prank. Maybe they’ve decided to make me the evening entertainment.

How are they having a whole conversation without me, pretending I’ve always known this alternate reality where a girl like her drives a schlub like me?

“Figure what out?” I snarl, exasperated. “If this is some performance art, I’m not having fun. I’m hardly in the mood for—”

It hits me like a falling brick to the skull.

I stop mid-sentence.

Hold the fucking phone.

Grandma’s shocked out of her skin that I don’t recognize her. Ward said I’ve been driven by the same woman. Grandma chastised me for using her number without knowing her name. But outside of Ward, the only text I sent tonight was to—

Holy fucking Halle, Batman.

“*She’s Halle?*” The words creak out of my mouth like my tongue rusted over, so quietly I can’t believe they hear me.

“One and the same.” Grandma laughs and nods, struggling not to tumble into a whole conniption fit of laughter.

It’s official. I’ve made the worst impression in the known universe on our driver.

Bad first impression, second impression, third, fourth, fifth impression.

Bury me now, because there’s no coming back from this.

My gut churns. My mind flicks back to the night she had to help me drag a shirtless beast into his hotel room after he almost passed out in the car.

Of course, she was pissed.

If I'd known, I would've never asked for her help. She squirmed when we got in the car that night.

Again, no wonder.

It must've been brutal having to drive her shirtless boss and his client around.

"I've mucked this up," I say.

Ward shrugs. "As usual."

I scowl at him.

"Don't give me that look, Nicholas. It's probably for the best. You're clearly interested, and she's an employee. Your own brain fart saved you from doing something stupid. Now apologize, move on, and live secure in the knowledge that she probably hates your guts and wouldn't date you if you were the last man on Earth, competing with a mutant sea slug after all seven continents were nuked into slag. For the record, if I were a girl, I'd pick the radioactive slug, too."

Bastard.

Ward's right, though, as annoying as he is.

Reese Halle's an employee. What she thinks of me shouldn't matter much other than the fact that I've been a legendary jackass and she deserves an apology.

But she won't accept it. There's no reason she should, and the idea of this woman believing I'm an abominable creep makes me feel like a gutted trout.

Said woman floats away, her delectable plum of an ass I desperately need to forget swinging behind her.

Grumbling, I stand.

"Where are you going?" Ward asks, an edge in his voice.

"To make things right with her. Duh."

Grandma clears her throat. "Don't lose your head. Remember, she works for us, and she's very good at her job. A simple apology will do, Casanova."

“No Casanova! Not with this. I’m a professional, Grandma. I need to apologize. That poor woman, she...she had to help me drag Jorge into his hotel the night things got a little wild.”

Grandma groans, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“We’re lucky she didn’t file a harassment suit,” Ward says.

“I didn’t know!” I throw back.

“Because you were drunk. The company receipt was a mile long when you had that stupid shot contest with our client,” he grinds out.

“And I lost *gracefully*. That man scared me when I saw how much booze he could throw back.” I sigh. I’m tired of looking like the dumbass little brother to Ward’s business hardass image. “Also, having a stick up your ass a mile long wouldn’t have closed that deal. You didn’t seem to mind the digits it added to your net worth. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an apology to make.”

“Completely chivalrous of you, I’m sure,” Ward snaps.

I’ll argue with his grouchy ass later. The driver’s across the room now, and I have to catch up with her.

I force myself over while she puts her plate and glass in the bin set out by the caterers and starts for the door, moving briskly.

“Halle—wait!” I belt out.

The next ten seconds could be a movie scene.

She turns.

Her heart-shaped face does justice to the rest of her. Young, fresh, *innocent*. The same pale-blue eyes I’ve always seen in the mirror look brighter on that face, perched above soft lips that look like they’re ready to demolish any man of her choosing.

Goddamn. And I had her almost carrying a half-naked man. There’s no forgiveness for that.

How could I be so dense? Is there actually something wrong with my brain?

Without her cap and that military-grade winter coat, there's no mistaking Reese Halle for a man.

I'm just a colossal idiot.

My eyes travel from her face, darting down her long neck to the sheer lace lining the hem of her fitted neck. Each breast rests neatly, snuggled separately in black silk.

"Mr. Brandt?" A musical lilt calls my name.

I can't answer.

I'm too distracted by the inward scoop of her abdomen followed by the curve of her hips. The dress is high in the front, exposing the creamy white of her legs from just above the knee down.

"Mr. Brandt?" she asks again. "Did you need something?"

Yeah, to swallow the bile slowly creeping up my throat before I yak all over her and complete my eternal shame.

My gaze returns to her face.

Her cheeks have gone crimson.

Fuck. She saw me checking her out. Add that to the list of endless crap to apologize for.

"I should be going," she says. "The town car's parked at my apartment. I didn't bring it today since no one requested a ride."

"I just wanted to apologize to you. For everything, I mean." I'm trying like hell to keep my voice level.

"Everything?" she echoes.

Shit, this is bad.

Is she going to *make* me say I thought she was male for well over a month? Maybe Ward's right and it's for the best I've botched this so badly. Otherwise, I'd be tempted to request a ride home in whatever she's driving tonight.

“I mean for...for offering to help you find girls. And for making you help with Jorge.” My eyes drop to the cleavage bubbling up just behind that sheer lace.

Damn you, focus on her face, a voice sneers in the back of my mind. *Her face, you unhinged piranha*.

“No problem,” she says softly. “Really, boss. It’s okay.”

I burst out laughing. It’s either that or let the tension murder me on the spot.

“It’s not okay, Halle—*Miss Halle*,” I correct sharply. “How can I ever make it up to you?”

She smiles, showing off a neat row of pearly teeth. Why does that smile feel so hollow?

“That won’t be necessary. I’m just happy to work here and meet your expectations. Thanks for the apology, although, again, it totally wasn’t necessary.”

She’s letting me off too easy.

She starts to turn, but I stumble forward again, strangling my tongue to call after her.

“It was very necessary,” I grind out.

She pauses midstep, turns, and laughs. “Honestly? I was mostly freaked out that I could be mistaken for a man, but maybe it’s a good thing. You put me in my place. At least I know where I stand in the dating department, right?”

Aw, hell. I think if she’d pulled out a magnum and shot me in the chest, it would’ve been easier than hearing those words. That agony I death-marched her through, disguised as a joke.

“Fuck right,” I whisper, stepping closer. “This is all my fault. I never pay attention to anything but—”

“Yourself? I noticed. It’s okay. You’re a busy man, and an important one. I’m just a driver.”

For a split second, I’m speechless. Especially when her eyes shimmer as they fall, and I’m the reason why.

“You say that like I’m some kind of merciless snob. I assure you, I’m not.”

“It’s not my place to judge you, and it doesn’t really matter. I’m your driver. You’re my boss. Let’s keep it that way, m’kay? Thanks for the apology. I have to go babysit now.” She skitters away, pushes open the glass door, and moves into the hall like she’s being chased by a hungry tiger.

I follow her.

She stops at a desk being manned by Susan, the HR lady. “Can I get my coat, please?”

“Of course. Remind me of your last name, please?”

“Halle. H-a-l-l-e.”

“How do I make this right?” I ask, annoyed that I’ve been left holding the bag.

Susan turns to the racks of coats behind her and pulls out a familiar bulky jacket that doesn’t match Reese’s dress at all. She hands it to her. “Here you go.”

Reese glances at me, then looks back at Susan and smiles sweetly. “Susan, can I ask you something? It’s about HR policy.”

“Of course.”

“If a co-worker follows you around, staring at your cleavage, can you file a report even if he’s your boss? And a partner at this firm?”

“Absolutely. Especially if he’s a partner. That isn’t appropriate in any situation,” Susan whips out, folding her arms and glaring.

Damn, I only stared *a little*.

Reese turns so we’re face-to-face, then she grins at me and winks. “See you later, boss.”

Fucking devil. She’s as quick as she is deadly. It’s always the quiet ones, isn’t it?

I'm still standing there like a stunned buffalo when Susan laughs. My eyes whip to her.

"Mr. Brandt, is everything okay?" she asks.

I lie by nodding.

She looks at Reese. "Do I need to get a certain grandmother involved?"

Reese giggles. "I don't think so. I handled it just fine."

She whirls and heads off, her hips swishing in that mesmerizing way I *need* to stop noticing for the thousandth time. My eyes aren't listening to my brain. They watch her until the tight ass hugged by black silk is no longer visible.

"You're not doing anything that'll get you into trouble?" Susan asks with a knowing smirk.

Insufferable.

Welcome to the curse of running a company where everyone over fifty has known you since childhood. You're not really running anything with these older employees, and you have about a dozen babysitters, making sure you don't get into 'trouble.'

"Nah," I say with a disarming wink before making my way back to the party.

Hell yes, I'm irritated, but I don't let the scratch marks show from that black cat digging her claws in.

I nod at people as I pass—my usual *modus operandi*—always calm. In control. Focused.

That's how the life of the party rolls.

I find our table and take my place between Ward and Grandma.

"If you're going to gawk at an employee, could you make it less obvious?" my brother says.

I shrug. "What're you talking about? I just apologized my ass off and asked how to make it right."

“Uh-huh,” Ward says, staring me down. “Hard to apologize when you looked like you were ready to undress her, right here in the middle of the room.”

Damn him.

She’s hot enough to risk a scandal, but I know where to draw the line.

“I had to apologize,” I growl back. “I tried to do the right thing. Whatever that is with this.”

“Some apology. Every woman I know loves it when I apologize to her breasts,” Ward mutters.

“I didn’t do that, you jack—”

“You were in no way subtle,” Grandma says coldly.

Oh, great.

Here comes the famous family tag-team to remind me what an epic failure I am.

“Subtle about what? There was nothing to be subtle about. I apologized and asked how to make it up to her. I even took it like a champ when she insulted me to my face.”

“And did she tell you how?”

“No. She told me to get lost,” I say, shaking my head.

“Smart woman,” Ward says, polishing off his scotch.

“Do you not talk to her in the car? I can see how this might be rather awkward for her,” Grandma says.

“Grandma, all I *do* is talk. She just never says anything back. If I’d heard her voice, this never would’ve happened. That’s why I didn’t know she’s a woman.”

“Wait. She’s been driving you around for six weeks and you’ve never heard her voice?” Ward asks, giving his empty glass a death glare.

“Once or twice. Probably. The mistaken identity thing was so ingrained, I thought I was hearing things. I don’t know. My bad. Whatever. She’s very quiet. Don’t you think so?” I look up, knowing I look desperate and hating it.

Grandma lets out a hissing sigh.

“She’s very pleasant when you give her a chance to get a word in,” Ward says.

Yep, I’m fucking boned.

Reese must think I’m a walking ego trap.

Ward laughs bitterly. “You have a lot of nerve calling me uptight every chance you get. You’ve never talked to her. You’ve been talking *at* her for six damn weeks. She probably hates to see you coming. I bet it’s the worst part of her day.”

The worst? Is it? I wonder.

I don’t want her hating the thought of driving me.

It shouldn’t bother me so much, but it does.

“Oh, dear. Poor girl,” Grandma says. “I wonder if I should check on her. Then again, that might make it worse. Maybe we should just offer her a raise.” She shakes her head and pats my hand. “I thought you were supposed to be the diplomat. You can actually smile when you’re not in one of your moods. Not like Ward,” she adds under her breath.

I sigh. “I gabbed so much because I was hoping Halle would finally warm up and start talking back, I guess. That’s how I operate. And most people do, eventually. Hell, it’s weird being driven around by a stranger. He—” I almost say *he*, because I’ve thought of Halle as a college kid for so long. “She never did though.”

Fuck. Come to think of it, now I know why.

“Pray tell, what exactly did you say to her?” Ward asks.

I grit my teeth before admitting, “I may have offered to take Halle partying with me once or twice and offered to... help find him dates.”

“You fool,” Ward bites off. “That’s almost a relief.”

I glare at him.

“Relief? Why?”

“You were looking at her like tonight’s dinner, and now I don’t have to worry about being slapped with an HR complaint later for all the weeks you could’ve been digging your grave. There’s no chance anything will happen now.”

Have I mentioned how much I hate my brother’s dreary logic?

“I have to make it right,” I whisper.

My brother stares at me for too long. “When did you grow a conscience?”

“We have to see each other every single day, Ward. She works for me. I have to fix this, if only to make it less awkward.”

Grandma purses her lips. “I admire your intentions, Nicholas, but I don’t see how you can repair this one. Anything you say will make her feel worse. You’ve already apologized. If you keep bringing it up, you’re only going to make things more complicated. Just laugh it off and move on.”

I look at Ward, just like I used to when we were kids, and I wanted some brotherly advice. No idea why.

Grandma has spoken, and she has way more social grace than both of us combined. If she says there’s no hope, I have to choke it down and try not to shred my reputation.

“Sorry, little brother,” Ward says with another low chuckle. “My best advice is to man up and quit being so...you.”

“What does that mean?”

“You know, thinking the whole world revolves around you,” he says.

“I’m not self-absorbed. Why does everyone think that?”

“Dearest heart...you didn’t know your driver was a woman for six weeks,” Grandma says gently.

“You only let her speak once or twice in *six weeks*.” Ward shakes his head.

I scowl at them. “I’m glad my honest mistake is such a riot.”

Ward shrugs. “If the shoe were on the other foot, we both know you’d be rolling on the floor.”

“I’d be afraid to crack a smile if I were you, and you’d retaliate with an avalanche of work. When are *you* going to man up and admit we need a decent assistant?” I snarl.

“I should unload on you anyway.” He glares at me.

“Boys, enough. The question is, what now?” Grandma asks, patting my shoulder.

“Now, Nick pays the price,” Ward says, adjusting his tie, the same color he obsessively matches to his eyes. “Of all the stupid shit I’ve done, I’ve never had a chick under five feet help me drag a drunk guy into his hotel room.”

“We didn’t carry him, technically. He just kind of...leaned on us. And she has to be taller than four feet whatever,” I insist, holding up my hands.

“She’s five feet even,” Grandma says with her designer confidence.

I look at her.

She takes a drink of wine.

“I recall the invoice for her uniforms.” She’s quiet for a minute. “When she got out of the car to help you get Jorge into his hotel, how was that not a clue? That should have been pretty difficult with the height difference.”

Ward snorts. “The hilarious thing is that you thought a waif of a driver was a man.”

“She was wearing a hat. And that coat looks like it’s meant for the Russian army. Also...” I trail off. What’s the point in pleading my case? Then again...I might as well come out and say it. “Frankly, that night with Jorge Franca, I’ll admit I was too drunk to notice.”

Ward’s chest heaves with a low, agitated growl.

“See? This is why you shouldn’t drink on the job. Ever.”

I shoot him the dirtiest look I can muster and remind him, “But you don’t care what I do when nine-figure deals are

being signed, do you, bro?”

He opens his mouth, but closes it before he can get a parting shot in. His lips twist sourly.

I'll take my wins where I can.

I have to make this up to Reese Halle—somehow—but for now? I'll settle for shutting up my brother's machine-gun mouth.

CLASS NOTES (REESE)



I park the town car at the curb of the bossman's penthouse and text that I'm waiting.

A few minutes later, he slides into the back seat holding a bouquet of roses so red they burn my retinas.

Oh, no.

He leans forward and hands it to me. "For my beautiful, gracious driver."

Swallowing a sigh, I take the bouquet and set them in the empty passenger seat beside me. "Um, Mr. Brandt? You're my boss. Remember? You aren't supposed to comment on my physical appearance."

"I *said* gracious, didn't I? And I meant beautiful personality, of course," he corrects sharply.

How hard can I roll my eyes?

"Right." I glance over at the flowers in the passenger seat, wondering who I pissed off in a past life to make Nicholas Brandt the *only* man who's ever given me flowers. "They're still fresh. How'd you manage it before leaving your place?"

"There's a shop in my building," he says matter-of-factly, like everyone in Chicago lives in a place with a luxury mall on the bottom floor.

"Of course there is." I pull away from the curb and into the steady stream of rush-hour traffic.

“Do you like them?” he asks, a rough edge in his voice that feels fake.

Like he’s trying oh-so-hard to keep up his usual late-morning grump mask when he’s really concerned for how I feel about the bouquet.

I’m almost touched.

Same for the fact that he’s...wait. Is he actually giving me time to answer his stupid questions now that he realizes “Halle” isn’t a mister?

“They’re nice,” I grind out without daring to add that he guessed my favorite color.

My eyes flick back to him as a smug, relieved look crosses his face.

“Honestly, though, it feels a little sexist,” I add.

“What?”

“Dude. I don’t mean the flowers, but here’s the thing. When I was a guy, you always answered your own questions. I never had to talk to you. Now, you’re waiting on pins and needles for a reply. You’re treating me differently than you’d treat a guy. It’s—” I’m about to say, “not hot” but I remember he’s my boss and I don’t, in any way, want to put him and hot in the same sentence. “It’s unbecoming,” I finish.

“Unbecoming? What the fuck? This is Chicago, not London, Miss Halle,” he barks. “Also, the whole reason I blabbed so much when I thought you were Batman was because I was trying to make you feel comfortable. So you’d talk to me.”

“I *couldn’t* talk to you. You never gave me a chance. Now all you want to do is hear my voice. See? Sexist.” I sniff loudly, fighting back a smile at the faint worry in his emerald-green eyes.

Sexist or not, he could slay a woman dead with those things.

“Chivalrous, you mean,” he says without missing a beat.

I can't help it, I laugh.

“What's so chivalrous about making me talk to you?”

“We have to be in a car together. I'm just trying to make you comfortable.”

“Oh, don't worry, bossman. I have a better idea how to do that.” Swinging my finger over to the dashboard, I punch the button to raise the privacy screen.

I hear him snarl as what's happening sinks in.

He tries to lower it, but I keep my finger on the button so he can't. We engage in a little tug of war, with the divider going up and down, the whole way to the office.

Call it childish.

It's a stupid, unexpected kind of fun toying with this man and his butchered apology.

Even if those roses *are* awfully lovely, every time my eyes flick to them. God, he must've dropped at least a hundred bucks on the arrangement at the overpriced rich-people florist.

I don't let him win the screen war until I've pulled up in front of the building housing Brandt Ideas, and that's just because he's my boss and I need to know when he'll need me again.

“Admirable determination,” he growls, waiting for my eyes to catch his in the mirror. “I'm going to the pier at noon to meet a client. I'll need you to pick me up there at three.”

“I assume you mean Navy Pier?” I ask.

“Where else?” he snaps.

I don't know whether to be annoyed or amused that our little tug of war clearly got under his skin. His usual tight, disarming smile has been wiped clean off his face, leaving a scowling lunk of wickedly good-looking boss-hole in the back seat.

“You don't need a ride there?” I venture.

“I’ve got it covered, Miss Halle. Be there at three o’clock sharp,” he says.

Fun times. Traffic there is always a beast.

“I’ll meet you out front,” I say.

He just nods and gets out of the car.

I spend the next few hours doing what I always do best—tooling around town, waiting for one of the Brandts to text me and tell me I’m needed.

They don’t, usually, during midday work hours unless there’s a conference or some other big event. So I go and get a coffee from Sweeter Grind and check out the news of the day on my phone.

The whole time, I keep looking over at the flowers.

As stunning as they are—picture-perfect red—I don’t know. It just feels weird.

If he thought I was a woman all this time, and I turned out to be a man, he wouldn’t be bending over backward like this to placate my feelings, would he?

And I *know* how he operates with women he wants in his bed. I’ve heard him blab about it at least a dozen times while I shuttled his player butt around.

There’s pathetic, and then there’s reality.

I need this job.

Even so, I don’t need to let some slick ego-beast with a warped sense of ‘doing the right thing’ sweet-talk me into an HR nightmare.

I definitely don’t need those searing looks from him every time he thinks my back is turned. Those looks are too hungry, too heated, too magnetic. They pull the winter chill right out of my bones and braise me with a bubbling, unwanted heat I won’t acknowledge.

I won’t.

Yep, this sucks.

And as I glance at the flowers again, gently picking them up and twirling them in my hand, I wince.

Is it sad that I'm starting to miss him thinking I'm Mr. Halle?



IT'S a sunny day with winter slowly giving up its hold, attracting a gaggle of people to fight through for parking.

When I pick him up at three, he climbs in the back of the car with a giant spool of cotton candy. He leans forward and passes it up to me.

Gag.

“What’s this?” I ask, dreading the answer.

“For my gorgeous—for my driver with the gorgeous, always on-point personality,” he says firmly.

Nice save. He only stumbled once.

“Thanks.” I toss it in the passenger seat next to the flowers.

I’ve never actually had cotton candy, but this heaping spool of neon-pink sugar looks like something that could put me in diabetic shock.

Unlike the flowers, at least I have a practical use for this gift. I’ll give some to Millie. She’s always up for a sugar rush like every kid her age.

“You seemed unimpressed by the flowers, so I thought I’d try again,” he explains, holding his hands out.

“You must be psychic. It’s just like I always say: when flowers don’t get the reaction you’re going for, a pink toothache is the next logical step.”

Yes, I know I sound like a fire-breathing bitch, but I don’t want a third not-sorry gift from this man.

“You can’t be serious. You hate cotton candy too?” he says with genuine disgust. “It’s like dessert and a show. Pretty

fascinating, really, the way it's made. Don't you have fun, Miss Halle?"

"Not when I'm on the clock," I say.

He frowns. "You could make this easy. Tell me how to make up for—"

"There's *nothing* to make up for," I insist.

"Bull. I know your short-term memory isn't fried. I made you help me lug a sweaty, half-naked drunk guy to his room," he growls, running a hand across his face.

"And I believe you promised a fat quarterly bonus for that, right? Not a dental disaster, which my niece will thank you for when I hand it off to her."

"You'll get your bonus," he promises. "End of the quarter reviews are next week. I made that promise when I thought I was making a reasonable request from another gentleman, and I'm a man of my word."

Oh my God.

Hearing Nick talk like an adult—with freaking manners—tells me this isn't all fake.

He's not just saving face.

He...he actually feels bad about his bruising mistake, and everything he put me through.

There goes my heart. Then I pinpoint what's wrong with the latest, very specific apology, and sigh.

"Again with the sexism." I shake my head in mock offense. "That's not just me saying it, but HR. I read the handbook my first day."

"What?" he clips, his eyes going wide.

"Why would it be reasonable to have your short, scrawny male driver lug a drunk guy to his room, but not your petite female driver? Expectations should be equal in all positions, per company policy. If a woman can pull sixteen-hour days assembling ad campaigns in Marketing, then I should've been

able to help with that request as your driver, no matter what you thought I was.”

His brows pull together, casting this annoyingly handsome expression over him when he’s confused.

“I’m listening. Then why, pray tell, did you—”

“My point is, it *wasn’t* reasonable, Mr. Brandt. No matter *who* your driver is.”

Nick flumps back in his seat. “You weren’t this easy to talk to when you were a guy.”

God, that’s what’s at the top of his mind? It’s my turn to laugh.

“Because you never let me talk!”

Thankfully, I’m pulling up to his building and he throws open the door. “See you tomorrow?”

“As always,” I say with a wry smile.

I sigh as he slams the door.

Even though I tell myself not to, I can’t stop looking at his perfect posterior as he heads through the revolving doors.

Jesus. I don’t want to know what’s wrong with me.

Sure, the man has a lot to admire physically. And yes, he can be funny.

But that’s it.

A grown salamander would have more social poise than Nick freaking Brandt.

He’s like a moody salesman, putting on this easygoing mask to hide whatever’s eating him when people aren’t looking, always trying too hard to get on everyone’s good side.

Why can’t he just accept that not everyone will like him?

Didn’t anyone ever tell him to just be himself and put on the brakes?

...I wish I knew, and that’s the worst part.

This cocky suit's heading home for another evening that'll probably be full of whatever debauchery he does when he's not working—and he doesn't realize he's already moved into my head, rent free.



AFTER WORK, I visit my sister.

Millie bounces up to me with big blond curls flopping around her head.

“Auntie Reese!” she squeals, holding her arms up.

“Hey, bumblebee. Ready for a surprise?” She flashes me a grin to die for as I pick her up and hand her the spool of pink fluffy candy.

“Hey, that's a lot of sugar,” Abby says suspiciously. “Since when do you eat cotton candy?”

I'm only holding on to my smile for Millie's sake.

“Gift I didn't need from the boss. Remember what I told you? He's determined to make up for mistaking me for a dude and all the stupid sh—”

Abby's eyes flick to Millie in my arms.

“All the stupid stuff he said when he thought I was a guy,” I correct. “First he bought me flowers, and when I didn't freak out over those, he brought me a ticket to the dentist.”

“So now you're pawning it off on us?” Abby snorts, tugging playfully at Millie's locks. “You know I'm gonna have to ration this stuff for the next month, right?”

“I'm sure it'll be fine. At least somebody gets to enjoy it,” I tell her.

“I hope your boss will pay for her cavities,” Abby says with a laugh.

“He'd probably do it in a heartbeat if I asked. Unfortunately.”

“Dang, sis. So you have a billionaire hottie wrapped around your finger—and you’re complaining? What? I can think of worse things.” Abby tosses her head, dumbfounded by my feelings.

I roll my eyes. She doesn’t understand.

“Well, if he doesn’t wear you down, tell him your poor lonely sister needs the comfort of a hot billionaire employer. I’m ready and willing to be comforted any time after seven thirty every night,” she says cheerfully.

That wins her a smile. Unlike me, Abby follows all the trash-talking gossip blogs, Twitter bullies, and might be a walking encyclopedia of who’s who on Insta and TikTok.

Worse, Nick is her favorite Brandt, scandals and all.

“Whaaat?” she croons. “It’s a serious offer.”

Millie wiggles in my arms, cooing as she tugs at the plastic around the cotton candy, trying to tear through it like a feat of strength.

“C’mon. The only offer I’m considering tonight is my niece’s sugar rush,” I say.



THE NEXT DAY, when I pick him up for work, he’s armed with another present.

Joy.

This time, he hands me a bottle of champagne that looks like it was shipped over from a Parisian catacomb.

“It’s a hundred and nine years old,” he says. “You’re welcome.”

“So I look like a lush now? Your gifts are getting stranger, boss.”

“You can’t tell me you don’t like good champagne,” he quips. “Everyone enjoys champagne from 1912, Miss Halle. It was a good year.”

“Because the Titanic sank?” I snicker, remembering that old movie. In some alternate universe, he would’ve made a good Jack Dawson. “I don’t think I’ve ever had champagne, honestly. I’m sure it’s nice and bubbly, but alcohol just seems like an odd gift for a driver.”

“It’s not like I expect you to guzzle it down on the clock. I’d never trash your sterling reputation,” he says, thumping his chest lightly with his fist. “How have you never had champagne, Halle? Are you part of some bizarre religious cult?”

I shrug. “More of a beer girl sometimes. They both fizz, right? I guess I’ve never seen the appeal in plunking down half a week’s pay for a nice champagne.”

A chill sweeps through me when I imagine what that bottle must be worth.

“Modest palate. Beer. Got it,” he grumbles, choking back what sounds like a sigh. “Did your niece enjoy the cotton candy?”

He stares at me hopefully, this hangdog look on his face.

“Her mom decided it was too close to bedtime to eat more than a pinch,” I say. “But she gobbled it up.”

“Fair enough. Glad someone likes it.” He nods, scratching at the trimmed halo of dark scruff covering his cheeks.

The next day, when I pick him up for work, he gets in the car and hands me a white envelope. My heart immediately starts pounding like he just flashed a knife.

What now? A concert ticket? A new car? A gift card to some outrageously beautiful (and overpriced) spa on Maui?

“Do I want to know?” I whisper, swallowing an anxious lump in my throat.

“Open it, damn you,” he bites off. “It’s a card. A nice one I picked out personally.”

I know this is where I should call it.

I should swallow my pride, tell him we'll let bygones be bygones, and forget he ever treated me like a frat punk.

That's what most reasonable folks would do, but they're not me.

I'm not done having my fun or satisfying this morbid curiosity that makes me wonder just how over-the-top this man gets.

Putting on my best ice-cold glare, I toss my nose up in the air with an offended grunt.

"Now, *you're* acting like a chick," I say.

"Sexist!" he spits, snapping a finger at me. Then the smug glint in his eye fades. "...does that finally make us even?"

It physically hurts not to burst out laughing.

"Never," I hiss.

And with one misplaced word—one bad decision to keep yanking his tail—I sign my death warrant. The game that should be winding down revs up.

Nicholas Brandt is many things: handsome fire, annoying as hell, and oblivious to the world beyond his own ego. But he's also a gold medalist in determination.

The same act goes on for weeks.

Ten days in, I've given up and told him to forget about it a million times.

Surprise, surprise, he won't. Every day he gets in the car with some bizarre new offering. The day he hands me balloons, I say, "I like steak."

"What?"

"If you won't let this go and insist on treating every day like Christmas...can tomorrow be a steakhouse gift card?" I ask, batting my eyes because it's all I can do not to gouge them out.

"If I'm your plus one—"

"Nope. Not happening then," I throw back.

His face heats red, and he's quiet the rest of the ride home. He doesn't even fight me when I punch the privacy screen up. One last glance and he looks like a human grenade struggling to push his pin back in before he explodes.

I should feel bad, but guess what?

I don't. As long as this continues, I swear to God Almighty I'm *not* letting Brandt find a single crack in my armored heart.

A few days later when he gets in the car, he tells me to go to Hotel Indigo.

"Why are we going there?" I ask, genuinely curious.

"Great Lakes Architecture Conference," he says glumly. "It sounds boring as hell, doesn't it? I should skip."

I bite back a smile. "I didn't say anything. Should I take you to the office instead?"

"Nah, it's springtime, Halle. The sun's finally shining in this godforsaken city and birds are chirping. Take us to Navy Pier. I'll buy you cotton candy again, and this time you have to take a bite. You can't just save it for your niece unless you truly hate it."

He's ridiculous. I want him to hear the frown in my voice.

"Hmm...no," I tell him. "I'm not interested in getting fired today."

"We could go to the zoo. You seem like a zoo kind of girl," he suggests, adjusting his tie.

What the hell does that even mean? It's times like this when I wish I had an idiot boss translator.

"Did you just compare me to a wild animal?" I ask.

He rolls his eyes and lets out a strangled growl.

"Please. I don't even want to know how your brain makes these jumps. If you don't like the zoo or the pier, we could try the River Walk."

I've had enough. I reach up and adjust the mirror so I can see his smirking face. I try not to stare at that chiseled jaw or

let my eyes linger on firm lips meant for sin.

“So, bossman. This may surprise you, but...I’m on the clock. My duties begin and end with pickups and drop-offs. I’d really hate to involve Susan and her silly HR complaint form. Much less escalate anything to Bea.”

“Fuck, whatever.” For a moment, he’s silent.

I think I might’ve just saved my butt—until I look back in the mirror and see this slow, twisted expression that tells me something truly devious just entered his brain.

God help me.

“If it’s all work and no play, come to the convention with me. Take notes. That can’t possibly be inappropriate and lunch is usually decent.”

For a second, I’m paralyzed.

Clearing my throat, I say, “I’m not your assistant. Company driver doesn’t cover—”

“I know,” he says, cutting in. “The whole C-level team shares an EA, and we go through them like tissue paper. I don’t think the new girl will last. And since she’s not assigned to me today, I don’t have an assistant.”

His comment surprises me. Ward qualifies as Mr. Uptight any day, but I could see Nick being the one putting the moves on their assistants, making them hate life. I eye him suspiciously through the rearview mirror.

That smirk from hell etched on his face widens.

“Also, I spent some time earlier this week reviewing your job description. The position says ‘other duties where needed,’ whenever you’re not driving senior staff.” He pauses for deadly effect. “I need notes, Miss Halle. You’re drafted.”

I. Want. To. Scream.

Instead, I put on a neutral face and ask an innocent question. “Do you really *need* someone to take notes, or are you just being annoying?”

“Notes,” he rumbles, folding his arms. “Pissing you off is a bonus.”

Yikes. It’s easy to forget this man can look like a portrait of scary-hot when he wants to.

“I...I think I’m supposed to pick Ward up and get him to a meeting later,” I say slowly. It’s a half lie.

I vaguely remember having something on my calendar, but I don’t grab my phone to check.

“Send him an Uber,” he snaps.

“Not happening. You can’t send Ward to meet a client in an Uber! Geez, even I know that.” I also know I’d get some seriously uncomfortable questions about why I wasn’t available to, y’know, do my job.

“I’ll send him another town car from a service. Relax.”

His eyes are sea-green walls. Impenetrable and totally uncaring that he just said the next worst thing to ‘calm down.’ My toes scrunch up in my shoes as I choke down that scream aching to fly out.

“If I come to this thing, will you make me regret it?” I ask, accepting my defeat.

“I don’t see how you could. You’re with me. Lucky you.” I almost see a little toothpaste-commercial sparkle in his teeth when he grins.

Yep. He’s definitely pissing me off.

“With you around, I’m not sure Lady Luck called my number,” I say with a muffled groan.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Miss Halle.”

“Always.”

“Look. I’ll be the first to admit these conferences are glorified naptimes. That’s why I don’t want to go alone.” He cracks his knuckles. “Still, it has to be more fun for you than driving my stick-in-the-ass brother around.”

“I’m not sure about that. I like driving. And I really don’t mind Ward that much,” I say, giving a nod for emphasis.

“You’re so full of shit. You’d rather drive the guy the entire office calls Warden around rather than go to a conference with me?”

He looks wounded. Disbelieving. Shaken, not stirred.

I smile. “Are you jealous, Mr. Brandt?”

Danger. I need a leash for my tongue right now.

Get it together. You’re straight-up flirting now. With your hot billionaire dick of a boss who’d chew you up in one bite. Nothing good comes from that. Ever.

“Not jealous,” he snarls. His crankyface expression says otherwise. “I just refuse to believe it.”

Ah-ha. He’s being honest again.

It’s an answer only the famous egomaniac Nick Brandt could ever give.



AT THE CONFERENCE, the bossman blends in with the other businessmen.

Sort of.

He’s still a heartthrob with messy hair and slayer eyes here, but he actually seems professional. Serious.

When he speaks to movers in the construction and engineering worlds, he talks like he cares about more than lavish parties and a devilish reputation. *Who knew?*

“I’ve never seen you this well behaved,” I whisper when we’re settling in for presentations.

“Don’t get used to it.” His delivery is ice-cold.

I bite my bottom lip to keep from laughing.

He glances at the program we were handed when we came in the door. “Which seminar can you stand? Our choices are

Doctor Boring on green architecture or Miss Monotonous on functional flow.”

“Again with the sexism.”

“How was *that* sexist?” He quirks an eyebrow in challenge.

“Boring gets to be doctor but Monotonous is miss. Isn’t it obvious?” I ask.

“Bah, your oversensitivity is showing.”

“Pointing out your rotten manners doesn’t make me oversensitive.”

“Fact check: Boring’s first name is Tiffany. Both sessions this morning are being presented by women.” He shakes his head. “I’m so sorry, Miss Halle, but it appears you’re the one with preconceived notions here.”

“Me?” My fingers curl in sheer annoyance as I stab a finger at myself.

“You assumed Doctor Boring was a man based on the title.” He makes a tsking sound and wags a finger I’m too tempted to bite off. “Disappointing. We need to get you into one of those workplace improvement jams with Susan.”

I roll my eyes at him, but it’s kind of funny.

“Hello, trouble! Haven’t seen you in a while.” A guy in a brown suit strolls up to Nick and extends his hand.

Nick gives it a fierce shake. “How are you, Stanley?”

“I’ll be a lot better once this shitstorm of a project ends.” The man sighs.

Nick laughs. “What are you working on? It can’t be that bad.”

“The money’s good, but the client couldn’t be more demanding.”

“The bigger the payday, the badder the client,” Nick says smoothly.

While he's distracted talking to this architect, I take the opportunity to fade into the background. The Brandt charm works wonders here, and I'm reminded it's everything I lack.

I'm underdressed and underclass at an event like this. And with engineers and architects speaking in technical jargon like it's ancient Sumerian, I understand nothing.

Whatever. I'll take notes for Brandt, but they'll be verbatim.

I won't be able to clarify things or decipher better phrases or flag what's important. Why did he even want me for this gig?

His own amusement?

Ugh.

Even so, my eyes wander. From the back, he's a chiseled god, hugged by a charcoal suit with pale-blue pinstripes that make him impossible to ignore. I can't resist sending my sister a Snapchat photo with a message attached.

You're welcome, Abby. FYI, your crush is pretty well behaved today.

A minute passes before my phone buzzes. I swipe the screen and see her text. ***Lucky lady! Here's your FYI: if a man like Nick Brandt was buying me random crap and begging for forgiveness daily, we'd already be beyond forgiveness. How do you resist? Do you still have a pulse?***

I snort and type back, ***He's my boss and an asshole big enough for an elephant. Also, I'd like to keep my job.***

Buzz-buzz. That's the sound of my sister being as annoying as she was back when we were teenagers.

Dude. He owns the company, Reese. You'd probably get to keep your job and get promoted.

Reese: Not really. It's split with his brother and his grandma's the big boss. Since she founded it, I'm sure she owns the biggest slice.

Abby: Jeebus, who cares? Did you even see the picture you sent?

My lip curls. She's so ridiculous sometimes.

With a sigh, I send a reply. *Unfortunately, yes, and staring at Nick Brandt's very touchable butt hurts my head. I should find something more productive to do at this stupid conference he's dragged me to.*

"You disappeared on me," Nick says, materializing next to me.

Oh, crap!

Heat pumps under my cheeks as I practically punt the phone off the floor. Instead, I drop it, and then watch in horror as he picks it up.

This nightmare second passes where I think he'll see the screen and see my conversation with Abby about his—

"Here, butterfingers," he says, mashing it back in my hand.

Whew. For once, I'm grateful he's kinda blind to what's right in front of him.

Hoping my face doesn't look like a ripe cherry, I shove the phone in my purse.

"Which breakout session are we going to? Did you decide?" he asks.

"Doctor Boring. We have to honor the PhD," I say.

"Decent choice. I feel like a power nap." He gives his arms this exaggerated stretch.

"So did you figure out your friend's problem?" I ask.

Nick raises and drops one shoulder, his face tight. "Stanley's more of an acquaintance. We've helped each other out from time to time. His clients want a fully glass new headquarters, but they're in a rural area so it also needs to fit in with the surroundings."

"What did you tell him?"

“I suggested he build into the green. Go around the natural elements to incorporate the two. Throw in a couple sunny break rooms or a courtyard if it suits the design.” He looks through me for a second, like it all comes that naturally to him.

Okay. I’m a teensy bit impressed.

Somewhere behind that smirk, he has a functioning brain, and one hemisphere might be dedicated to something besides sex and bourbon.

“Interesting idea. I didn’t know you were smart.” Oops. Wincing, I cover my face with my hands. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to say that.”

Not out loud, anyway.

He flashes this brutal half smile like I just paid him a compliment.

“Better you’re reminded what I can do when I’m not finding new ways to make you miserable, Miss Halle.” The way his smile evaporates makes me think he’s almost serious.

God.

“Did your grandmother ever design a glass building like that? It feels like her style,” I say, smiling as I remember the times I’ve flipped through Beatrice Nightingale Brandt’s many, many shock-and-awe galleries of breathtaking designs.

He nods. “I told him to go check out her gallery at the art museum before he leaves town.”

“I like helpful you. Do you know where Doctor Boring’s seminar is?” I ask before his head swells with pride.

“Yep. Follow me, Halle,” he says with a flourish of his arm.

On the way over, I can’t decide if I’m annoyed or happy he keeps calling me by my last name. It keeps a comfortable distance, like I’m still some guy carting him around and the mistaken identity thing never happened.

On the other hand, it keeps a comfortable *distance*.

A deep, dark, quietly insane part of me thinks that's a problem.

Dr. Boring turns out to be as short as me with grey hair hanging above her shoulders.

She talks faster than a caffeinated chipmunk. These notes might suck.

Also, I keep getting hung up, wondering what things like sustainable ergonomics and industrialized pastiche mean.

Dear Lord.

I'm not even sure I have them spelled right. He really should've asked someone else to tag along who's versed in technobabble.

It doesn't help that I hate being stuck in a classroom all day. It's so high school. This is half the reason I decided on a life on the road, knowing I could never hack grad school, let alone a desk job.

Nick slides a notepad over with a few sentences jotted down in ink.

We have to quit calling her Doctor Boring. Her name is Bowling. Can you believe it? She's Boring Bowling.

It's hard not to giggle.

I pick up my pen and scribble a message back. *Shut up before you get us in trouble. You made me come here!*

I slide it back to him. I'm rewarded with that million-dollar smile.

Two minutes later, the notepad slides in front of me again. My conference notes have gone from bad to nonexistent, but I'm not sure either of us care. I look down to read what he wrote.

"Trouble?" What are we? High schoolers?

Nope. Definitely not.

Nicholas Brandt and I wouldn't have even breathed the same oxygen in high school. He'd be so far out of my league I

couldn't even buy tickets.

I scrawl another quick message that reads, *I avoided bad boys in high school. No one needs a rap sheet before they're eighteen.*

Orphans don't especially.

Too honest? I wonder.

He studies my note quietly, staring at it before he purses his lips and answers in that slashing script of his. *Is that what you think? I'm a bad boy?*

I meet his glowing green gaze. His playful demeanor is gone.

Frowning, I quickly write out, *You're not a bad guy. You just find trouble easily. Sorry. I was careful to keep out of trouble back in school.*

His reply comes faster this time. *Shame. I had you pegged for a partier, Halle.*

You also had me pegged for a man, I write, sending it back to him with a little more force than intended.

Nick bursts out laughing, cutting the not-so-good doctor off mid-sentence.

Whoops.

Boring Bowling narrows her eyes, scowling. She stares at him and then at me with a blank face, tapping her foot impatiently like the fussy professor she is.

A couple of balding men in front of us turn, looking to see what caused the commotion.

Yep. We're back in high school, all right.

Brandt holds his hand up in apology. After a few more seconds of glaring, Boring Bowling picks up right where she left off.

I'm already bored out of my skull when Nick slides the paper over again.

When are we going to let that mistake go, Miss Halle?

I pause, pondering before I write, *When you quit buying lame gifts, maybe. Also, that chuckle fit is proof you were trouble in high school.*

Then the worst thing happens.

This sly, bright smirk curls across his face that leaves me in ruins.

I'm almost afraid to read what's on the paper when he slides it back. Eep.

Sweetheart, if I'd known you in high school, we would have gotten in WAY more trouble than that. Way is not just all in caps, but underlined three times.

Holy hell. My mind wants to pull me into a dozen bad places, and they're all filthy.

Exactly why I would have avoided you, I write back.

He gives me a one-word response.

Liar.

Awesome. There's my regularly scheduled dose of maddening frustration with this man.

How do you know? I write, sliding it over.

You're here now, aren't you? And you haven't stood up and walked away, he writes.

Damn him. Guilty as charged.

But I'm not giving up so easily. I pick up my pen.

Your grandma pays me to deal with you, boss.

His reply comes back in seconds.

True, technically. But today you came for me. Not for Grandma.

Also true. Thankfully, the torture ends as the whole room breaks out in quiet applause. We stand up and follow the line snaking toward the break area stocked with fancy snacks and a wine and coffee bar in the middle.

“I’m going to the bar. Do you want to tag along and meet more people who enjoy watching paint dry?” Nick asks, eyeing me innocently like the weird exchange on paper never happened.

“I’d love some coffee. The rest...no, thanks,” I tell him.

“It’s called networking, Miss Halle. It’s good for long-term career prospects.”

“I’m just the driver.” I shrug. “I guess some of these people may hire their own drivers. Your grandmother did, but it’s hard to imagine better pay.”

He eyeballs me slowly, and whether he knows it or not, I’m feeling too vulnerable. “Can I see the notes you’ve been working on?”

“You mean the real ones or the notes for the class clown who wouldn’t leave me alone?”

His eyes flash as that devil-smirk reappears. “Real.”

Oh, he’ll regret asking me to come, but I hand him the notebook where I tried to record Boring Bowling’s speech.

“I did the best I could, but I feel like I’m missing a lot of background info.”

He reads the first page, flips through a few more, and nods. “Very thorough. Keep that up and we could promote you to EA. It pays a lot more and I’m sure you could hack it.”

“Nope. I like driving just fine, boss.”

“Really? Even with a significant raise?” He waits like he’s expecting me to do an about-face and beg for the job.

Screw him.

I stand my ground. “I like money as much as the next person, Mr. Brandt, but this work...it’s not what I’m cut out for. I’m not much good at it.”

“You’re not bad at it, either, and you’ve shown you can handle my brother and me. If you ever change your mind, let me know. I’m getting a drink now. Should I grab a glass of champagne for you or do you still need that coffee?”

“Coffee.” I shake my head. “I have to drive.”

“Did you ever try my champagne?”

“I put it in the stray cat’s water bowl in the back of my apartment. She didn’t claw my door all night.” For a second, he blinks at me, and I hold my hands up. “Joking! God, what do you think I am?”

“You’re diabolical,” he says with a snort.

“I’m also kidding. Again.”

He starts to walk away, shaking his head. I’m about to step outside for a minute or two of fresh air when some blond chick cuts him off before he can get out of the ballroom. She touches his arm and leans into his space.

Nick tries to put some distance between them, but she’s not having it.

How odd. She’s not hideous.

In fact, most guys would probably line up for blocks to hit it with her sultry looks, full lips, that swish of shimmering gold-spun hair, and hips that look like they were designed to beckon men to their doom.

I normally don’t stare at another woman like this with my blood running hot and my vision turning red.

I definitely don’t normally get jealous.

Yikes.

But I’m also bewildered. I’ve never seen Nick coldly reject low-hanging fruit like that. Of course, most men don’t like being pursued. They want to do the chasing.

I grab my phone and Snap the shot to Abby. ***I don’t think he’s used to the tables being turned like this.***

Abby: Damn! Run her off. If you don’t want him, I do. Who’s blondie? I already hate her.

Reese: ROFL. You don’t even know her!

Abby: Why are you letting him go? He likes you enough to shove presents in your face.

Reese: BOSSMAN! Should I send it ten more times until it sinks in?

Abby: Whatever, sissy sis. Bosses who whip out expensive gifts totally grow on trees...just like money.

Reese: I didn't know that. Thanks for enlightening me.

Gah. I've been so tied up in my own affairs, I haven't thought about her. I hope she's not hurting financially, getting in over her head again. Abby gets caught up in trouble sometimes when she's desperate.

Abby: Reese. Run her off.

For the tiniest split second, I consider taking my sister's crazy advice.

THE REAL ME (NICK)



The conference takes the whole damn day, and Reese—*Miss Halle*—sits beside me, patiently recording everything the speakers say.

A few hours later, it finally ends and people spill into the halls to hit the cash bar one last time.

“Now do you want something stronger than coffee?” I ask.

She finishes whatever she’s writing before looking up, giving me a look that aches with those robin egg-blue eyes. “I should’ve let you get me a drink earlier. It’s almost time to drive you home.”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I’ll be here for a couple more hours. I have a few people I need to talk to before we leave.” I lean in and whisper, “These conferences are really about closing deals. In case you hadn’t noticed.”

She nods. “Good luck. You and your silver tongue? I’m sure it’ll take you thirty minutes, tops. No one can say no, once you get going.”

She catches herself and twists her face away shyly.

I chuckle at the irony. She’s awfully good at rejecting me, and it’s been going on a hell of a lot longer than thirty minutes.

“Mr. Brandt?” she asks, flicking back a loose lock of that walnut-brown hair.

“Yes?”

“I could go for a pop. Dr. Pepper,” she says.

“Will do.” I stand and push the chair out, ready to buy drinks but decide to push my luck. I give her my best grin.

“What?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head.

She tilts hers. “Is that your sales face or something?”

“That depends. Is it working?” I growl back.

“Hmm. That depends. What are you trying to sell me?”

“You know how you said no one could deny me?”

“That’s where this is going? Am I going to have to talk to Susan?” She narrows her eyes.

“Give me some credit, woman.” I scowl at her. “I was just about to ask you to type up the notes and send them to everyone.”

Relieved, she flicks her eyes up, considering. “How much does an EA make?”

“It depends on their experience. The last one made close to six figures,” I say cautiously.

What gives? She turned the job down earlier. Does she want it now?

“Well...this driver makes ninety thousand annually, which is more than generous. Still, this isn’t my usual workload, whatever that job description says. Tell you what. I’ll type the notes and send the email for a one-time fee of three hundred dollars, flat.”

“Three hundred? You either type really slow or—”

Her grin reveals deep dimples that hook me in the chest. “Consider it a convenience fee since I’m *not* an EA.”

Damn her. I should put her on the sales team, seeing how she negotiates.

I hold up a hand and snap my fingers.

“Done.”

After everything I've already put her through, I'm not going to squabble over three hundred bucks.

She turns the notes back to the first page and takes out her phone.

“What are you doing?”

She shrugs, her lashes fluttering softly. “You said you were going to close some deals and we'd be here for a while. I might as well make good use of the time.”

“You're not writing the whole thing on a phone. The computers in the hotel business center make it easier and more accurate.”

“The business center costs like twenty dollars. That's stupid. I already pay for my phone. I'm savvy, not greedy, and I'm not charging up the company card for it either.”

I force down a smile.

If she doesn't have a company card on her she'll use, I do. I won't make her pay for the business center out of her own pocket. Still, how can I resist goading her?

“You'd still have a net profit of two hundred and eighty dollars,” I point out.

She looks stricken. “Wow, really? I took a few business classes too. This way I have a net profit of three hundred dollars.”

My brows arch up. I didn't know she had any college.

“Use your company card,” I order.

Halle looks at me like I'm a mammoth idiot. “Why would I waste the company's money if I'm not willing to waste my own?”

I'm not sure I've ever had an employee this loyal. I open my wallet and hand her a personal credit card. “Here. It's mine. You're only wasting my money, and believe me, I've got twenty bucks to spare.”

She glares.

Not the reaction I expected.

Fuck, is there any pleasing this girl?

“You’re such a snob sometimes,” she spits.

It’s hopeless. I can’t hold the laughter anymore. “What? Because I offered to pay for you to use a real computer to type notes I’ll use?”

“No. Because who pays twenty freaking dollars to use a computer when you already pay for like a thousand laptops?”

“Billionaires. It’s part of the job description. We have more than we can use, so we have to spend it to keep the economy going,” I quip. “Also, in case you hadn’t noticed, I didn’t bring any of those laptops with.”

“Snob,” she says with a groan.

“Swipe your fingers to death then. You can keep the card in case you change your mind when your hands cramp up and you’re trying not to drop the damn phone reading off that notepad,” I grind out.

Our eyes meet like stormfronts. She doesn’t look away, just purses those heart-shaped lips as she slowly opens her mouth to eject some fresh brimstone.

“You know what?” she asks softly.

“What?”

She picks up the card and holds it up to me. “Keep the card and give me the extra twenty dollars.”

“What?”

She shrugs. “You’re a billionaire. It’s your job to spend money, and you would have paid twenty dollars for an hour on the machine.”

“Fine, three twenty. Deal. Now, I’m getting drinks,” I say, amused by her obstinance even if I don’t let her see it.

Marching her in here was the best decision I’ve made all day. I’ve never had this much fun at a conference.

I go to the bar, buy a shot of brandy, and seal a collaboration with another firm in no time. I also set up a meeting with an ad firm looking for a new office design. Then I hit the bar again for a second shot, plus Reese's soda.

When I return to our table, she's sitting there holding her phone like a nineties kid with a Gameboy, working the keyboard with both thumbs.

I flop down beside her, holding out my hand.

"Here's your drink. Well earned, Miss Halle," I say, passing the Dr. Pepper over.

She doesn't say anything for a minute. Her thumbs keep moving and her eyes don't leave her phone, then she sets the phone on the table and smiles at me, sweet as pie.

"All done. Pay up."

Smirking, I pull out my phone. "What's your Venmo?"

"My cell number."

I send the payment and leave a twenty-five percent tip.

"Sent," I snap off.

Her phone dings a second later and she holds it up.

That bratty mouth falls open in a soft gasp before she catches herself. Not fast enough to stop the blood rushing to my cock.

"Oh, I—I see you're a decent tipper. Who knew? Thanks, boss."

"My pleasure." I mean that too literally, clearing my throat as I say, "Thank you for playing secretary today."

Those blue eyes roll in her head like marbles.

"Don't expect it to happen again. This is a one-time deal, and you and Ward need a real EA. Did you close your deals?"

"One. I set up a meeting to close the other." I hold my glass up, offering a salute I doubt she'll take.

She pops the top on her soda and holds it up, clinking her can against my glass.

So maybe she doesn't have a voodoo doll who looks just like me waiting at home.

She's also right. This isn't a normal CEO outing with his driver.

Then again, Reese Halle isn't the usual stuffy old chauffeur who's often actually male.

I'm not the average partner, either, and this combination could be lethal.

We've kindled more sparks today than any boss and their driver should, but I push the thought away.

"So, you said I should hire someone. Are you sure I shouldn't just promote someone?" I ask.

Okay, fuck, maybe I haven't completely pushed the thought away.

I want her around the office more.

I want her desk just a few feet away, where I can stop at it for meaningless chitchat whenever I damn well please.

I want her to banter me into a smoking crater.

I want that impossible kiss, that fuck hot, irresistible drink of this woman.

I even want the flaming bag of crap guaranteed to rain down on my head the second after a kiss that devastating ever happens.

Luckily for her, I'm not a *complete* maniac.

Let's focus on the positive, the realistic. With no training and no experience, she's done an excellent job here today and even managed to send the notes in record time.

"You won't be promoting me. Being chained down in an office just isn't right for me," she tells me.

"You could handle it, if you want it enough." I veer my gaze at the notebook she's worked in all day.

"Yeah, I probably could, but I'd despise every minute. I hate desk jobs with the heat of a thousand suns," she says,

shaking a fist for emphasis.

“Are you going to spend your whole career on the road then?” I ask, suppressing a smile.

“Honestly, who cares?” she whispers more to herself than me, stands, and pushes her chair back in. “Are you about ready to go? I promised my niece I’d be over for dinner.”

Weird, but I won’t press her if she genuinely hates this crap. I follow her out of the ballroom.

“Are you going to answer my question?”

She looks at me and does a double take.

“You really want to know? Sure. I plan on dealing with everything on four wheels until I’m too old to be useful. I don’t know. I’ve heard older drivers say you get back problems from sitting so long. I may have to quit one day, or go for a cushier position, but until then? I’ll drive and pray self-driving cars never become a thing for the next forty years. It’s what I do.”

Good answer.

“People with office jobs need chiropractors, too. That’s why any employee who ever puts in a request for a standing desk gets one at Brandt Ideas. I suppose there’s no way around the butt-in-chair part when you’re a driver, though. Are you sure you don’t want to try out something else? You could be doing your health a favor.”

Her face tightens, deep in thought, and of course my eyes get stuck to those ripe strawberry-pink lips.

“When I was younger, I wanted to be a truck driver. No lie, I wanted it so much I was ready to skip college to get my commercial license and hit the road,” she says slowly.

“You, behind an eighteen-wheel rig?” I know I’m about to get shit for saying it again, but it just falls out. I’m that surprised.

Fortunately, she just glares and then shakes her head and continues.

“It didn’t turn out that way. I decided to hit the books and got my start in passenger driving. Somewhere along the way, I decided I didn’t want to be on the road for long stretches or wind up sleeping in a different parking lot every night. But one thing stayed the same—driving destresses me. I *like* chauffeuring because I meet new people, new challenges, and every day’s a new experience. I even liked driving weddings and parties for my old place despite the sucky pay. If I’m taking people around for huge life events, then I’m part of their excitement.”

I’m still floored, trying to picture this shortstack woman as a truck driver. One thing’s for sure, she’s got the grit for it.

“Tell me one thing. What caused this obsession with being behind the wheel?” I ask.

“...I don’t know. I always liked cars. The day I turned sixteen, I pooled money with my sister, Abby. We bought a clunker to share using every dime we could scrape together. I took the driving test and had my license the same day. Soon enough, I was spending too much on gas, so that summer I applied for a job as a delivery driver for this bakery. A couple years later, that led me to a law firm courier gig where I got paid by the mile. When I figured out I could get paid by mileage, I started looking into full time gigs. Freight seemed like a natural fit until I started to realize how much I’d be away from my family, always at the mercy of the road. With you—with Brandt Ideas, I mean—I’m always in town if my sister needs me.”

“Good. So, we’ll never have to hire a new driver?”

“If you play your cards right, not anytime soon.” She gives me this smile that’s too fucking adorable for life.

We’re out of the hotel now, and the valet brings the sleek black Lincoln around. Reese walks to the back passenger side door and grabs the handle.

“What are you doing?” I whisper slowly, my brow pulling down.

For a second, I stand there, perplexed. She hasn't done this for me since her first week on the job, and even when I thought she was Batman-Halle, I told her to knock it off.

“Opening the door for you,” she says, blinking. “What does it look like?”

I place my hand flat against the door. “Don't ever open this door for me again. You're my driver, not my butler.”

“But it's my job.” Pale-blue eyes framed by long dark lashes stare up at me in surprise.

“Consider it more of my casual sexism,” I quip, unsmiling. “Or maybe I just fucking loathe being waited on hand and foot.”

Her eyes soften. Her chin tilts up as she shrugs. I don't think she wants me to see the warmth in her smile, but I do.

“You're the boss,” she murmurs.

Goddamn this woman.

I'm lost in her warm eyes for God only knows how long.

Again, my gaze mutinies, landing on her lips. I stare until my mouth aches for her like someone sprinkled ghost pepper flakes on my lips.

Then I pinch myself through my pocket, severing the trance.

Miss Halle jerks her head down and darts around the car so fast I know she felt it, too.

She was caught in the moment, that weird forbidden spark between us, lashing out to ignite if we'd only give insanity a chance.

Careful, you idiot, a sardonic voice growls in the back of my mind.

She's already in the driver's seat when I slide in the car.

What were we talking about before my brain got stuck on wanting to devour her? I need to make this normal.

I've already fucked up enough of her short tenure with us.

“So, you’re here for life?” I ask again, knowing I’m repeating myself.

“I don’t know about forever,” she says after a long pause. “Eventually, if it’s ever in the cards, I want my own luxury limo service. I’ve been working as a driver for years and networked my butt off everywhere I’ve been. I have a lot of ideas. I think I could elevate the luxury ride experience, and make it as special and relaxing for my clients as it is for me.”

Ambitious and surprising. I’m genuinely impressed.

“Tell me a few of your ideas,” I say, meeting her eyes intently in the mirror.

“Well, for one, I think a lot of ride services focus on little things like snacks and drinks. But what if the experience went beyond that? Think reclining chairs and hot towels and pull-out screens similar to a first class airline ticket? Most limo services also focus on big events or regular whale clients who’ll use them all the time—people like you and your family—but I think there’s an untapped segment of the population who’d enjoy the luxury experience without needing it on a daily basis.”

“Doesn’t that fall under weddings and proms? You already do that,” I say.

“Not quite. If you think about the limo at a wedding, it’s still there for transportation first, and usually for large parties. They’re booked when there are just too many people to fit in a typical sedan or when the bride and groom want to ride in style. People will pay for several hours to keep an empty limo standing by just to have it for the half hour they actually use it. But I think if the ride *was* the experience, or at least a key part...then you could reach a totally new clientele. Business class is awesome. Sure, recurring clients will always be the backbone of this biz, but a six-hundred-dollar day trip for a family of four isn’t bad either. Plus, there are months and nasty situations where business travel nosedives.”

I hide my smile behind my hand, pretending to scratch my cheek. She’s really thought this out. Unfortunately, it makes her that much more enticing.

I hate the heat in my blood that flares and won't go away now that I know Reese Halle has one hell of a brain to match her beauty.

“How would you make the ride the experience?” I ask, desperately hoping she'll slip and say something stupid.

“By hiring drivers who accommodate all the usual services, but also act as guides on request. Whether that's telling folks about the history of Lake Michigan or shuttling them around to the best Polish delis in Chicago. People might like a ride and a story.”

A chuckle rips out of me.

“What's so funny?” she snaps, her eyes narrowing with worry.

“I can't believe you're finally talking to me like a normal human being. Are we past you shutting me out?” I ask, pushing my luck, almost hoping she'll go cold so I won't be so damnably hot.

She lifts her head up enough to flash a smile in the mirror.

“Like I said...you never gave me a chance to talk before. I think today might be the first time you've asked me anything that needed more than a one-syllable answer—or doesn't involve shoving some weird gift down my throat.”

Touché.

The way my gut clenches tells me she's right. Fuck. Maybe I am a swinging dick.

“To be fair, you rarely ask me anything either,” I grumble, looking to save face.

“Mr. Brandt, if a businessman has to be asked, he usually doesn't want to talk about it.”

I smile. “You do know your market.”

She goes quiet then, those shimmering blue eyes studying me in the mirror.

Meeting her gaze, I clear my throat. “You know you can't freeze me out again, right?”

“I didn’t know I ever froze you out. That’s a little harsh,” she says shyly.

“No matter how hard I tried, you wouldn’t give me the time of day. Now that you know we can talk, you can’t just sit in the front seat and ignore me, Halle.”

She doesn’t say anything.

“Miss Halle? I hope it’s better now that you know I’m a scandal-stomping ogre, but basically harmless.”

I hold my breath.

“Ehhh. I don’t know about scandal stomping or harmless. That lady at the convention seemed to think you wanted something scandalous.” There’s a cautious edge in her voice.

I snort loudly. “Who? The blonde? She was annoying as hell, trying to corner me. As if I didn’t know who the fuck she ___”

“I Snapchatted it to my sister,” she cuts in. A second later, she looks like she wants to slap a hand across her face. “Um, sorry. I didn’t mean to say that out loud. I just...it was an odd scene. You looked so pissed.”

Interesting.

“You did, huh? And why would you violate your boss’ privacy like that?”

I know, I’m a bastard.

Even so, I’m having too much fun when her eyes pop open.

“I apologize, okay? It won’t happen again. Abby, she just...she’s a sucker for the gossip blogs and you’re pretty famous. I think you’re the best-known Brandt, and the one most people like.”

Way to stroke my ego. I turn over her words, giving a slight nod to let her know I won’t flay her alive like Ward would if he were in my place.

“You didn’t really Snap me, did you? It’s unlike you,” I tease.

“...you’ll never know,” she says with a nervous giggle.

Another big mistake, pushing her like this.

The playful taunting in her voice drives me crazy in all the wrong ways. If she weren’t an employee, I’d be hearing that laugh after hours. I’d convince her she needs a drink tonight, followed by a nightcap of my infamous charm, sans every scrap of clothing hiding her sweetness.

“I’ve enjoyed your company today,” I say.

She’s quiet for a moment before she says, “Likewise, Mr. Brandt.”

At first, I think it’s all she’s going to say.

Then she clears her throat. “I know a lot more about you after today too...”

“Like?”

“Like you’re more than just a billionaire bad boy who makes a lot of headlines. You’re not so bad, I guess. Behind the hot rake cut—”

“Hold up, Halle. Did you say ‘rake’ cut?”

She giggles, redness splashed across her cheeks.

“My bad. Abby made me binge-watch Downton Abbey. Point is, I know you’re not what they say you are now. Behind the muscle, the good looks, and work hard, play hard attitude...there’s a sharp mind and a beating heart. Honestly, I wasn’t sure at first, but now...it’s nice knowing the real you, bossman.”

Snorting, I shake my head. “I could get stuck on the fact that you find it so hard to believe I’m not a vodka-blooded numbskull, but I’d rather focus on everything else you said. Tell me about the looks,” I growl, stabbing my gaze at her.

Those soft red cheeks glow like cherries.

“...I didn’t say anything else.”

“You said I’m a hot billionaire playboy with hair that drives you wild. There are worse things to be.”

She glares into the rearview mirror. “I did not! I said you had good looks, which five billion people would find pretty obvious.”

I nod. “Good to know you approve of my hairstyle personally, Miss Halle.”

She rolls her eyes, but her cheeks look like they might start a reactor meltdown in this car.

“I do *not* approve of your hairstyle, Mr. Brandt. It’s the current cover cut, that’s all.”

“Cover cut?”

She groans. “The in-kind that’s on the cover of all the magazines right now. I’m sure it’s no accident you have that cut.”

I touch the back of my hair and beam at her.

“I’ve worn my hair like this since I was twelve years old. Grandma will happily prove it with old photos. What you mean is, I’m a trendsetter, and I think you like the OG more than all the copycats.”

Those blue eyes almost roll right out of her head. She’s redder, shifting in her seat, so mortified she might keel over.

“Reese?”

“Yes?” Her eyes flick back at mine nervously, probably terrified we’re almost on a first name basis.

“You’ve seen me on my best behavior—”

“And your worst.”

I nod. “I want to promise that since you’ve seen me on my best behavior—the real me, just like you said—I won’t let you down again.”

“Really?”

“Really. Unless teasing you isn’t good behavior, in which case you’re shit out of luck.”

She snickers. “As long as I never have to lug a shirtless client around again after he’s drunk...”

“Absolutely not.”

“And you won’t get in my car missing your shirt?” Her eyes narrow at me in.

Someone honks at us. Typical Chicago nice.

“Shouldn’t you be watching the road?” I say. “Don’t worry. You’ll never see an inch of skin below my neck again.”

“Thank you,” she says, a hint of disappointment in her voice. “I promise you I won’t send my sister pictures of your ass anymore.”

I perk up, breaking into a shit-eating smile.

“My ass? You really did?”

“Who knows?”

“You do. And apparently, so does your sister.”

“I’m not telling, and she’s not a narc so...let’s just keep the mystery, okay?”

I push out an exaggerated sigh. “Damn. If I’m going to be on my best behavior, I’m going to require yours as well.”

“My what?”

God. What have I got myself into?

“Your best,” I repeat. “Give me that and I’ll never ask for more.”

“I’d never give you less,” she says firmly.

“Reese?”

Again, her eyes look panicked. She clears her throat.

“I prefer Miss Halle. How about we keep it that way? It’s weird if the other Mr. Brandt keeps calling me that and you don’t...”

Whatever. Weird is Ward’s middle name.

Is she freezing me out again? Already? Have I pushed her too far?

Before I can test any boundaries, she pulls up to my penthouse.

“Thanks for the ride. As always.” I open the door, about to step out of the car.

“Wait. Nick?”

“Shouldn’t that be Mr. Brandt?” I whip around and stare at her.

“Right, right, right. Sorry.” Her playful tone is gone.

Immediately, I regret my words.

“What’s up?”

“I’ll be on my best behavior. No more frigid conversations unless you’re being a total ass. And, um, no more Snaps of your ass—”

“Ah-ha. You admit it,” I growl.

She shrugs, fireball-red blood returning to her cheeks.

“Reese?” Again, her name slips out. That one word proves how overly comfortable I’m being. “Miss Halle,” I correct sternly.

“Yes?” she whispers.

“I think we’re even now. Every dumb thing I did before, forgotten. Understood?” I ask.

Her brunette hair bounces as she nods.

“Tomorrow’s a new day. We’ll carry on normally, just like when you thought I was a college boy but without all the weirdness, okay?”

Yeah, no. There’s no fucking way I’ll ever see her as a college boy again.

“No weirdness. I can do that,” I lie.

I linger in the open door, staring at her fresh, innocent face for too long.

She can’t believe for a second I’ll ever see her as anything besides the beautiful woman she is.

“Good night, Miss Halle.” I shut the door and turn so I have a good reason to stop gawking.

Ten minutes later, after I’m inside, I need a reason to text her.

Pick me up an hour early tomorrow, please. I have some crap to take care of after being out of the office today. Let’s make it seven o’clock sharp.

Fuck me. I’ve lost my mind.

I go to the office before my usual nine a.m. start time by *choice*? Since when? I’m the anti-morning lark. Ward even used to literally *drag* me out of bed at the ass crack of dawn on Christmas Day when we were kids to open presents.

She texts back immediately. *Whatever you say, bossman.*

I’m glad I don’t need to hide my smile as I reply with, *If I had my very own exclusive assistant, I wouldn’t have to head into the office at ungodly dark hours.*

Reese: So hire one. You’re a billionaire.

Nick: I’m efficient. Why hire when I can promote internally?

Reese: I’m at my sister’s singing with a toddler. See you tomorrow. Bye, Nick.

There she goes again. Slipping up and calling me by my first name.

This time, I don’t dare correct her.

CHARMING MIRAGE (REESE)



Months Later

I'm parked in the Brandt Ideas parking garage, listening to an audiobook.

Business Finance 101 by some guy who could give Dr. Boring-Bowling a nice run for dullest lecture ever.

It's boring as hell, but at least it gives me an idea of where to start with my future business plans...whenever I can keep my eyes open.

My phone buzzes in my lap. *Hey, can you pick me up early today?*

It's Nick.

Of course it is.

I can't think of any reason he'd need a ride at four p.m. when he's usually hunkered down at the office until past six, but in the months we've worked together since clearing up our rocky start, he's actually been professional.

After that conference, he lived up to his word.

The awkward gifts stopped.

So did the outrageous hot takes from his life.

Judging by how disappointed Abby sounds every time he comes up, he's even kept a lower profile with the tabloid

hounds. I giggle, imagining how much that must suck for *The Chicago Tea's* ad revenue.

He's been friendly, approachable, talkative, but not too talkative.

Now, he lets me get a word in—a lot of words, really.

We have a good working relationship. Yes, he sometimes requests more rides than he probably needs to hop across Chicagoland, but it's never more than friendly. And as impossible as it seems...he's kinda turned into my favorite passenger, tied with Beatrice, or Granny Bea as I've taken to calling her.

Also, the passenger with the nicest ass, but I keep that to myself. I let him know I'll be there.

My phone buzzes and I look down at his latest message.

Okay. Thanks. I have a business engagement tonight. I may need help this evening.

Oh, boy.

As long as it doesn't involve shirtless drunk guys, I send back.

Nick: Scout's honor.

Reese: I'm not stupid enough to believe you were ever a Boy Scout.

I look at the time on my phone. It's a quarter till four. I'll finish this chapter, then pull around and pick him up.

When he gets in the car, he asks, "What are you doing tonight?"

"Apparently driving you around."

"After that?" he clips, wearing his grumpy face.

He's a bit of a Jekyll and Hyde, and it looks like Mr. Hyde's winning out today. Grouchy, no nonsense, and scary-hot.

Where is this going? He hasn't asked me to dinner or bought me gifts in months. In fact, it's been so professional, so

calm, I thought I'd finally been relegated to worker bee zone, one more boring piece of his daily background. "Umm—maybe to see my sister. Where are we going?"

"My place is our first stop," he says, his voice iced over.

First stop. Huh.

So, apparently that means there'll be more than one.

It also means plenty of time for this to get awkward.

Lovely.

I pull into the street.

"I've had a big media event on my calendar for months. It's for charity," he says, clearing his throat. "Everything's lined up perfectly, except..."

He trails off.

If he's had a fundraiser on his calendar for months, why didn't he mention needing a ride until now? My eyes flick back, eagerly waiting for more.

"Except my date called in sick this morning," he finishes.

I put on the blinker and change lanes so I can turn ahead. "I don't follow—your date *called in*?"

People call in sick to work, not dates.

My belly flips over.

What, did he hire her? As if someone as shrieking hot as Nick Brandt would ever need to hire a date?

He waves a hand. "Well, she canceled. Dropped out. You get the picture."

I stifle a laugh. "Does it hurt your ego to admit you got ghosted or something?"

"Hardly. She was kind of a flake. I almost expected as much. Anyway, you're missing the point."

"What point?" I make a sharp left turn.

"I still need a date for tonight."

I glance back to see his green eyes flashing.

Oof. Am I imagining things or is he looking at me almost like he wants me to—

No.

No, no, no, no, and also, no.

I clear my throat and muster my flattest tone. “Well, there seems to be no shortage of size double zero girls in Chicago willing to date you, right? Better start texting.”

He sighs like I’ve just burst his bubble.

“Reese, I can’t be seen with any random girl at this event. I need class,” he rumbles.

Oh, no.

“What are you going to do?” I venture, feeling the sweat beading on my brow.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’ll bring an employee. A friend. No one will ever know.”

“If that’s how you want to play this, fine. But if it’s Paige, the new assistant, I think your brother will smash your face in with a sledgehammer,” I say.

He smiles. “You think Ward’s got a hard-on for her too, huh?”

“Maybe.”

Actually, it’s pretty dang obvious. The Warden’s been looking miserable lately, pretending he isn’t ogling the new executive assistant with all the subtlety of a starved coyote.

When I peer at him in the rearview mirror, his jaw looks clenched. Those hell-green eyes seize mine and won’t let go.

“Dammit, look...I was trying to be subtle to make this less awkward.” He pauses. “Truth is, I need *you* to come with me tonight.”

Not a question.

Not a request.

Not an invite.

Basically, he's given me a marching order.

A clanging fire alarm couldn't match the panicked roar in my head.

Okay. Crap. *Think.*

Think before this desperate, sexy, arrogant beast takes out his lighter and blows up professional boundaries and my happy place in the employee zone.

"How 'bout no?" I try.

"What?" he snaps, his gaze sharpening.

"Nick...you're my boss and it's a pretty weird request. Might even be against company policy. Remember what happens when you ask me to do things that are way out of my job description?" I hold a finger up, wagging it at him.

"I realize I'm asking a lot. I'm not begging for a simple favor," he says, his brows low like thunderheads. "I planned on making it worth your while. Spend a few hours with me, and I'll pay you ten thousand big. It's all above board. We'll keep it off the official books. You'll get a check from yours truly and nobody ever has to know."

Did he just say—ten thousand smackerroos?

Hold me.

I'm not sure how I feel about that. I'm not even sure *how* I should feel.

"Aboveboard? You're joking, right? You're paying me to be your damn date, dude. I'm not some kind of sugar baby!" My voice breaks an octave higher.

That's how bad he's got me flustered.

"Relax, Miss Halle," he growls, stumbling back to the last name basis that's kind of gone by the wayside. "Reese, you're getting the sugar tonight, and you don't even have to call me daddy."

Oh. My. God.

I actually thump my chest to make sure it doesn't lurch to a stop. And Mr. Scrooged in the Head isn't even done.

"We'll be in public all night. It's more like an acting gig than anything else," he says, softening his voice.

I pull up in front of his building and hit the brakes so hard we bounce.

Maybe we can end this madness now.

"You said you wanted class, Nick. *Class*. I can barely walk in heels. I don't know caviar from chewing gum. I'm scared to even try that hundred-year-old champagne you gave me forever ago—let alone drink it out of a plastic cup because that's all I've got besides mugs." I pause, ticking off each reason on my fingers, desperately hunting for more. "And...I don't have anything to wear that costs more than eighty bucks. Unless your big shot friends don't mind a Target wardrobe..."

"I had a dress ordered to your fit this morning. Extra rush job. You can keep it after tonight. HR had your size from the driving uniform. We'll pick it up after I change."

A dress? Nick Brandt bought me a dress?

I can't even imagine what that'd look like. Since when have I ever worn a formal dress?

Panic time.

"If I say no, will you fire me?" I grind out.

"Never. You're well within your rights to tell me to go to hell. This isn't an unreasonable request—it's a high-pressure shit show. But you know I wouldn't ask—I wouldn't dare—if I weren't hard up. I hope you'll say yes and do me this one mammoth favor. If you want me to get down on one knee..."

Thank God he doesn't finish that sentence. My heart flies into my throat, beating so hard I cough.

"I...I would. I guess. I like you. As a boss!" I add hastily. "But trust me. If you want class, I'm not your girl. Don't you have anyone else you can ask?"

“I have plenty of women I could *ask*. But you’re the one I really wanted, even before the flake.” He smirks me into oblivion.

“Can I think it over?”

“I hope you will. Nothing’s ever simple with that mind, and that’s exactly why you’ll make a perfect pretend date. See you soon.” He steps out of the car without a second glance.

Damn, he’s good, and I’m left spinning through bad thoughts.

Is he asking me out? On a date? Or does he really just need a business date? And if he needed a date for business purposes only...why his driver?

It makes no sense.

After the day at the conference, he must remember I barely have a clue about his high-powered world of bajillionaires pressing palms and making deals bigger than some national treasuries.

I pick up my phone and text Abby. *So. News. Nick bought me a fancy dress and asked me to go to some flashy media event with him.*

Abby: Finally! Millie and I will see you tomorrow night.

Reese: What? You can’t think I’m going.

Abby: Of course, you’re going. What kind of dress? A formal?

Reese: ...I don’t know. I haven’t seen it. Or agreed to go.

Abby: Go!!!

Reese: He’s my boss, Abby. I add a crying emoji.

Abby: Even better reason. She tacks a devil emoji onto her reply.

A monster sigh oozes out of me. The life force is leaving my body.

Did I wake up in an alternate universe?

Suddenly, her rough decisions in life make sense to me.

Abby, you can't date your boss! I fire back. That's not how things work in the corporate trenches.

Abby: He's hot. Why wouldn't you?

Reese: B-o-s-s.

Abby: Look. You've got your shit together more than I did at your age. Hell. You're more together than I am now! If you know what you should do, do it. Things don't always go well for women who don't do what they're told.

Reese: He's not that kind of man. I don't think he'd fire me for not going. I'm sure he wouldn't. His grandmother would send an angry assassin to cut off his balls.

Abby: Then if you don't want to go, don't go. Let him risk his balls on somebody else, Reesie.

One problem, I text, and hesitate before I add, ...he sorta offered me ten thousand dollars.

Abby: ROFL. Holy shit, are you crazy? Why are we debating this? Go, go, go!

She adds an animated gif of a screaming cartoon drill sergeant for emphasis.

Hold the *ugh*. It's not a heavy enough three-letter word for this.

Nick passes his doorman and comes strolling toward the car.

Reese: Gotta go. TTYL.

Abby: LOL. Bye. I won't be expecting you tonight.

“Okay, looks like the dress is at a boutique on State street. Shall we?” he asks, his handsomeness ratcheted up to eleven with his eyebrow angled to kill.

“You realize I'm only doing this for money, right?” I whimper.

Nick gives me a smirk for the ages.

“If I thought you'd do it for free, I wouldn't have offered five figures.”

“You’re a dick,” I sputter.

Blah. Bad Reese.

He’s my boss and obviously I shouldn’t have said that but...

...but what in all that’s holy is he doing to me?

“Nah. I didn’t even have to bribe you with cotton candy this time,” he jokes, chuckling quietly as I flip him the middle finger.

It’s a quick ride from his place to State Street. I pull up in front of the door, expecting him to get out. When he doesn’t, I undo my seatbelt and turn around, looking him dead in the eye.

“What are you doing?” I hiss.

“Letting you pick up your dress. Why should I ruin the surprise?”

“Nope. Not going in alone. You’re coming in,” I say.

“I’m cool.” He clears his throat. “Reese, what if the dress needs alterations?”

“They do alterations here?” I say, turning to look over the fancy storefront. It looks like a full-service place, at least, with low lights and colorful dresses in the windows.

“Where do you shop?” he asks.

“Big box stores or online. That was always good enough.” *Until now*, I think but don’t say.

“This is a bit more eloquent, in case you didn’t notice.”

Oh, I noticed, smartass.

Even so, I shrug. “I’m sure you’ve never set foot in a big box store, but you shouldn’t knock it. It totally beats paying a hundred bucks for a t-shirt.”

“You’re impossible, lady. And I assure you I’ve bought shirts that run me eight hundred dollars if the style fits. It’s your turn to enjoy dressing to match your looks.” Smiling, he

shakes his head. “Now, please find a damn place to park, so we can pick up your dress.”



HERE WE GO. Straight down the mouth of a billionaire Twilight Zone.

What the *hell* did I agree to? The valet takes the Lincoln away, sweeping a low bow before he climbs in.

My hand trembles. My boss takes it in his.

“That dress brings out your eyes,” he says in this low smoldering growl.

For a second, with his confidence, I believe I look like I belong here.

Then I look down because I don’t even remember what color I’m wearing. Only that I’m covered in more sequins than a mermaid. This lonely dress costs more than every outfit I’ve ever owned.

Oh, look at that. It’s emerald teal-green. A shade dangerously closer to my “date’s” eyes than mine.

I still can’t believe I agreed to this.

Whatever happens next, remember, I’m just here for the cash.

Nick Brandt has a worse reputation than most of Hollywood. He has Instagram groupies reposting him daily as the ‘hottest bad boy bachelor in the Windy City.’

He doesn’t do relationships.

He hooks up and moves on—and more importantly—I work for him. I’m just pretending to be his flavor of the month.

He leans in and whispers, “When we go in, expect cameras everywhere. Osprey and his goons never fucking quit. Just try to ignore them. I wish it were socially acceptable to wear aviators to these damn things to block out the flashes.”

I don't say anything. I just stare, feeling my pulse pounding in my ears.

Yep, I'm terrified.

He must notice because he says, "You'll be fine. You're beautiful, you're tough, and you're hanging on my arm. Three things most women would die for."

Whoa.

He thinks I'm beautiful? Tough? Never mind the parting egomaniac shot.

It's that—him, whispering those words—that buoys me up the soaring white marble staircase and through the palace-like glassy doors.

We step into the building together. Cameras flash like heat lightning.

He's my boss, not my boyfriend. Breathe, I remind myself.

It's stupid, but as I blink the brightness out of my eyes, my instinct is to lean into him. I'm not sure what I'm expecting. Definitely not the way he winds his arms around me, catching me as I misstep and nearly stumble.

"You okay?" he whispers.

I nod briskly, my hair flying.

"You're sure?"

Another ambush of flashes attack my retinas before I can answer.

"I'm just...getting a little dizzy. Any chance we can get away from the cameras for a second?"

"Follow me." He leads me by the hand away from the paparazzi, deeper into a crowd of well-dressed people. He introduces me to what looks like an older couple as my eyes readjust to normal light. "Reese, this is Mr. and Mrs. Winthrop. They're a big deal in hotels and real estate."

"Nice to meet you," I say, mustering my best smile.

“Delighted. Who is this beauty?” Mr. Winthrop asks, giving Nick a weirdly assessing look.

“My date tonight, Reese Halle.”

“Nice to meet you, Miss Halle,” the Winthrops say in unison.

Yep, I’m getting *Titanic* vibes, except I feel like a female Jack. Dressed the part, but lacking all the social grace big money brings.

He introduces me to a few people who were friends with his dearly departed grandfather, and more folks who are still friends with Beatrice. I even meet the mayor.

This is bananas.

Growing up an orphan, I’ve only ever met people at school or work, and they sure as hell weren’t power elite. I keep waiting for someone to tap me on the shoulder and tell me I don’t belong here.

I’ve never worn a formal evening gown before.

Orphans don’t get prom dresses.

For a second, I wonder what it’s like to be a Brandt. Is it always this intense? This magical?

What it’s like having grandparents with friends who know half of Chicago? Hell, what’s it like even *having* grandparents?

Abby and I went through so many foster families, we didn’t really know any of them. We floated, the two of us, like feathers on the wind.

Luckily, we were kept together for the most part, but sometimes we were forced apart.

I was over the moon when she finally turned eighteen and they let her be my guardian. We didn’t have to worry about being separated anymore.

Ever since, we’ve been inseparable. Kind of comes with the territory when your big sister’s your only family.

Being separated from her—*completely alone*—was the scariest feeling I've ever had.

Something tells me Nick never had to deal with feeling unloved. Abandoned.

Sure, there was that drama with his parents accidentally killing off a popular movie star, and the scandal that plagued them. But being ripped away from your only family?

That's alien pain to a billionaire playboy's universe.

Speaking of green-eyed Lucifer, he places his hand on the small of my back and ushers me along to the next person he wants to introduce.

All things considered, he's being a perfect gentleman. Even if I catch his eyes lingering on my ass a couple times.

I smile at him. He's trying. Sincerely.

And I'm starting to enjoy the ride. It's a new experience that should mean something.

Back in foster care, the only dreams I ever had were being out on my own, taking care of myself. I didn't trust anyone except Abby—and even my brightest dreams couldn't have cooked up the bounty spread before us.

A refreshment table, covered with gourmet chocolate fountains, tiny pastries, and pristine melons cut into swans and blooming flowers. I move in for a closer look, trying not to rub my eyes, expecting to wake up.

Something bright flashes in my peripheral vision. Another camera?

Jesus. One of them got inside.

But when I blink and turn my head to find the flash, I stop cold.

Bossman stands beside me, phone in his hand, snapping pictures.

I raise an eyebrow. "What are you doing?"

“Capturing my knockout date in that fuck-hot dress for posterity,” he says, eyeing me over the top of the phone.

He’s so ridiculous. I giggle.

“Why bother?”

“Because she’s downright sinful tonight,” he whispers. “Plus, I’m fairly certain the next time she wears a dress this elegant, it won’t be for me. I’ll be in the corner after delivering a big wedding speech, jealous enough for ten lifetimes.”

Holy hell. *I can’t.*

I’m used to a lot of things from my boss, but when he’s sweet...that’s when he whacks me off guard and I’m just spinning.

Realistically, I doubt I’ll ever wear this kind of dress again. I won’t have a reason.

I’ve been on dates before, sure, but with guys who think bowling coupons and cheap beer are a rocking night out.

A strange, enchanted part of me wouldn’t want to wear it for anyone else. Blame it on the Cinderella aesthetic here.

Obviously, there’s no way I can tell him that.

He’s still my boss.

Before I can dwell on it, though, he slips his phone away, takes my hand, and leads me to the ballroom floor.

At first, I’m so awestruck by everything around me that I’m putty in his hands. The lights, the ginormous crystal chandeliers, the cascade of famous faces all around us...

I feel woozy.

Then the crowd parts for us, and I see it. He’s not doing what I think he is—right?

“Nick, what are you doing?”

“What does it look like? We’re dancing,” he says, pushing his fingers into mine.

I scan the room. Silk and satin flare, flowing around us in a sea of elegant turns and complicated steps. Everyone seems so

good at it, levitating like it's effortless.

"Nope. Not part of the deal. I don't dance. Not like this." The old-world jazz drifting through the air doesn't have an easy beat, either.

"You dance some other way?"

I flick my eyes to both sides, then whisper, "I can breakdance like nobody's business."

I don't know why I'm whispering. I'm a little proud of my talent.

"I've got to see that someday," he says, grinning and hooking an arm around my waist, pulling me to him without letting go of my hand clasped in his. "For now, we'll waltz."

My eyes go wide.

I'm sure I'm about to wind up a crooked pile of limbs on the floor.

"I don't—" I start, but the surprisingly rough hand squeezing mine cuts me off.

"Tonight, you just relax and follow me."

God, this night. It's too perfect, too unreal, and yet still very wrong.

This isn't me.

Somehow, I'm in the arms of Chicago's hottest billionaire bad boy. Only, he's no bad boy, no scandalicious ticket to tabloid-worthy misadventures.

He's morphed into Prince Charming. He's *too* well-behaved.

I'm scared.

"Hey, Nick?" I whisper.

"Yeah?" His warm minty scent tickles my nostrils, a rich cologne tinged with a hint of his sweat and heady testosterone.

"What's really going on?"

He looks down at me, his head tilted. “What do you mean? Last I checked, you lied about how much you suck at dancing, Reese. Everybody’s watching us and they love it.”

Not what I’m getting at.

I’m about to ask what I’m really here for tonight and why, because it’s obvious to me there’s more going on here.

This doesn’t add up, and it’s not my paranoia speaking.

Yes, I’m playing a part—his fake date.

I’m here, spinning in this beautiful ballroom, hanging on his arm. I’m not even freaking out as we fade into each other, as he entralls me a little more with every breath, or when people start aiming their phones at us for pictures.

But this isn’t what we’re here for. I’m guessing everyone in this room has an opinion of Nick Brandt, one way or another. We’re not here to impress them.

Who, then? What? Why?

Before I can ask, the lights go lower. The dancing turns infectious, and we’re surrounded by gently twisting bodies, happy couples glued to each other’s eyes and following his lead. *Our* lead.

A few of those couples wear their desire, their love, full of longing looks and knowing glances and wandering hands.

Oh, God.

Maybe it’s the atmosphere or maybe it’s his smell, but before I know what I’m doing, I’ve leaned my head on his chest. And then I’m just lost in the moment, his willing captive, too overwhelmed for words when his thick hand caresses my face.

His fingers dip under my chin, urging me up to a beautiful doom.

It’s in those eyes. They glow like soft green stars, intense and urgent, asking a silent question—or is it a demand?

What will you do, Miss Halle? I hear him saying in my head. *What will you do if I take that mouth right here? Right*

now?

My toes scrunch up in my shoes. Our movement slows, our eyes lock, our breaths turn heavy.

And when his gorgeous face sweeps down, so ready to devour me, I don't even have a prayer.

Our lips collide like they're opening a portal to another world, hot and wet and wild.

He tastes as good as he looks.

He deepens his kiss, drinking me in with a muffled groan.

He swipes his tongue in my mouth, chasing me, swinging between a litany of teases and filthy, claiming strokes.

The nip of teeth against my bottom lip makes me squeak—but holy flipping bossman, I don't care.

All the tension that's been choking us for months—all the magnetism since the day he truly met me as a woman at that office pizza party—boils up my throat and into my fingers.

I'm clinging to him, moaning, soaked and wanting and too stunned for words. He gives back a guttural noise that's too much like the sound I imagine he'd make inside me.

Insanity, it's nice to meet you—and that's a big fat problem.

I can't fathom what happens next. I don't want to. I just know one thing.

If this is my first and only chance to kiss Nicholas Brandt, I *will* make it count. I press my lips tighter to his, pulling another hot groan from him as his nip becomes a bite.

Ten dumbstruck seconds must go by before we tear ourselves away for air.

“Nick...” I whisper.

But before I can force out anything else—let alone my concerns—wet gold explodes in his face, barely missing mine. *Huh?*

Cold beads dribble down my bare arms as he wheels me around, the entire universe grinding to a stop.

Holy crap.

I step back.

There's a faint tingling sound followed by shrill glass crashing against the marble floor, fierce and deliberate. My eyes pinch shut as I jump at the noise.

The room goes funeral silent.

The live band drones on, but you could hear a mouse skittering across the floor.

I'm not sure I want to know what that mystery liquid is, but it smells...boozy?

"Nick? Are you okay?" I force out, opening my eyes.

"I'm fine." His voice is tight, clipped.

A series of bright flashes stun my eyes. A murmur rolls through the crowd. I stumble back, blinking.

Once I've opened my eyes again and readjusted to the light, I realize we're in a circle.

Dead center.

Nobody's dancing now. The room has stopped. Lifeless.

They've formed a peanut gallery around us, and I'm part of the show.

Correction: make that total *shit show*.

One look at the blonde in her skintight red dress, perched between Nick and me like she'll claw both our throats out, tells me that.

"Sorry, sweetie," she croons, shoving a flat hand against my shoulder and rocking me back with the grace of an angry rhino. "But do you mind giving us some space?"

Almost two decades of abusive, short-tempered fake families whip through my head.

When you're an orphan, you know what it's like to be pushed.

A few times, it was the parents throwing us around. Sometimes it was other foster kids. Usually, it was both.

I've never had it easy and I'm used to defending myself. Even if I'm in a room full of stunned rich people, taking abuse isn't what I do.

My hand closes around the petite, bright-red fingers hovering above my shoulder. I'm about to power slam this bitch to the floor when I remember where I am at the very last second.

I let go, reluctantly, with a parting scratch of my nails on her wrist.

"Of course," I snap. "Have at it."

"Reese, no. You don't need to..." Nick trails off, lost for words, his face set like an angry god.

I'm so flipping lost.

I meet his gaze, then trace my eyes back to the tall, beautiful blond warrior-girl. What happens takes a fraction of a second.

There's a resounding *smack* like lightning snapping off a branch.

She slaps Nick so hard his face turns.

Half of his face comes back scarlet-red when he twists his neck.

"Shit, that hurt..." Blond Death moves her hand away, shaking it out.

"What the hell?" I whisper to myself, though I already have a terrible inkling what this is all about.

Nick Brandt is no angel.

I'm sure there's a broken heart or ten behind that hellfire blow—and it's a story I'm not sure I want to know—especially not after he just kissed my soul from my body.

She ignores me as I stagger back, giving them more space, but I hover in earshot.

“Did you bring that little bimbo here to humiliate me, Nicholas?” she hisses.

“I didn’t know anything could ever humiliate you, Carmen,” he says, shoving his hands into the pockets of his pants, aloof and ice-cold.

I’ve never seen him this pissed off, this ready to dismember someone.

I get it. I don’t belong here—certainly not in the middle of this dog fight—but it’s a little hard to ignore the *bimbo* jab.

Before I can step in and defend myself, Nick stabs a finger at her.

“Knock it off. She’s no skank and we broke up a long time ago. People move on. Why can’t you? The only thing humiliating tonight is how you’re acting,” he snarls.

Oh, crapballs.

I recognize her now. She’s even more otherworldly in person, without all the layers of makeup and digital filters.

Carmen Seraphina.

She starred in like a dozen slapstick teen cheerleader movies when I was a kid, before moving into more serious roles. She’s been all over numerous gossip blogs, usually linked to Nick.

She’s the one they call Brandt’s Dream Lover.

Seductress. Scandal. Sex cupcake. His destiny.

Oh, crud.

Hot tears sting my eyes, but I won’t cry. Not here.

It doesn’t even make sense. It was pretend for one night, one measly chance to get my feelings hurt for no good reason.

Too bad I understand why I’m here now, and it hurts.

I’m bait.

To make Nick's "girlfriend" or Dream Lover or whatever-the-hell-she-is jealous.

But why would Carmen Seraphina—the woman who has it all, including millions of followers who worship her and her own fashion line—be jealous of a short stack brunette driver with no past and a bland future?

If he thought it would work, not only is he a jackass, but he's stupid.

Then again...she's closing the distance between them, isn't she?

And when she slaps him again on his other cheek, and the whole room gasps, there's no denying the murderous jealousy blazing in her eyes.

"Come on, you prick. The same old song and dance? Again?" She turns her nose up in disgust. "We always break up, and we always get back together. We belong together, Nick. You know that. One of these days, you're going to stop playing your stupid games and accept it. We're going to live in West Hollywood with a big family, big smiles, no big assholes chasing us, and...and happily ever after."

Nick looks like he could knock down a redwood with his bare hands. His face twists like a grimace when he opens his mouth.

"You're drunk, Carmen," he growls in a tone that's barely human. "Go home."

"I am not! Fuck you! You just don't want to admit you're playing me. Who is this whore, anyhow? You know she'll be everywhere tomorrow, so you'd might as well tell me. I'd rather hear it from you," she screams, jabbing a finger at his chest.

I'm going to vomit.

I blink again, surveying the room, looking for an exit.

When I find one, I start shrinking into the crowd, taking lunging steps as they part for me. I'm not going to keep it together much longer.

Then a strong, warm hand surrounds mine, pulling me with practiced control. If only it weren't attached to a man who'll never be comforting again.

I look up to see Nick has moved around her, caught up to me, and has my hand.

He leads me away, shepherding me like a secret service agent guarding the First Lady.

"Sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. She's a tornado. Destructive and dramatic. Let's get the hell out of here. I don't want you dragged into this," he whispers.

I bite my tongue—hard—and wait until we're out of the crowded room to respond.

"Not to be a smartass, but it's way late for that. I'm smack-dab in the middle of...I don't even know." I throw my head back and look at the black sky.

The stars that were coming out earlier are drowned now by dense Lake Michigan clouds.

I should've known this would happen.

This is Nick Brandt. A tactical drama bomb. Tonight must be par for the course with a man who lives to make headlines, whether or not he's trying.

I was stupid to ever agree to this.

"I knew there was something wrong with this. I shouldn't have come," I say, my voice a broken whisper.

The cool night stings my bare arms, my cleavage. I've never felt more naked, more vulnerable.

Hugging my shoulders, I avert my eyes.

I wish he'd just disappear. Fuck off. But of course he does the opposite.

The towering idiot takes off his blazer and drapes it around me.

God.

I want to hurl it back in his face. I want him to know I need nothing from him. But it's too stinking cold to care about making a point, or even a well-deserved grand gesture.

"This was a m-m-mistake," I whisper through chattering teeth.

"Why?" I hate how he sounds genuinely confused.

Where do I begin?

Because orphans don't go to billionaire's balls, and drivers don't fake-date big shot bosses. They definitely don't hold up well when screaming rich ex-girlfriends come in swinging. There'll probably be a price on my head before sunrise.

"Y-you know why." Stupid teeth. Stupid chattering.

Stupid man.

Nick waves the valet over. "Get the Brandt town car. *Now.*"

He pulls me closer and wraps his arm around me to keep me warm. If I weren't paralyzed, I'd stop him.

I want to slap him—at least as hard as Carmen did—but damn him, I need the warmth.

The valet fetches the car in record time. At least one thing goes right.

I get in the driver's seat without another word. Nick slides in the front with me, and I do a double take.

"Oh, no. You, back, now." I stab a finger at him through the air with every word.

"Reese, hear me out—"

"I don't want to! Not tonight. Just...be honest with me. Was I here to make your ex jealous? Is that why you kissed me?" I'm shaking, clenching the wheel so hard my knuckles ache.

He lets out a slow, brutal sigh.

"No. Of course not. I don't give a shit about her anymore," he says, raking a hand through his hair. Then he adds, more

quietly, “I’ll admit I did want a date so there’d be no mistaking the fact that it’s over between us. She won’t accept the brush-off, so what’s the harm in twisting the knife?”

“What’s the harm?” I cluck my tongue, breathing pure fire through my nostrils. “So that’s a yes, and I...I cannot *believe* you pulled this shit.”

Long pause.

“It’s not the same thing, Reese,” he says miserably. “I wanted a date so she’d know I wasn’t here for her. I wanted to be there with *you*—”

“Save it. Please? I don’t want to hear about it and I just want to go home.” I let out a groan. “Hell! If I’d known this was your plan, I would’ve asked for twenty thousand.”

“It’s yours,” he says.

Yeah.

This is not going well.

He’s missing the whole point. I’m not sure the words exist to make it with this self-absorbed ass of a boss, a date, a human being.

Ironic laughter bursts out of me until I gag. “That doesn’t make it better...”

He’s quiet for a minute. “How angry are you? Scale of one to ten?”

“Ninety!” I spit back, pulling out of the cursed lot and trying to focus on the road ahead. “I hate you. You’re the most disgusting, selfish person I’ve ever met, and I grew up in a horrible foster system full of crazies, so—”

“Reese—” he starts.

I’m not done.

“Let me finish,” I snap. “I still need this job. I *really* need this job. My sister always spends more than she makes, and I help take care of my niece. I’m finally able to do that comfortably with this salary for the first time since...well, ever. So, I’m hoping if I never mention how much I hate you

again, and you never mention this godawful joke of a date again, I can keep working. I mean, I'll try, assuming whatever bombs are about to be lobbed into my life from whoever blabs about that scene. Fair enough?"

"Reese...let me explain," he says, his voice raw, pleading.

"Just answer my question. I don't want explanations, *boss*." The last word comes out like a curse. "Will you promise not to mention this ever again, or do I need to send your grandma my resignation tonight?"

He straightens, squaring his shoulders, looking at me quietly like I punched him in the face. It's what he deserves.

"You'd rather quit your job than let me apologize?" he asks.

I sigh, my eyes fluttering shut a second too long. "Yes. Yes, you jackass. I swear to God, if you make me, I'll work *two* full-time jobs to make the same money. I'll drive sixteen-hour days, up and down this continent, just so I don't have to listen to one more word of your—your bullshit. *Yes*."

He turns, staring out the passenger window, this creeping darkness shadowing his face.

So, if I'm about to get fired, at least I'll go out in style.

"I won't mention it again," he says firmly. "You have my word."

I nod weakly, clearing my throat to say, "One more thing."

"Another demand?" He smirks, but this time it's not playful.

It's frustrated and cruel and makes me feel so small I almost pitch him out on the side of the highway.

"Don't talk to me like that. I could just disappear and give those stupid reporters my side of the story. I bet that Osprey guy would chew it right up." I regret the threat as soon as it's out of my mouth, but it works.

I think.

His eyes grow sadder, more defeated. “Are you going to do that to me? Throw me to those rumor-spinning chucklefucks?”

“Probably not, but just...stop requesting unnecessary rides. I don’t want to see you unless it’s absolutely necessary for a meeting or whatever,” I say. “I’ll do my job. You’ll do yours. Nothing more.”

“I don’t request rides I don’t need,” he throws back, glaring.

Then his shoulders fall, and he sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose.

I don’t have the heart to argue my point.

When I finally pull up in front of his palatial building, I’ve never been so happy to see the ornate, brightly lit door.

He opens the passenger door. “Good night, Reese—”

“*Miss Halle,*” I say sharply.

“Good night, Miss Halle. I’m sorry for—for everything.”

“Whatever. You’re not supposed to mention it again,” I remind him.

There he goes.

The biggest Prince Charming mirage of my life.

As soon as his door closes like a vault slamming shut, I punch my foot on the gas and stab the car into the night.

THINGS CHANGE (NICK)



Six Months Later

Words of wisdom from the *Philosophy of Nick Brandt* I swear I'll write someday: change is the only constant, and it is an ass kicker.

I slurp my coffee. Today's the big day. The stress couldn't be higher.

I'm having a goddamned baby, and the entire family's gathered round to see it.

We're launching the brand-new interior design spin-off, Brandt Dreams, and I'll be running it. I'm meeting my new team later today.

Speaking of change...one look around tells me how many asses it's booted lately.

My own brother has changed so much since becoming a married man. It doesn't matter that it started out as a sham marriage to Paige Holly, our once-assistant, to win us the biggest deal of our lives with the Winthrope hotel line.

My idea, thank you very much, even if Ward and Paige both acted like they wanted to throw something at my head when they first heard it.

Then there was Grandma's heart issue, forcing her into retirement.

Mettles were tested. Pants lit on fire. Ward finally grew up in the space of a few frantic months, and so did I.

It's miraculous everything worked out in the end.

Grandma's last design found a place on the Chicago skyline fit for her legacy, Ward got married, Paige found happiness, and we all got a massive payday.

We've technically been running Brandt Ideas together as co-CEO Senior Partners ever since, but Ward took the initiative. Moving over to Brandt Dreams feels like a relief, a chance to prove I can handle as much as my brother.

At the same time, Brandt Ideas will always be home. I grew up here. My family lives here. Alongside so many memories, good and bad, they make my necktie feel too tight.

I sigh as the shiny black town car pulls up to the curb.

Remember what I said about change?

With Reese Halle, it's been a ten-legged man at an ass-kicking contest ever since the day I put her heart through a woodchipper.

"How are you today?" I venture as I slide in and look at the back of my chauffeur's head.

"Fine. And you, Mr. Brandt?" she says in the same short, professional, and utterly lifeless manner I've come to expect.

Fuck me.

It never ends.

Every time I see her, I remember how I screwed everything to hell.

It's been six months.

Six months getting rides from a driver who'd love to fling me out into rush-hour traffic.

Six months crushed by guilt.

Six months remembering that night, when she looked at me too beautifully, when she tasted too right, when I had a chance to *inhale her*.

Six months living like a monk—a playboy without play—jerking off and coming in my hand every night to a woman who hates my guts.

You'd think she'd get over it, but she has no plans to. She meant it when she whispered those three stabbing words.

I hate you.

Every time I see her, I think of the way she looked at me, like I wasn't worthy of polishing her shoes. Much less signing her paychecks, the newly appointed king of high dickishness until the universe shrivels up.

I know. I fucking *know* I deserved it. That's the worst part.

I don't know why I try the words burning at the tip of my tongue. Chalk it up to monthly torture, I guess.

"If I'd known things would turn out the way they did," I say quietly, "I never would've taken you that night, Miss Halle."

"And if I knew you'd keep bringing it up, I'd have resigned the next morning. Where to?"

"The Brandt Dreams office," I say miserably.

"Yes, sir."

Sir. Fuck. Every time she calls me that, it guts me from the neck down.

My finger hovers over the button to raise the privacy screen. But it's been six months.

Six months of special agony.

We have to get back to normal sometime, don't we?

Lifting my finger off the button, I search for an opening to make conversation with the snapping turtle at the steering wheel.

My eyes flick to the passenger seat. Excitement flicks through me when I spot the huge pink teddy bear riding shotgun beside her.

"Big date tonight?" I ask slowly.

Her eyes snap to the rearview mirror, pale-blue witchfire tuned to hate. “None of your business, but no.”

I hold my hand up.

“I meant with your niece. The bear’s for her, right? Don’t be so defensive.”

Reese relaxes and actually smiles, temporarily somewhere else.

“Millie’s on a unicorn kick right now. We’re going to read *The Nuff* and make unicorn macaroni. I probably should’ve found a unicorn instead of a bear, but no luck. This thing is bigger than Millie, and it’s her favorite color, so I hope she likes it. She’ll be such a cutie, dragging it around.”

When she talks about her niece, it’s hard to imagine a tough bone in her body—or a switchblade waiting for my neck.

“Careful. You’re not so bad when you let your guard down, Reese,” I say.

“I believe you mean Miss Halle.” She raises the privacy screen.

Shit. Tough crowd.

I’m used to this, though.

Life as Nick Brandt means if you fuck up once, it’s seared into the fabric of history forever. The internet means people never forget.

Reese nearly got caught up in the whirlwind Carmen spun, along with me, and she’s not used to that.

She told me a few weeks after the hell-night that the real reason she hadn’t resigned was because she thought it would be too hard to find another job with a Google reputation assembled by Roland Osprey—*if* Osprey and his minions had successfully nailed her identity.

They didn’t.

He’s a motherfucker regardless.

I could march into his office this second and punch him in his lying face. It might even be worth getting locked up for assault.

Still, I don't blame her for being pissed. But it's been six frigging months.

How long can a firestarter like her carry a grudge?

When Ward was afraid to commit to Paige, I thought he was just being a little worm. I realize now it's the Brandt curse.

Mistakes come easy to us. Fixing them when your entire life's entertainment fodder, that's harder. He's lucky Paige handled it as well as she did.

I pull out my phone and start flipping through emails. The privacy screen is up, and she can't see me. I wipe the worried look off my own reflection.

I'm not taking any chances with her finding me stewing in the back seat because she won't talk to me.

She pulls up to the office without ever lowering the screen, thankfully.

My mind should be anywhere but Reese as I head inside to launch a brand-new company. But you already know it's not.

Damn.

I think I'd give up all the Brandt Dreams if this porcupine of a woman would just give me a chance to make it right.



THE MEETING GOES WELL.

My team has appointments galore with businesses and wealthy Chicago families to discuss interior design opportunities. I have no doubt we'll be poaching clients left and right soon.

A business becomes legit when it becomes profitable. That's when everyone feels accomplished, and nothing

motivates people like success.

This is my bittersweet project. I don't need Ward or even Grandma paving my way. I just wish I had a few crumbs of Ward's newfound confidence in the future.

My phone pings as we're wrapping up.

I open the new text message and instantly scowl.

Still taking your vow of silence, Mr. Brandt? If you'd ever like to comment on your...ahem, dirty little video, you know where to find me.

Human scum.

No matter how many times I tell him to fuck off, Roland Osprey never leaves me alone. He's a scandal-chasing wolf with a taste for blood, and mine must be a favorite by now.

Unfortunately, I know how relentless he is. I also know exactly what video he means.

This is why I don't share Ward's confidence. He never fucked up enough to render his life beyond repair.

I have.

What I do today doesn't matter, because everything I've done—every juvenile, drunken slip—will be carved in stone on glowing screens until I die.

There's no redeeming me, even when I haven't gotten properly sloshed in...has it really been almost nine months?

I wish it mattered. If I'd kicked my affair with the bottle sooner, I wouldn't have a dragon breathing down my throat.

Why the fuck did I make a sex tape with a woman I can't stand?

Better question, how the hell does Osprey know about it?

Carmen must've slipped and tipped him off somewhere. It's the only explanation.

Muttering to myself, I pull up the message again and start punching a response. ***I've told you to lose my number. I'm reporting you for cyber-stalking.***

My phone pings almost instantly. I swallow a groan.

I'm trying to help you out by giving you a chance to respond, Mr. Brandt. I'm a fair man and The Chicago Tea is a fairer publication than anything else you'll find in this industry.

Liar. I wish I could snarl through the screen as I text back, *Like hell you are. You're bluffing. If you had the video, you would've already published it.*

Gritting my teeth, I hope I'm not wrong, because it'll be a world of hurt for everything Brandt if I am.

My phone pings again.

Roland: Perhaps. But you don't know that for a fact, do you? For your sake, I hope you've made a lucky guess. Also, Miss Seraphina remains so moonstruck over you I'm not sure why you ever let her go.

Nick: She loves publicity, you dolt. Do a few vanity pieces and she'll be eating out of your hand like a trained pigeon. Hell, she'll probably date you.

Roland: I have better sense. I don't mix business with pleasure, no matter how magnificent you've said Miss Seraphina's ass is in past public statements.

Jesus, he doesn't fight fair. And I can't believe I ever lusted after her, let alone so openly.

Carmen's ass is everywhere, I fling back. You could've heard that anywhere.

Roland: I heard it from the donkey's mouth—yours.

Nick: Dickhead. Fuck off.

Roland: As soon as you give me a statement for the court of public opinion, I will.

Nick: I'm not giving you a damn quote. Why don't you use this as an opportunity to break into real news?

Roland: Easy answer—I make too much money talking about you.

If this idiot were here and not just words on a screen, I'd break his nose.

Happy to be of service, I send back, ready to end this.

Roland: Okay. Since you won't give me a statement, I'll just use Miss Seraphina's. She's open to constructive talks.

I hope like hell he's bluffing. Carmen hates this prick almost as much as I do. As much as any public persona with something to lose does.

I won't play ball.

Besides shooting myself in the face, it's just another reason for her to ambush me with thrown champagne and a blistering slap to my face. Surely, she's had enough run-ins with bloggers, influencers, and the media to know not to say anything.

Leave her alone, too, I send, clenching my jaw.

Roland: One last question. Who was that darling little date with you the night Carmen lost her cool? No one could ever tag her properly.

Fuck. No wonder Reese is still pissed.

She's probably still trending on Instagram as her hashtag-alias—*Miss Literally Who*.

Leave her out of this. If The Chicago Tea ever mentions her name, I promise you I'll send every attorney in this city who's worth anything charging up your ass.

I slam the phone facedown just as it pings. I hate how quickly I look at the screen, my blood like lava.

Oh, Nicholas. I've always loved your empty threats. Besides being the dumb one, you're also the hothead. Grandma Brandt would not be proud.

He just had to go there, huh?

I could dismember him.

I just hope to God there are no other copies of that video floating around.

Of course, if Carmen would just move the hell on, the story would die. In a fair world, the night she tore into me and ruined any chance I ever had with Reese should've been the end of it.

But if Change is an ass kicker, then Karma is a screaming bitch.

Internet memes die hard when you're a Brandt who's still single, so...this ordeal never ends.

I need a fucking drink.

A car honks, just outside the thick glass doors in the lobby. I jump and drop my phone.

By the time I pick it up, I realize Reese is waiting.



SHE LEAVES the privacy screen down, but I don't prod her this time.

The hate-texts with Roland Birdshit make it obvious why she's still pissed all these months later.

She's right to be.

I'm not even sure anger is the right word. Playing with me left burn marks. Scars.

And why should a woman like her ever care to play with fire?

"Mr. Brandt, I have to stop at the gas station. I'm sorry."

Her voice catches my attention, and I meet her eyes. Her jaw looks clenched. Her face is tight and a deep line furrows in the center of her forehead.

"Of course, but...are you okay?" I frown.

"I'm fine." The words are clipped and rushed. Not just her usual anger.

"You're certain?"

“We just...we need gas,” she sputters, stabbing a finger at her phone attached to its holder on the dash.

It pings and vibrates nonstop. We’re in four lanes of traffic.

She pulls the Lincoln across three lanes without ever checking the mirror, darting into a dilapidated gas station and stopping next to a pump.

What the hell? Also, I could’ve sworn the tank was on the other side, but I’m not in the car for fill-ups often, so maybe I’m wrong.

The driver door opens and she leaps out. The car beeps because the keys are still in the ignition.

“This is Reese Halle!” she yells.

I lean up and glance out of the open door.

She’s on the phone. Frantic. Caller unknown.

I relax back into the seat and turn to stare out the window, giving her some privacy. I appreciate the fact that she pulled over to take a call that’s clearly killing her.

I just wish I knew why.

“Yes,” she says. “Are you sure?” She’s quiet for a minute. “What about Millie?” She pauses. “Her...her daughter.” That’s followed by a soft, sad, “Oh. Okay.”

A pale Reese falls back into the driver’s seat and slumps over the steering wheel, hitting the horn. The car screams across the parking lot. Someone gets out of a car across from us and flips us the bird, gesturing angrily at their ears.

Reese realizes she’s on the horn after ten long seconds and backs off.

What the fuck gives?

I’ve never seen her this pale, this miserable, not since that night..and other than easing off the horn, she’s still not moving.

“Miss Halle, what’s wrong? Are you hurt?” I grip the back of her seat, shaking it slightly for emphasis.

She doesn't move. She doesn't answer.

"Reese!"

Still no response. She takes a breath so deep her shoulders move up and slouch down when she exhales, then she does it again.

I've seen enough.

Jumping out of the back seat, I round to the driver's door and kneel beside her. "Reese, what's wrong? Tell me," I say gently.

Her breaths come in hard, labored waves, but she still doesn't answer me.

I've seen this before, a decade ago submerged in a nuclear sub in arctic waters, collecting intel on the Russians. There's no mistaking a panic attack.

"Keep breathing," I whisper, rubbing her back. "Deep breaths. You're doing great."

Her shoulders rise as she inhales, her blue eyes lashing toward me. Our gazes connect.

"Can you hold it for me? Hold it and count to ten this time..."

She doesn't nod, but she doesn't let out a ragged exhale immediately. I'll take that as a win.

"One, two, three, four," I count for her. "Five, six, seven."

She exhales before I get to ten.

"Good." I put my hand on her arms with the same caution you use to pick up an injured animal. I'm not her favorite person, I know, but right now I'm her only person in the middle of...this.

"I'm just going to slide you into the passenger seat so I can move the car. Understood? Just so we're not blocking the pump."

I pick her up, half expecting her to fight. Instead, she winds her arms around my neck and lays the side of her face

flat against my chest.

Fuck. Whatever's going on, it's left her in shambles.

I carry her around the car, place her in the passenger seat, and buckle her seatbelt.

Back at the driver's side, I check the gas meter. We've got a quarter of a tank.

We're okay on gas although we never refilled. I move the car into a parking place, stop, and turn around to look at her.

"When you're ready...will you tell me what's wrong?" I whisper.

She's slumped over in the passenger seat, nearly comatose.

"Where can I take you? Can you at least tell me that? Is there someone I can call for help? Do you need a hospital?" I keep my voice even, but inside, I'm worried as hell.

Grabbing her wrist, I press two fingers against her soft skin.

Her pulse feels strong, steady. Her breathing slows after another minute.

"I think you're okay physically. Who called you?" I ask.

She mumbles something I don't understand.

"Come again?"

She doesn't.

The moronic conversation I had with Roland Osprey before she picked me up rips through my head. He asked who my 'darling little date' was with me the night Carmen flipped her shit.

I told him to leave her the hell out of it.

"Reese, who called you?" I demand. Because if Osprey did this, he's a dead man walking.

"Chicago PD. The...the police," she says weakly.

Not what I expected.

Roland probably gets to live—for today—but now we're getting somewhere.

“The cops? Why?” Then it hits me. Shit. I remember she mentioned her niece on the phone. “Is Millie okay?”

“No. I...I have to find her.” She turns her head and blinks at me.

“You have to find Millie?” I repeat. “I don't follow...is she missing?”

Reese just shakes her head, her blue eyes disappearing as she pinches them shut.

“Where would we look for her?” I ask, trying to play along, to figure out what's destroying her.

“Mrs. Gamlin's place.”

“Mrs. Gamlin?”

“The neighbor lady at Abby's apartment. She watches her when Abby's...when she's gone.” She sits up straighter, coughing into her hand.

Good. We're getting somewhere, and I hope that cough means she's coming out of it.

“Do you have an address?”

“The Spanish Oaks apartments on East Devon,” she tells me.

I punch the place into my Maps app and pull out of the gas station. When we're on the road, I look at her and decide to try going direct.

“Reese, is your sister okay?”

“No. Maybe. I don't know. I...I don't understand it. I'm not sure why she'd ever do this. It doesn't make any effing sense.” She sighs, turning and pressing her red face against the glass. “At least Millie wasn't with her. Can you turn the air conditioner on, please? I need air.”

I crank the AC up so high I feel like a penguin. “I'm worried you're having an anxiety attack. Has this ever

happened before?”

“I don’t know. Don’t remember. Maybe when Abby and I were separated, back when we were kids. I can’t believe this. Why would she do it? *Why?*” That last word is almost a broken scream distilled into one word.

“You said a cop called. What did he say about your sister?” I ask.

She nods limply.

“She got arrested, Nick. Drug sniffing dogs, a SWAT unit, everything. They found enough cocaine in her car to get a group of elephants high and—get this. It was hidden under Millie’s car seat. Who does that?” She’s quiet for a minute. “She’s been clean for years, especially since she became a mom.”

I’m quiet, listening, unsure what the fuck to make of this. I just nod, urging her to go on.

“She’s a good mother. She’d never—the car seat of all places—I don’t understand. I was supposed to see them tonight for mac and cheese supper. Millie’s favorite.”

“We’ll get Millie her mac and cheese and her unicorns. I promise you that,” I growl.

I follow the GPS instructions because Reese is too out of it to help.

Five minutes pass in dreary silence, until Reese screams, “Shit!”

“What’s wrong?”

“I need to talk to Abby. Right now. I have to figure out what happened, and she’s going to need an attorney. I should probably call Millie’s worthless sperm donor, but if I do that, he’ll use this against Abby. He’s been pecking at more custody rights for years. He doesn’t really care about Millie.”

“Sperm donor? Last I checked, that’s not usually part of visitation rights...”

She smiles. “Abby and I just call him that. A better word is deadbeat.”

“Looks like the shock wore off,” I say to myself. I could damn near drop to my knees in seeing her smile, however faint.

“Hmm?” she asks.

“Never mind.” I shake my head. “Do you have his info?”

“No. His name’s Will Frisk. That’s about all I know. I never liked him much when they were together. Abby was obviously distressed when he took off because he left her with a newborn, but honestly...I thought it was for the best. Either he left and took his drama with him, or he stuck around and she had to support all three of them. She got the better end of that deal. And when he ghosted, he also took the drugs he was always trying to peddle...which is why I don’t get it. He was a horrible influence. She’d never get mixed up with him again.”

“As long as you have the kid, there’s less damage he can do. I’ve been through my share of custody issues,” I say bitterly.

She looks at me, her mouth hanging open. “You have a kid?”

“Nah, I *had* parents. Reese, what nineties kid who grows up under rich narcissists doesn’t know about custody battles? I’m lucky as hell my grandparents were around for Ward and me. They raised us more than the two selfish boneheads we called mom and dad.”

She’s quiet for a moment.

“Wow. I thought billionaire bad boys had perfect lives,” she muses.

I smile. “You need to stalk the tabloids more.”

“I’m just mad. So *mad* at my sister. If Millie was with her, she’d be with CPS right now. That’s what the cop told me. Because they don’t know where she is or who’s picking her up...” She lifts her phone and starts scrolling, a nervous simmer in her eyes.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Looking for an attorney. I have to help Abby. I’m probably going to need one myself for any legal issues with custody...”

“Put the phone down. I’ll make some calls once we’ve got Millie squared away. I’ve got an excellent attorney on retainer. One I trust. Even if he’s not that versed in criminal law or family issues, he’ll know how to find others who are. No point in you hiring a JD off the street. You’re holding up well and that’s what you need to keep doing. If Ward was in jail, I’d be a mess and you’d better believe Grandma would handle it.”

“Granny Bea could handle anything.” She gives a tired laugh. “I’m pretty sure I’m not holding it together at all. I mean, my boss is driving me and it took me twenty damn minutes to tell you what happened.”

“You were in shock. That’s normal. Then you pulled your shit together enough to know what’s important. Trust me, we’ve got this.” I thump my chest.

She gives me a deer-in-the-headlights look I probably deserve.

“...it’s not your problem. Or the company’s. It’s totally mine, Nick, and it’s definitely not appropriate to pull my boss into it. You know what happens when lines get crossed. Nothing—”

“Good?” I finish for her. “This is me doing good. Because it’s damn inappropriate to let someone you see every day suffer when you’ve got the power to step in.” I pause, trying like hell not to make this worse. “Listen, tonight I’m not your idiot boss who makes you spit hornets. I’m your friend—if you’ll let me be. You’re right to be scared when it’s easier to think I’m a jackass.”

“Well, you are,” she throws back, a familiar razor-edge in her voice.

My lips twist in grim recognition. Fair, I suppose, when I’m barging into her life like this. But what the fuck choice do I have?

I let it go.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to tell Millie?” I ask a little while later.

She turns her head up, this exhausted look in her eyes.

“It’s stupid, but I’m hoping she won’t ask. Not right away, I mean. Then I’ll just tell her something came up with Abby and we’re having a fun sleepover. Can’t I leave it at that until tomorrow?” She looks at me like I have all the answers, biting her lip.

It hurts.

It cuts me to the bone, knowing she’s that fragile right now, and I’m the only thing holding her together after my dumbass tried so hard to pull her apart.

“Do you and the kid have sleepovers often?” My lips turn up at the thought of Miss Frosty having a sleepover with a bouncy kidlet.

“Not often, but we do sometimes. Usually if Abby has a date or goes out of town to visit friends,” she tells me.

“You’re a good aunt.”

“I have to be.” She shrugs. “Abby and Millie are my only family. We have to be tight.”

“I get that. Ward and Grandma are my only family, too.”

“And Paige.”

“Oh, yeah, there’s nothing like a new sister-in-law to mix things up,” I say with a snort. “Sometimes she’s on my side, busting Ward’s balls. Other times, they’re stomping on mine. Husband-wife team.”

That gets a giggle, which makes me feel like I’ve accomplished something tonight.

“I thought your parents were still living, too?” she asks quietly. “After all the crazy stuff and bad things they did...are you really cutting them out forever?”

“We don’t talk.” I leave it at that, and it’s nice to be able to say that and trust it won’t go any further.

Reese gets it.

I just hate that I’m finally not the person with the most fucked up family in the room, for once. As it stands, the battered dove next to me needs a break. Not Brandt-level heartbreak.

Tonight, I’ll do my damndest to make sure her family stays whole.

NICK THE PRICK (REESE)



My colossal prick of a boss is driving me to my sister's beat-up apartment, and I'm letting him.

Wait, scratch that.

My pure *fire* billionaire boss is driving me to my sister's beat-up apartment, and I'm secretly impressed that he wants to help.

Oh, I'm aware how stupid that is. Nothing about this promises a happy ending.

We're heading for a wall of rock-solid drama and I don't even know when to brace for impact.

Still, I'm lucky he was here, because back at the gas station...I'm not sure I could have driven myself anywhere. And for Millie's sake, I don't have time to waste getting my crap together.

"I have to get that attorney," I mutter for the tenth time tonight.

"We'll take care of it," Nick insists, his green eyes twinkling with promise.

When did he get so patient? He doesn't even point out we've already had this conversation.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" I whisper, speaking my doubts out loud.

"She'll be fine with her favorite aunt."

“I’m her only aunt,” I point out. “And how can you be so sure?”

“I’m a Brandt. I’d like to think I inherited Grandma’s gut instinct. If she’s not smiling by the end of the night with you, I’ll make it happen.” He flashes that smile, that defiant gaze that says he might give my niece her own petting zoo to make good on his promise.

Okay, so he’s patient, but still cocky as hell.

I don’t know why I believe him when he tells me he’ll make sure Abby comes out of this unscathed. Pretty absurd, considering he’s never met her, but that’s how desperate I am.

The bossman finally pulls into the old orange-and-white brick building.

“Where’s her unit?”

“All the way down and to the left.”

He gets us as close to Abby’s unit as he can and stops the car.

I’m still in the seat after he’s stepped out. My chest feels ten pounds heavier. I’m struggling to breathe again.

I try not to make a show of forcing air in through my nose.

No luck. Those green hawk eyes of his are all-seeing, and he leans down so we’re eye level.

“You were calm. What happened?”

“What if she’s not here? What if today’s the one day Abby used a different babysitter and I don’t know who?” Silly, I know. But everything’s gone wrong today and I have this terrible feeling the universe isn’t done short-circuiting.

“You’re worried about Millie. That’s understandable. You’ve had a hard day—a hell of a time—but if Abby usually has her neighbor babysit, that’s where we’ll start. If she didn’t, whatever. We’ll find your munchkin.”

God.

It was so easy to accept his promise that Abby would be okay, but it's harder to believe even a Brandt could miraculously find a missing four-year-old at the snap of his fingers.

My fist tightens. I take another deep breath full of needles.

The driver's door closes. I look up in surprise, wondering if he's given up on me and my crying act.

A few seconds later, my door opens. Nick takes my hand.

"Come on, Miss Halle. I don't know this Gamlin lady, and the kid won't come to me. You can do this."

"But what if—"

"I'll hire a private investigator. You're not going home without your niece tonight. Do you trust me?" he growls in question, that haunted, steely look I know too well hardening on his face.

Sighing, I twine my fingers around his and let him help me out of the car. He shuts the door behind me.

"Sweetheart—"

"What?" I cut him off before he gets any farther.

Jesus. Sweetheart? Was that a term of endearment or pity?

Why do I care?

I don't have time to ponder the insane intricacies of a complicated relationship with a man I'm still supposed to hate. I need to find Millie.

"You need to tell me where to go," he finishes. Talk about anti-climactic.

"Abby's place is number two twenty-nine." I point to my sister's apartment. "We just need to go up to the third floor. Mrs. Gamlin lives right above her."

He nods, leading the way. Our hands are still locked together.

That's probably for the best because I'm not sure I'd have the strength or wits to move on my own. My chest hurts. It's

hard to walk.

He drops my hand and we stop.

Dread becomes me.

Shit. Maybe he's realized this isn't his problem. I look up at him helplessly.

Just in time to feel his arms close around me, pulling me into his chest, this kind, fortifying hug I never would've guessed Nicholas Brandt had in him.

"I'm figuring this out as we go. I can't tell you what happens next, but you're going to quit worrying now, okay?"

How do I just shut off panicking over the only family I have?

"But—"

"Reese. I've got this. Let's go."

I follow, trying not to sink in my own confusion.

Why is Nick the Prick being so nice? Why is my sister locked up? And what kind of life will Millie have now if Abby can't get out? *Why is everything falling apart?*

There's a silver lining. When I'm confused, I get angry, and when I get angry, I get determined.

I use the spare key Abby gave me for the front entrance. Nick must notice because the next time I glance at him, he's wearing that amused smirk I can't decide whether I despise or secretly love.

"See? You're okay, Halle. Let's go rescue your sidekick." He heads inside and leads me upstairs.

His voice is so disarming. He's brushed my temporary insanity off as a joke—no big deal—and it's working. I'm moving again.

There's a thump behind Abby's door just before we stop by her place on the second floor.

"Nick! Someone's in Abby's apartment."

"Why do you think that?" he asks.

“You didn’t hear? Something just made a huge thump in there.”

He shrugs. “Probably a cat.”

“She doesn’t have a cat. Why would you assume that?”

“Kids are usually begging for animals. Hold on.”

I don’t say anything. I look closer, and notice a small scrap of yellow crime scene tape on the doorframe.

“Oh, crap. Of course. They had to search this place...are they not finished?” I wonder.

“It’d be blocked off if it were still an active investigation. They don’t dick around with that—I’ve seen enough crime shows to know,” he tells me.

Shrugging, I reach for the spare keyset again, instead of taking the next flight of stairs to Mrs. Gamlin’s. The strong hand cupped around mine tightens, tugging me back.

I glance at Nick.

“I’ll go first,” he tells me sternly. “You stay back until I give the all clear.”

I snort. “Dude. It’s my sister’s apartment.”

“And we know it wasn’t your sister thudding around in there and someone took the crime tape down. Let me scope it out,” he growls, his jaw set.

“You’re not usually so bossy.”

“You don’t usually take orders well,” he tosses back.

I blink, shaking my head.

“If you think it’s something bad, maybe we should just get Millie and go. I just want to know who’s in Abby’s apartment.”

“Only one way to find out, and I’m not letting anything happen to you. Stand the hell back.”

We take the five steps to Abby’s apartment before I pass Nick the key.

He puts his hand on the doorknob and looks back at me. “Back up. Get to the side.”

“Why?”

He rolls his eyes. “Do you have to question everything? So no one sees you.”

I can’t argue with that, and I also know when to shut my yap.

He turns the doorknob a couple times before pressing his ear against the thick wood. “It’s locked. Sounds like the TV’s on.”

“Should we just go to Mrs. Gamlin’s?”

“If that’s what you want.” He pulls out a pocket knife. “But since I’ve come this far...”

I stare at the knife while he holds up the key with his other hand. It’s small, but it’s kind of badass, him wanting to protect me like this.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a billionaire with a pocketknife,” I whisper.

He gives me a disarming glare. “It’s a souped-up Swiss Army knife. Sometimes you need more than a bottle opener.”

Right.

Before he can ready his war face—or even turn the key—the front door swings open. I jump so hard I nearly hit the ceiling.

Mrs. Gamlin wears a black gown and has a matching scarf tied around her white coils. “Can I help you with something? You’re scaring the bejeezus out of the kid!”

Nick raises a brow.

I move from the side of the railing, trying to put my heart back in my chest.

“Hi, Mrs. G. We didn’t mean to upset Millie. We thought you’d be upstairs and didn’t know who was in Abby’s

apartment, so we just...took precautions?" I flash her an awkward smile.

"Oh, hi there, hon. About time. I've been waiting to hear from somebody. After those boys with badges pawed through the place for a few hours, I had to make sure it was still in one piece. Plus, the baby has all of her toys here. Is Abby all right?"

I tense, feeling whacked between the eyes with the question.

"She's fine! It's a crazy mix-up, that's all. I mean...they didn't find anything, did they?" I force the world's most awkward smile. The less said, the better.

Mrs. Gamlin shakes her head.

Relief whooshes out my lungs.

"Well, thanks for watching Millie. Abby called and uh, I'll take it from here." I'm butchering this, but I just want to get the kid and go.

Mrs. Gamlin makes no effort to unblock Abby's doorway. "Not to be nosy, but where *is* Abby?"

Millie shuffles up to the door behind her.

"Mrs. Gamwin, *Lalaloopsey* no play!" Then the bumblebee moves her face, spots me, and leaps onto my leg. "Auntie Reese!"

I scoop her up in my arms. There's no way I can answer Mrs. Gamlin's question about Abby now. I'm not scarring Millie for life with a crying fit.

I take my sweet time bouncing her against my chest, while Nick looks on warmly and Gamlin stares impatiently.

"Something came up," I say. "Last-minute temp job like you know she gets sometimes. Abby won't be home tonight," I tell Mrs. Gamlin, hoping like hell it works.

"Ah, finally back to work! That's good news because she's a week overdue on rent, and after these cops showed up, I was starting to wonder. I'm not trying to be a b—" She stops and

looks at Millie, then softens her voice. “Witch, dear, but I *do* need groceries. Social Security checks don’t cut it.”

Great. Now I have to deal with this, too.

Nick pulls out his wallet. “How much does she owe?”

“Two fifty even,” Mrs. Gamlin says quickly.

“Nick, no!” I protest.

He takes out several crisp bills and hands them to Mrs. Gamlin. “Here’s three hundred. Thanks for all your trouble.”

The woman raises both eyebrows high and whistles. Then she gives him a head-to-toe eye-scraping. “Thank you, young man. You need me to babysit again, honey, you know where I am.” She clasps the money in her fist and walks out of Abby’s apartment, beaming like the sun.

Yep. This is my life.

I’m desperate, scared, and indebted to my boss, and I sure as hell don’t want to be.

“Take it from my next paycheck,” I whisper.

“Hmm.” He strokes his chin, considering my request, and then turns those emerald eyes on me like knives. “No.”

His follow-up glare says *this is not the time*.

Ugh.

Too tired to argue back, I carry Millie into the apartment. Nick follows us in.

“Since you’re so big on favors tonight, could you take the car back to the office for me? I’ll have to stay here with Millie until I figure out what’s happening.”

His eyes dart to the broken window covered in aluminum foil. Maintenance was supposed to fix it weeks ago.

“Here? I’m not liking that idea,” he rumbles, his face tightening as he scans the shoebox living room.

For some ungodly reason, I put my hands on his shoulders. “Look, I know what this looks like. This tiny run-down

apartment isn't your style, but it's plenty safe. Go enjoy your penthouse."

"That's not what I meant," he growls, clearing his throat. "If you need a place to stay for the night—"

"Stop," I cut in. No freaking way is he putting us up in some fancy hotel. "Fine. I'll soothe your worries, gather up her things, and take her to my place."

Not that the Chateau Reese is a huge improvement over Abby's digs, but I keep that to myself. I'm *trying* to compromise.

"You could let me help," he says, as if I'm oblivious.

I smile when I really want to flip him off.

"In case you didn't notice, I've *been* letting you help. You've gone above and beyond tonight, boss. I'll always appreciate it, but...I can take it from here."

He nods, bends down, and picks up a book from the floor. It's *There's a Monster at the End of this Book*.

"You a big reader, Millie?" he asks, the familiar Brandt boy charm polishing his voice.

She looks at Nick shyly and gives him a crooked smile.

"Uh-huh, mister." Then she turns to me. "We spending the night, Auntie Reese?"

"Sure are, bumblebee," I say.

Her smile slips. Then comes the question I've been dreading.

"Where's Mommy?"

"Working! Late-night job," I try to say cheerfully. "She's out making money so she can get you more toys."

"You smile funny, Auntie Reese." Millie smiles, showing a dimple in each cheek.

Damn. Nothing about this is easy.

Nick chuckles, covering his face with his hand to hide it. Not fast enough.

My eyes snap to his with a warning look.

“Sorry. She’s too cute.”

“And she knows it, unfortunately. Don’t encourage her.”

Millie turns to Nick, her little eyes going wide with interest. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Nick, little lady. It’s a pleasure.” He takes her tiny hand gently and shakes it. “And you?”

“Millie!” she squeals. “Are you Nick the Prick?”

Oh, my God.

No.

All the noes ever are mine right now.

“Millie!” I hiss.

Nick glances at me, his smirk growing wider. “I suppose that would be me.”

Millie nods excitedly. “Mommy says you gonna be my uncle! Oh, and Auntie Reese eats too much ice cream worrying about you.”

Oh my God, Part Two.

“Millie, enough. We’ve got to—”

He raises an eyebrow at me and flicks his eyes back to Millie.

“Does she worry about me a lot, Millie?” he asks coolly.

Millie gives an exaggerated shrug. “Just what Mommy says. Will you be my uncle? I want Uncle Nick!”

Can I crawl under the table and die already? Can I at least take Abby’s place in the slammer?

“Millie, I need your backpack. We’re going to pack your things and go to my place, okay?” I say loudly, trying to grab her attention.

By some miracle, Brandt doesn’t prolong my torture. He finds a bag on the floor, picks it up, and stuffs the storybook inside.

“I found it. You go get her clothes. I can handle packing a few toys,” he says.

I laugh, not knowing what else to say. But I gather several outfits, socks, and pjs for Millie. Surely, that’s enough for now.

I’ll have Abby home in a couple of days. *I need to get her home.*

I’m so not permanent guardian material, even if I’ll die trying to be.

When I come out of the bedroom, Millie’s purple bag hangs on a chair beside the table. I stuff her clothes inside.

When I look up, Nick hands me a sleek black card.

“What’s this?”

“My personal credit card. I don’t want you worrying about surprise incidentals right now, and I know you’re too much of a Girl Scout to use the company card if it’s not a business expense. Use mine for whatever Millie needs—or for yourself.”

Holy Toledo.

If things were very, very different—if he were my boyfriend, not my boss—if he weren’t a billionaire and I wasn’t his driver—if he hadn’t taken me on one date and kissed me just to make an unhinged woman jealous...this would be a really sweet gesture.

As it stands, it’s a lot of things I can’t process.

Mostly, it’s humiliating.

I blink back tears. “Thanks, but no, thanks. I can’t take your money.”

I sniff. Hard. I still have my dignity, whatever else this night robbed away.

Then another worry knifes through me.

“Oh. Oh, crap,” I whimper.

“You said a bad word,” Millie says, giggling her little butt off.

“What’s wrong?” Nick asks.

“My job. I’m going to have to figure something out. I wonder if Mrs. Gamlin can babysit tomorrow? I’m the only driver. I can’t be out all day.”

“No Mrs. Gamwin! Tomorrow not my day. Where’s my mommy?” Millie whines, giving me a stricken look. “Why she go to work without telling me?”

“Work surprises us sometimes, Millie,” Nick says softly. “Grown-ups have it rough. No matter how big and strong you think you are, there’s always another grown-up waiting in the weeds to boss you around. She’ll be back soon, I promise.”

He looks at me and I glare at him.

For a second, she seems to buy it. Then Millie throws her hands up, imitating Abby’s mom voice. “Tell me where Mommy is!”

“Work, doll. She’ll come home a whole lot happier, I assure you,” he whispers.

Then he takes my hand and forces the sleek black card into it, closing my fingers with his.

“It’s okay, Reese. You need time to figure out your next move. You’re not alone in this. You’ve been with us an entire year. Take some paid vacation until we figure it out.”

“I’m not sure how much I have,” I say.

“I’ll take care of it,” he says, holding that eerie calm in his voice that almost makes me believe it’s all that easy.

“I can’t just not show up. You have a ton to do for Brandt Dreams and Ward has the big community center pitch coming up. You can’t be down your only driver.”

“With the profits we’ve had the past few quarters? We’ll manage with a temp service.”

“Ward will *fume* if the company has to hire a service while I take an unplanned vacation. You know how particular he is. I’ve got to find a babysitter. And please don’t let Ward find out!” I sigh.

The thought of *both* Brandt boys hovering over me with worry turns me inside out.

“He’s very good at dialing up the misery, but not with this. He won’t be unreasonable, but if you’re worried, I won’t tell him. I’ll personally pay for the service. He’ll just assume you’re not coming in because I pissed you off.”

I look up and meet his shimmering eyes. “Why would you do that, Nick?”

“Nick the Prick?” Millie says, clapping her hands.

“Millie, not nice. Don’t ever say that again,” I scold.

Nick actually turns around, bringing up his fist to bite it, holding in a laugh.

“Why, Auntie Reese? You and Mommy say it all the time.”

I groan. It’s not like we ever slipped up in front of her, but apparently little ears are still burning long after she’s supposed to be asleep. Abby would laugh...if she ever makes it home.

Nick smirks at me, then looks at Millie. “What can we do for you, sweetie?”

She holds her hands above her head.

He raises a brow at me.

“You’re tall. She likes that. I think she wants you to pick her up...but you don’t have to,” I say slowly.

Without hesitation, he bows down and picks Millie up, holding her high in his strong hands. She coos and giggles.

“Uh-oh. You like to laugh, don’t you?”

She giggles in response.

“Such a nice laugh, too. It’s what they call infectious.” He smiles, but his eyes flick to me. “You should teach your auntie sometime.”

Millie shakes her head. “Grows-up don’t laugh like me.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” he says sadly. His face grows serious when he meets my eyes again. “Reese, you’re practically family, especially to Grandma—”

Millie reaches down, tugging the thick beard Nick's been growing out for several months. At some point he let his usual sprinkling of stubble turn into a full, dark, and delicious halo of scruff.

"You got a grandma, Nick?" She gasps in awe.

"Sure do, and she's pretty great," he says casually, as if Beatrice is any ordinary grandmother, and not a world-renowned genius.

"Lucky! I don't have one, but Mommy says Mrs. Gamwin is like my grandma."

"That's too bad. Everyone should have a grandma. We'll just have to arrange for you to meet mine," Nick says.

"Oh my God," I snap.

He looks at me.

"Stop. I don't want the whole company knowing my business. Please," I say.

"Millie and I aren't telling anyone. She's just going to play with Grandma one of these days, when everything's cool again. Aren't you, Millie?"

"Yeah!" She laughs, throwing her hands up. She slaps Nick's cheeks with her chubby hands.

He takes it like a champ, all manly smiles and none of his grump-face.

Later, when I can stop and breathe again, I'll hate what he's done to my ovaries tonight.

"See, Reese? Take a lesson from the kid. Keep finding reasons to laugh," he says, his voice holding a warmth I'm not used to.

Millie presses her luck, laughing like mad as she pulls his ear.

"Ow, hey now, you—"

"Talk to me! I'm fun," Millie chirps like the pint-sized attention hog that she is.

He laughs at her. “Too right. You’re adorable. Even when you’re getting bratty.” His eyes move from her to me. “Another lesson from the kid—if you need anything, just yank on something.”

God help me, I giggle. But it feels good.

“People need Auntie Reese! She doesn’t need people,” Millie says.

“How did you come up with that?” I ask, surprised at the observation.

“Mommy told me. Where is she?”

Not again.

“What else does your mom say about me?” I ask, trying to head her off.

Nick smirks. “I think we need to get your aunt home before she gets hangry. What do you think, Millie? You hungry yet?”

“I think *she’s* the hangry one,” I say, feeling my stomach gurgle. “Let’s grab something quick.”

“No hangry!” Millie objects, her little brow digging at her eyes adorably.

“You don’t know what hangry means, do you?” I ask.

“Hungry and mad! Mommy says I lose my poop when I’m hangry. Not true. I haven’t had an accident for a long time.”

“She’s pretty brilliant, Reese,” Nick tells me, casting those eyes at me like heat lamps. “Let’s get the future PhD her dinner.”

Wonderful. My boss has known my little niece for all of twenty minutes and they’re already conspiring against me.

“All this time, I’ve been too hard on you,” I say, rolling my eyes. “You just needed to be in a class of your peers to thrive.”

“Four-year-olds?” he asks. “They make a lot more sense than grown-ups.”

Okay, he deserves a laugh for that.

“At least you’re smiling now. Come on, let’s go. Millie’s discerning tastes won’t wait forever.”

I grab her backpack, ready to head to the car, but remember one important detail.

“Wait. We don’t have a car seat,” I say, looking around the apartment. I thought Abby had a spare around here somewhere.

But I only get three panicked steps around the place, opening the overloaded storage closet, when a firm hand lands on my shoulder.

“Don’t torture yourself,” Nick whispers in my ear as he sets Millie down. “New plan. We all hang out here until the Presto-Delivery App brings us a car seat.”

“Hammy-burger!” Millie balls her hand into fists.

Nope. Not on my life. I’m not letting Nick play guardian angel again tonight.

“Forget it. I’ll make you a big bowl of yummy macaroni here.” I walk into Abby’s tiny kitchen and take out a pan from the drawer under the stove.

“Reese, come sit. If Millie wants a hammy-burger tonight, she’s getting one,” Nick says in his caveman tone.

He’s so serious-looking I laugh.

“It’d have to be a solo trip since you’re *not* buying me that car seat. You really want to take the company car through a drive-thru by yourself just so my favorite rascal can have her kid’s meal?”

“What kind of savage do you think I am? I’m ordering delivery for everyone and then Miss Millie can pick our entertainment.” He stares through me, his eyes a shade softer.

And for the tenth time tonight, I’m speechless.

Good thing Millie picks up the slack. She claps her hands loudly and belts out one word every parent knows.

“*Elsaaa!*”

“One or two?” I ask, rummaging around for the remote.

“Both!” She throws her arms out at either side of her head.

“Both? I’m not sure we have time for that...”

If it bothers her, she doesn’t show it. She just grabs the remote out of my hands and starts mashing buttons with her chubby little fingers.

“Abby says Disney Plus is the best money she’s ever spent,” I say.

“I’d have to agree,” he tells me.

“What? You watch Disney Plus?” My brows go up.

“I own a hundred thousand shares of their company. Why wouldn’t I check out their products? Also, I’m a sucker for their superhero movies and what monster would *ever* turn down *Aladdin*?”

A messy laugh slips out of me. “You never struck me as a movie guy.”

“Now you know. Of course, I don’t watch those silly princess movies—”

Millie turns around and marches up to Nick, who’s now sitting on the ancient mauve couch.

“Yes?” he asks.

“Princesses are *not* silly,” Millie says sternly. “Anna saved her sister and Elsa saved her whole kingdom from the snow.”

“...didn’t Elsa cause the snow first?” Nick says, holding his hands up in mock surrender. “Okay, okay. My bad. Let’s refresh my memory; I only saw it once on a flight to Hawaii.”

Under my breath, I snicker. The idea of Nick flipping Brandt watching cartoons on a long flight pummels what’s left of my sanity tonight.

But it’s a good pummeling.

We settle in and watch *Frozen*, and when dinner arrives, we all eat our cheeseburgers and fries like we’re starving. It

feels like the eye of the storm before a world of hurt lands tomorrow.

But as I watch Nick falling into the movie, somehow...

...somehow this hurricane doesn't feel like the apocalypse.

When the movie ends, an instant delivery service leaves a car seat outside Abby's door. Nick tries to drag it inside subtly and fails miserably.

I stab a glare at him from the sofa with a dozing little girl. But as he waves to me silently and slips out the door?

Yeah. I'm not even mad.

SOBERING THOUGHTS (NICK)



Back at my place, huddled next to the fire, I call Ward.
“What’s up?”

“We need a temporary driver for tomorrow. Probably for the next week,” I say.

“Reese? If she’s going to be out for days, she needs a doctor’s note. HR policy, not mine. She can’t just go on vacation at crunch time without clearing it first,” he grumbles, ornery as ever.

“She had an emergency, Ward. She’s not going for a joyride.”

He pauses, softening his prickly voice as he asks, “What happened?”

“Family matter. I was with her when the call came in. It’s fairly serious,” I tell him, hoping he won’t pry.

My phone dings, announcing a text. I’ll check later. This has to be taken care of.

“Well, emergency or not, she’ll have to take it up with HR. It’s not good form to let employees come straight to you with their problems, even if they’re people we like, little brother. We have a command structure for a reason—treat everybody equally and minimize confusion. HR takes precedent with PTO. Nobody’s fault. It’s just policy.”

The way Paige dealt with HR? I want to say. I’m sure he’s forgotten about that, though.

The phone dings with a second text I ignore.

And why does he talk to me like I'm still the kid brother? We're co-owners.

I don't need lectures from my bear of a brother.

"I'll have her talk to Susan, but I'll vouch for her emergency personally. We should respect the gravity of the—"

"HR gets to decide if it's a true emergency or not," he says, cutting me off. "Reese is an excellent driver and a good employee. I'm not arguing that. But if we make exceptions for her, we have to do it for everyone. It's easier sticking to blind policies, and since this isn't something we deal with on a daily basis, Susan's in a better position to know just what those policies are."

I glower, hating that he's still such a sucker for the tiniest rules when he broke at least a dozen with his fake-fiancée-turned-real-wife pact.

"Look, if anyone else had the same shit happen, I'd give them time off. Over and done. I'm sure Susan will agree." Although, to be fair, I might not give another employee my personal credit card.

"Then talking to her shouldn't be an issue. Nick, what the fuck? What is it you're not telling me? What happened to Reese?"

The phone dings for a third damn time.

"And who keeps texting you?" he asks before I can answer.

"I don't know. I'm too busy gabbing with you and haven't looked. What *wouldn't* I be telling you, Ward?"

He's quiet for a minute.

"I'm not sure. If there's something going on with you and Reese...it's not okay but we can work it out. Paige and I met at the office, too. I get it. You spend twenty to forty hours a week with a woman, it happens. It's not a big deal unless you hide it and make it a big deal."

My breath stops.

“What the hell? You think I’m dancing around some office fling?” The phone feels like it’s about to implode in my hand.

“Why not? You request a lot of rides for odd reasons like midday coffee runs when there’s an espresso bar downstairs. And this is the first time you’ve ever mentioned an employee’s plight before, even when we’ve had people out on medical leave.”

Whatever, I’m busted. It isn’t like he thinks.

This isn’t Nick the office clown thinking with his dick. This is Nick the fool thinking too much with his annoying as hell heart.

“If I’m ever with someone when the doctor calls to say they need a quadruple bypass, I promise I’ll mention it, Ward,” I bite off.

“That’s it then? You were just there when she got bad news, so it hit you like the softie you are?” His tone tells me he’s hiding real concern behind his acid sarcasm.

“Bingo. Should I call a service for tomorrow, or what? Or should I leave that to Susan to figure out too?”

“Call her. I think she has a service for temp staffing, whenever we’re missing key personnel. If Reese needs more than a day or two, we might be able to keep the same person.” There are times when I appreciate Ward’s obsessive attention to detail.

“Okay. I’ll talk to her. I need to see who’s blowing my phone up. Later.”

“Wait. Will you at least tell me what’s up with—”

“No. I told her I’d keep it under wraps,” I say, cutting him off. “You know how Reese is. She loves her privacy. She felt bad enough about me stepping in, and the last thing she’d ever want is the whole senior leadership butting in with offers to help. We’ve got this,” I say.

“You’re starting to scare the hell out of me with these social skills. What gives?” He pauses, waiting for an answer

that never comes. “Bad joke. Sorry. Goodnight, little brother.”

The call drops.

I clench my jaw, hating when he calls me that. Desperate to pull my mind off it, I clear the screen and look at my messages.

Four missed texts. All from a screaming asshole.

Still no comment, Mr. Brandt? I have twice as many credible claims that you and a certain model-actress-old flame made an X-rated video together. I may even have that video in my possession.

There’s no way in hell Roland Birdshit has a copy—Carmen can’t be that vindictive or self-destructive.

My eyes read the next text through an angry red blur across my vision.

At least tell me this—are the rumors that you and Carmen Seraphina still sizzle true?

Not only no, but *hell no*.

Too bad any response will just keep Osprey on my ass, though, so it’s better not to say anything.

She says you’re getting back together soon, his next message reads.

Like hell we are. I’d need a lobotomy first.

I’m in this deep, so I read his last message.

I’ve told you before, I’m a fair man. I’m trying to do you a favor by giving you a chance to comment before I approve anything fit to print. If you don’t answer me in a timely manner, however, I’ll have no choice but to run with what I have.

“Run yourself to death, fuckhead,” I spit at the screen.

I wish I could decide if I’m more pissed at Osprey or my own reflection.

This is my life, and no matter what I do today, I’m still paying for yesterday’s sins.

Now I get why Reese was so shocked when I stepped in to help.

I also get why every employee we have goes straight to Ward with company problems and only talks to me as a last resort. While Ward buried the trauma of growing up a Brandt behind an armadillo personality, I escaped with mindless pleasure.

That's why, years ago, I got drunk on a white sand beach with a woman I've known my whole life—a woman who always brought out my worst—and I made a video that I'll pay for until the day I die.

Shit.

If I had a genie, I'd wish to undo that day in a heartbeat.

But there are lots of other days you need to undo too, aren't there?

It's been roughly six months since the slap-happy champagne-to-the-face incident and Reese still thinks I was with her to make Carmen jealous.

It's true. I wanted Carmen to know it was over.

I never cared if she was jealous or not. If I'd had a functioning brain that day, I should have taken another girl, someone I didn't know. I damn sure shouldn't have taken Reese that night.

Out of old habit, I pour a couple fingers of brandy, hold up the glass, and...recoil in disgust.

Isn't this liquid fuckery part of what got me in this mess?

Sighing, I toss the booze in the sink and glug down a large glass of water from the faucet before calling Susan.

"Nicholas, hello. To what do I owe this late-night phone call?" she asks, a polite way of saying *who did you murder to justify calling me this late?*

"I need help. Can you get the C-level team a temporary driver for tomorrow and preferably a few more days?"

"What happened to Reese Halle?" she asks immediately.

I swallow a groan.

“She’s had a family emergency. A rather serious one. I told her she could take paid vacation. How much does she have?”

Susan sniffs. “I can’t tell you that without her permission.”

“No worries. If she runs out of PTO before she’s back, let me know,” I say sharply.

“Of course. I have to ask...is Miss Halle okay?”

My eyes pinch shut a second too long. People keep asking me that and it’s a fair question. Truthfully, I don’t fucking know.

I hope so. I need to find out. And if she’s not, I need to make her okay again.

“Yes,” I say, a little too slowly.

“Did someone die?” Susan asks quickly.

“No, nothing like that. More like a personal crisis. Frankly, it’s probably better to ask her about it when she gets back. We just need a driver until she returns, and in the meantime, it’s my job to make sure she’s taken care of.”

“Hmm, well, informally I believe she has a little over two weeks of paid vacation banked. She’s only been here just over a year, but she doesn’t take many days off. If it looks like she’s running thin on PTO before she’s back in the office, I’ll certainly let you know.”

“Thank you.”

I cut the call and stalk over to my fridge, desperately looking for something to sip that won’t invite more trouble.

A couple bright cartons of Florida orange juice stare back at me.

Radioactive OJ it is, then.

Three glasses and an antacid later, I lie in bed alone, staring out at the Chicago skyline stretched across the window. Buildings rise wild like blades of silver and blinking tinsel-gold lights. It’s a beautiful, cool night and this is a comfortable

bed. I'm cocooned in a world of comfort and luxury the average person would die for.

In theory, I should be grateful.

I'm not.

This is how I always end up, sooner or later.

Alone. Frustrated. Waiting for the next disaster.

Before, I didn't mind it, because the next day always offered a new escape and my worries always seemed to work themselves out.

Now, I realize I'm trapped, slowly being pulled under a riptide of menacing comfort. I've fucked up too much. I can't escape my past, and who would ever want to share my reputation?

Brandt Dreams could easily go belly up, too, no matter how much elbow grease I throw into it.

Ward inherited the diehard trust our people had for Grandma. They turn to him first.

Since I'm the head honcho at Dreams, my brother isn't there to back me up, much less lift morale. It's entirely on my shoulders, and even if I make it my world to hold up, it's impossible not to slip with assholes like Carmen and Roland Osprey tossing banana peels in my path.

Fuck. I wish I hadn't tossed that brandy tonight.

I stare at the skyline for who knows how long, hypnotized by the dream of better lives happening behind those tiny, distant windows strewn across the city.

At some point, I must fall asleep with my phone by my ear, because I wake to a deafening notification sound. Probably Roland Osprey still hounding me.

I jerk up with a groan and look at the screen.

That's Reese's number. I hit open faster than I should.

Just confirming I can't come to work today. I'm so sorry. But I'll be back ASAP. Probably tomorrow.

Without thinking, I start typing. ***Don't come back tomorrow, Reese. Deal with this shit and don't worry about anything else. Did the lawyer get in touch yet? If not, I'll find you another one. How's Millie?***

Before hitting send, I hesitate.

Ten seconds later, I delete the entire thing.

Telling her not to come in tomorrow will just upset her more. So will badgering her over using my legal resources.

She's got enough on her plate. She's ferociously independent. I don't want to be responsible for making her day worse at the ass crack of dawn or making her feel that much more helpless.

I soften what I actually send.

Just let me know the plan for tomorrow, whenever you're able. Is the attorney working out? Let me know.

A reply comes back quickly in two messages.

Thanks, Nick. Millie is a handful. Thank you for the car seat...I'm going to pay you back at some point but it wasn't a bad idea. At least I'm not stranded this way.

Oh, and again...thank you for everything. I should be back soon. Really.

It's just words on a screen. But even from plain white letters in a cloud of blue, I can tell she's upset. Scared.

I wish I could do more.

No problem, I type back. ***Am I still Nick the Prick?***

...you're a work in progress. I'll let you know. She adds a devil emoji to the end of that sentence, damn her.

At least she's honest.

In fairness, work in progress might be the nicest way anyone's described me in a long time.

If the other texts from Mr. Birdshit are true, I know what I'll always be, in her eyes and everybody else's.

Whatever. Only one way to make sure that doesn't happen, even if it seems goddamned hopeless.

I unglue myself from the bed and face the day.



HALF A DAY LATER, there's a knock on my office door.

"It's open," I call out, hoping for Reese, as unlikely as it seems.

Paige Brandt strolls in, combing a hand through her blond hair. "Ward says a lot of packages are piling up outside his office with your name on them. What should I do with them?"

I scowl, loving how hard it is to keep secrets around here—especially when too many of our mail people assume anything big and important goes to the wrong Brandt.

"Thanks for letting me know, for one. Since you don't work here anymore, I'll move them."

"Ah-ah," Paige says, urging me to stay sitting with a flick of her hand. "Just because I'm running my own art studio doesn't mean I'm above moving a few boxes, Nick."

I smile.

"If you insist, take them to Grandma's office, please." I stand. "Actually, a couple of them might be pretty heavy. Leave those for me."

"All right." She doesn't turn to leave. She stands and stares at me like she's expecting more, a bright pain in the ass that reminds me why she's a perfect fit for Ward.

"Something else?" I ask, already dreading the answer.

"Can I ask why you've got a whole stack of packages coming here?"

"Oh—they're for the office." I tell her. "I probably didn't follow protocol, but whatever. It's stuff I didn't even think about needing until this morning. But if it makes a difference, I paid for them, not the company."

She puts her hands on her hips. “Having been an assistant, I feel for whoever’s signing for them. In a building with this many people in it, it’s a security issue to accept random packages taller than a person. Also...you’re not going to tell me what’s up, are you?”

“I’ll make sure you know the next time,” I say, conveniently ignoring that last question. “Please don’t encourage Ward.”

She sighs and heads out the door. I follow her over to the EA’s desk outside Ward’s office, where a Christmas-like stack of tall boxes has formed since morning.

Only the loft bed weighs a ton.

I cart everything to Grandma’s vacant office and decide it’s best to start with the loft. The place looks like it did the day she left—a green space of vines and glassy modern magnificence no one had the heart to claim once she retired.

Nudging a few chairs around, there’s just enough space to set up everything I need.

I’ll start with the big stuff first. It takes me the better part of an hour, cursing and flipping off the horribly written instruction sheet several times.

Bit by bit, the bed comes together. I just have the slide left to attach when Ward comes in, slamming the door behind him. There’s an icy pause before I turn around.

“What the hell are you building in here? An amusement park?” he growls, taking a stride forward.

I hold out a hand.

“Perfect timing. Stay there for a minute. You can help me set this thing straight and slide it over the desk after I screw the slide in.”

“The slide?” His dark eyebrows flick up. He doesn’t berate me, though, just leans against the wall and watches me secure the last screw before saying, “That looks like a badass bed. I’ll give you that.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. Just wondering why in God’s name Grandma’s old office needs *a bed with a slide*,” he spits, shaking his head.

“I needed something that would fit in here without messing with Grandma’s old desk since we’ve decided it’s basically a museum piece,” I throw back. “A kid needs a way up and down. All lofts have steps, but the slide seemed like a quicker way down. More fun, too.”

“Lovely. I wonder what the liability is if a child skids down a loft in our office and busts their head open.” He glares at me with that familiar *you idiot* look I’ve seen ten thousand times.

I frown, studying my handiwork. “You have a point. Guess I’ll order some gym mats to put under it or modify this slide for extra safety...”

“You sure like this kid,” he says, throwing his hands up in the air. “Don’t tell me. You found out one of those one-night stands made you a father, didn’t you?”

I don’t respond to that with more than a fuck-you glare.

I’m not attached to Millie. I’ve barely even met her. I just wouldn’t want any kid getting a broken bone having fun, especially from something I assembled.

“Did Paige order you here to solve the package mystery?” I ask.

“Paige knows about this?”

Shit. I didn’t mean to start anything between them.

“Not really. She just asked about my packages when they started piling up closer to your office. I thought maybe she sent you to find out—”

“Hardly,” he clips. “I don’t need my wife to send me in like a charging Marine when all that banging around was reason enough. You’re lucky the evening crew left. But if *you* had a kid, we would know about it, right? You’re not that insane?”

Fuck, he’s serious.

If my own brother has to ask me that, maybe it's truly too late to evolve beyond Nick the Prick.

"Nah. I'd keep it secret until the kid's a teenager so they're well-prepared to deal with their dick of an uncle," I snarl, tossing the screwdriver at his feet. "Come help while you're here. We just need a little muscle to turn it, then slide it against the wall."

"One condition," Ward says as he takes one side of the bed. "Tell me what kid's worth uprooting Grandma's old office."

I take the other side.

"Reese's. She's going to have custody of her niece for a while, and she'll need help. I'm not having her go bankrupt paying Chicago daycare fees."

"Wait. You want her kid hanging out *here*?" His eyes flash like lightning, a shade brighter blue than my sea-green.

"I'll hire a nanny. I've thought this through," I say sternly.

"How old is she?" he asks.

"Four, I think."

"I see you've made an executive decision." He nods. "And you've decided we provide on-site childcare, huh?"

"I'll pay for it, Ward. I'll accept full responsibility for any and all complications, not that I'm expecting any. Don't worry about it cutting into your profits...or your damn bear cave of workaholic secrets."

"I don't care about that. I just want to know what it is you're not telling me."

"Nothing, besides keeping details of Reese's personal life mum without her permission to throw them around. This also makes the most sense, keeping the kid at the office. She can do her job in peace and grab the girl at the end of the day without another ride through traffic."

"Are you sure that's it?" he asks quietly. "It doesn't have anything to do with the way your mouth hit the floor the first

time you saw her face? Back when you realized she wasn't a fucking man?"

Before I can fire back, he holds up his hand, palm out like an apology.

"I'm not criticizing. Not *much*. But if there's more to this than you're saying...I'm your brother. Tell me."

I nod, surprised he's letting up on his dickery. "You remember when Grandma was in the hospital?"

"How could I forget?"

"Paige saved her life and took on a mountain of extra work. She picked up the slack so we could be there without worrying about the office going up in flames," I tell him.

"My wife's nothing less than amazing." He smiles, a far-off look in his eyes.

"She is. However, somebody else stepped up that week. Reese drove all over the known universe anytime we needed it. She made late-night hops to the hospital and early morning coffee runs way before her start time. She needs our help now, and if we let her down...you know how hard Grandma would lose it?"

Ward nods, stroking his beard. "So you're stepping up. I'm sure Reese will be pleased with all the support." He motions to the other packages. "Do I want to know what's in these boxes?"

"Stuffies and a rope with giant clothespins. She can grab a stuffie and play whenever she wants to," I say, a little proud I put so much thought into what I'd enjoy as a kid.

"What the hell's a stuffie?"

I grin. "It's what Millie calls her stuffed animals."

He raises an eyebrow. "You know Reese's niece that well?"

I don't answer.

I don't know.

He looks at the packages and back at me.

“Okay, well, I have to say I’m floored. I’ve hardly seen you take this kind of initiative with anything, and dammit, I’m a little proud of you. But Reese has never been fond of you, right? I’m not sure why you’d volunteer to get so involved. I mean, I have an idea. I’m just worried about how it’ll work out.”

His eyes are narrow, questioning. It’s like he can sense the guilt wafting off me.

Damn him. Time to come clean.

“Ward, I did something stupid while Reese was new—”

“Besides mistaking her for a frat boy, offering to hook her up, and having her escort a half-naked client into his hotel room?”

“Yes,” I force out. “I did something worse, and that’s why she got frosty with me. I’ve always wanted to make it up to her ever since. I think finally we’re on better terms again and I’d like to keep it that way. It’s my chance to un-fuck our relationship—*work relationship*, obviously,” I add that last part hastily.

Ward blinks at me.

“You did something besides that abysmal introduction? Do I want to know?”

You really don’t, I think to myself.

When he puts it like that, it daggers me even more why she named me Nick the Prick.

“Whatever. It’s none of my business, as long as it’s not a mess for the company,” he snarls, pacing the room before his eyes circle back to me with worry. “I hope this makes up for whatever *else* you did to that poor woman. You’d better un-fuck things, all right.”

“I will.”

But I also hope I can fix a whole lot more. I don’t want to be anyone’s prick.

If I can smooth over the storm I created with Reese, maybe I can prove to everyone—including myself—that I'm more than just sex, booze, and bad decisions.

Am I actually more than that, though?

I unpack the stuffie chain and work on hanging it from the ceiling. Ward opens boxes of stuffed animals, chuckling like a big kid himself when he unwraps a few googly-eyed critters.

Paige comes in holding a coffee cup a little later.

“What’s up, sweetheart?” Ward asks, this look I envy crossing his face when he sees his wife.

It’s like all the world’s problems—including the latest grief I’ve given him—melt away as soon as he’s in her presence.

“Whoa! There’s...a slide in Grandma’s office. Do I get to test it?” she says with a giggle.

Ward clips a stuffie to the chain.

“We’re not finding out.” He looks at me. “Someday, you’ll make a great dad.”

“Says the guy clipping pink unicorns to a rope from the ceiling. *You’re* going to be an amazing father,” Paige says.

He turns to face her, his eyes train on her lips.

“I told you I’m ready...”

She closes the space between them. He brushes her face with his hand and kisses her.

These two are adorably disgusting together.

“Paige, did you need something?” I ask, cutting in before I’m hostage to a make-out session.

She takes a step away from him. “I’m just here to watch the show. You two could be the Property Brothers.”

“I think Nick’s gunning to star in his own show. *The Mannie*,” Ward says, stabbing a finger at me and grinning like he’s so damn funny.

Idiot.

Paige slurps her coffee. “Netflix is doing a lot of reboots these days! I could see Nick in a Manny reboot.”

I glare at her.

She laughs, jabbing a thumb at my brother. “Sorry. Ward started it, crankyface.”

“Way to throw me under the bus,” he says.

“Well, you did,” she says.

“Will you two get out of here? I need to finish up so I can look for a real nanny,” I growl, folding my arms. “I have my own company to run on top of it, thank you very much. Reese wants to come back to work, and she can’t do it without childcare. I think she needs the distraction. So, if you don’t mind.”

“Nick, are you okay?” Paige asks, giving me a worried look. “Sometimes I think you’re competing to swipe the bossy grump award from Ward.”

“Never better,” I snap, hating that she’s right.

Ward and Paige exchange a slow, concerned glance.

“I should get back to work,” she says, saving face.

Ward nods and follows her out the door, leaving me in the world of shit I’m trying so hard to dig myself out of.

A FAMILY MATTER (REESE)



If I haven't lost track, we're watching *Frozen* for the seventh time in less than forty-eight hours.

I may be sick of this movie, but it keeps Millie from asking questions. We'll watch it fourteen more times if it delays me having to weave deeper lies about her mom.

My phone rings with an unknown number. I grab it and answer, desperately hoping it's the attorney Nick set me up with.

"This is Reese," I say.

"Miss Halle?" a polite but very serious voice asks.

Maybe it *is* the attorney's office.

"Yes, that's me." The words come out strained with urgency and excitement. The woman on the other end probably thinks I've been staring at the phone, waiting for this call with bated breath.

And she'd be right.

"Miss Halle, my name is Elaina Smith. I'm a caseworker at Child Protective Services."

Child Protective Services? I've had the kid for barely more than a day and someone called CPS?

"Okay?"

"Abby Halle was very worried about what would happen to her daughter once she was arrested. She told the officers at

the scene that the kid was with Jane Gamlin. When we contacted Mrs. Gamlin, she informed us you picked her daughter up. Is Amelia Halle in your custody now?"

"Yes," I say. "I'm her aunt."

"I've done some research into Amelia's—"

"Millie. Her name is Millie." She doesn't even know my niece. What research does she think she's done?

"Yes, well, I've looked into Millie's case. It seems she has another living parent, a Mr. William Frisk—"

Oh, no. I have to choke down a rock in my throat before I can speak.

"Will Frisk. Right. She's seen him a handful of times in her four years alive, and he has a rap sheet longer than the state driver's manual," I say bitterly.

"Is that true?" Smith pauses.

Why would I lie to her?

"Uh—to the best of my knowledge criminal records are public. Since you've done so much research—" I pause, trying and failing to hide my irritation. "You're totally welcome to look it up."

"Miss Halle, please understand that these situations are governed by state law. I'm simply doing my best to—"

"Let me tell you something," I cut in. "My parents died in a car wreck when I was two years old and Abby was six. We were at the neighbor's house when it happened. Aunt Sarah—our kind neighbor, basically an adopted aunt—wanted to keep us. CPS said she didn't have enough space or money, and she wasn't a relative."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Smith says robotically.

I'm not finished.

"We bounced around from foster home to foster home until Abby aged out of 'the system.' She finally found a stable place to live and convinced someone she could be my guardian. We didn't misunderstand anything. You're not taking this kid

before I've even spoken to an attorney. Abby and I are orphans. Her mom's in jail, and I'm Millie's only family. Her sperm donor dad who should be arrested for back child support doesn't count in any sane universe."

She clears her throat and mutters something on the other end of the line. "Well. I didn't realize this was Abby's situation. I'll have to do some more digging."

Eff your digging, I want to say.

Play nice for Millie, a voice warns me. Control your temper.

"Look, I'm sorry. There's just a lot to deal with right now and I'm trying to make the best of this," I say.

"I understand that. How about this—I'll let you keep Millie in your custody for now if you promise to reach out and let Mr. Frisk know his daughter's safe with you."

"I will. Do you have his number? I don't."

"I found a phone number for him, but unfortunately it's disconnected," she tells me.

"So, I can keep my niece on the condition I let her sperm donor know, but I have no way to get in touch with him, and even the government doesn't have a working number?" I hold my head up, staring at the ceiling, trying so hard not to scream.

"It doesn't have to be immediate. However, it should be timely. Just make sure you get in touch with him when you can, and a qualified attorney if you feel your case needs legal attention."

"Okay."

"One more thing," Smith says, dragging it out.

It's CPS. Of course, there's *one more thing*.

"I need to come out very soon and pay you a visit to ensure Millie's in a safe environment."

Lovely.

This is exactly what went down when they snatched us from Aunt Sarah's many years ago, and we bounced around from one shady foster family to the next.

"What time?" I say, hoping I don't sound frazzled.

Ugh. I hope they don't decide my building is too old and the landlord's slacked on inspections, or one bedroom isn't enough space, or whatever else it is they can latch on to in order to steal Millie.

"What time?" I ask again.

"I can't tell you that. Sometimes bad actors enjoy putting on appearances, you understand," she says, ice-cold as ever.

Oh, I'll be putting on a show if I make it through the meeting without punching someone.

"No problem. I just need to visit my sister, talk to her attorney, and if he's not working out, find a new attorney, then make arrangements at my job for more time off since I'm sole guardian to a preschooler, hunt down a sperm donor whose number you don't have, and find childcare. I'm sure I can do all of that while waiting for you at my apartment. Totally reasonable."

"Take care of whatever you need to. If you're not there when I show up, I'll come back until you are."

Wonderful. There's nothing like having a stalker who can snatch your kid away at the smallest slip.

"Thanks." I cut the call off there. I have nothing useful left to say.

I try not to dwell on how awesome this day is starting as I bundle Millie up and we go visit my sister.



ABBY LOOKS like hell when she sits down on the other side of the glass.

Her hair hangs down in streaks, knotted up after a single day in a cell. Day-old mascara leaves black streaks around her swollen eyes. Whatever passes for hygiene and a pillow in prison isn't helping her, and it hurts my heart.

Millie's little mouth drops. She stands in my lap and presses her hand to the glass with wide eyes.

"Mommy needs a nap!" she sputters.

I'm just grateful she doesn't seem to understand where *Mommy* is. Or remember my little white lie about the temp job.

Abby presses her hand to Millie's on the other side of the glass divider, trying not to cry as she smiles.

"The quicker I talk to her, the sooner she can get some sleep, bumblebee," I say, wrangling Millie back into a seated position. I pick up the phone on our side of the glass. "Millie says you need a nap. How're you holding up?"

"Okay. I just...I miss her. She looks good. You're taking care of her, thank God."

"Mommy says she misses you and you look good," I relay to the wiggle worm in my lap.

Millie tilts her head up at me and beams. I wish I could hang on to the moment before meeting my sister's eyes again.

"So, what happened?" I ask.

"I didn't mean for this—it's just—" She lets out a long sigh and hot tears streak her face. "I was desperate for money. I made a mistake, okay? It doesn't matter. Reese, you can't let Will take Millie."

My heart stops cold in my chest. I can't process her words.

Is my sister admitting she...she was messing around with drugs?

Jesus Christ.

Millie—who thankfully can't hear Abby—still notices the difference in her composure. She clings to me tighter.

“I’m going to take care of Millie no matter what happens. Don’t you worry. But I got you an attorney, courtesy of the asshole. Have you talked to him yet?”

“He called. I...I can’t tell him much,” Abby says with a sigh.

“Why not?”

I don’t understand.

Abby looks around, her eyes large and panicked and pleading. A guard behind her notices and steps forward.

“I told you—I can’t say.”

“Um, you kind of have to say if you ever want to get out of there. Tell me. You know you can trust me,” I urge.

“Reese, I know what you’re thinking, but...trust *me*. There are reasons I can’t and we need to just leave it at that. For now,” she adds hastily, as if that makes it better. “Just don’t let Will get Millie, whatever you do. I don’t care what it takes. Please don’t let him have my baby.”

Raw desperation fills her red eyes.

Where was this concern when you apparently had coke stuffed in the car seat?

The confusion is maddening. I don’t say anything though, because I have to keep it together to deal with attorneys, a billionaire boss who needs to know if I’m ever going back to work, and the ray of sunshine from CPS.

I pull Millie closer to me and hug her, trying not to whisper, *I’ve got you, baby, even if my sister is a pusher and your dad’s a dickhead.*

I sigh. “Can you just tell me if you’re guilty?”

For a brutal second, she’s silent, her lashes fluttering.

“...like I said. I made some mistakes. Big ones.”

Gutted. On second thought, I’m grateful for the sudden wave of anger because it keeps me from breaking down in tears.

“They told me I have to inform Will that I have Millie, but I won’t let him take her,” I say mechanically. “I’m supposed to call him ASAP. Do you know his number?”

She shakes her head.

“No. It could be somewhere in my apartment, but I think you’re poking the bear by calling him.” She’s quiet for a minute. “Who said you have to call him?”

Oops, I’ve said too much. Abby will freak if she finds out there’s a risk Millie might wind up with a total stranger, following in our footsteps.

I shrug, trying to play it down. “Just some caseworker. I’ve got a handle on it.”

“Caseworker? From where?”

Should I lie? Right in front of my tiny niece? What’s even believable?

Jesus. I don’t know.

“It’s nothing, Abby. Don’t worry,” I try again.

“It’s CPS, isn’t it? Someone told you that you have to drag Will into this. Shit.” She sinks back against the seat that’s far too short for her, pinching her nose.

I say nothing. There’s no point in confirming her terrible guess and torturing her.

“Whatever. Just...don’t let him take Millie,” she says.

“Over my dead body,” I tell her, and I mean it.

If I have to leave everything and flee to Canada in the middle of the night, Will Frisk won’t be near my bumblebee.

The guard steps closer to Abby and taps a watch on her wrist.

“Looks like my time’s up. Bring Millie back when you can.” She gives me the world’s saddest wave goodbye before the guard leads her away.

Millie waves to her, then realizes something isn’t right. She presses her little hands to the glass, leaning out of my lap

while I try to wrestle her back.

“Don’t let Mommy leave! Want Mommy back!” Millie screams, her voice wavering with that warning quiver every kid has before they burst into tears.

Fabulous.

So besides dealing with work, finding childcare, and dreading CPS, why not add an inconsolable four-year-old and my own smashed heart to the mix?

I also can’t fathom my sister’s choices in life—or why in God’s name she won’t talk.

Outside the county jail, I buckle Millie into the purple car seat with the fancy cupholder Nick bought her. It’s nicer than the one in her mom’s car. We drive over to the office quickly.

“Auntie Reese?” she asks once we’re exiting the car. What she really means is *what now?*

Good question. It sums up my life perfectly. I let out a broken laugh.

Millie doesn’t understand why I’m laughing, but joins in with a loud, confused giggle of her own, which only makes me laugh harder. This time for real.

Leaning down, I kiss her on the forehead. “I need to figure out what to do about work tomorrow. Do you want to see Nick?”

She claps her hands. “Nick the—”

“Nuh-uh, bumblebee.” I keep my face firm and raise my eyebrows. “Bad word. I told you not to say it again.”

Her face falls. “But it rhymes. You and Mommy do.”

“Your Mommy and I pay the rent. One day you’ll grow up and pay for your own place too, and then you can say whatever you want. Deal?”

“What’s rent?”

“Never-ending payments for the privilege of living under someone else’s roof,” I say glumly.

“I have a dollar.” She smiles at me like she’s just solved the whole city’s housing problems.

“You’re a sweetheart, but a full month’s rent costs a little more, baby,” I say, biting back a smile.

“Maybe for my birthday!” She giggles.

“Maybe.” I shut the car door behind her.

My second hand Camry feels out of place in the company garage. I’ve always done my best to maintain it—there’s not a scratch on her—but I’m just too stubborn to break down and buy the kind of shiny new car the average Brandt Ideas employee drives even if I can afford it.

I’m too used to being resourceful, and now, as I clutch Millie’s hand and we walk into the lobby, I realize I need to be more than ever.

“It’s a castle!” Millie chirps.

“Not quite, just a really fantastic office building.” Beatrice Brandt’s touch lingers everywhere here, from the swirling rows of neatly trimmed flowering trees on every floor to the Parisian-like fountain perched on four heroic shoulders on our way to the elevator. This building has floors that cost more than any make-believe castle Millie’s ever seen, even for the other businesses that just rent space here.

“Wowie, look!” She points at the fountain.

I check my pockets for loose change and only come up with an old arcade token from the last time I took Millie there a week ago. I hand it to her.

“Make a wish.”

She stares up at me.

“Wish for something you want and throw it in. It’s an old tradition,” I say, stooping down to smile at her.

For a second, she’s thoughtful, her tiny face scrunched up. Then she palms the coin and flings it into the fountain like a baseball pitcher. I smile at the splash that echoes through the lobby.

“Nice. It sounds like you wished really hard,” I say cheerfully.

“I wished Mommy gets outta jail!”

Oh, God. My smile evaporates. I don’t even have the heart to tell her you’re not supposed to share your wishes if you want them to come true.

I scan the lobby. There are a couple other people standing around the elevator.

Oof. I hope no one heard her.

“Jail? Why do you say that?” I ask.

“The window. Mommy was stuck and...and Mommy looked sad.”

“But we saw your mommy at the doctor before, remember? Lots of windows there, just like offices.” I don’t know why I bother fighting for this charade.

Millie, like the little brainiac she is, puts her hands on her hips with a pout. “Auntie Reese, why you lie? I watch TV. We watch Hawaii Five-0. I know what jail is!”

Damn, she’s good. Also, what was Abby thinking?

“You don’t have to worry. She’ll be home soon. I promise,” I tell her, hating that I have no earthly way to make good on that vow.

“But I miss her...”

“I know, baby.” I tussle her hair and take her hand so I can move us toward the elevator. “I know, and we all miss her.”

“Can I push the button?” she asks, thankfully distracted.

“Go for it.”

Upstairs, Nick isn’t in his office. *Just great.*

I’m about to leave, annoyed that we wasted a trip here. Then again, I’m not really dressed presentable enough to grace the halls of Brandt Ideas anyway, and it’s pretty rare to have people bringing young kids around.

Just as I'm trying to pull Millie away from an anime cat bobblehead on someone's desk, there's movement in Beatrice Nightingale Brandt's old office.

Huh. Cleaning crew?

Beatrice is the reason I got this job. She's a lovely lady, and they've treated her old stomping grounds like a shrine ever since she retired.

Is she visiting? Even disheveled and clutching a preschooler, Granny Bea is someone I wouldn't mind talking to right now...

I rush to her office and knock on the door, dragging Millie along.

Heavy footsteps. The door pops open a second later, revealing half of a handsome face with one keen emerald-green eye perched above a chiseled jaw. He shoves it the rest of the way open.

"Welcome back. I wasn't expecting to see you today." He steps aside so I can enter.

When I look past him, registering the room, I'm lost.

"Holy crap," I mutter. Granny Bea's office has undergone a total transformation.

A pink and purple loft bed hangs above Beatrice's antique, hand-crafted desk. A plastic chain dangles from the ceiling with plush stuffed animals hanging on it like fruits.

"Uni-corn!" Millie shrieks, shooting across the room. She fights with a baby-pale blue clothespin to release a lavender unicorn.

Nick laughs, moves to the stuffie chain, and squeezes the end of the clothespin together. The big toy hits the floor.

"Millie, come here. Don't touch that. It's not ours!" I try hopelessly.

Millie scoops it up, holds it out, and hugs it close to her chest with a warm smile. "I love you."

“It’s hers,” Nick says, standing next to me with a proud look.

“What?” I meet his gaze.

“It’s for Millie, Reese. All of it.”

“What?”

What the actual hell? When I knocked on Bea’s door, I thought maybe she was back. I never expected to find Nick flipping Brandt managing a playroom. Why?

“Come on, have a seat.”

Right. I’m still halfway in the doorway. I step inside, shutting the door behind me. It even smells like a candy store in here, as bright as the makeshift toys and kids’ furniture that looks like it belongs here.

He crosses the room so we’re now toe to toe. “No need to thank me. I’m guessing if you found a babysitter, you wouldn’t be here with Millie.”

“Well, you’re right. I came to work out what to do about tomorrow because...my hands are pretty full. I’m sorry. I’m a little shocked you took over her entire office.”

“Grandma’s been out for a while. Touring conservatories she’s raising money for, that’s her latest thing. She hasn’t been back for more than a quick hello to boost morale for months,” he says.

I can’t believe how calm he is.

I can’t believe he did this.

I cannot freaking believe he thinks this is okay.

“I went to your office first. I was going to leave when you weren’t there, but I saw a shadow in here and thought maybe Beatrice was around,” I say, unsure how to even start freaking out about this...*day care?* Is that what this is?

“You came to *me?* We’re making progress,” he says with his usual devil’s smirk.

I actually crack a smile.

“Bossman, who else would I go to about this?”

He shrugs. “Most people go to Ward and then HR. Employees only come to me when no one else is around.”

“Ward scares me and Susan is so—” What’s the word?
“Nice, but by the book.”

He grins. Not his usual master of the universe expression, it’s fast and almost vulnerable. Blink, and you’d miss it.

“Thanks. Nice knowing someone trusts me around here,” he says.

I don’t know how to respond to that.

I trust him more today than I did last week, certainly, but he’s also made some epic mistakes.

He’s still easier to talk to than Ward or HR right now. He knows my situation, and he hasn’t been subtle about coming to my rescue.

“Well, back to the reason I’m here. I won’t be in tomorrow and I thought you should know,” I tell him, rubbing my folded arms.

“If you had childcare, would you keep driving?” He cocks his head, staring me down.

“Oh, of course. I never took an unplanned day off before at this job.” I don’t remind him how much driving relaxes me or how much it helps when I’m stressed to overload.

He nods, surveying the room, his eyes stopping at Millie, who’s still on the floor with her unicorn.

“I set all this up for you. It’ll be ready for the nanny tomorrow, bright and early. She’ll be available on an as-needed basis,” he tells me.

“The *what*—”

“Nanny. As delightful as the kiddo is, I can’t watch her myself with Brandt Dreams kicking off.” He gives me that stern look, as if he’s schooling me on something obvious.

“I heard you. But this is kinda ridiculous...even if you’re trying to be nice. It’s way too much and I can’t possibly—”

“Reese. This isn’t my guilt trip talking. This is karma.” He rolls his shoulders like he needs to limber up for his next sentence. “Remember what happened to Grandma last year? You drove us all over hell and back while she was in the hospital. You even helped take the weight off Paige’s shoulders a few times. Consider it payback. I mentioned it to Ward, and even he doesn’t have a problem with it.”

My cheeks are about to combust.

“That...that was *my* job, Nick,” I stammer. “None of this is yours, so I’m grateful, but—”

“Whatever. Maybe it is the guilt again,” he offers. “Consider it one last apology for all the fu—”

I raise my eyebrows and tilt my head at Millie, tossing her unicorn in the air and catching it.

“For the *fudge* I melted all over your life when you first started,” he says so smoothly I laugh. “More importantly, you’re part of the team. Grandma considers you part of the family, and so do Ward and Paige. So do *I*. We’re all a thousand percent behind you. If this makes your life easier, just smile for me and let it.”

There it is.

That slow, winding fissure snaking through my heart. I swear I can feel it splitting in two.

Tears I’ve been holding in all day finally come in this hot, silent, shaking rush.

I turn, burying my face, fighting to stay quiet so I don’t worry Millie.

I’m just crying because I’m overwhelmed and he’s too good to me. They all are, but there’s no mistaking who spearheaded this pop-up playground.

I’m proud, but I’m also overwhelmed.

I know nothing about taking care of a four-year-old. I have to do it because I can't let Will take Millie or—God forbid—let her end up in foster care just like I did.

You know what else is overwhelming? Finding out a man who shook me to the core with one brutal kiss, who made me a ploy to piss off his ex, just swooped in to save me. Multiple freaking times.

If he's a hero, he's The Incredible Unexpected.

But that wild card built like a wild animal is also my boss, and taking all of this help shouldn't be so easy. It's still extremely wrong, personal, and I don't know how to just let down my walls and let him...

...let him take *care* of me.

I might be sobbing a little because when he said this room with the slide and the stuffies were for Millie, I might have—just for a split second—hoped it had more to do with one nightmare date than work.

But then he said the ultimate F-word—*family*—and any doubt was demolished.

I've never had anything bigger than my sister and Millie.

Until now.

“Thank you, Nick...for everything.” Without thinking, I throw myself at him, burying my sobby face in his chest. The words barely come out.

His warm arms fold around me, naturally protective. It's been so long since that night I forgot how good he can feel.

Danger. Danger. *Danger.*

I'm in it.

I keep my face against his chest a second longer, breathing him in, muffling my ugly cry sniffles before I pull back and look up.

“S-sorry. I don't know what to say.”

He wears a sly smile as he shrugs, his eyes twinkling like stars.

“No biggie, Reese. How many times have I got to tell you to relax?” There’s a joke in his rough tone.

I lean closer to him so Millie won’t hear me whispering.

“Sorry about the whole Nick the Prick thing, too. I never should’ve started that.” I don’t know why I say it or what I’m expecting.

Maybe for him to say we’re starting over. Again.

Or for him to get defensive and rub his generosity in my face.

This is Nick we’re dealing with, after all.

But when we were close, I smelled his breath. It was clean, minty, nothing at all like the faint hint of last night’s booze I’d gotten too used to the first couple months I drove him.

Come to think of it, he smells like that a lot, lately.

Is he manning up? No longer getting drunk? Did that scare with Beatrice’s health straighten him up?

Maybe he’s not so bad after all.

Especially when he says, “I had it coming, Reese. You can quit making excuses for the times I let my inner idiot off its leash.”

“I—I should get Millie home,” I say quickly, stepping away from him like I’m being blown by the wind.

Actually, I need to get out of this tight space with his steel abs, ripped chest, and rogue beard, stat.

“Can I bring the unicorn, Auntie Reese?” Millie whispers, tugging at my leg.

“No, ma’am,” I say.

But Nick says, “Sure,” at the same time.

He looks at me, leveling those razor eyes that have officially seen too much of me.

“Let her take it. She’s having a tough time, too.”

Nope. Whatever he’s becoming, he definitely isn’t a total prick anymore.

I’ll admit I hate him a teensy bit less after today.

This whole time I’ve been stressing about how to handle everything on my plate ever since Abby got arrested. I’ve been too focused on pretending everything’s okay for Millie to recognize the fact that she’s just as terrified. Her life has been turned upside down like mine.

Plus, the boss filled a whole room with toys for a reason, didn’t he?

“Come on, Millie. We have to find some dinner and get you cleaned up. Grab the unicorn and let’s go,” I say, reaching for her tiny hand.

“I wanna play! Your place don’t have toys, Auntie Reese...” she whines.

“Take whatever you want home,” Nick urges, waving a hand at the bounty of toys.

“No, we can’t spoil her that much. Then if she’s here with a nanny, she’ll just think it’s boring.”

Nick gives me a slow look. “We’ll get new toys. Simple solution.”

Millie’s eyes go wide and she drops the unicorn, pressing her little hands to her cheeks.

“Oh my Gosh! A...a slide?”

“Sure is, little lady.” Nick smiles and nods at her. “And if you’re good for your aunt tonight, you’ll get to come back real soon and use it as many times as you want.”

So, nice guy or not, he’s still part Lucifer.

The giddy smile Millie throws him reminds me he’s a natural charmer.

“We’re lucky she just noticed it now,” I whisper before turning to her. “Okay, Millie. One time, and then we go.”

She takes off, shooting up the steps, crawls across the bed, and goes tearing down the slide with her arms in the air. “Wheeee!”

“See? She’ll be fine with the nanny,” he says, searing me one last time for today with that irresistible look.

DOLLHOUSES (NICK)



I sit down at the bar and lift a finger. “Give me a beer. Whatever’s on tap.”

“Haven’t seen you here in a while,” Jeff says, flashing me his usual affable smile.

“Has it been that long?” I try to sound friendly.

I love this place, but I haven’t missed it much.

“A couple months, at least. You used to stop by nightly. I’ll grab you that beer.” He scurries off.

I should be proud. Mostly, I’m hoping I’ve finally reached the point where I can nurse a lonely beer without risking a descent back into a black hole.

I glance at my phone to see if I have any messages from Reese.

The silence shouldn’t bother me. Then again, the poor girl has so much beating her over the head it’s hard not to check in and see how she’s doing.

I’m not about to crowd her, so I’m here for a drink and a distraction. To be among people and see the glinting city nightscape from another angle, rather than brooding at home.

Jeff slides my drink over, and I nod in thanks.

Before I’ve finished my third sip, he comes back, grinning like he’s got a winning pull tab. “The blonde in the corner wants to know if you’d like anything fancier than beer?”

“Like what?” I snort, not even cracking a smile.

Jeff chuckles. “Like *her*, I’m sure. She comes bearing gifts. That beats the hell out of dating apps.”

Leaning forward, I poke one eye at the corner of the bar. A platinum blond with half her hair in a fancy bun on top of her head smiles and gives me a syrupy wave.

When she raises her arm, her low-cut shirt sinks into cleavage, leaving nothing to the imagination.

She’d have been the perfect distraction for Old Nick.

Now? Now, her presence announces she’s the same dumbass mistake I’ve made too many times.

“Tell her I’m good.” I look at Jeff.

His eyes trail from me to her and then back again in disbelief.

“Really? You sure?”

I drain my beer halfway and nod. “If she keeps at it, get her a drink on my tab not to talk to me. The top-shelf stuff.”

Jeff rocks back and whistles, scratching his stubble loudly. “Whoa. No wonder you haven’t been coming around. You’re busy with a lady friend, huh?”

“She’s just not my type,” I say firmly.

“A few months ago, she’d already be in your lap,” he says with a laugh.

“Things change, but I will have root beer on my own tab.” I want to make sure this chick isn’t confused.

He grins. “No worries. I’ll tell Blondie her next drink’s on me.”

“Good luck.”

Jeff holds out his fist, and I bump it.

I scan through my phone, and I’m happy to see there’s finally an email from Sutton, my attorney, saying he’s connected with Reese.

My root beer's waiting in a frosted mug when I set my phone down, draining the last of the beer.

In the corner, my would-be hookup is all smiles when Jeff hands her a hurricane. I chuckle to myself. Way to go, Jeff.

A few minutes later, he's in front of me again. "You're Mr. Popularity tonight."

"Huh?"

He veers his head to the other side of the bar. "The wallflower with the long dark hair holding the wine glass. She asked what you were drinking and if you'd like another. If you're going to look at her, be subtle. It was a dare from her friends. She turned red and stuttered, trying to get through it."

I smile. "Tell her I'm flattered, I have a girlfriend, and she's beautiful but I can't accept the offer."

Fuck. I wonder who's saying these words.

"You sure you don't want a quick look? She *is* beautiful. Women like her don't just grow on—"

"You heard me the first time." I shake my head. "Let her down easy, Jeff."

He stares me down for a minute. "Okay, buddy. What's going on?"

"Huh?"

"You've been here for over an hour, only had one beer, and you've been turning down drinks from smokeshow ladies all night. You got a girlfriend and you're too chickenshit to say it?"

"I don't."

"You trying to con some chick into dating you? Playing hard to get?" His eyes are so huge it's almost comical.

"No," I say.

Jeff snaps his fingers. "Ah-ha! You took too long to answer. Who is she?"

“No one. Look, I’m just trying to get my train back on its tracks after years of misdeeds.” I flash him a wink. “They *were* entertaining years, but they’re over now.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Mack.” He turns to fetch someone another drink.

Not even five minutes later, he’s back.

“Okay, bud. Last chance. This third girl looks like a fallen angel, and she has you pegged for a beer drinker.” He holds up a dark Trappist Belgian beer. My favorite. “It’s not what you’re drinking tonight, but she pinned you down, so I had to humor her.”

Damn. I never realized women could be just as relentless as men.

Even though I say nothing, he scans the bar so he can point her out. “Hmm. She was right over there, but I don’t see her now.”

Before I can blink, an all-too familiar set of curves and medusa eyes slides onto the barstool beside me.

“Oh, Nicholas. It’s so nice to see you again.”

“You know her, I see. I’ll leave you two kids alone.” Jeff walks away whistling, leaving the Belgian beer in his wake.

I face Carmen with my harshest dagger eyes.

“What the fuck do you want? Why are you even here? Shouldn’t you be in Hollywood?”

“You forget, I still own a condo here. This is home, Nick. I grew up here with you.” She surveys the room. “Nice hangout. I had no idea you were still being stupid, hanging around bars, drinking too much, doing stupid shit.”

“I’m on my second drink. Root beer—and not the hard kind. Plus, some horrible woman wasted a Trappist beer on me,” I say, taking a defiant pull of my root beer.

She purses her lips. “Hmm. Is she horribly pretty?”

“If you’re into the Hollywood type,” I snap, making my preferences clear.

It doesn't stop her from asking, "Are you?"

I glare at her. My tastes have changed. Apparently, my appetite craves short Midwestern girls with mahogany-brown hair and soft blue eyes begging to be claimed.

Just remembering the last time I bedded Carmen—what little I *can* remember through the drunken haze then—triggers my gag reflex.

"Not interested. Let's cut to the chase. What do you want? It's been over for a long time, and I think you know it. I also hope you know I'm not playing games—especially if you dripped anything to Roland Birdshit and his merry band of liars."

"I didn't *mean* to say anything," she says with a sigh. "After our last meeting I...I was upset. You know how slimy Mr. Osprey can be, how good he is at his good cop-bad cop thing. He's not hard on the eyes, either. I just started talking."

Of fucking course you did.

She winces sheepishly. My eyes drill through her.

"I slipped up, Nick. I just—I hoped it would bring you to your senses. Or at least make you talk things out with me, which seems to have worked. You're talking to me for the first time in ages—"

"You slung champagne at me and slapped me across the face. You almost sent the fucking tabloid hounds after an innocent woman," I snarl, slamming my glass down hard enough to get a few looks from bystanders.

"Because you were with another woman! Duh. Who was the slut, anyway?" Carmen hisses.

I form a fist so tight my knuckles go white.

"Watch your forked tongue. She's not what you think—she's no one to you—and we broke up a long damn time ago. There was no reason she shouldn't have been there, and even less for you to flip your shit and cause me a public spectacle that lasted for *months*."

I stand up.

Christ. I need to get the hell out of here before I give Carmen another chance to make us both Internet famous.

She grabs my arm, this desperate smear of confusion on her face.

“Wait!”

I stare right through her.

“We never had these problems before. Remember how easy it was? We knew each other, Nick. We grew up together.” A wicked smile slides across her face like the serpent inviting me to remember Eden. “All those times on your grandparents’ yacht? No way do I believe you’d forget. We could still be like that.” Her voice goes sultry. “So close. So real. Just the two of us together, against the world, against all the people who don’t understand us...we’d be unstoppable.”

There.

Now we’ve gotten to the gist of it. She’s never given up her twisted power couple fantasies, and she wants to use a long torched bridge to a bygone childhood to reel me in.

“Speaking of old times, you know what I notice?” I ask.

“What?” she asks, leaning in.

“You’re nothing like the wide-eyed, bright girl I grew up with. You left that behind for Hollywood, and the money and fame and power changed you. The girl I grew up with was never this greedy. Never this fucked in the head.”

“Greedy? Excuse me?” She sets her drink down and flings her hands to her sides. “I’m ten seconds from slapping you again. How *dare* you imply this is all about money. I poured my heart out!”

Oh, I dare, all right.

Undaunted, I watch her pout, weathering her tirade.

“I’ve always been here for you. I’m the *only* woman who ever knew exactly what you are and I *still* accepted you. That little fresh-faced suburbanite you had at the gala? She was crushed when she realized you’d already wronged another

woman enough to get smacked in public. You think she'd stick around if she knew half your shit? I flew into town as soon as I heard about your grandma's heart last year. You wouldn't even see me. I don't know how you can accuse me of being greedy, when I'm the one who's always been here for you—the real you, Nicholas Brandt.”

“You're right. You came as soon as you heard about Grandma, and I told you then I didn't want your sympathy. Still don't need it. So buzz off.” I open my wallet, pull out a hundred-dollar-bill, and leave it under my glass. It should be more than enough to cover the drinks.

I take a step away and stop. There's still one thing to say.

“Carmen, I'm sorry if you're still upset about the breakup, but I doubt it's that simple. No chase is ever worth a run-in with *The Chicago Tea*. Osprey knows about the video we never should've made, and anything you give him just spurs nasty rumors. It's making it worse for both of us. It's high past time to let it fucking blow over.”

Carmen gives me the same soft smile she always used just before we fucked, and she stands.

Shit.

What did I say to encourage her?

She presses her face against my ear, those red lips from hell trying to drag me into the abyss. “That was such an amazing night, wasn't it? That's why I kept a copy. Some memories are *impossible* to let go of.”

What the fuck?

So there *is* another copy of that mistake floating around? I hate hearing it confirmed.

Disgusted, I push her away. She almost topples over. I catch her before she falls—I'm not a *complete* asshole—and let go again as soon as I know she's steady.

Her face falls. Her eyes narrow.

“Nicholas, you need to understand one thing. I'm never giving up what we had. I'm the only woman who's ever been

able to keep up with you and your wild ways. Sooner or later, whenever you're off this self-righteous kick, you'll come to your senses. For your sake, I hope it's before a better man comes along."

I don't even look back as I stalk away, knowing it was a mistake to come here.

Her whacked obsession could ruin both of us. The sex tape is a ticking time bomb for her career, too.

I wish she'd get that through her head.

I just wish she'd wise up, and let me fucking go.



THE NANNY I hired for Millie seems nice enough and comes with impeccable references.

Still, there's no denying little Millie has been through a whirlwind the last few days. I can't help wondering how it's going with Reese out driving.

I open the door to the makeshift office playroom to check on the kid. She's sitting at the bottom of her slide, playing a game on her tablet.

Tiffany stands up instantly from the chair she was sitting on while watching the girl.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Brandt. Millie finished her artwork early and earned herself some game time." She points to the wall where there's a drawing of a stick figure with a giant bubblehead and striped tie taped up.

Millie jumps up when she sees me, sending the iPad flying.

"Good thing I bought a bumper cover for that thing," I say.

Tiffany giggles.

"Oh, don't worry. I wouldn't have let her hold it if you hadn't. I know her type." She bends at her knees so she's at eye level with the kid. "Don't I, Millie?"

“Nick, it’s you!” Millie screams, running for the wall and ignoring her nanny.

“In the flesh,” I say.

“No. Here.” She hits the brakes just before colliding with the wall and points to her picture.

Thank God. For a minute, I thought she’d ram it headfirst, and then Reese would crucify me.

“See? It’s you!” Millie jumps up and down, pointing excitedly.

“Oh, that? Well. You’ve interpreted my likeness like a master. I think you’d impress my sister-in-law, and she’s a huge art snob,” I say with a wink, making Tiffany snicker. “Thank you, Millie. I’ll hang it up in my office.”

She beams at me.

“You smile a little like your aunt,” I tell her, noting the family resemblance. Looks like every Halle girl comes with the same sunset-blue eyes.

Grandma’s old showcase of architectural models sits just above Millie’s drawing and catches her eyes. “What’s those?”

“Model buildings. All real ones. The greatest projects my grandparents brought to life. Want a closer look?” I ask.

She nods.

I scoop her up for a better view as Tiffany looks on.

“You can take a break if you want. I’m between calls right now and Millie wants to hear about the models. Feel free to run down and grab a coffee,” I tell her.

“Oh, perfect! I haven’t had a break since naptime.” Tiffany hurries out of the room yawning.

“You see that little house there?” I tell the little girl, tapping the glass with my free hand. “Grandma designed it for a man in California, Landon Strauss. His wife, McKenna—I think—she’s a big-time author and he owns this secret-agent bodyguard firm called Enguard. Anyway, he wanted to surprise his lady with a homey cottage to write in with all the

good stuff that makes life easy. On the outside, it's like a Grimm fairy tale. Inside, a luxury dream to make every prince on the planet jealous. There's even a secret passage or two, just like a castle."

"Castle! Sekwit passage!" Millie claps her hands, trying her best to pronounce the words.

"Kiddo, has anyone ever told you you're adorable?"

"Doll houses," she whispers, almost conspiratorially.

"What?"

"You got a lot of dolly houses, mister. Does that mean you have dolls?"

What's she talking about? It takes me a minute. I laugh.

Of course. I should've explained it to her first.

"They do look like doll houses, huh? Except these doll houses really exist, somewhere around the world, and you can walk inside them. Do you know what we do in this office, Millie?"

"Yeah, you...you drive fancy cars!"

I chuckle.

"That's what your Aunt Reese does. I work with a team that designs buildings for people, just like my brother and our grandparents before us. To make sure we're doing what they want, sometimes we make a tiny sample to show them. Most of the time, the client likes the model. I help make sure we get the real one built looking just as nice. Every now and then, the client isn't happy with the design and we have to come up with something else. Most of these have become real buildings in Chicago, New York, LA, Toronto, Brussels, and lots of other places. My grandparents created most of the 'dollhouses' in this case, but Ward and I helped with the newer ones like the California cottage."

My eyes flick proudly to the hyper-modern green dreamscapes on the top shelf, the last ten years' worth of Grandma's best designs that also have a piece of us forever.

Millie covers my face with her little hands. “I want grandparents.”

Oof. What the hell do I say to that?

Anything feels too hollow. My parents were about as screwed up as Millie’s. I wouldn’t have survived them without my grandparents, and neither would Ward.

Luckily, she has a kick-ass aunt who tries insanely hard to keep her wearing that fluttery smile. “You have Reese, and she loves you. That’s just as good as two grandparents. I never had an aunt, nothing like—”

“So you think you’ll use the kid to butter me up?” a playful voice cuts in.

There’s no mistaking it.

I turn to the doorway to find Reese, ravishing as ever in a hunter-green dress. Her morning-blue eyes sparkle like waters against the deep summer green. As if that weren’t enough, the setting sun splashes light through Grandma’s oversized windows, until she glitters like an angel.

I’m fucking awestruck.

“You’re beautiful,” I grind out before I can stop myself.

Apparently, my tongue moves faster than my brain.

Her cheeks bloom rose-pink. “Um, thank you?”

I’m not taking it back. A long silence yawns between us.

Then Millie slaps my face with her palms. “Want Auntie Reese!”

“You’re a bossy little lady. Must run in the family,” I say.

“Auntie Reese!” she whines, reaching out her stubby arms.

“What if I turn you upside down and you get to meet the Tickle Monster instead?”

Millie squeals. “No monster!”

With Reese watching, I flip the kid over in my arms, but hold off on the tickles before she’s right side up again. She’s squirming and laughing when I lower her to the floor.

Reese's eyes trail from me to Millie. She smiles and opens her mouth like she's about to say something kind, but closes it immediately.

"Any news?" I don't want another awkward silence consuming us.

"Not much. The attorney spoke to Abby and followed up with me yesterday, but I don't know if my sister's talking. Will is still M-I-A." She sighs. "Next week will be better, I promise. Life has to go on, and I'm determined to get through this with as much normalcy intact as possible. For everyone. I'm realistic about the court case...this could take months—or even years. I just have to keep on going. Make it the new normal."

Millie starts to snifle.

"What's wrong, bumblebee?" Reese picks her up and holds her close.

"I want Mommy back! You said years. That's a really long time!"

Shit. The kid's got ears like a fox.

"Shhh. I misspoke, love. That probably won't happen," Reese says in this soothing murmur.

Millie wraps her arms around Reese's neck and lays her head down.

I step closer to them and put my hand on Reese's arm.

"It won't be years. If that's the best my guy can do, I'll fire him and find you someone better. We'll get this all worked out in a few weeks, Reese."

She rolls her eyes, letting out an anguished sigh.

"You're sweet, but...you can't know that, Nick," she whispers, patting Millie's back.

Wrong. I do know.

Because I'm dead serious when I promise to put every resource behind it. Whatever it takes to wipe the bone-weary expression off her face and keep Millie smiling.

“We’ll fix this. Until then, don’t apologize for being human. It’s okay to worry. It’s alright to be sad. I told you, we have your back,” I say, squeezing the back of her arm.

“Nick...I know your family went through a lot with your parents’ scandals when you were growing up, and then last year when Granny Bea handed the reins to you and Ward. But not everyone can be a Brandt. Some people aren’t that lucky. Not everyone gets a happy ending, and if we don’t admit that right now, it could be a whole lot harder later. We might have to settle for a crappier ending, and just not having the worst happen. I hope that’s what we get. Anything but the worst.”

Millie starts snoring lightly in her aunt’s arms.

Reese smiles. “Thanks for tiring her out. She fell asleep fast.”

“That was mostly Tiffany. I’ll get her stuff.” I gather up Millie’s snacks, toys, and her cup and place them in her bag. I pick up her car seat last. “Let me carry this down for you. You can’t haul the princess and her treasures.”

Her teeth flash pearly white. “Thank you, and thanks for looking after Millie, too. What happened to the nanny? I don’t want this interfering with your work.” When she laughs, there’s a nervous ring to it. “I don’t want to be a constant pest.”

I hold the door open. “You’re not. I wanted to check in on Millie—and find an excuse to step away from a pile of blueprints—so I dropped by to give Tiffany a break. Millie got interested in Grandma’s scale models, so I showed her and told a few stories.”

“God, you’re—” She pauses, her cheeks flushed, considering her words. “A really good boss. Sometimes.”

Goddamn, she’s cherry-red again. My eyes flick to her lips, remembering how sweet they tasted after one reckless dance.

I raise a brow. “You sure that’s what you wanted to say?”

“Yep.” She nods vigorously, but the hot glint in her baby-blue eyes tells a different story.

We're at the elevator now and I stab at the button with my elbow.

In the Lincoln, I open the back door, lay Millie's stuff on the floor, and fasten her booster seat in before I step out of the way.

"You're good to go. Happy trails."

She's still staring at me, this awkward admiration in her eyes.

"I never thought I'd say this, but...you're going to be one hell of a dad someday." She bends down and puts Millie in her car seat.

"Never say that again," I mutter while her back is still turned.

I know it's meant as a compliment—except it's not.

Coming from Ward, it's an insane fantasy. From her, it's like a cruel mockery of everything I can never have.

"Why?" She laughs and straightens.

I'm not smiling.

"Reese, I'm the Windy City's favorite scandal. I've got a certain reputation. Nothing about my past says dad," I tell her, keeping my voice level. "Don't let me being nice to the kid go to your head."

"Whatever you say, cactus boss. See you tomorrow."

She walks around the car and gives me a flippant wave as she gets in.

Way to put the sadness back in her eyes when I tried so hard to pull it out.

"Fucking idiot," I mutter to myself.

I watch her drive away, hating the fact that my foot-in-mouth existence can't be as simple as the drama-free lives in Millie's dollhouses.

HIDDEN BRUISES (REESE)

The next day, I have a break between rides.

I'm crazy tempted to swing by the office and check on Millie. But if she sees me, she'll want to come with, and I still have plenty of work left.

Instead, I pull into the parking garage and pick up on another business audiobook. The dry words wash over me, in one ear and out the other, but at least it *feels* normal.

Until my phone rings. I snatch it up and slide the green bar over.

"This is Reese Halle."

"Hi, I'm Nadia, Jacob Sutton's paralegal at Sutton and Sutton," a cheery voice says.

My heart races.

Get to the point woman. Can you help my sister?

"Okay? I take it there's been an update?"

"Yes. We've reviewed the case, and Mr. Sutton believes there's evidence of possible duress. A medical exam shows Abigail took several blows to the head and face the night of her arrest—"

Blows? Like punches? What the hell?

Oh my God.

That explains why she looked like roadkill when I went to see her the next day. She wasn't just worried about Millie and

freaked out.

She was knocked around the night before. I took the dark circles under her eyes for a lack of sleep and possible drug usage. Now, I wonder if they were bruises.

“Uh, how bad were these injuries?” I ask.

“No evidence of broken bones or anything like that. She’ll heal just fine. But there is a hint that she could’ve been transporting illegal substances under pressure from another party. Of course, it’s nothing without her backing it up.”

“Okay.” I don’t understand. If Nadia’s right, why isn’t she screaming it from the rooftops? “So have you gotten a statement?” I ask the woman.

“Unfortunately, no. She won’t provide us with anything.”

“What do you mean? She says she wasn’t under duress?”

“She won’t tell us who hit her or why. She’s simply not talking. As long as she’s being uncooperative, I’m afraid it’s going to be enormously difficult to help her.”

It takes a moment to click in my head.

“If someone hit her and made her transport drugs, she’s probably afraid,” I say, swallowing thickly.

Who would do that, though? And why? *Who* is Abby scared of?

The paralegal sighs. “I realize that, Miss Halle, but until we know who she’s scared of, we’ve reached a sticking point.”

“I—I don’t think she would’ve knowingly transported drugs. After she got out of the foster system, she had an addiction problem for a little while in her early twenties, but she worked through it. Millie’s been her priority, night and day, since the minute she was born. Abby’s been clean for years to the best of my knowledge. This doesn’t make sense.”

“Who would put drugs in her car seat? Do you have any guesses?” Nadia asks.

“I don’t know. I’ll try to think...thanks for the update, I guess,” I say, totally deflated.

“No problem. If anything changes, I’ll call you back.”

I drop the phone into the passenger seat beside me and sag in my seat.

Maybe I should go through Abby’s apartment again. What if the investigators missed something that would give us the foggiest idea what the hell’s actually going on?



I SECURE the baby gate between my tiny kitchen and the living room and then put water on the stove to boil.

Millie climbs over the gate like a little Houdini.

“No, ma’am! You’re too good at that but now’s not the time to impress me.” I pick her up and place her on the other side of the gate. “Stay. How old are you again?”

“Four!”

“Yep, new rule. No Millies in the kitchen until they’re at least five whole years old.” I hold out a hand with my fingers spread apart, smiling at her. “And only then if Aunt Reese says yes.”

“Awww, gimme a chance, Auntie!”

“You’ll get it the next time we sing ‘Happy Birthday.’” I hold out my hand again. “Do you know why?”

“Burn-burn,” she says glumly.

I nod and smile at her. “That’s right. Go watch TV, bumblebee. Pick out something fun.”

One guess what she picks.

Frozen. Again. With the volume blasting past fifty percent.

Sigh. Why are the adorable ones always the biggest pains in the butt?

I spread frozen chicken nuggets across a cookie sheet and pop them in the oven.

Someone bangs at the door.

Millie jumps up and runs over, trying to beat me to it.

“No, no, Millie-pede!” I yell, noticing how she’s almost as quick as a bug with a bajillion legs.

Too slow. The door hangs open on a smirking bosshole by the time I’ve got one leg over the gate.

“Nick!” Millie screams.

“Is this a bad time?” he asks, those green eyes watching me like prey.

I’m caught mid-stretch. Yikes.

I twist backward, hiding that damnable blush he’s too good at pulling out of me.

Act cool.

“Just a second,” I call out.

I quickly dump the macaroni into the boiling water before I step over the gate again. “You’re just in time for a five-star dinner: chicken nuggs and mac ’n cheese.”

“The best!” Millie screams, throwing her little fists in the air.

Nick hands her a juice box and a pack of snacks. “Little Miss Hangry, go watch your snow people. I need to talk to your aunt before dinner.”

“Thank-ee!” She swipes them gratefully and plops down on the couch with the juice box and fruit snacks.

Be still, my racing heart.

“How did you get so good at this? I’m out of my element and she’s *my* niece.” I smile at him, even though he’s stone-faced and unreadable again.

“What can I say? I know how to have a good time.” He winks at me. “If you’d let me, I’m sure I could teach you to lighten up and have fun.”

Whoa. Dangerous territory, even as heat whips through me, courtesy of those feral green eyes.

“In your dreams,” I spit.

“Every night, sweetheart,” he answers far too smoothly.

Ass.

Oh, but heat creeps into my face, my neck, my—no.

I laugh, brushing it off.

“Will you stop? You’re still my boss and I’m still your charity case.”

“Whatever you say, Miss Modesty,” he growls. His voice bristles with dark thorns, equal parts frustration and desire and a promise he could *prick* me in so many ways—and not like that stupid nickname I feel bad about.

I roll my eyes to keep up appearances.

“You’re distracting me. I need to finish dinner.” But when I turn back to the kitchen, I can see angry white water boiling over.

“Crap!” I mutter, racing to the stove to crank the heat down.

Nick chuckles. “Need help with your pasta water?”

“No, but we should probably get this over with. Let’s talk in here. FYI, before I went from being the fun part-time aunt to full-time mom, I never cooked. I was more of a salami on wheat kinda girl...or the Friday night taco kind.”

He follows me into the kitchen. “Give yourself some credit. You’re doing a decent job without much practice.”

“*Puh-lease.* I just overcooked boxed macaroni and our bedtime routine consists of me screaming ‘brush your teeth or no cookies forever!’”

“You *would* be a hardass over cookies,” he says with a snort, reaching into my fridge—completely uninvited—and pulling out a bottled cold brew coffee. “Do you mind?”

“Be my guest,” I say, throwing up a hand.

But seriously, how could I mind when he’s already inserted himself this deep in my life and done so much? I guess my hot, infuriating boss can steal drinks from my fridge anytime.

“Not time for bed. I want chicken nuggies.” Millie stands behind the baby gate, her narrow little eyes fixed on me.

A laugh tumbles out of me. “Oh, no, honey. I was just telling Nick how we go to bed. Go watch your cartoons.”

She sucks suspiciously at her juice box. “Okay.”

“I see you weren’t exaggerating about the bedtime routine.”

Why would I?

“How’s everything else? Sutton emailed me today to say he gave you an update,” Nick says, taking a pull of coffee as he gets to the point. “What’d he say?”

“You don’t already know?” I look at him, twisting my lips.

“Attorney-client privacy. It’s a thing. He’s your lawyer, not mine, even if he’s on my dime. Not for this.”

I stir the macaroni. “Well, the paralegal called and said there’s some evidence that maybe she did, um, it—” I purposely avoid the words *moving drugs* because I don’t want Millie to hear. “She did it out of duress. But they need her to back it up, and she’s not talking.”

“What evidence do they have?” he asks, his gaze focused, steely hot and slashing through me.

I fill him in on the medical exam.

“Damn. She’s not talking because she’s afraid of whoever hit her,” he says quietly.

“That’s what I thought, too. I’m going to go search her apartment again in case something got missed the first time,” I say, but the wind goes out of me.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, setting his coffee down and moving closer.

“None of this makes any sense,” I say, lowering my voice out of Millie’s range. “If I can find a hint of who the heck would want to hit Abby...at least I’d know where to start.”

“When are you going over? I’ll come with you.”

I turn away from him, mixing in the powdered cheese pack and moving the macaroni off the stove. “No, you’re not. That’s way too much to expect of my *boss*.”

“It’s nothing. I practically searched the place with you once, remember?”

I tense, unsure whether I’m good riled up or actually bothered by his proximity.

“This is a family issue...”

I want to leave it there. I want to tell him I’m grateful, but just stay out of it for once.

Ugh. This whole thing is awkward enough without involving my boss—who I have naughty dreams about I’m not sure I can keep blaming on the stress—in every little detail.

“It’s not a great neighborhood and someone’s fucked Abby over, Reese. You know that. Maybe at that very apartment. I don’t want you and Millie there alone.”

I stiffen, holding his jade-green hell-gaze. He’s not giving me a choice.

“Would you stop me? I’ve been there hundreds of times. Abby lived there alone with Millie for years,” I throw back.

“Yeah, and then someone beat her and landed her in jail on bullshit drug charges,” he growls quietly with too much truth. “Forgive me if I lay down the law and tell you I’m coming with for peace of mind.”

“You’re not forgiven,” I say.

“No? Here’s a thought. If you go and they decide to mess with the other Halle sister, what happens to Millie then? I’ll certainly do what I can to keep her safe for you, but I’ll probably go to jail for kidnapping. I’m not family.”

“That was a low blow.” I glare at him.

“Low, but true.” He shrugs. “And necessary. I’d rather bruise your pride than see you with real bruises or worse any day, woman.”

Oh. My. God.

It sucks just how on-point he can be when he cares.

“Whatever, let’s say you tag along. Maybe you can bribe the drug dealer with a fat wad of bills and a VIP pass to Jorge the Brazilian’s night club!” I spit back.

He peels away, showing his teeth in a grimace.

“I deserved that, I suppose. I’m just some pretty boy who can’t hold my own, huh? Only good for using my money to save a woman I care about?”

Oh, no.

He sounds so...so broken. I hit back below the belt because he started it, but I already regret it.

“Were you listening? I didn’t say pretty this time.” It comes out limp, rather than caustic.

That’s me trying to crack a joke and failing. Miserably.

“You have before,” he grinds out, his tone too serious.

With an exasperated rumble, Nick approaches, shoving his sleeve up to show off his tattoo.

“Take a good look, Miss Halle. This is who I was, once upon a time. I may have spent a couple years in a submarine off Russian waters, rather than charging into ambushes, but I know a thing or two about how asses get kicked. Got it?”

Speechless.

For what’s probably a whole thirty seconds, all I can do is stop, stare, admire, and regret every bitter word leaking out of me tonight.

“I guess I always wondered where the muscle came from,” I admit.

His smirk comes back. “Not from pushing blueprints around my desk. I still do military-grade workouts three times a week.”

The stove beeps. I open the oven and pull out the nuggets.

“Are you staying for dinner?”

He cocks his head, looking over the feast. “You got barbecue sauce? I *never* pass up nuggets. Now tell me when we’re planning to go to your sister’s place.”

It’s hard to breathe through my laughter. When I look up, he’s back to being Mr. Congeniality, a sly smile hanging below lidded, warm eyes.

“Just because you know how butts are kicked doesn’t mean I need you to kick any for me,” I tell him, trying to be serious again.

“You said it yourself—you’re overwhelmed.”

No denying that. I also need to watch what I say around this new, improved, and armed-with-endless-banter Nick Brandt.

“Being overwhelmed doesn’t mean I need my bossman to fight my battles. Has anyone ever told you you’re kinda pushy?”

“Only you, darling.”

Darling? I hate how it rolls off his tongue. I hate how it reminds me of his stolen kiss even more.

“Don’t call me that,” I hiss in the world’s meekest protest.

He shrugs. “It’s your rodeo and you’ve got the final say. Just tell me when I’m coming with you,” he says, making me do a double take.

“I’ll think about it. *Maybe.*”

“Perfect. Maybe I’ll think about what I should call you, darling.” Those green eyes shine with mischief.

“That’s harassment,” I warn, holding up a finger.

“Actually, I think the word you’re looking for is blackmail.”

Don’t flipping smile.

How many times can this man kill me in one night?



IT'S BEEN A FEW DAYS, but I study Abby closely when she slides into the flimsy chair behind the glass across from me.

Her eyes are still dark, but no longer deep dark halos. Her skin was definitely bruised, and it's starting to heal.

She looks panicked today, grabbing at the phone before I even pick up the receiver on my side of the glass.

"What's wrong—" I barely get the question out before she interrupts.

"Millie? He didn't take her, did he?"

"Relax. We still can't find the jackass. Nick hired a nanny to help make sure she's safe and sound during the day."

She takes a deep, rattling breath and blows it into the phone. Her lips turn up at the corners even as her shoulders sag with relief.

"Watch out, sis. You almost smiled," I tease.

"Bossypants is after you, I swear. Maybe I'll be out in time for the wedding..."

I shake my head violently.

"No way. He just couldn't afford to lose his driver to a four-year-old," I lie.

"Okay. Because rich people drivers in Chicago are so hard to come by. I'm glad it worked out for you, though. I was really worried about what would happen to you having Millie full time..."

"The nanny was his idea—" I stop myself.

Ugh. Why am I telling her this?

"Yep. Because he's in love with you," she teases with a smile.

Whatever. At least my joke of a love life takes the brutal edge off this.

“Nick Brandt loves himself first and last. Maybe his grandma’s in there somewhere.” That’s not fair, though, and I add begrudgingly, “He’s been amazing with Millie, I’ll admit.”

Abby raises an eyebrow. “The Windy City’s richest bachelor digs my four-year-old?”

I nod. “He built her a bed with a slide. She plays in Beatrice’s office while I’m at work. Yesterday, when I came to pick her up, he had her on his shoulder and was showing her the buildings the firm’s designed over the years.”

Abby laughs. “You’re boned, Reese. That’s father material, right there.”

I bite my tongue. “I told him he’d be a good dad, and he freaked out. He’s got the whole Jekyll and Hyde thing down pat.”

My phone vibrates against my leg. I pull it out of my pocket. Lucifer’s ears must’ve been burning with us talking about him.

Nick: The executive assistant told me you’re taking a long lunch today. Why?

“Hang on,” I say into the receiver. “He’s texting me now.”

Reese: None of ya business, Nosy.

Nick: You’re not at that apartment without me, are you?

Reese: Again, nosy.

Nick: Take Ward if you won’t have me. Or bill yourself a bodyguard on my card. I’m serious.

Reese: What? He’s lost his mind. If I don’t want you around, why would I want your married brother growling at me instead?

It’s a family thing that must skip generations, the Brandt boys’ uniquely hot-and-cold assholery.

Nick: I just want to make sure you and Millie are okay.

Reese: This isn’t your issue.

Nick: I’ll hire you a bodyguard. Not bluffing.

I try not to snort out loud, knowing he'd probably "hire" himself.

Reese: *Wtf? You know you're my boss, right? Not my big brother and def not my boyfriend. I'm with my sister. Her visits are timed. Later.*

Nick: *Sorry. Promise me you won't go alone.*

Yeah, I'm not promising anything. It's not his business and I still have a smidge of diminishing pride intact.

I power my phone off.

"He's texting you nonstop? Must be serious," Abby says, flicking at her hair.

"Forget about Brandt. I need to know what happened." I lean forward, assessing how she reacts.

Her jaw clenches and she stiffens. The smile that was there only seconds ago shrivels up and dies.

"We've been through this...I made a mistake. I'm sorry."

"I need to know what mistakes you made, Abby. Like why you're not talking to the attorney. He's not cheap."

She slumps forward, resting her face on her hand.

"I'm just...I'm sorry. How much is it costing?"

Crud. She's going to harass me over this one too.

"Enough," I snap. "I mean, it's partly a company legal expense—personal crisis and all—but the man's only as good as his info from you."

"Hallelujah. My sister's lover boy is so rich he's buying me a lawyer man. At least *something* good came out of this, right? Besides waiting to wake up in *Orange is the New Black*, I mean..."

"For the last freaking time, he's my boss. Nothing more. Also, you're deflecting. Nick's money is no good if you don't talk to the attorney."

Her face sinks, that sarcasm melting off. "I can't."

"Why?"

“I just can’t,” she says in that same haunted small voice before looking up at me again. “And is Millie safe with this nanny? Like if Will comes in and says he’s her dad...is she going to let him leave with her?”

“They won’t let Millie leave with anyone who isn’t me,” I say.

“Well, that’s heartening. But what’s Nick Brandt going to do? File a custody suit on your behalf? Barricade the office? I don’t think it’ll keep him from snatching her sooner or later.”

“He’s a Navy man—”

“Ohh, spicy. Explains why he’s so ripped.”

“Honestly, I don’t think he’d have to be a badass to take out Will Frisk. *I* could take out that miserable snake.”

“You’d be surprised,” she says, not a drop of humor in her tone.

I stare, blinking. “Listen. Do you want to be with Millie again?”

“You know I do. How could you even ask?”

“Then you’ve got to talk to Sutton—or at least talk to me.”

Again, those sad, hopeless eyes.

I’m losing hope she’ll say anything more before she whispers, “It’s not safe, Reese.”

My heart stops.

“Who hit you? Tell me.” I can work backward with just a name.

“What? Hit me?” She looks up.

“You had a medical exam the night you were arrested, Abby. They said there were bruises to your face and head. Are you going to pretend you hit yourself?”

“I—I don’t remember.”

Damn her. She may be my sister and scared for her life, but I’m ready to strangle this chick.

“Uh-huh. You get hit so often it wasn’t memorable?”

She doesn’t answer.

“You hit yourself?”

Still no answer.

“Jesus. Abby, I want to help you, but you’re making it ridiculously hard. The longer it takes you to speak up, the longer you’ll be away from Millie, and she’s started having nightmares. Do you want that?”

Her face sours, wrinkling with frustration.

“Is that why you came? To remind me how shitty of a mom I am?”

“I didn’t say that. I think you’re great, whatever happened to put you here. It’s a lot harder than I thought being a parent.”

She gives me a thin smile.

“Are you managing okay?” Before I can answer she says, “Well, I guess you are. You’ve got Nick’s nanny, and he’s carrying the kiddo around.”

“He even showed up for dinner with juice boxes and snacks.”

“Holy hell. If you don’t marry this guy, I will.”

“You’re not marrying anyone if you don’t get out of here, and apparently you don’t want out badly enough to talk.” I sigh.

“So, just for fun, let’s say someone *did* hit me,” she says slowly. “They’d probably be dangerous, right?”

I nod. “Yeah. Which explains why you had to do whatever to wind up here. You have a little girl to protect. You did their bidding because they made you. I’m right, aren’t I?”

“But if I need to protect my daughter and this person is dangerous, wouldn’t it be better for me to hang out here surrounded by guards? And wouldn’t Millie be better off being doted on by her loving aunt and rich-as-hell boss rather than with me? Miss Magnet for evil?”

“Evil?” I’m taken aback.

“Reese, think. Why would I risk involving you, let alone Millie, with someone I thought might be dangerous? And still out there.”

A chill runs up my spine. She’s trying to protect us. I never thought of it that way.

“You won’t even give me a hint?”

She shakes her head.

“Okay, well, they had to have probable cause. What did you get pulled over for? And if it was for drugs, why did they suspect you?”

“I think I got pulled over because my taillight was out. I’m not sure. The whole thing was overwhelming. I freaked out and then I was mostly just happy I hadn’t picked Millie up from Mrs. Gamlin’s yet.”

“That’s...not a lot to work with,” I say bitterly.

“Sorry. I hope someday this all makes sense. I just really don’t want you or Millie falling any deeper. The more I talk, the bigger your risk.”

“You can’t just rot here,” I insist, sitting up in my seat. “So, if you won’t talk to me, are you going to talk to Sutton?”

“I don’t know. If it isn’t safe...no.”

“What *is* safe then?” I don’t mean to badger her, but I’m losing my patience.

“I don’t know. I’ll figure it out when I can.”

Then what? I just play mom until then? What about Millie?

She’s still asking where her mom went every day.

“Look, I can imagine how much this sucks...but sooner or later, you have to come clean. Between me and the attorney, we can keep you safe,” I tell her.

She looks at the clock overhead. The guard standing behind her at the edge of the room shifts his weight, slowly

approaching.

“We don’t have much longer,” she says.

My heart sinks. There’s no point in more pressure right now.

“You don’t need to worry about Millie,” I tell her. “She’s safe, and I don’t think you should worry about Will either. He hasn’t been interested in her for a long time. He’s completely off the radar—even CPS is satisfied for now. I got through their little white-glove inspection.”

“I just...I need to calm down. It’s hard. The longest I’ve ever been away from Millie before was a few nights a year, and even then she had dinner with me before going to your place.”

“I remember. Trust me, she’s fine. I even learned to make chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese.”

“You’re the best little sister ever. I don’t think I’d get through this without you.” She gives me another smile that looks like it might break her.

I know you wouldn’t. “You have to talk, Abby. Just think about it.”

“We’ll see. Right now, I have to go,” she tells me.

She stands, never giving me a second glance, and that’s probably for the best. The second she disappears, I’m storming out in a huff, pushing past a couple burly cops on my way out.

This is all so bewildering, so intense, so painful.

How the hell do I save my sister if I can’t get her to open up?

BEST OF INTENTIONS (NICK)



I slurp my coffee and hammer the cup down on my desk in disgust.

I've been tagged in two thousand thirteen posts and another sixteen hundred tweets.

I'm trending for no good reason.

I had dinner with Reese and her four-year-old niece last night. The only other places I've been in the last twenty-four hours are here and home.

How the hell can I be trending? What the fuck now?

Snarling, I face the inevitable. All of my tags link to one place: *The Chicago Tea*.

I'm so fucking over it. I rip up the phone and call Roland Osprey.

"Mr. Brandt, hello. It's about time," he answers on the first ring.

"Birdshit, what's your problem?" I snap off.

"Problem? I wasn't aware I had one. You, on the other hand...well, I trust you've seen your latest spike in popularity."

"Why are you determined to destroy me?"

"You make it so easy," he throws back. "This isn't personal. I'm not out to get you, but I do run a vast

entertainment empire. The people love you, and I love the people.”

“I’m going to sue you if you don’t knock it the fuck off,” I growl. “You know that, right?”

He pauses before asking, “Do you remember the last time we saw each other?”

“No.” Why would I want to?

“It was at your grandfather’s funeral—”

“Right. No wonder your slimy face isn’t my most vivid memory of that day.” I drag a hand over my face, swallowing a groan.

“I’m just saying Godfrey Brandt was such a caring, wise man. He was always so careful about where he opened his mouth, did his business, and put his dick. He’s one of the few among his peers who I believe remained faithful to one woman. It’s regrettable his grandson can’t say the same. Your grandfather must be rolling over in his grave right now.”

“Cut your shit and leave my grandpa out of it. You’re not getting the goddamned video and I’m not commenting on it.”

“But you keep confirming it exists,” he says in that oily, refined tone I despise.

If he wasn’t such a snake, maybe he’d have the city calling *him* it’s most eligible billionaire bachelor and Chicago could leave me the hell alone.

Why was I stupid enough to make this call?

“The photos blowing up on your little blog are over three years old. They have to be. Carbon Beach, California was the only vacation we ever took together. It was one big drunken mistake. Another time, another place, another life,” I say, trying to reason with this asshole. “This movie star friend loaned her a private jet with a loaded bar. Carmen convinced me to hop on for the ride. Can’t you just move on? Why is this newsworthy?”

Birdshit laughs darkly.

“I write what my readers want, and my facts are impeccable. Thank you for the history lesson, though. I’ll be sure it gets in the next article,” he sneers. “In this case, sex on the beach wasn’t just a drink, was it? Do you know how many people would kill to see you and Carmen Seraphina up to no good naked? Even with some tactical censoring...my God. I can only imagine the traffic and the ad revenue.”

“Fuck off.” I end the call by slamming my cell on my desk so hard it’s a miracle the screen doesn’t shatter.

Way to go, Nick. Another waste of time.

Tiffany passes my office window, holding Millie’s hand.

Grandma’s office is barely a stone’s throw from mine. Thank God the kid wasn’t in her playroom when I had my tantrum, even if no one can see me in full meltdown through the frosted glass.

I need to watch it. With this kid and Reese counting on me, I’m realizing I’m not the only one affected by my shit anymore.

For the next hour, I do my damndest to get back to approving designs for Brandt Dreams’ first interior projects when my door swings open. She doesn’t even knock—and why should she when this used to be her kingdom?

I look up. Grandma stands in the doorway, regal as ever.

“If you were ever a sight for sore eyes around here, today’s the day, Grandma,” I say.

“Oh, I just stopped by to see that lovely little hummingbird before checking in with you. She’s so adorable.”

I grin. “I know.”

“How long has she been spending her days here?”

“Just a few.” I motion to the chair across from my desk. “Do you want to sit?” I stand. “My seat’s probably more comfortable. We can trade if you want.”

Her forehead wrinkles. “You can quit treating me like an old lady right now, dear. I’m quite capable of roughing it out

without imported leather.”

I don't point out she's in her seventies.

“Well, you should sit either way.”

She looks at me for a long moment, her eyes searching. “Did you forget you were supposed to take me to see the Winthrope site?”

Shit. That's today?

“I'm sorry, Grandma. It's been a long week. Ready when you are.” I grab my coat on the way out the door.

We slide into the town car together.

Reese turns to see Grandma and beams. “Granny Bea! It's been forever.”

Grandma smiles at her. “You too, sweetheart. Is that darling creature upstairs truly your niece?”

Reese gives her a quick nod.

“She's so adorable. I'm happy someone's finally putting my old office to good use, considering my grandsons act like it's haunted.”

“I hope it's no inconvenience,” Reese says sheepishly. “I promise it won't be like this for long.”

“Pish.” Grandma waves her hand like she's swatting a fly. “You're practically family, and that makes young Millie one of us by extension.”

Grandma slaps my leg, turning to face me with a low whisper. “You tell her.”

“She knows I think the kid's a rockstar,” I say, clearing my throat.

When we arrive at the Winthrope hotel site, a tangle of construction and dreams, I climb out of the car and hold the door open for Grandma.

Once I've helped her out, I take her arm and lead her through the gate, into the construction zone.

“Nicholas Brandt, I *can* walk over a little uneven ground. I told you to quit treating me like an old lady.”

“I’m being the gentleman you always wanted me to be. You could fall. Your heart might be strong enough to handle more hospital visits, Grandma, but mine isn’t.”

“Aren’t you sweet?” She laughs and shakes her head.

Ward stands in front of the construction zone with his arm tucked around Paige, who’s wearing a pink hard hat.

“I thought you were tied down with the studio?” I ask her.

She shrugs. “This hotel was such a big deal, I had to be here. I might’ve never been a Brandt without it.”

“I dig the hard hat,” I tell her.

She laughs. “It was a compromise.”

“Compromise?”

“Paige didn’t want ‘helmet hair,’ and she wasn’t coming this close to a construction zone without one,” Ward says, kissing the top of her helmet. “We agreed if I bought a pink one, she’d wear it.”

She smiles up at him.

“You two are so cute,” Grandma says with a fluttery smile.

I roll my eyes. She catches me and points a finger at my chest.

“Listen, when you’ve made it to my age and you’re still kicking, you’re easily amused. Now, I want to hear more about this adorable little girl with the slide in my office.”

“Nick built it himself,” Ward says. “Actually, he put everything together.”

Grandma smiles at me with surprise.

“You boys are doing so well on your own. I should’ve handed over the reins a long time ago before my heart left me no choice. But what’s going on with Reese? Why, pray tell, does her niece have a playroom in my office?”

Ward speaks first.

“Nick hired the nanny to help Reese with childcare. With everything going on right now, we couldn’t afford to lose our driver. Nobody gets through traffic like her,” he says, giving me a quick glance, unsure how much Grandma should really know.

“Why would you lose Reese?” Grandma asks.

I shrug, rolling my shoulders.

There’s no point in keeping everything buried.

“Her sister got arrested, Grandma. The kid didn’t have anywhere to stay. Reese is her only other family. If she didn’t have childcare, she wouldn’t be able to work, and I didn’t want her giving her left leg to find someone to watch Millie. It’s stupid to lose a good employee over a babysitter when the situation’s out of her control,” I say.

“I gotta say,” Ward jumps in, clearing his throat. “Nick took the initiative here—even when he’s been busy with Brandt Dreams—and he’s managing pretty well. It’s only been a few days, but so far, it’s all working out.”

I nod at my brother gratefully. It’s weird when he’s not a complete dick.

“The nanny teaches Millie, too. They don’t just play,” I tell them. “Tiffany Hines has a preschool curriculum she’s used with previous clients, so I told her to make sure she implemented it.”

“Oh, my. So, you’ve hired a private tutor for the driver’s niece?” Grandma asks, her eyes going wide.

When she looks at me, I get this odd sense she’s seeing someone else.

“I’m paying for it personally. Not on the company’s dime. Nothing else would be appropriate,” I say, squaring my shoulders.

Grandma throws herself at me in a bear hug, then reaches up, patting my cheek.

“See? *This* is why I never gave up on you. I knew there was a good man in there somewhere. Apparently, you just

needed a set of blue eyes and a backbone to wake up.”

Over Grandma’s shoulder, Ward grins at me and holds his thumb up.

“Nah, Grandma. You just have to be on Nick’s level—four years old and ready to do portraits in crayon over a juice box mocktail.”

Ah, there’s my brother. I subtly flip him off, making sure he can see the one finger salute wagging behind my back.

“Behave.” Paige elbows my idiot brother playfully.

Grandma lets go of me, chuckling because of course she sees it all, and turns to Ward. “The kid likes him then?”

“Reese likes him a lot more,” Paige says with a knowing smile. “She talks about him nonstop.”

“Does she?” Grandma asks slowly.

Fuck.

I was tempted to ask her later, but since Grandma just did, I glare at the hotel’s giant foundation and the towering cranes around it.

“We’ve come a long way from her joking about throwing him in the trunk and dumping him in Canada without a passport,” Ward says.

Paige giggles. “I wanted to body-slam you more than once when we first met.”

“If you body-slam me, I’ll enjoy it,” Ward says, lowering his voice to a volume he thinks I can’t hear. “But you really think Reese secretly wants Nick?”

Paige shrugs. “There’s no one else she’d rather rant about.”

“Oh, that’s perfect,” Grandma says, clapping her hands. “That little hummingbird will be my grandniece.”

I can’t pretend I’m oblivious any longer.

“Stop it. All of you. I’m her boss. I would’ve hired a nanny for anyone else in the office in her situation.”

“But you haven’t, big little brother,” Paige says.

“I hate it when you call me that.”

“You’re Ward’s little bro, but you’re older than me, so—”

“I know. It makes sense and I still hate it.”

“Little brother?” Ward says.

I catch his eyes and wait for some outrageous, pedantic shit.

“I was Paige’s boss once. Just saying.”

Boom. There it is.

“You only *thought* you were,” I say, deflecting his unwelcome advice.

Grandma chortles—yes, *chortles*.

“I’m afraid we can’t engineer Nicholas’ love life like this lovely hotel just by pecking him. So let’s walk and see the progress, or I’m leaving,” she says, patting my hand and mercifully ending my torture.

Ward waves, leading the way into the skeletal building, and we all follow him inside to do some actual work.



“WHY ARE YOU SO QUIET TODAY?” I ask.

Reese’s eyes flick to mine in the rearview mirror. “I didn’t realize I was...”

She goes quiet again.

“Pull over,” I say, after another stretch of silence.

“What?”

“Pull into the next parking lot.”

She doesn’t answer, but we enter the lot of a shopping center not far from my building. It’s late, so it’s mostly vacant.

“Park,” I order.

As soon as she does, I get out and climb into the front passenger seat.

“That’s—” She exhales at my presence. “Different.”

What does that breath mean? Is Paige right?

Forget it. Even if she wanted to fuck you, the price is a wrecking ball.

“Something wrong?” I clip.

“I’m just used to everyone being in the back,” she says.

Against my better judgment, I take her hand. “Sorry. I could tell you’re upset. I wanted to help.”

Her eyes drop to our intertwined hands and then rise to my face.

“I’m not upset. It’s been a long day. I need to get you home and come back to the office to grab Millie.”

“Would you feel better if we searched your sister’s place again? I can help. I have time right now.”

She pulls her hand from my grasp and locks her fingers together in her lap, looking down.

“We’ve been through this before. It’s not your problem.” She shakes her head. “Honestly, it’s probably stupid to think we’d find anything. The place was combed over by investigators...”

“You want one more look. I don’t think it’s a bad idea, and I want you two safe.” The truth is, I need them safe. I can’t handle the idea of something happening to them. “We don’t know what your sister was involved in or what was really going on. And if she’s not talking, we need clues.”

“Why?”

“What was Abby doing the night she got in trouble?”

“...I don’t know,” Reese says, twirling a lock of brunette hair around her fingers anxiously.

“Who was she with?” I ask slowly.

A hot tear slides down her cheek.

“I told you, I don’t know, dammit. I’ve been asking myself the same questions constantly. I tried to pull it out of her repeatedly. Abby thinks she got pulled over for a blown taillight, but I don’t believe it. Especially with the medical record showing someone hit her. There’s more to this than she’s saying. She told me she can’t talk because she thinks she’s protecting me and Millie. From who, from what, I don’t know.”

It hurts like a punch to the jaw to see her so lost.

Hell, if I could just give her answers, I’d take a decade of Roland Birdshit’s incessant torture.

I reach over, using my thumb to wipe the tracks left by the tears off her cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Reese. It’s not over yet.”

Blinking, she heaves out a slow breath.

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do. But you’re Nick Freaking Brandt, the Windy City’s finest.” She uses a fake Queen’s English voice for that last line. “And...I’m Reese Halle. Former orphan and sister of a walking mystery case who’s hopefully not facing life in prison.” Her plain Yankee accent with the occasional drawn-out vowel is back.

“I like Reese Halle’s voice better than that British bullshit,” I say.

She snorts and gives me a faint smile.

“The point is, you’re a billionaire. Your worries exist in another universe. I know you work hard, but you play just as hard. If a reporter ever takes an interest in me, it’ll be because I ran over some famous person and killed them.”

“I’ll post your bail,” I say.

She snorts again. “I know you’re trying to be nice, but Abby’s mess isn’t your problem. You’re the billionaire boss, and I’m just the driver.”

“What do you mean ‘just?’”

“You know what I mean, Nick. I don’t think you should make this your fight. Let me sort it out on my own.”

“I don’t want to interfere. I want to fucking *fix* it,” I say, reaching for her face, tilting her chin up to look at me with those wide, sparkling gas flames for eyes. “I need to know you’re safe.”

She’s quiet for a minute. “I saw *The Chicago Tea* today.”

Fuck. This is going nowhere good.

“Hope you at least had a laugh,” I say.

She doesn’t smile. “Those were some pretty racy photos of you and Carmen on the beach...”

“It was years ago, Reese. I don’t know why the jagoff published them today. I wish he wouldn’t have. It’s like he’s determined to wreck me just for fun.”

“You’ve got a Hollywood model slash actress who clearly isn’t over you. I can’t help but wonder why you’re so insistent on taking on my problems. I’m no model. Just a boring girl from Rockford,” she says with a worried look.

“Nothing boring about you, and just because she isn’t over me doesn’t mean I’m not over her. It really doesn’t matter. I’ll wait until he gets bored and fucks off to hound someone else.”

If only it was that easy. I don’t dare mention the X-rated video dangling over my head like a guillotine, a career-ending atom bomb Carmen could unleash anytime, even if it wrecks her, too.

“Nick, I’m sorry this Osprey guy wants to trash your reputation. Your family’s been through enough with everything that happened last year. But doesn’t that prove my point? Don’t you have your own crap to worry about?” She tilts her head, studying me. “I just...I don’t understand. Is this some kind of weird stress relief for you? Trying to fix my life because—because maybe you can’t fix yours?”

What the fuck?

My gut twists, even as her face registers pure horror a second after the words fall out. *This is what she thinks of me?*

Hell. What if she's right?

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean..." She grabs my arm. "Nick—wait!"

"Forget it. I'll walk the rest of the way since we're only a few blocks from my place. Have a good night, Reese." I open the passenger door and stalk out.

I'm across the parking lot and on the sidewalk when I look back. The Lincoln's still parked.

Whatever. She can sit there as long as she wants. I have nothing to say if I only bring her grief over ulterior motives.

She calls me three times.

After the third attempt, I send her a text, walking through the lobby of my penthouse.

I'm busy. See you tomorrow.

I silence my phone and drop it back in my coat pocket.

I have nothing left to say to you tonight, Miss Halle.

Can I really blame her for thinking that, though? Honestly?

The Chicago Tea proves one thing—there's an avalanche of shit out about me waiting to break every day. If I were a twenty-something year old woman whose life was falling apart, I wouldn't put my faith in *the* Nicholas Brandt either.

No matter what I do there, I'm cursed.

There's no coming back from the past.

Memories of her first month race through my head. I probably mistook her for a college boy because I was drunk off my ass. Even with her bulky winter trench coat and cap, there's no way a body like Reese Halle's looks remotely male.

I'm such a fallen fucking star.

If my grandparents weren't Brandts, I'd be living in a cardboard box.

No wonder she questions my motives even if she's dead wrong about them.

No wonder I look like this clumsy, washed-up superhero charging into her mess with nothing but deep pockets to help.

No wonder I'm still jerking off to this woman, coming in the shower with a release that hurts—and it's as close as I'll ever get to having her under me.

Let her think I'm human trash.

I'm not backing off until I know they're safe. She can be pissed and insult me to my face if she wants. I don't fucking care.

Helping her is one thing I won't regret, even if I've got a better chance of becoming the Pope than having one torrid night of sheet-ripping sex with Reese Halle.

Sitting by the fireplace I don't bother to light, I stare at the darkening cityscape until I'm buried in shadows. I unmute my phone before I bother voice-activating the lamp.

She hasn't tried to call again.

Good, I lie to myself.

Jaw clenched, I send another message. ***Forget about earlier. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have stormed off like a dejected thirteen-year-old.***

Her response is immediate.

Bossman, truth be told, you're always a little Jekyll and Hyde. But you're not the one who should be apologizing. I had no right to ask you that crap, and I'm sorry.

I smile because that's my Reese.

Correction: that's Reese, and I only wish she was mine.

I know what I need to do.

I have to get to the bottom of whatever's happening with her sister, before it gets the jump on her or that poor kid.

Then I need to permanently delete her from my dirty dreams, my lust, my quiet obsession that only grows harsher the longer we play this long game.

Even if it kills me, I'll protect her from *me*.

CANNONBALL PROOF (REESE)

Millie and I are at Millennium Park, her favorite place in the city.

She's adorable and carefree, tottering around the Bean, a gleaming icon like quicksilver in the sun.

In my head, I keep replaying my stupidity with Nick last night. And it feels pretty terrible that he was the first to apologize—even if I tried to beat him to the punch with my calls.

He shouldn't have. I was nothing short of rude as hell. On impulse, I send him a text.

I'm sorry again for last night.

The worst part is, I'm not sure I was wrong. I definitely should not have blurted it out to his face, but...

The amount of time he spends worrying about us *is* interesting, considering his inability to keep his own life together.

He may be changing, but he's still the world's hottest walking time bomb. It's like New Nick doesn't know how to handle his devilish good looks without any sin.

Then again, I'm in no place to guess at what goes on in his head, much less his heart.

My brain is so messed up right now I could scream.

Abby was always who I turned to for advice, the big sister I could count on.

We grew up with the same history.

She went through the system's spinning knives with me.

She understands.

She knows what it's like to have nothing and no one in a way most people never will.

Sure, Abby has her own demons to conquer. She may not be perfect, but I thought she was doing better. She always showered love on Millie, and I didn't realize how much work love is until I've had to do it every day.

And I'm still thanking my lucky stars I had my load lightened so I can hold on to a shred of normalcy.

If my smirking, bewildering, and yes—drop-dead sexy—split personality grump of a boss hadn't come through for me, I'd be struggling, and I earn a nice income.

Now I understand even more why Abby always needed help financially.

But we've always been there for each other.

If I don't free her, I'm letting her down, and I'm the only hope she has.

Not to mention the idea of her missing so much of Millie's life. It makes me sick, and so does the thought of Millie starting to forget her own mom.

A random woman sits down on the bench beside me. She stares at me for a second too long. I don't meet her eyes. She probably thinks I'm too young to be at the park with a kid Millie's age.

Whatever, it's none of her business.

When I look up, a kid comes running across the park, an older boy who looks like he's six or seven. He about to plow dead into Millie and he doesn't see her.

"Millie!" I bolt up, beckoning her with my hands. "Move over!"

For once, she listens, giggling the whole time. She runs at me on her stubby legs just as the boy goes blasting by the spot where she stood a second ago.

Close call. Concussion by a quick moving monster-kid narrowly averted.

God. I'm going to go grey by twenty-five if this keeps up.

She runs up to me and hugs my leg.

I lean forward and kiss her on the head. "Go play, but stay where I can see you."

"O-kay." And she's off again.

Yep. Parenting isn't for the faint of heart.

My phone pings.

Nick responded.

My heart jumps. What did he say?

I press my back against the bench until it hurts. My nosy bench neighbor glances at me again.

I bet I look like a crazy person, flipping out like a college girl with her first big crush on a dude ten thousand percent out of her league. Sighing, I read his message.

Already forgotten. You were stressed. You've heard my mouth misfire a hundred times when the pressure's on. I'm not curled up in a ball sobbing over any hurt feelings, believe me.

There's a gif attached of a cannonball bouncing off a man's rock-hard abs.

I laugh. It's so Nick.

Equal parts jokester and brooding strongman.

Yeah, I definitely overreacted. It's not my place to judge him for being rich and irresponsible and trying to do his best. He's been nothing but helpful. Office playroom and hired nanny aside, without his attorney, there's no way I could even start to help Abby.

I need to make it up to him with more than a lame apology, but I don't have the energy right now. My eyes are also glued to Millie, who's now jumping around a bench, holding out her hands like she wants to take flight.

"You and me both, bumblebee," I mutter.

"You loved that text," Nosy Bench Neighbor says. "How'd you get lucky enough to date a comedian?"

Wait. That voice.

I look up. "Oh my God, Paige! I didn't realize it was you. I'm sorry."

She smiles, pulling down a pair of oversized shades on her nose.

"No problem. I wanted to see how long it'd take before you noticed."

"What brings you to a park midday?" I ask.

"I needed some fresh air before my sculpture classes tonight. It's good for the muse," she says with a smile.

"How's your studio doing?"

"I love it. I'm teaching seniors how to sculpt their self-portraits. You know I still stop by the office every now and then just to help Ward and Nick." She leans over, dropping her voice to a whisper. "They know their new assistant isn't half as good as me."

"Ha, you've got big heels to fill, lady. She's not bad, but she just isn't as quick as you."

Paige smiles. "It's my husband and brother-in-law. What would I be if I didn't offer to take care of them every once in a while?"

"You don't request rides as much as you used to."

"I mean, I'm not technically on payroll." She grins and blushes. "Plus, a lot of my classes run late in the evening. Ward drives me to those. He insists on coming because he doesn't like me downtown alone after dark."

“More like he doesn’t like letting you out of his sight.”

She slaps my arm. “Enough about me. Who lit up your face with that text?”

Since she put it like that...now I don’t want to tell her.

“Nick...the Prick himself,” I say, though I have to fight to push that last part out.

“Oh, you’re still calling him that?” Again, she gives me that look over her sunglasses.

I narrow my eyes. “Why wouldn’t I?”

For a second, I’m alarmed. What has he said to her?

She smiles like a cat with a toy. “Because he hired you a nanny who tutors Millie. That’s not very prick-like.”

I wave my hand. “Oh, boy. Has he told you about all the other stuff?”

“Maybe. I mean, I only know there’s an issue with your sister. He’s been awfully protective of your privacy. Hope things are okay. It’s kinda fun hating your hot boss, isn’t it? I should know since I married mine.” She sticks her tongue out.

I laugh. “I guess, but...what do you mean?”

“Every time you pick me up, you have a new war story, and there’s only one Brandt boy who’s always the star.” She leans over again, dropping her voice. “Good thing, too. If it was Ward, I might have to kill you.”

“Stop!” I push at her playfully. “Look, since I don’t drive you around much these days and Bea’s gone, he’s just my most interesting passenger. Also, your husband is way too nice and boring now. As his driver, that’s cool. I won’t sneeze at low-drama passengers. But that also makes Nick like a hundred percent of my road hazards these days.”

“Mister Road Hazard seems to be helping stop a lot of crashes lately,” she says knowingly. “I think he’s turning over a new leaf.”

A smile pulls at my lips.

“Could be. I’m not sure how I ever would’ve handled this without him. Like you said, he hired Millie a nanny, but he also helped my sister out with a good attorney.” I leave it at that.

I don’t want to say anything she doesn’t already know or have her thinking my sister is some kind of criminal lunatic.

Then I remember Paige Brandt is Nick’s sister-in-law, privy to Brandt family secrets I can only imagine. She must know more about him than I do...right?

“Hey, can I ask you something?” I venture, keeping my eyes on Millie.

“Of course.”

“What’s the deal with Nick?”

She gives me a long look and snickers. “I’m not sure what to tell you. He’s a hot mess, and I do mean hot. Although, I did snag the sexier Brandt, so meh.”

She also got the more boring brother, but I don’t say anything.

“I’d be lying if I didn’t emphasize the *mess* part. It’s not entirely his fault, though. What do you know about how things went down with Victor and Giselle Brandt last year?” she asks.

“Their parents? I know enough. I think. I know they were shady as hell and always trying to drag down Beatrice, their sons, you, and anyone else at the company if they thought it would hurt Bea or get them more money.”

Paige nods. “Anything else?”

“Nick mentioned that he and Ward handed their asses to them so they’d never come around raising trouble again. He wasn’t really specific about how, but I didn’t ask either.”

She stares at me for a long second. “You guys seem to talk a lot. Interesting.”

I try not to blush.

“Well, commuting through Chicago traffic can rack up some serious time in the car together...” I hope she believes

me.

“It’s not just that Ward and Nick’s parents were shady, though. They were, but they were the reason why the Brandts turned into such tabloid material. They were on the family yacht when that actor died. There was never enough evidence to charge them, but everyone believed they were guilty. And every time the boys tried to move past their parents’ scandals, something would dredge it up again. Victor and Giselle were also super pissed because Beatrice cut them out of the will—and they deserved it for being horrible. I don’t want to spill everything, because it’s not my place. But Ward and Nick spent more time with their grandparents growing up, and their parents’ mess left a few scars.”

Dang. That’s heavier than I thought.

I flop back on the bench, processing everything.

“I didn’t know that but I’m not surprised,” I say slowly. “Nick mentioned Bea being like a mom to him more than once.”

“Exactly. So, I’m no shrink, but you can see how growing up like that might make it hard to trust people. I think all the crap they had to deal with early on molded them both. But it wasn’t just the scandal, I mean. It’s one thing to have parents making bad choices. It’s another to have your grandparents swooping in at every opportunity because your mom and dad aren’t *fit* to raise you.”

Wow.

My heart aches for Nick.

“They were basically abandoned,” I whisper.

“Right. Ward dealt with it by walling himself off. It wasn’t that he didn’t care about people. He was *afraid* to care about anyone too much, because they might leave him high and dry, until I tamed my beast. Nick, I think he tried to live down his parents’ scandals by creating his own drama. Becoming the center of attention feels like something he can control, even when he can’t.”

Ouch. The poor guy. I shouldn't be so hard on him, so judgmental.

The foster system sucked, but I've never really thought about what it'd be like to have bio parents who flat-out don't love you. *Would that be even worse than no parents?*

"Was it that bad? Is he broken for...for life?" I don't want him to be.

"No. I just think he's afraid of love, and he will be until someone gives him a good reason not to be. Just like his big brother." Paige pushes her shades down, as if to say *case closed* to her psychoanalysis.

We're silent for a moment, basking in the springtime sun, both of us deep in thought.

"You know the girl on all the gossip blogs? The crazy chick that threw champagne and slapped him when he enlisted me for that crazy fake date night—Carmen what's-her-face—is she just a psycho ex-girlfriend or what?" I ask, holding my breath.

Paige looks at me and frowns.

"Hmm. I don't know much about that, unfortunately. That's one card Nick holds close to his heart, and Ward's only ever hinted at it a couple of times. I got the impression they were friends who turned into more, then went hot and cold for a while. Like childhood sweethearts or something. They grew up together. Ward did tell me that Nick finally told her to get lost for good around the time Beatrice was in the hospital."

"...I think Carmen missed the memo," I say, trying not to let my bitterness show.

"Yeah, she's been after him again. It's kinda pathetic. Nick keeps pushing her away and she just keeps feeding the tabloids. I feel bad for both of them."

"Is he in love with her?" I grind out.

Why? Why do I care so much?

"I—I don't think so. They both just seem really lost to me." She's about to say more, but an alarm chimes softly on

her phone. “Oof, there’s my cue. I need to go set up for my class. Do you and Millie want to see my new studio? I’ll help her make a clay pot.”

“Sure! She’ll love that. I left the town car across the street in case somebody needed a last-minute ride. I’ll save you the walk.” I stand up and cup my hands around my mouth. “Amelia Halle! Come here for a surprise.”

She comes skipping over, trips on a half-flattened water bottle, and goes down.

My heart stops.

I make a frantic run for her and I’m closing in when she stands, brushes the gravel off her arms, giggles, and then runs on to meet me.

Millie slams into my leg, and I pick her up.

“Are you okay, Millie?” I ask breathlessly.

“*Surpriiise!*” she squeals.

Yep. I got lucky. She’s going to be just fine.

“Do you want to make a clay pot today?”

Her little face turns into a ginormous grin. She claps her hands, but one slaps my face before managing to connect with her opposite palm.

I walk over to the bench with Millie on my hip. “Have you met Paige before?”

Millie shakes her head.

Paige stands. “Hi, little lady! We haven’t met, but I’ve heard so much about her. Nick loves her. Ward thinks she’s adorable, and Beatrice wishes she were her own granddaughter.”

“See? You’re a popular girl,” I tell Millie.

Paige steps around me so she can see Millie’s face.

“I’m Paige. What’s your name?” She holds her hand up.

Millie gives her a high five. “Millie. Millie Halle.”

“Millie Halle, do you want to make some art?”

“Yeah!”

I lean back when Millie goes to clap this time and thankfully miss her chubby palms.

Paige plays with Millie in the back seat on the way to her studio. It gives me time to think.

I need to talk to Nick, and I need to say more than the half-hearted crap I texted earlier. Maybe I’ll drop by his place later.

Then again, I’m not sure that’s a good idea.

With my luck, I’d go over to apologize and run smack into a snarling Carmen Seraphina.

Not that it matters.

I don’t care who he dates—or breaks up with ten times over.

As we’re walking into Paige’s studio, my phone buzzes. I pull it out of my purse.

Stand by. I might need a ride later, Nick says.

After a short walk, Paige lets us inside and I bring Millie a booster seat. Paige goes to a cabinet, pulls out a ball of clay, and hands it to her.

With the little artist hard at work, I can respond to Nick’s text. ***You need a few things but I’m not sure a ride is one of them.***

Nick: Very funny. You’re a riot. What are you and Millie doing?

Reese: She’s upgraded from nuggets to chicken ala Kiev, and I ran away with a biker. Want me to see if he can give you a ride?

Nick: Bullshit. What are you really doing?

Reese: We’re at your SIL’s art studio. She’s teaching Millie to make a clay pot. It’s cute to watch.

Nick: It just so happens this is the last ride I’m requesting. I’ve hired a nicer driver without a club for a

tongue, and she'll be starting tomorrow. I'll miss your good looks.

For a second, my heart stops, until I realize it's too absurd to be true.

Reese: Like hell, bossman, and you don't need a ride. You just wanted an excuse to text me.

Nick: Whatever you want to believe.

He attaches a gif of a man running around, hysterically trying to fan out the flames in his pants.

Liar-liar.

Laughing, I put the phone down.

Paige leans over and places her hands under Millie's small hands, helping her mold the clay. "What's he saying now?"

"Oh, he just might need a ride later. Nothing too important. Just business."

"That was a lot of grinning for boring business," Paige throws back.

"Yeah, maybe."

"Push your thumb in the center of the ball and then wiggle it around to make a hole, okay?" she tells Millie.

Millie giggles, jabbing one hand into the top of the whole lump. "It's squishy."

"Is it fun?" Paige asks her.

"Yeah!"

I smile at Paige. Thank God for friends like her.

"You and Ward are going to be awesome parents," I say.

"I hope you're right."

It's true and kind of amazing considering the type of parents the brothers had.

Deep down, I know Nick will make an amazing father, too. The way he's so attentive with Millie is impossible to miss.

I really shouldn't have gone off on him the way I did yesterday. It's just embarrassing, needing so much help from my boss, and I wasn't wrong when I said we're from two different worlds.

Still, I have to make it better to soothe my own conscience.

He's not mad, but it doesn't excuse my big mouth.

"You're awfully quiet over there. What's cracking?" Paige asks.

"Well...I *may* have been rude to one of my bosses yesterday and it's bothering me. I think I should apologize. Umm—apologize again, I mean."

"Nick made you put your foot in your mouth, huh?" She flashes me that famous Holly grin.

Her last name might've changed to Brandt, but she'll always be a Holly at heart. There's a reason her cousin, Milah, is this big pop star singer known around the world.

"Nick the Prick is my friend!" Millie says.

I level a stern look on her. "Amelia Halle, I told you to never say that again."

"It rhymes, Auntie Reese," she insists, like that excuses everything.

"Find another rhyme."

Paige doubles over laughing.

"I see you've taught her well." Her eyes move to Millie. "You and Nick are friends, huh?"

"Yee! He showed me dollhouses he makes before the big house, and when Miss Tiffany gets cranky he lets me go slide."

That's the first I've heard about this.

"Miss Tiffany is cranky?" I ask.

"She makes me write my name and ABCs in my notebook, and...and I don't like it one bit!"

“Oh, my. That’s a hard life,” I say, sharing a knowing look with Paige.

Paige smiles at me. “Well, if you need to see Nick to talk this out, you know where he lives. But you seem fine to me.”

Maybe, but she doesn’t know how low I hit him.

“Although, if you’re going to go over to apologize, you might want to find a new nickname for Millie first.”

I roll my eyes. “We need a new rhyme. I’ve been playing around with Nick the Trick but it just doesn’t sound quite right.”

I push my tongue in my cheek. I also don’t need a reminder that he could nail the part of evil magician in any big fantasy film with that build, that smirk, and that agonizing hint of what he could do on a long, dark night.

“Good luck with that,” she says to me before turning to Millie. “Okay, I think our pot’s looking good. Do you want to paint it?”

“Yeah!” Millie squeals.

Paige takes a plastic bag filled with assorted paints out of a drawer and hands it to Millie with a small brush.

My eyes go to Millie’s light-pink jumper. I know Paige is trying to help, but I don’t want to have to buy new clothes on top of everything else.

Paige’s gaze follows my eyes. “Oh, shoot, maybe we should get a smock first. What do you think, Millie?”

“Kay!” She follows Paige to a coat rack filled with smocks and lets Paige help her into one before she returns to her creation.

“So, do you think it’d be weird for an employee to show up at their boss’ place to talk about something that happened at work?” I ask.

Paige smirks. “Given all the other factors? Nah. Quit second-guessing and do it. Now help me set up for my next class real quick.”

“Quick...that’s it,” I say, snapping my fingers.

“What’s it?” Paige blinks at me.

“Millie, we call him Quick Nick now, okay?” I smile. Because there’s no denying how quick he’s come running to my rescue.

“Quick Nick! It rhymes.” Millie smiles at me, looking up from her project.

“Lucky girl. You found one after all,” Paige says.

“Yeah, if you’re going to denigrate your boss, you can’t do it in front of a kid who repeats everything like a little parrot.”

Paige picks up bags of clay and hands me half of them.

“You start here, and I’ll start at the back of the room.”

“Got it.”

Once each chair has a bag of clay, paper towel, and paper plate, I grab Millie and we leave. On the way back to the car, I keep turning over the new Nick-name.

And yes, my blood heats when I imagine whether or not it’s true in the bedroom.

With all the rumors, all the scandals, all the salacious hints about him...I’m guessing that’s a big fat *no*.

I wish I could stop there.

Because by the time I’m behind the wheel again with Millie in her car seat, I’m worried.

What if Quick Nick lives up to his name in other ways?

What if he’s already pouncing on my heart, bringing me down like a rabbit in a tiger’s grasp?

MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME (NICK)

My coffee table is covered in photos.

I sit on the floor over an album I'm arranging. The internet is only a fun place to keep photos if no one knows who you are. Otherwise, you're cannon fodder for every superficial shithead on Earth who wants to fling their two cents at your life.

Been there. Done that. No fucking thanks.

With the pictures that matter, I'm old-school.

Photography—whether it's taking pictures or staring back at them—has always lowered my blood pressure, and I've neglected my little hobby for too long. It's obvious from how old some of the pictures are.

There's a photo of me with Ward, both of us wearing Santa hats in front of a tall Christmas tree decked out like a neon-gold dream. He just started middle school and I'm still finishing elementary.

Grandpa stands behind him, giving the camera that life-loving smile I miss, and I'm in Grandma's lap.

Our parents? Nowhere to be found.

As usual.

When I come across an even older picture, I smile. It was a stand-off with Ward in Maui, at our grandparents' place. We're already soaked from hurling water balloons at each other.

I remember winning that day. I could dodge the balloon bombs faster and Ward's aim sucked.

Then there's a picture of us in our dress uniforms. He was almost out of the military then, and I was following in his footsteps.

That's my life, following Ward's lead.

I shake my head and try not to dwell on it.

I pick up another photo that makes me stop.

Graduation day.

I was out of the service for just over a year, finishing a double degree in business and architecture. I had so many credits from classes in the Navy, I went through it like lightning.

I tuck it back in the album and grab another.

A picture from the "fake date" Reese and I went on, seconds before we kissed.

Shit. I forgot I ever printed this off my cloud storage.

Its elegance is enhanced by the black and white filter. Though the classy look has nothing to do with the scene, and everything to do with *her*.

She's so gorgeous it makes me throb, and she looks too comfortable with my arms around her—right before Carmen blew everything to kingdom come.

For a moment, we were smiling, entranced, our lips thrumming with a violent magnetism as they connected.

She melted so sweet for me, her whimpers like wine, my hands trailing to cup her ass.

I *know* she felt the same spark I did.

Like our date was real. Like lust would overwhelm us. Like for just one night, we were a true couple.

And maybe we would've been, if the bitch who won't take no for an answer hadn't lost her mind.

Pain daggers through me. I knew what might happen the instant I showed up with Reese.

If I cared, if I was man enough to guard her heart, I never should've subjected her to it.

The joys of being Nick fucking Brandt.

The past never dies. There's never any shortage of brand-new ways to detonate my life. Always with collateral damage.

The intercom chimes, ripping me from my thoughts.

"Mr. Brandt?" a gruff voice asks.

"Yeah?" I say.

"There's a Reese Halle here. She's asking to be buzzed up."

Why would Reese be here?

"Send her up," I tell the front desk.

Damn. I hope Reese hasn't had any new disasters.

When I hear the knock, I fly over, damn near ripping it off its hinges.

Reese shifts Millie to her side and bites her lip. "Hi. I'm not sure if it's okay to show up here out of the blue like this —"

"It's fine. Come inside." Deep down, I'm glad as hell she's here.

She nods but doesn't move.

"I just wanted to apologize. Again. Face to face. I'm so sorry for—"

"For what? I told you, it's forgotten," I snap off, more harshly than I mean to.

She gives her head a small shake, looking at me pensively.

Her lips have the opposite effect. If the kid weren't here, I might hurl caution to the wind.

It would be too easy to close the space between us and reclaim that ripe strawberry of a mouth with my teeth.

“For the way I talked to you when you offered to go to Abby’s with me,” she answers.

I fold my arms, leveling a stare. “You’ve already apologized for that several times. It was no big deal. I told you.”

“But—”

“Why don’t you come in?” I step back and wave a hand toward my living room.

She nods nervously and follows me in, where she stops midstep.

“Oh.” Her mouth drops open. “This place—it’s *beautiful*, Nick. I love your fireplace.”

“I had it redesigned recently by my own crew. We filmed and photographed the entire thing. It’ll be showcased for Brandt Dreams.”

“I can see why! It’s seriously breathtaking.” She repositions Millie for the second time.

“You can put her down. Let the little lady stretch her legs,” I say.

Reese surveys the room. “Um, everything here looks high-end. Expensive and pretty breakable.”

I chuckle. “You worry too much. If she breaks something, I’ll make her work it off. Right, Millie?”

She smiles like a cherub. “Yeahhh! I’ll clean the whole playroom!”

“The whole room?” I return her smile. “That’s bold. You’ll have to sweep the floors, too.”

Her face wrinkles. “But...but the broom is bigger than me.”

“We’ll compromise,” I assure her, reaching out to ruffle her hair.

“You hear that? Be good for us.” Reese holds her up, resting her forehead on Millie’s. “I’ll put you down, but stay

away from the fireplace. No running, no jumping, and no flippies of any kind, okay? Your feet stay planted on the ground and you move slowly.”

“Flippies, Auntie Reese!” she says with a giggle.

“Millie—”

“I’ll be good. *Pwomise.*”

Reese sets her down on my marble floor.

“Can I take your coat?”

“Oh, we won’t be here long. I just wanted to—”

“Apologize. Why do you think I need to hear it a hundred times?” I ask her.

She sighs. “I was way too harsh. I was rude to you, Nick. You were just trying to help. You’ve *only* tried to help lately. You didn’t deserve what I said and you also deserve better than a half-joking text or two.”

Her eyelashes flutter, cutting me in two. I hope she never finds out how impossible it is to stay mad at her over a flippant comment.

“Really, truly, I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. For us. I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about, but I’ve thought things over and...yeah. I’d welcome your help tracking down Will Frisk. It was stupid of me to refuse.”

I shrug. “Are you sure? I’m still willing to help, but I’ll back off if that’s what you want. When you told me to mind my own business, I should’ve listened. It’s just hard when we ride around this frigid-ass city all winter with barely a hint of sun to look forward to.” I stop, far too close to telling her it’s her smile I look forward to when there’s no sunrise. I lean forward so Millie can’t hear. “Listen, if someone fucks with you, they’re fucking with me, too. That’s how it is now.”

Her eyes dance when she laughs.

I think she lingers a second too long, breathes too deep, inhaling me.

Shit.

“That’s sweet, and I’m sure I wouldn’t have made it this far without your help.”

“Wrong. You’re strong and capable. I’m just breaking your fall,” I say. “There was no point in leaving you to suffer through it alone when I can help.”

“I’m not used to people helping, so help makes me nervous,” she says, those pastel-blue eyes darting away. “Abby was the only person I’ve ever been able to count on. It’s weird because with you—without the company—I’d be totally alone...”

She shrugs with both shoulders so high it’s like she’s retreating into a shell.

Reese has never been this open with me before.

That picture from the night I mashed up her heart comes back to me. Yeah, I think she’s as beautiful tonight as she was on that fake date before our brush with Carmen.

It’s in the eyes. They’re soft, bottomless, trusting.

Goddamn, Nick Brandt, you’re such an idiot.

Slap. Slap. Slap.

“Millie!”

My eyes trail Reese’s gaze to the source of the sound.

Millie stands in front of the sliding glass door to my balcony, slapping it with both hands.

I smile. “She’s okay.”

“She’s going to keep her hands to herself, aren’t you, Millie?” Reese says, hands on her hips. She’s more adorable than ever when she’s trying to sound stern.

Walnut-brown hair cascades over her face when Millie drops her head.

“Yes, Auntie Reese.”

“Since you didn’t let me take your coat, why don’t we all go check out the balcony? You’ll love the view,” I say, already approaching the door.

Reese's mouth forms a tight line. "There's no way she can fall?"

"She'll be fine, Mama Bear. Let me grab my coat." I look over at the glass door where Millie has her face pressed against the glass. "It's a cool night for a munchkin. Do you want hot chocolate?"

"Yeah! Choc-wit." Her smile shows her dimples.

She's the cutest kid.

"I have whipped cream and marshmallows. What should we put on top?"

Her face grows serious like she can't decide. "Can we have whipped cream and marshmallows?"

"Sure," I say as Reese says, "No!"

"She's four. Let her have her fun," I throw back.

"That a freaking ton of sugar. Do you want to put her to bed tonight?"

My eyes linger, drinking in her frustration.

I want to put *you* to bed tonight, or at least I want to take you to bed, Reese.

That singular thought conjures scalding images I can't get out of my head. What would it be like to shear off her clothes? To pull that fierce mouth to mine, to devour her, to spread her legs and impale her right on my seething—

No. Get your shit together, man. She's still an employee.

"She'll be fine. Give me five minutes. Do you want cocoa too?" I ask.

Her tight face relaxes. "Any chance you have hot tea? Or coffee?"

"I've got both."

"Tea would be great. Surprise me with what kind," she says.

"You guys can go ahead. I'll meet you outside. It's all voice activated. Just say, 'Lexa, unlock the main balcony' and

she will.”

Reese nods, flicking her hair.

On the balcony, carrying a small tray of mugs, I pass out hot drinks and turn on the gas firepit.

“Don’t worry. I put a lid on Millie’s cup and lowered the temperature,” I tell her.

“You’ve thought of everything.” Reese holds her hot tea with both hands and smiles, closing her eyes. “This looks even nicer than the indoor fireplace. How many, um, fire-making things do you have?”

“At least seven. Every bedroom has its own fireplace, and so do a couple bathrooms. Nothing like hot flames on cool nights,” I say, staring too intently into her eyes.

Reese whips her face away with a redness on her cheeks I don’t think is from the coolness. She walks about two feet from the railing.

“Do you see where I am?” Reese asks, sipping her tea.

Millie nods.

“There’s an imaginary line here. If you cross it, we all turn to ice.”

“How?” Millie asks.

“Elsa magic. But if the spell gets broken, we go home, and you don’t play on the slide with Miss Tiffany. You only draw in your notebook all day.”

“No notebook!” Millie spits like she’s being sentenced to hard labor.

Reese smiles at her. “Then don’t cross the line, okay, bumblebee?”

“O-kay.”

I sit in a lounge chair beside the fire and Reese sits across from me. Her eyes trail Millie, making sure she doesn’t get anywhere near the railing.

“She’s safe. It’s solid glass between the metal. It could repel a charging bull.”

She glances at me. “She can climb. Don’t let the little legs fool you.”

“You act like she’s been through boot camp. I’ll eat my watch if the girl can do a pullup at least three times her own height,” I say.

“She’s flexible and fast. You don’t know what she’s capable of.” She wags a finger at me.

I try not to snort.

Reese has never been at my penthouse for a social call before. I’m not sure she’ll be here again, but I’ll see if I can do anything else to childproof the balcony just in case.

Millie goes close to her imaginary line and jumps back from it so hard she falls on her bottom. She looks up and sees me watching her.

“Don’t worry. I made sure we won’t turn into ice,” I say with a mock-serious tone.

She smiles and scurries off, paying some imaginary friend for a milkshake her hot chocolate becomes.

Old words come floating back.

Reese told me I’d be a good dad once, and for some unholy reason those words combined with Millie’s tiny figure playing on my balcony makes me see this moment differently.

What if the kid playing on the balcony was mine?

What if the beautiful woman sitting across from me wasn’t just my driver?

But another memory hits.

Reese, dazzling photographers and influencers in a bright dress that fit her like a glove, her lips on fire and for one glorious moment—mine.

Mine and nothing else.

Never going to happen. Never should fucking happen.

I wish I could forget. Her blue eyes and easy smile are so soft tonight with nothing but the tangerine glow of the gas flames dancing between us. The city lights twinkle in the distance, illuminating her like she's one with the city's soul.

"Thanks for dropping by," I say, taking a pull of my drink.

"Well, you're welcome. I wasn't sure it'd be okay or if you'd be busy."

"Never too busy for this," I say. "You and Millie are welcome anytime."

"What about without Millie...or is an adorable preschooler my price of admission to the ivory tower?" She holds back a smile that hits me straight in the balls.

Damn.

I swear, if Millie wasn't here, I'd already have Reese Halle splayed out on my bed, jackhammered and breathless.

I swallow hard, taking another sip of chocolate that almost chokes me. "No kid necessary. Not for you."

Her smile grows.

"How's your sister?" Since the chill night can't muffle my desire, I'd might as well add conversational ice water to the mix.

"I don't think she's doing well. Nothing's new. She's not talking to me or Mr. Sutton. I really don't understand. I know she's afraid, scared for us, but...her addiction was *years* ago. I'll never believe she was abusing it again, let alone doling it out."

"That's rough. My parents are screwed up, but Ward and I had our grandparents. It has to be hard as hell to be growing up with no adults around."

Reese nods like her head weighs a ton.

"Most foster kids wind up homeless or in prison a year after their eighteenth birthday. Abby was in a narcotics' treatment program for a year. It was a hard road to get her right, but I've seen worse. But like I said, that was years ago."

She got help and worked through it. She's a good mom. I used to get irritated with her, because she always borrowed money...but after what I've learned about childcare, I understand why. Thank you."

"You're welcome, again. No more thank yous tonight," I tell her.

She takes a long sip of her tea. "I just wish she'd talk. I'm not sure what she's hiding, but she's not helping herself by holding it in."

"You know I was Navy, right?"

She nods.

"So, the thing about the service—it doesn't matter which branch—it's hard-ass work. The hours are long. It's physically grueling. You're often somewhere you don't know surrounded by people you don't know, and you see some real crap." I pause, setting my cocoa down. "Sometimes, you even have to do things that under normal circumstances would be rather fu—" I get a glimpse of Millie playing in the corner of my eye and catch myself before I finish the word. "Messed up. A lot of guys fall into drug addictions after active duty. My gut says your sister isn't a bad person. She's mixed up in something, and she's terrified to talk."

"Yeah. Nothing else makes sense," she says weakly. "Someone hit her the night she was arrested—"

"When you said she's holding back to protect you, I believe her."

Reese sighs and brings her cup to her mouth again. "You're right. But unless she talks, no one can help. It's all so frustrating. She has a good attorney—a great one I never could've gotten thanks to you—and she won't give him anything."

"Don't worry. Sooner or later, she'll drop her guard and explain what happened. I'm sure once she does, she'll be a free woman and back with Millie." No hesitation in my voice. I'm keeping the faith.

“That would be too perfect. I love Millie, but I’m a better aunt than a mom. I’ll keep going as long as this takes, of course, but I feel like such a screwup.” She sighs, throwing herself back in the chair.

I glance over at the kid, still hopping around and babbling.

“She’s fed, dressed, and laughing at imaginary friends. You’re already ten steps ahead of where I’d be if I had a kid dropped in my lap. Enough beating yourself up,” I growl, meeting her eyes.

“Oh, please.” Reese laughs. “Kids come naturally to you. Also, I never had you pegged for an optimist, but you seem so sure this will all work out. Why?”

I gaze into her big blue eyes for a heavy moment.

“I’m no raging optimist, but I’m feeling pretty good about our chances tonight.” I also know her sister’s going to be okay, because if Sutton and his people can’t get the job done, I’ll find someone who will.

The only thing I can’t take is this distance.

Standing up, I move to sit beside her. Taking her hand in mine, I squeeze with a firmness that’s possessive.

Our touch ignites.

She rubs her thumb in circles over my palm.

Thank fuck for Millie. If her niece weren’t playing a foot away from us, I’d kiss her into the next lifetime.

“Nick, you’re amazing. I wish the people who constantly crap on you could see what you’re really like,” she says.

“That makes two of us,” I grumble.

Even so, I’m thrilled as hell.

She’s letting her guard down. She’s comfortable with me today.

I slip an arm around her, holding my breath. You know a woman’s got you by the balls when she makes you feel like a nervous sixteen-year-old again.

Reese gives in, leaning over and laying her head on my chest.

My arm drops from her shoulders to her waist and my grip tightens.

She sighs. I smile. The night twinkles on.

Millie runs close to her imaginary line and darts away again, this time racing past us until she's out of breath. The only way this scene could be more perfect is if it lasted. If Reese and Millie didn't have to head home soon.

What the fuck am I thinking?

Cuddling? Hot cocoa? Almost-family time?

Roland Birdshit might be right to toy with my sanity because I'm clearly losing it.

Millie walks up to the couch Reese and I are stretched across and taps on my knee. I look at her.

"It's cold, Mr. Nick. I want a movie. And I'm hungry."

"It's getting pretty late for a princess, I'll admit."

Reese's eyes pop open from their lidded state. "Oh, crud. I was so busy tonight I forgot to feed her."

My eyes flick to Millie, then Reese again.

"I said it's late. But not too late for pizza..."

Millie lets out a delighted squeal that echoes through the night. "Pizz-zaaa!"

Reese pulls out of my grasp and sits up.

"No, we should probably go home. Nick is right, it's getting late."

Our moment ends with a whimper, but I'm not ready for them to leave.

"Quick Nick says it's pizza time." Millie stamps her foot for emphasis.

I turn to Reese, quirking an eyebrow.

"Quick Nick, huh? Creative."

For a second, she looks so pale she could die.

“It was the only way I could get her to quit calling you Nick the—you know,” Reese begins in a whisper. “Another thing I’m really sorry for.”

I chuckle. I’ve caught her off guard and decide to use it to my advantage.

“How does pepperoni sound? I’ve got three of the best shops in the city set up for one-click orders,” I say, pulling out my phone.

Reese’s eyes dance from Millie and then back to me. “Pepperoni it is.”

“Cheese, cheese!” Millie yells, cupping her hands over her mouth.

“Millie, you can’t go to someone else’s house and change their dinner plans,” Reese warns her. “I can pick the pepperoni off for you.”

“Hey, I’m the one who asked. Millie wants cheese. I like a girl who knows what she wants and isn’t afraid to ask for it.”

Reese’s eyes connect with mine.

“I looove cheese!” Millie chirps again.

“See? She’s got guts. The squeaky wheel gets the cheese tonight.”

Finally, Reese cracks, laughing as I punch in the order.

I stand up, offering her a hand.

With this company, I could eat a piece of cardboard with toppings drawn in chalk and smile like a fool.

HERE COMES MUSCLE (REESE)

I pop into Sweeter Grind with Millie on my hip and order up a cinnamon latte—plus a caramel macchiato for my boss.

His brother keeps up a constant front of manly black espresso drip and jokes about anything else being for wimps. Nick won't admit it, but caramel macchiato is his favorite drink after decadent mochas.

It's also something small I can do for him after everything he's done for me—for us.

"I wanna cramel coffee," Millie says, adorably butchering *caramel*.

"You're not old enough for espresso and you'd best believe we're moderating your sugar, babe," I tell her.

"I want juice!" she squeals, waving her arms at the bright beverages in the refrigerated case.

"It's not sweet. You won't like it. There's better juice in your playroom for free."

"Fiiine."

The barista calls my name.

"You're going to have to walk now. I can't carry you and two drinks." I set Millie on her feet. "Grab an arm or leg and don't let go."

She pulls on my pant leg all the way to the car so I'm not worried about her wandering off or someone snatching her. Once or twice, I have to hope the pants don't fall, though.

It hasn't gotten much easier playing mom while Abby is locked up, but I'm getting better at it. *I think.*

Parking lots used to terrify me with her. I never had enough hands to manage all the risks that come with being totally responsible for someone else's life.

Thank God for Tiffany, or we'd be doing this all day, every day. The nanny works my hours and stays on call if I have urgent pickups or unplanned deliveries.

Day by day, we're surviving. The last few days have even been peaceful.

I still can't get the way Nick squeezed my hand and held me out of my head. I have the gift of good memory, and it keeps me on my toes every time we're in the same space.

I can't wish for more with him.

I shouldn't.

Of course, a terrible, lonely part of me refuses to cooperate. The same part that can't forget his kiss.

Lately, every glance at his chiseled face has my eyes drawn to his lips.

At Brandt Ideas, I walk Millie into her playroom and leave the macchiato for Nick to find on his desk. It's uneventful, a boring day of rain and barely anyone needing rides.

I hate feeling disappointed that I miss seeing boss-zilla.

The next morning, I get a text at four a.m. ***I need a ride, bright and early if you're able. This can't wait.***

Millie sleeps beside me, curled in a ball. I don't want to wake her so early, and I don't know if Tiffany is even available. But the last thing I want is for my boss-crush who's repeatedly saved our bacon taking a freaking Uber or cab.

My gut clenches at his tone, too. The message was weirdly short and to the point.

Something's wrong.

Nick Brandt sure as hell normally isn't awake this early requesting rides.

Reese: How early? Let me see if Miss Tiffany can keep Millie.

Nick: I need to be across town by seven. The earlier, the better. Bring Millie if you have to.

Reese: Okay. That gives me a couple hours to work something out. Are you okay?

Nick: Fine.

I frown. My heart stalls as I remember the last time there was so much urgency.

Reese: ...is Beatrice okay?

Nick: Everyone's fine. I just have a score to settle.

Huh? What score needs settling at four in the flipping morning?

It takes seven calls to get Tiffany to answer.

"Uh—hello?" she answers, still grogged out.

"Tiff, hey, I'm really sorry to bother you like this but I need an after-hours—or I guess before hours—sitter this morning. One of the Brandts has a seven o'clock emergency meeting."

"No problem." She perks up. "But the first bus to the office doesn't run until six. Any chance you can drop her off here? I'll get her to the playroom with me this morning."

"Text me the address, and we'll be on our way. Thanks again—you're a lifesaver!"

Even though it's true, my mind wanders to the real lifesaver—the man who hired her, who needs my help for a change.

Nick texts before Tiffany sends her address. *Did you get it worked out? We'll need to pick up my media attorney, too. His driver's out sick.*

God, does no one in Chicago drive themselves anymore? I feel like I'm one of the few people willing to brave city traffic.

I have to drop Millie at Tiffany's, and I'm not sure what part of town she lives in, I text. I'll be over as soon as I get her to the sitter. Are you sure you're okay?

He doesn't respond until I'm combing Millie's hair and we're almost out the door.

Nick: Don't worry about it. This doesn't concern you.

Cool. Jack Frost is back.

No problem, grump-zilla, I won't.

When I get to Nick's building, he's already downstairs, stalking to the car before I can send him a text. It's the fastest he's ever come out.

"Were you waiting in the lobby?"

He doesn't answer and slams the door shut. "Head to the Wellter and Schultz firm on Michigan Avenue. As soon, as we pick up this killer, I'll give you the next address."

Killer? My eyes flick to his in the rearview mirror.

Those emerald eyes gleam like drawn sabers today. He's definitely worried about something—and furious.

"Want to tell me what's going on?" I venture.

"Not really," he throws back.

Oof. I take the hint and raise the privacy screen, which he makes no effort to pull down.

The law firm is roughly fifteen minutes from Nick's condo.

Fifteen minutes of cutting silence, separation, where I wonder how the stone-cold beast in the back seat can be the same man who made my little niece cocoa and held me like I was made of precious blown glass.

I pull up to the curb, get out, and open the back door. Nick slides over in the back seat, and a man in a black business suit carrying a leather briefcase climbs in beside him.

“Good to see you again, Mr. Brandt. Sorry it’s not under better circumstances.”

“We’ll take care of it, Wellter.” Nick crosses his arms.

Jeez Louise. What is he not telling me?

There’s no chance I’m going to find out with the attorney here. “Where to, bossman?”

“Check your phone,” he says.

It pings a second later with an address. I drive until I recognize the dark skyscraper stabbing at the sky before I’ve even turned into the parking lot.

“Oh, wait. Isn’t this—”

“Osprey Media,” he finishes. His tone is clipped and his jaw clenched.

I let them out at the front door.

“You know the drill.” I try smiling.

Nick nods at me without returning it.

Okay, then.

I’ll wait in the garage. He’ll text me as the meeting ends, and I’ll circle back around to the front.

Knowing this is Osprey’s office, I have a pretty good idea what triggered Nick’s mood. As soon as I’m parked, I pick up my phone and start flicking through social media. I click the first link he’s tagged in.

The Chicago Tea

Loose Leaves & Steaming Updates

LAME TAGLINE ALERT.

Who reads this crap? Besides Abby, I mean?

I scroll through a dozen half-naked photos of Nick and Carmen on a beautiful beach. They make me wince, but the

photos aren't the worst of it, and soon I find the real problem.

Old text messages. Screenshots. Personal and visceral and embedded in a story with cringe commentary next to it.

NICK: *I'll always be a fuckup, Carmen. I'm Victor and Giselle Brandt's spawn. Why would anyone expect more?*

Carmen: *You don't have to be. Look at Ward.*

Nick: *I have no idea how he escaped the curse. Then again, he's...Ward.*

Feeling sorry for Chicago's richest Romeo? Read on. No wonder Carmen Seraphina dropped him like week-old leftovers! The words from Osprey's blogger makes me gag.

CARMEN: *How did the meeting go?*

Nick: *Fuck if I know. I was blackout drunk. Like ten seconds from dropping on the floor right there in the meeting. Thank fuck for my team or Chicago could have one ugly-ass train depot.*

Are you really surprised? The Prince of Broken Hearts works as hard as he plays—and apparently it's always pretty messy.

ANONYMOUS: *When are you going to settle down? It seems like even your brother is ready to tie the knot and fly the straight and narrow.*

Nick: *Me? Settle down? Do I seem like the kind of guy who'd be happy tied down with one woman and some brats?*

Anonymous: *Stranger things have happened.*

Nick: *Shoot me before I'm ever that dumb. I beg you.*

DEAR GOD.

That last one hurts like a sucker punch. I'm white-knuckling my phone as my eyes flick over the end of the article that's stripped him buck naked.

MISS SERAPHINA, from all of us here at The Chicago Tea, best of luck with your future endeavors. Nicholas Brandt seems like a lost cause. You always deserved better.

Dearest readers, don't worry. Rumors are abuzz that Mr. Brandt will be treating us all to an even bigger bombshell very soon—although, it's hard to top being drunk through a meeting to finalize a railroad depot redesign that's become a cornerstone of Chicago architecture. Perhaps a few city inspectors should have a serious talk with a certain Mr. Brandt —VERY SOON!

Until next time, keep steeping.

SAVAGE.

Holy shit. No wonder he's livid.

I wish this jackass would leave Nick alone, but I wonder... who gave him the texts anyhow? Carmen? She was violently pissed when he brought me to the gala that night.

And what's this bigger bombshell he hinted at?

I stare up at the skyscraper, too much like a dark middle finger, hoping they're able to fix this soon.

My phone rings with an unknown number calling.

I slide the green bar, expecting to hear it's collect from the county jail. I'm wrong.

"Hello?"

"Hey," a gravelly voice says.

Oh, boy. This day just keeps getting better.

I'd know that voice anywhere.

I take a deep breath. I have to tell him.

“Will? If you’re looking for Abby, I have news—”

“I know. I couldn’t call sooner. I’ve been on the road all week, and I’m sorry. I did a big construction job out of state and broke my phone on the site. Just got everything working again and heard the lawyer’s voicemail this morning.”

“Oh.” I’m not sure what to say. I expected to tell him about Abby, but he knows. “Well, Millie is totally safe. She’s staying with me. So if you’re busy with work—”

“No, I need to see my peanut,” he cuts in, stabbing me square in the heart. “Her mom’s locked up over some stupid shit. I bet she’s scared to death. She should be with her dad.”

No. She. Shouldn’t.

Every time I’ve talked to Abby since this happened, she’s pleaded with me to make sure jerkwad doesn’t take her kid.

“I thought you hadn’t seen her much in the past few years?” I ask.

I know I’m right. He’s barely been around for Millie and a near absent on again, off again boyfriend for Abby. She’s in *jail* and he hasn’t said one word about trying to help her yet.

Hell, Nick has done more for her than this joke of a baby daddy. I take another deep breath and release it, trying to stay calm, to avoid mouthing off and making this worse.

“Reese, she needs me now. Who the fuck knows how long Abby’ll be in there. I heard it was drugs?” He snorts. “Too fuckin’ typical.”

I have to physically bite my tongue to hold back.

“We could arrange something. I guess,” I say coldly.

“We have to. I hoped Abby would get it together after the baby came, but hell. Maybe it’s all for the best...”

Dickhead, no. You can’t mean that.

“My boss is calling,” I lie. “Gotta go. I’ll contact you lat ___”

“When can I see Millie?” He doesn’t let me off easy.

“Text me. We’ll set it up. I have to go.” I press End Call without wasting another second.

I’m going to be sick.

To add to everyone’s misery, the thick clouds over the Chicago skyline finally break, releasing a glacial rain. Even Lake Michigan has *had it* with this day.



NICK and his bulldog attorney climb back into the car after what feels like forever.

“How did it go?” I ask distantly.

“I’m going to nail that bastard’s dick to the wall if his hit piece isn’t down in the next forty-eight hours.” Nick twists his lips, giving me a scorned look. “Sorry.”

He looks over at Millie’s empty seat, sighing with relief.

“I was an idiot once—those texts are living proof—but that was years ago. I’m not like that with clients. Hell, I never was. After I shot my mouth off about the depot redesign, I sobered up and went over it four extra times that week.” He sighs, turning to Wellter, the lawyer. “Do I have to pay for this shit my entire life? Even if she hates me, how the fuck could she do this to my family? She’s not just messing with me. This will damage everything named Brandt.”

She. That can only mean Carmen.

Is it just the hit piece he’s upset about? Or does he still have feelings for her?

He trends on social media all the time and it usually isn’t flattering, but then again, it’s also not usually about his business.

I still wonder how much of that brushfire kiss was him trying to make her jealous.

My stomach flips.

Whatever. I’m just here to drive.

I drop the attorney off at his office and head to Brandt Ideas.

Nick is still fuming in the back seat, his eyes glinting out the tinted windows like lasers hellbent on finding Osprey Media's headquarters on the skyline and destroying it.

"Millie's dad called." I glance into the rearview mirror, hoping my words distract him from his outrage.

"What the hell? When? And when were you planning on telling me?"

Not the reaction I expected.

"He called while you were at the meeting. I wasn't going to mention it in front of your attorney, or even worry you with this right now...but I thought you'd want to know."

He sighs. "Of course I do. And I apologize. It's been a bastard of a day and it's not even nine o'clock."

"...do you want to tell me what went down first?" I ask carefully.

"No," he bites off.

Annoying. So he can hire a whole squad of specialists to take care of us, but he can't tell me why someone trash-talked him like that online?

My face must give my thoughts away.

"I did this," he says. "I caused this mess. That's what I mean. I'm the only one who ought to be cleaning, without dragging you into this shit. Now, how did it go with Millie's dad?"

I swallow.

"I'm not sure. His number wasn't working before. Sutton's office called at some point and left a voicemail—probably to help me satisfy CPS. The weird part is, he already knew Abby's in jail, and now he wants to see Millie..."

"Don't let him," he flings out. "Not without me there," he adds.

Oh.

Oh, wow.

Another reaction that catches me off guard, even if it makes my heart race.

“Nick, it’s fine. You don’t have to—”

“I don’t trust him, Reese. If he hasn’t been around all this time, why does he care all of a sudden?”

“I wondered the same thing...I’m not sure I believe the broken phone story. But since his ex is in jail and Millie’s missing her mom, maybe his conscience started eating at him. It should, because he’s a shitheel of a dad.”

Nick’s quiet for a minute.

“Possibly. There’s a lot about this whole situation I hate,” he growls, this roughness in his voice channeling my own pain.

I suppress a smile.

“Me too. Starting with my sister being in jail and ending with my inability to shower alone for more than three minutes ever since my niece took over my place.” My eyes snap away from his. My cheeks flare. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to say that last part.”

“Don’t you dare apologize. You showering is the best thought I’ve had all day,” he rumbles.

Uh-oh. His eyes could rival a hungry, sleek panther’s right now.

A tingle vibrates low in my belly and spreads like wildfire to *other* places. I purse my lips, trying to play it off as stress, but I’m well aware the blush is becoming noticeable.

“Some things you shouldn’t comment on. Especially now,” I say.

“I’d apologize but I’d rather be honest. I’m serious when I said it’s the best thought I’ve had today. Your crimson-red cheeks are a close second.”

Oh. My. God.

“You’re crazy. Not that I blame you after the way the morning went...”

“Crazy? No, Halle. Just happy because *you like* that I like that thought, or else you wouldn’t be bright red. Can we stop for coffee? I’m craving another macchiato after the surprise you left yesterday.”

He needs to stop. Right now. Before my cheeks melt off my face.

The worst part is, he’s so calm too.

I’m tempted to tell him no. I’m driving and he’s torturing me. But his coffee run would give me time to clear the lava out of my face.

I pull into the closest coffee shop I find. “Go in yourself. I need air.”

He opens the door, leans back in the seat, and stares at me, lifting that dark slash of an eyebrow.

“So, I can be proud you’re hot and bothered?”

“Nick, go!”

He chuckles. “Do you want anything?”

“A well-behaved boss.”

“Request declined. That’s why you have Ward.”

Fair enough.

“Just...get me whatever you get.”

He’s gone for a few minutes and comes back with two drinks, passing me a cup.

“It’s been a shitty morning. I know I got us off track earlier with my comment—”

Yeah, no kidding. But he’s also not wrong, and judging by the way he’s gazing at me, he knows it.

He also knows full well how much I *like* his teasing.

“I’d rather you not go see Frisk without me,” he says, his eyes shining with a dark warning.

I take the overcaffeinated latte he brought me. It’s stronger than I’m used to, but just sweet enough, and good.

“I know you’re trying to help—you always are—but I don’t think you should worry. He’s a horrible dad, a crappy boyfriend, and a huge idiot, but Will Frisk has never been dangerous. He’s just self-absorbed. He’s a fuckboy. Being dangerous requires too much effort on his part.”

“People who only care about themselves can do some ugly shit. I don’t want anything happening to you or Millie.”

“I know. But he’s not a threat.”

“You can’t know that. If he hasn’t been around much, you don’t know him well enough to say it’s impossible. You told me it’s out of character for Abby to hide drugs in her car seat, right?”

Turning over his gruff logic, I nod.

“Yeah. That’s the part that makes this whole thing hard to believe. Someone put her up to it.”

“And the medical report showed someone hit her the same night she was arrested?”

“Right,” I agree again.

“He called you, so he has your phone number. Did you ever give it to him?”

I pause, shaking my head.

“I don’t think so. It’s possible one of the numbers I called trying to reach him worked...I can’t remember when I was so frazzled the first few days after this happened. Maybe he got my number that way.”

Nick stays quiet until I meet his eyes again in the rearview mirror.

“Okay, so we don’t know how he has your number. But he knows for a fact your sister’s in jail—”

“He got an inquiry from Sutton’s office. I may have left it on a voicemail at some point too. Like I said, I’ve tried a lot of numbers. It’s probably nothing.”

“He *says*, but we don’t know,” Nick growls back. “So, someone hit Abby before she went to jail, and whoever it was has her so terrified she won’t even talk to her own attorney. This guy shows up out of nowhere. We’re not sure how much he knows or where he got your number. He didn’t want to see his kid when she was home with her mom, but now that mom’s out of the picture, he wants to see her? Which would require also seeing her young, shortstack, single aunt?”

“That’s a lot,” I say. “And you’re pressing your luck calling me shortstack, mister.”

His smirk feels like a heat ray.

“A lot of facts, you mean. Call me crazy, but let’s be cautious,” he says, taking a long pull from his coffee.

Well, damn. He has a point.

“When you put it like that—”

“I need to be honest. I did a background check on him. You’re judging him a bit too kindly.”

“You did?”

He holds up a hand.

“Don’t get mad. I had to know who we were dealing with if he showed up, sooner or later. The background report listed a range of charges from petty theft to a couple DWIs. I’m not even sure how this man still has a license. You’d be making a mistake meeting this guy anywhere that isn’t public without muscle to back you up.”

My heart skips a beat. If it were anyone but Frisk, and for any reason but Millie, it might be creepy. But I’m a little touched that he cares that much.

“And let me guess—you’re the muscle?” I ask, raising my eyebrows.

He gives me a lopsided grin that makes me give up a smile.

“Lucky you,” he says.

“I wouldn’t meet anywhere that wasn’t public anyway. I don’t like him.”

He shoves his sleeve up and flexes his arm.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart. I can handle this jackass and Roland Birdshit with one arm tied behind my back,” he says in this exaggerated strongman accent.

I laugh. “Okay, Quick Nick. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

FRISKY BUSINESS (NICK)

Later that afternoon, I look through the window of Grandma's old office.

Tiffany sits on a sofa across from Millie's loft bed. Millie snores beside her, curled up like a bear cub, despite having a three-thousand-dollar bed only a few feet away.

Sunlight from the massive windows behind the crisscrossing vines illuminates them both.

This kid and her nanny are a universe apart from my shit, thank God.

While I'm being speared by Osprey, Millie drifts through what I hope are sweet dreams. Can money at least buy that?

I miss the carefree days of childhood—before my parents had their outing on a yacht and made the family name infamous—and I'm damn glad this little girl with her bouncy curls has a chance at holding on to what I lost an eternity ago.

If I can help her hang on just a little while longer, my job is done.

"You all right, little brother?" Ward's voice booms from my left side.

I glance over. "Yeah. Why?"

"Your mouth's smiling but your eyes aren't."

I turn to meet his gaze.

"Nah, it's just..."

Ward inclines his head toward my office. “Do we need to speak privately?”

“Yeah.” It’s pointless, and I know it.

I’m sure he’s heard about the heap of chaos I’m in. I go to my office with Ward following.

He sits down in the chair across from my desk.

“It’s not the end of the world, you know.”

Easy for him to fucking say.

“Birdshit’s hit piece?” I growl, hating how the mere thought of it sends fury roaring through me.

“What else?”

“Not the end? Are you joking?”

“It’s not. It may seem like it now, but it’ll blow over like it always does. More inanity will be trending tomorrow that has nothing to do with you. No one will even care anymore,” he tells me.

“They’ll care—and so will we—if anyone from the city bites on that dickwad’s invitation to recheck the depot. Not that I think we’ve got anything to worry about. I’m sure of it. I put my heart into that project, whatever the fuck I said when I was wasted.” I bring my fist down on my desk. Ward gives me a sharp look. “Sorry. You know what the worst part is?”

“No. Enlighten me?”

“I can’t even reach her to chew her out for pulling this shit,” I snarl.

“Her?”

“Carmen.”

“I’ll admit I’m surprised. I thought she wanted to talk to you and used this as bait? Paige thinks Carmen’s still in love with you. I told her it’s hard to call this love when it’s more like a fucked up obsession.” He rakes an annoyed hand through his hair.

“It’s vengeance, you mean. She wants me to *pay* for breaking up with her. She’s enjoying this torture, dragging this out, feeding Osprey scraps in dribs and drabs.” I pause, taking a deep breath. “She hopes if she makes just enough of my past fuck ups public—minus the big one—I’ll come crawling back before she releases it. Why the hell would I? If I ever piss her off, she’ll just release the hounds. I’ve got my lawyer researching blackmail charges.”

“The big one?” He looks confused, his green-blue eyes narrowed.

Shit.

No point in hiding it. My brother deserves to know just how bad this can get.

“Years ago, when I was a total drunken idiot and we were almost a couple...we made a sex video. I thought I destroyed all the evidence, but apparently she kept a copy.”

“Goddamn.” Ward goes quiet for a moment, then stands, shaking his head. “Well, that’s your business. It’s hardly relevant to what you do here or the deals we close. If it comes out, we’ll cross that bridge then. Everyone makes mistakes, but hell, you’ve changed. You’ve changed a lot this past year. You can’t beat yourself up over old mistakes.”

“The texts on *The Chicago Tea*—”

He leans against the wall.

“Some of those were a little more relevant to Brandt Ideas, yeah, but you were right. Your team covered your ass no matter how blasted you were. I’ve reviewed all the information presented in that meeting and the plans. They were thorough. The final product cleared proper city planning and permits without a hitch. If someone wants to argue this firm was somehow negligent, they’ll have an army of lawyers up their ass.”

Ward isn’t worried at all. He’s confident we’ve got this.

I wish I felt the same.

I exhale slowly.

He gives me a fierce look. “I’ve got your back, Nicholas. You should be proud, no matter what a few clowns on the internet say. You’ve done a lot of growing up.” He points at the wall I share with the new playroom. “What you’ve done for Reese is proof. You stepped up and helped run the company when Grandma left. You helped us land the Winthrope deal. I couldn’t have done it without you, and for a while, when I thought I’d lost Paige...you helped me with that, too.”

“All the help in the world can’t pull me out of this. This slow fucking character assassination is going to destroy Brandt Dreams before it’s even up and running. We’re at our full advertising budget now, and it’s plastered everywhere that I’m heading the spin-off. Who’d want to work with me after this?”

“Are you listening? I said you’ll be fine.”

I suppress a laugh. Ward has gone into full big brother protector, and he’s about to lay down the law.

Whatever. I nod to let him think it’s that simple.

“No one’s fucking with my company or the family legacy. I won’t let that happen. I’m ten seconds from having Osprey and his BS machine followed by a PI so I can start filing frivolous lawsuits. It’ll keep him buried in paperwork, anyhow. You know an asshole who’s made a fortune off trading everybody else’s dark secrets must have a few of his own.” I pause, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Nick. Brandt Dreams will be fine. *You’ll* be fine. Yes, you were a fuck up once. Now you’re the man who runs this company with me, started your own spin-off, and personally interviewed nannies for our driver. Hell, you wouldn’t even hire anyone without a teaching license.”

“I’ve been spending a lot of time with Reese,” I admit.

“I know. It’s okay.”

“It’s just—”

There’s a long silence.

“Is that what you’re worried about? That she’ll believe those bullshitters? Everyone has a history. My broken engagement before Paige—”

“No. It’s more—this is my mess. My sins. My karma hitting back. I can’t let her get dragged down with me. The night Carmen ambushed us at that gala...I’d never seen Reese more hurt.” I swallow bitterly, pushing the memory down my throat. “She doesn’t want to be in the limelight, and I don’t blame her. She especially doesn’t want to wind up trending on social media over half-baked scandals.”

Ward gives me a stern look, clearing his throat. “That wasn’t a fake date, was it?”

“Huh? Nah, that shit was phony as a three-dollar bill,” I say quickly.

He smiles this terrible grin. “Whatever. I have a meeting, but you need to keep your phone on. Don’t give yourself a heart attack before it blows over, little brother.”

He starts for the door, the trademark teal-blue tie he always wears to important meetings swinging.

“I’m thirty-one. I think you can drop the ‘little.’ I’m just your brother at this point.”

He looks at me over his shoulder and squints.

“Like hell. You’ll always be my little bro.”



ARE YOU BUSY TONIGHT? Reese texts.

I glance at the interior design on my laptop and the client specs beside me, but it doesn’t matter. I’m not too busy if she needs me.

What’s up? I send back.

Reese: Will is demanding to see Millie. I told him I’d meet him at Sweeter Grind. It’s a coffee shop Paige takes me to sometimes. If you’re busy, it’s cool, though.

Nick: I said I'd be there. I add a flexing arm emoji, a reminder I'm her muscle.

Reese: LOL. Okay, I'll pick you up soon.

Nick: No. Get Millie's booster seat. I'm picking you up for once.

Reese: Like...a date?

Nick: I can think of better dates that don't involve your niece's asshole dad, but if you want...

Reese: Ha ha I was joking. Chill.

"Chill?" I whisper to myself.

Damn her. It's not even possible with this woman.

Later, when I arrive at her place, Reese and Millie are waiting outside. Reese has the car seat in one hand and she's holding Millie's wrist with her other.

I park and climb out to help her get the booster seat and the kid in.

"Whoa. You brought the sizzle tonight," she whispers, her big blue eyes in awe.

It's fifty-something degrees tonight, so that isn't a reference to the weather.

I'd like to be flattered, thinking she's talking about me, but her eyes are glued to my Maserati.

She hands me the car seat without making eye contact.

"How have I never seen this before?" She steps closer to the car and pulls back the top panel of her gloves, exposing her fingertips. She strokes the car like an unruly tiger. "It's so beautiful. Straight from a dream. I used to read so many car magazines when I started driving."

She gives me a bashful smile.

"Vroom! Vroom!" Millie chirps as she settles into the seat I've buckled down.

"Tell me about it, little lady," I whisper.

I wish Reese would touch me like my ride. If I got her under me, I could do a whole lot better than a vibrating engine and the seduction of a leather seat.

I'd give her the ride of her fucking life, tight turns and churning pistons, straight down the winding road to madness.

"Vroooooom!" Millie squeals again, slapping her chubby arms.

I look down at her and smile. "Soon, munchkin. We all like car rides."

Yeah. Her old man better have a damn good reason for not being around all this time.

How could anyone leave this kid? I shut the door.

Reese still stands beside the hood. She's now holding one glove in her covered hand and has a bare hand flat against the hood.

"Do you need a minute alone together?" I ask, deadpan.

"You have to let me sit in the driver's seat sometime." She straightens up and looks me in the eye.

"No, ma'am. It's a date, remember? I'm driving."

"You're terrible." She smacks my chest playfully and laughs. "Even I could think of hotter dates that don't involve my niece or her dad."

"So can I, but I'll take what I can get."

"I'd kill to drive this. No apologies if you wind up in the trunk," she jokes, those soft blue eyes sparkling like starlight.

"Maybe on the way home," I tell her.

"Fine, be that way." She crosses her arms and slides into the front seat, but even her mock irritation fades the second she's in the car, marveling at the interior.

"You're cute when you're pouting. And cuter still when you're crushing on my car," I say.

"Only a little," she says in a distant voice.

Then she gives me this quick look and snatches her eyes away, a red blush igniting on her cheeks.

Fuck, this Not Date might be lethal.

The drive to Sweeter Grind takes no time.

Once we're there, the mood changes. A grim tension settles over us—everyone but Millie—who babbles about Tiffany and some game they played earlier.

Reese helps Millie out of her kiddie seat and we all walk inside the coffee shop together. I buy a couple drinks and a lollipop for the kid.

Millie has the candy sucker in her mouth, but holds the stick like it's a cigar, pointing at me while I wait for our coffee.

“Are you the boss now?” I ask.

The tyke folds her arms in front of her chest and nods at me, the spitting image of every famous Chicago mobster. I chuckle.

Then I feel Reese pulling at my shoulder, her eyes wide with uncertainty as she whispers, “Nick. That's him.”

I watch a bulky blond man with a crew cut and two-day-old stubble come marching in. Will Frisk looks slow, agitated, and one ugly glance away from being pissed off.

My eyes never leave him as he slides into an empty booth, waiting for us. I grab our drinks and we make our way over.

“Reese? Sorry to hear about Abby,” he says as soon as he realizes who we are. “Thanks for taking care of my daughter.”

Yeah. Out-of-town gig or not, if that was my woman or even an ex who's still the mother of my kid, there's no way it would've taken me over a *week* to find out what's going on.

Find a better excuse, scumbucket, I think to myself.

I try to remind myself not to be judgmental. Only, we have instincts for a reason, and this guy trips every alarm my nervous system has.

He spots Millie trying to climb on Reese's lap and breaks into a smile. "There you are, baby. Come give your daddy a hug."

He bends down, holding his arms out.

Millie's eyes dart around, clinging to Reese's hand as she steps behind her leg. She looks like she doesn't even recognize him.

"Millie, what's wrong?" I ask, looking down at her.

She takes the lollipop out of her mouth and turns her face up. "Don't wanna hug a stranger. Mommy says if a stranger wants a hug I'm supposed to scream." She shakes her head, curls swinging wildly.

Frisk gurgles—I think with disbelief.

I meet his eyes, daring him to argue that the kid's lying and he's more than a stranger to her.

"Millie, Daddy has to work out of town a lot. It's not my fault. I'd be home more if I could," he says, too much anger in his tone.

She's just a kid, jackass. And your overgrown ass is very much a deadbeat father.

"Do I have to, Auntie Reese?" Millie asks slowly.

Reese nods, as I say, "No, you don't."

Reese stares at me with a raised brow. Half the blood drains out of her face.

Millie looks from her aunt to me.

Frisk bows up, his shoulders bristling as he looks at me and says, "Who the hell are you?"

"Millie, just listen to your aunt." I meet Frisk's eyes. "Nicholas Brandt. Nice to meet you."

I hold my hand out. He takes it and tries to squeeze it to death. I love the shock in his eyes when he finds out I can squeeze back harder—and I can break his arm if he gives me a good reason.

“So, you’re Reese’s man?”

I wish.

Considering she’s right here, I say nothing. I don’t want to make this more uncomfortable than it already is.

“I’m moral support,” I bite off.

He gives me a confused look and nods limply. “Whatever. Millie, are you gonna give Daddy a hug?”

Reese gives her a reluctant nod, urging her on. The little girl peeks out from behind her aunt’s leg and holds her arms out as he bends, touching her little hands to the guy’s neck and instantly pulling away.

He’s squatting and her arms are at a weird angle. I realize too late that her lollipop sticks to his hair, then tumbles to the floor with a *thunk!*

Millie scoots back.

“Oh. Oh, shit.” Will picks the lollipop up from the floor, stands, and tries to give the sucker back to his daughter with the world’s slimiest grin.

“Trash it, Amelia,” Reese says.

“We’ll buy you a new one,” I say, holding my hand out. “I’ll take it. I don’t think you can reach the trash can.”

She puts it in my hand, and I pitch the dirty lollipop with a sidestep so my eyes never leave Will Frisk.

Another minute of awkward silence passes. We all sit down at a table just inside the door. Millie climbs in Reese’s lap. Reese is beside me, and Will sits across from us.

“I’m sorry about Abby,” Will says with a cough.

“Yeah, you’ve said that,” Reese says with an edge in her voice.

“So how long has she been in jail?” he asks.

“A couple weeks now. I’m starting to lose track,” Reese tells him.

Will stares at her. “And Millie, she’s been staying with you?”

“Yep.” Reese leans back in her seat like she’s being tortured.

“Well, thanks for taking care of her. That must’ve been real hard on you. Are you not working?”

“Actually, my bossman hired her a nanny. Millie’s getting a good education while I work. She’s in great hands.”

He leans back, grins, and looks at me as it dawns on him.

“Wait. You’re her boss, huh? Oh, yeah.” He grins wider, his eyes drifting to Reese’s chest. “I see why you got her a nanny.”

Yeah. I’m about to drag this fuckwit to the parking lot and use him to patch potholes.

“Because my employee had a personal emergency and couldn’t do her job without adequate childcare? That’s what you mean, right?” I growl, unable to temper my voice.

He chuckles sarcastically. “Like you couldn’t find some other schmuck to drive you around...”

“Considering the nanny was hired for *your* child, while no one knew your whereabouts, I think the appropriate response might be ‘thank you,’” Reese says.

I smile at her.

“Sure,” Will says. “Thanks.”

I nod.

He looks at Reese. “So, Millie’s been staying at your place? Have you cleared Abby’s stuff out of the apartment yet? Guessing she’s gonna be in the pen for a good long while.”

“It’s way too early for that kind of guessing—especially out loud,” Reese snaps, glancing at Millie in warning. “I haven’t gotten around to it yet. Depending on how this plays out, I might need a storage unit, but who knows.”

“Don’t bother. I’ll go over there myself in the next couple of days and clear it,” Frisk volunteers, far too quickly. “Probably all sorts of crap for Millie still there. How about I save you some work? For looking after my peanut, I mean.”

I’m glaring.

Reese stiffens at my side. Her hand feels like plastic when I reach for it under the table.

“No. Not necessary. She’s my sister, and you’ve been...not the closest for a few years,” Reese says.

“Aw, c’mon. She’s still my girl and we’ve got a kid. You don’t need to be responsible for her no more,” he snarls.

“Will, you’re not around much,” Reese says quietly. “Abby and I have always looked out for each other. If you were with her, you’d know that. It doesn’t change now just because you showed up this week.”

His face goes red, and I lose it. His temper comes on like someone flicking a switch.

“Fuck, you talk like I’m some kinda deadbeat loser! I was gone *working*, on a jobsite, lady. Do I gotta get a goddamned lawyer to show you I’m serious?”

Dude. Your kid wouldn’t even go to you. Save it for someone who’s buying it.

Also, he’s t-minus five seconds from me putting him in a headlock and dragging him out of this coffee shop.

“Maybe you should,” Reese says, squeezing my hand, undaunted. “We need to work out a custody arrangement. Abby mentioned she doesn’t want you having Millie—at least not full time. That’s why I asked you to meet me here.”

“You’re shitting me,” he huffs, his eyes flicking to Millie, who stirs restlessly in Reese’s arms.

Every alarm in my body blares. She didn’t even want to hug him. He’ll leave with this kid tonight over my dead fucking body.

“Excuse me?” Reese asks.

“You work for *him* so you can’t be stupid. Abby and I got joint custody. With her in jail, I’m Millie’s guardian. I don’t need a lawyer to know that,” he spits.

Reese tightens her arms around the kid, a defiant gleam in her eyes.

“Millie’s staying with me until further notice. It’s what Abby wants.”

“Abby’s in fuckin’ jail,” he snarls back. Then he tilts his head up, exhaling all over us, and does a miserable job of faking calm. “Look. *Look*, I’d do anything for Abby and Millie. They’re my girls. You know that, but a kid belongs with its parents. If Abby can’t take care of her because she’s incarcerated, Millie oughta be with me.”

“She’s staying with Reese,” I say, jabbing each word at him.

He doesn’t acknowledge me.

“The fuck is your boss even involved with this? Are you stupid?”

“Because your daughter doesn’t flinch when she hugs me,” I cut in. “And I don’t know your ex-girlfriend, but I’ll do anything I can for her because I care about her sister and her kid. Stop being a dipshit.”

“Or what?” Frisk laughs. “You gonna take me out back and ruin your manicure, boy?”

I stiffen, forming a fist.

“You say to-may-toe, we say to-mah-toe. I think we agree Reese will be sorting Abby’s things and clearing the apartment if necessary. Millie will stay with Reese in the meantime. I’m glad we got this sorted out.” I meet Reese’s eyes. “You ready?”

She sighs. “Yeah, I think I’m good. Thanks. It was a productive meeting.”

“We haven’t settled shit. This has nothing to do with you. You’re making a big mistake!” Frisk barks in my face, raising

his voice. Millie buries her face in Reese's chest, clearly afraid.

Enough.

"No mistake." I lean forward. "If it involves Reese, it matters to me."

"I never agreed she could keep my kid and you know it. You leave with Millie and we're gonna have a problem."

"Then get a court decree and an attorney. I'll be waiting with mine." I nod at Reese, motioning to her to head for the door. "Come on, we're leaving."

I stand and start for the door. Reese is on my heels holding Millie.

"This is my kid we're talking about!" Frisk roars, running up behind Reese. "You think I'm gonna take this and let you pull one over on me?"

I stop in my tracks.

The coffee shop is mostly deserted, but the gaggle of baristas and customers are staring.

I'm not sure how far this guy wants to go, or if he's crazy enough to start throwing punches in public. Regardless, he's sure as hell not touching Reese or the kid.

"My place on Saturday mornings with a security team present," I bite off. "There's your custody agreement."

"Fuck you, you—" He stops mid-sentence, red as a beet, grabbing at Millie's arm.

The little girl lets out a piercing wail. Reese moves swiftly, prying his grimy hand off her with a quick spin he doesn't expect.

In a flash, I'm moving, throwing myself in front of them and blocking the ogre-fuck. My phone's already in my hand.

"What are you doing?" Frisk growls.

"Calling the police to see if they can verify your custody paperwork. Also, reporting you for attempted kidnapping and

child endangerment,” I snap.

For a second, he straightens like an angry black bear. Then, slowly, he holds his hands up, his eyes going wide like he didn't expect this.

“Wait.” Emotion laces his face, fear and hot rage mingling, before he exhales. “I was just going, asshole...”

I lower my phone.

“Good. Also, don't bother showing up for visitation. You won't see this kid without a court order and a cop to enforce it now. Glad we could chat.”

“She'll hate you both for taking her daddy away,” he growls.

“I think I can live with a four-year-old not liking me if it means protecting her from a fat snake. I'm not a parent, but here's a piece of advice my grandpa always told me—if you're doing your job right, your kids won't like you. If they do, you're not enforcing the rules.” I pause. “Reese, head for the car.”

I reach into my pocket and unlock the car. I also want to make sure I'm between them.

She heads out, and I wait in front of the door, watching Frisk storm away toward the restroom. I don't move until she's got Millie securely in her car seat.

By the time I catch up with them, her hand slides into mine, and she gives me a quick, but ferocious hug.

“You're amazing. Thank you, Nick. Thank you.”

“I forgot something. I said you could drive,” I tell her, refusing to be showered with praise for doing what any man with a pair should.

“That's sweet, but...right now, I kinda just want to go home and never wake up,” she says, sniffing, the delayed adrenaline overwhelming her.

“Reese, I don't know what he's capable of, but he's creepy as hell. I'd rather have you and Millie stay with me tonight.”

What the hell am I saying?

I've lost my last marble in that scrum with Frisk. Still, I can't sleep and risk something happening to Reese or Millie at her place. She's got nothing but two flimsy locks between them and the outside world there.

"Your place?" Her eyes go wide. "Are you sure?"

A smile breaks across my face. There's something so innocent about this girl.

It's hard not to kiss her again, here, even with her niece in the back seat.

"I need you safe." My voice comes out gravelly. "Plus, I know you'll sleep better if you're somewhere Will Frisk never has a prayer of breaking into."

Her smile says I'm right.

It's all the encouragement I need as we climb in the car.

I just wish my brain wasn't already spinning with possibilities, imagining everything but sleep with this woman under my roof.

SPILLING PSKETTI (REESE)



“Nick, I don’t think it’s a good idea. If anyone finds out I’m staying with you there’ll be rumors and—” I start.

“That creep tried to grab Millie. I couldn’t care less if it costs me another hit piece. Does he know where you live?” He looks at me, his eyes in flames.

I swallow. “No.”

I don’t think so, but then again, I didn’t think he had my number...

“You’re sure? Are you willing to bet Millie’s safety on it? Would Abby have ever written your address down anywhere?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t want people to think I’m—er, sleeping with my boss,” I whisper. “Because obviously I’m not—not in a million years.”

My legs shift together as I say it.

Yeah, I wouldn’t believe me either.

He takes my hand and hooks his fingers through mine. “If there are rumors, I’ll deal with them. If they’re coming from outside the office, I’ll ram a lawsuit right down Osprey’s throat. You only win if it isn’t true, and I *will* win. I don’t want to harm your reputation either, but it makes the most sense. Your safety and Millie’s outweighs my drama.”

“We’ve been okay at my place,” I say, my eyes drifting over him.

He's cut like a statue, especially when he's all growly and overprotective. Those shoulders, those abs, those pistons for hips.

I have zero doubt that Nick Brandt is an absolute beast behind that suit, and it's shameful that I'm worried I'll never have a chance to find out.

"The idiot said he was out of town. Who knows what's true, but now that you're on his radar—you need a safer place to crash," he insists.

Maybe he's right. Even if he isn't, good luck saying no to those molten green eyes.

Also, I have a promise to keep. I swore I wouldn't let Frisk get Millie.

The only person protecting this kid is me, and my enigma of a boss. Until Abby gets back to being a mom, the choices I make have to be for Millie first, and they have to keep her secure.

"Okay, you win," I say.

"Should we swing by your place and get clothes first?"

"It's just one night, right? We can change clothes before work in the morning."

"Might need multiple nights. I want to keep you close until Will winds up in jail or gets launched into the sun. Whatever they're doing to incinerate trash these days."

I snicker.

"That could take a while. And it must be pretty tough getting one of those rockets to the sun, knowing your woes," I whisper.

"You mean Roland. Forget him." His eyes twitch with irritation.

"Well, and Carmen." Why do I say it out loud? Her existence annoys me to no end when it's none of my business.

"Let's go get your clothes," he says, ignoring the fact that I named his ex.

Oof. I don't even know what to make of that, but my boss' love life really is none of my business, right? *Right?*

It doesn't take long to get to my apartment. He parks in front of my door, outclassing every car in the lot.

"You should probably wait," I say nervously. "Um, if we're up there for more than ten minutes, your car might get picked apart and sold for parts when we get back."

He throws his head back and laughs.

God, that glorious smile turns me into a puddle.

"I'm only partly joking," I warn, wagging a finger.

"You've parked the Lincoln here before, haven't you?"

"Rarely. I try to park down the street at a private garage if I'm in the area for a while with the company car. I pay for the parking. It's cheaper than replacing a whole town car."

"I should've abducted you a long time ago," he grumbles.

I undo my seatbelt and open the car door. "Can Millie stay with you? It'll be easier if—"

"Millie, you want to hang out in the car with me?" He says before I can finish, turning around to face her.

"Can we play music?" Millie asks, her eyes wide.

"Yep. Satellite radio's got everything from Italian opera to the Disney station, and I know your pick." He picks up his phone and fidgets with it. "You should go. Millie and I are jamming."

I burst out laughing, shaking my head as I get out while the music starts.

What is happening to my life?

Millie never knew Nick until recently, yet she's smiling every time he shows up. She's fallen hard and fast and...ugh.

So have I.

I try to fight back the butterflies while I collect our things in a couple suitcases and run back downstairs. When Nick steps out to put the bags in the trunk, Millie squeals after him.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“Yeah, minus you interrupting her groove. I think you can make it up to her if you join in the next singalong,” he says, smiling with his eyes.

I don’t know whether to be mortified or delighted that my boss wants to hear me sing to a four-year-old. Either way, I don’t resist when I’m back in the car, and we jam half the *Beauty and the Beast* soundtrack all the way to his place.



NICK’S PENTHOUSE still paralyzes me with its perfection.

No, it doesn’t matter that this is my second visit.

“Your place is a palace,” I whisper, inhaling whatever it is that makes it smell so good here. I realize a second later that something is him.

Yikes.

“You complimented it enough the last time you were here,” he says.

“Well, no matter how many times I see it, I’ll never get used to this.”

“Glad you like it. I’ll show you the guest rooms so you can unpack.”

Guest rooms. *Plural.*

He shows me a room lined with gold and modern slate-greys that opens into a bathroom from a luxury traveler’s wet dream.

“I think you get the idea,” he says. “I have a more elegant guest room connected to the balcony, but I thought this would be perfect for you two. It’s a little smaller, easier to look in on Millie.”

“It’s perfect. She shared a room with her mom, and I’ve been letting her stay in mine. I’m sure she’ll like it here.”

He nods. “Make yourselves at home. I want you both comfortable here.”

I smile at him so hard I could break.

“Thank you. Again.”

He looks at Millie, who’s running down the hall, flapping her hands like a hummingbird. We step out, and Nick blocks her path, leaning down.

“Careful, little lady, you don’t want a scraped knee. What sounds good for dinner?”

“Psketti and meatballs!” Millie says, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

I expect him to look at me to translate.

Instead, he just laughs in that masculine rumble that vibrates through me like thunder.

“Spaghetti and meatballs it is.” He turns to look at me. “Hope you’re cool with that since two out of three votes are in.”

“Totally,” I say, clasping my hands.

I may be facing hell, but right now, with this man, my heart runneth over.

Millie grins and claps her hands.

I put away our things, plop Millie down in the living room, and get her settled in front of some cartoons before I find Nick in the kitchen.

He’s chopping vegetables on his kitchen island. There’s already a sheet of plump, delicious-smelling meatballs rolled up and waiting to be baked.

“Whoa, dude. You make spaghetti the hard way,” I say.

“You know a better way? It was one of my Grandpa Godfrey’s favorite recipes. I learned from a master,” he says, pointing two fingers at his eyes and then at me. “Never half-ass psketti night, Reese. House rule.”

I laugh. “When I make spaghetti, it involves heating a jar of sauce and calling it a day. Maybe frying up some ground beef and onions in a pan, if I’m feeling adventurous.”

He shakes his head.

“The horror. I should’ve had you both over for dinner a long time ago.”

“In fairness, I’ve learned not to burn frozen nuggets and boxed mac and cheese quite well. I’ll catch up to you,” I say defiantly.

“And I’ll teach you to make an omelet better than sex before you leave,” he promises.

“Better than sex? Um...I’m going to need to taste that.” I turn away, blushing horribly, my eyes hiding nothing about what I’d really love to taste for comparison.

“Do you need help with anything?”

“From a girl who burns nuggets? No. Go play with the kid while I whip up the best sauce you’ve ever had.”

“Big promises, mister.” I fold my arms. “Can I hang out and watch?”

“Of course. Want a glass of wine?”

“Nick, you know I’m more of a beer girl. At least we’ve moved on from champagne...” I wink at him.

He gives me a knowing smile. I think the champagne incident feels like a whole lifetime ago to both of us.

While the sauce simmers, he turns on the radio, reaches in the fridge, and pulls out a couple freshly chilled bottles of a local brew I love. We clink them together, and I let his arm wind around my shoulders.

It doesn’t stop there, skimming fingers down my back. Every subtle flex of his fingers reminds me what a beautiful contrast he is.

His poise, his power, his control.

When his fingers brush the waistband of my pants, I suck in a breath, glaring pure heat into his eyes.

“If Millie weren’t here...” he whispers, a dark suggestion in his eyes.

“You—we—we’d both be in trouble,” I stutter back.

And I think we’re both lucky a loud, happy laugh from the living room swings us back to reality.

I give his collar a playful flick and push my shirt back down. While he stirs the sauce, taking long pulls off his beer and watching me the whole time, I insist on throwing together a salad.

“Do you always take over?” he asks.

“You’ve got the main course covered. I *can* handle a basic Caesar salad. It’s the least I can do.”

Millie comes padding in. “It smells like hangry in here!”

Nick smiles.

“Millie, we’re guests. Let’s save hangry for home, okay?” I say.

She crosses her arms. “But I’m hangry now, Auntie Reese.”

Nick laughs at her, thoroughly amused.

“Don’t encourage her. Not everything she does is cute,” I say.

“This is,” he says, pointing a wooden spoon at her. “Dinner’s almost ready for our critic.”

Now Millie laughs too.

I roll my eyes and go back to tossing salad, hiding a smile.

“Can we eat on the couch and watch *Toy Story*?” Millie asks.

Dang. Maybe we’re done with a thousand runs of *Frozen*.

“Sure,” Nick says.

I catch his eyes. “It’s a white couch. That’s...not a good idea. She’s a walking case of butterfingers.”

He looks at Millie with a gentle smile. “How about we do movie time after dinner?”

Millie agrees, I think, because Nick suggested it.

Twenty minutes later, we’re at the table, and I’m dying right in front of him. Everything’s so freaking good. Even Millie downs her food without complaint, smiling at me through dinner.

“Are you enjoying this?” I ask her.

“Yeah! Love Quick Nick psketti.”

“I like my psketti, too,” Nick says, twirling a pile of noodles around his fork. “The effort always makes it taste better.”

“You make a mean psketti,” I agree.

“Better than jarred stuff?” He quirks an eyebrow at me.

“Definitely.” I hold my hands up in surrender.

All things considered, we’ve found a way to salvage the evening after that rotten run-in with Abby’s ex. Millie’s having fun, and I can’t remember the last time I’ve felt so relaxed.

After dinner, we get half an hour into the movie before Millie’s nodding off. I get the kidlet cleaned up and put her to bed.

Once she’s down for the night, sleeping heavily, I head back to the living room, hoping to find Nick.

He grins at me from the couch and holds up a fresh beer for me.

“Oh, you didn’t have to do that.”

“It’s a trade. You need to relax and I need the company,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Thanks, mind reader.” I sit down beside him and take it. “So, I’ve been thinking about the way things went down with

Will. That whole conversation was just strange, don't you think?"

"Yeah? I was too busy wanting to punch him in the face from the first second I saw him to notice. Of course, I don't know the situation like you do. What struck you as off?"

"When he called, he asked if I'd meet him there to discuss how to get Abby out and so he could see Millie. I've visited Abby a couple of times since she got arrested, and every time she's asked me to make sure Will doesn't take Millie. But it's like...he was concerned with helping her get out of jail. In all the years she's known him, this would be the first time he ever acted like he cared about her."

Nick nods, his mile-wide shoulders rolling as he clasps his hands.

"Also, he asked me there to see Millie, but he didn't talk to her that much once we got there. He didn't ask if she liked staying with me or if she needed anything. Then he started asking about Abby's place..."

"She didn't even want to hug him," he agrees.

"I know, and she's fine with you. She didn't even *know* you before all this. That says it all." I slurp my beer again.

"He won't take Millie. You saw him take off with his tail between his legs. I told him I'd play hardball. The jackass is hiding something, and he doesn't want the law involved. Was he always so creepy?"

I frown. "He and Abby were an on again, off again thing for years. I just hope he doesn't have a key to her place."

"Do you want to have the locks changed?" he asks.

"It's a rental and I'd rather not deal with Mrs. Gamlin. I just want to know what he's after. I can't imagine he'd find anything after investigators tore through the place, but if there *is* something to find, I need to be the one to find it. Not him."

"I told you, I'll help you go through it, whenever you're ready. I don't want you there alone."

"I know. Thank you," I say quietly.

“Quit thanking me.”

I turn to face him slowly, trying not to lose myself in eyes like liquid turquoise. “I have to. You don’t have to do any of this and—”

“I don’t, but I want to.” His gaze sharpens. “Reese, can I ask you something?”

I nod, my pulse quickening.

“Do you remember our fake date?”

My gut clenches.

“You mean the night Carmen slapped you silly and slung champagne on us right after we...you know. We trended on social media the next week because none of the influencers could understand why you’d drop Seraphina for a total nobody. How could I forget?”

“Fuck. When you put it like that, it sounds devastating.”

“*Is* there another way to put it?” I shrug, checking my inner bitch, knowing he’s done more than enough to make up for that strange humiliation. “It’s fine. It was a long time ago.”

“It’s not, and I’m still sorry.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry I took you there that night. I never told you, whether I intended it or not, I used you to shield me from past drama, and it was wrong. Dead wrong.” He stands, staring out the massive glass door of the balcony, into the Chicago night. “Dating Carmen was my biggest mistake. She was a childhood friend who never should’ve become more. After she went to Hollywood, she transformed from the sweet girl next door into a hungry, manipulative bitch. She’d make me go places and do things to prove that she could. Our relationship—if you can call it that—was about partying and sex—”

I almost shudder.

It’s not my business.

I shouldn’t care about Nick’s love history, but...he’s opening up to me. And I hurt for Nick Brandt with every

word.

“I’m sorry, Reese. More than you’ll ever know,” he says. “I’m just giving you the explanation you’ve deserved for months. Carmen grew up, became obsessed with money and power, and she thought with her fame and my family’s position, we could be unstoppable.”

I blink at him, slowly taking it in.

“I broke up with her,” he continues with a sneer. “Always the same game. She’d come back. I’d push her away—I’d try. We do have history, so I fell into her trap one too many times. Not long before Grandma got sick and plunged us into a crisis, I realized I was too old for that bullshit. I said goodbye once and for all, but she didn’t get the message. I knew showing up in public with another woman would be a clear indication it was over. For everyone. Her and the gossip traders.”

“I know,” I say tightly.

“Let me finish.”

We lock eyes and I nod slowly.

“I could have taken anyone, Reese, not just the original stand-in I had lined up before she canceled, and I asked you. When that fell through, I realized I didn’t want *anyone*. I wanted *you*. What I’m telling you is...the date part was always real to me. I just went about it like a fucking moose.”

Wait, what?

He wanted me there? On a date? For real?

“Anyhow, I hate that it poisoned shit between us for so long,” he says, walking over to me. “I never wanted you to hate me.”

With my heart in pieces, I pick up his hand.

He laces his fingers through mine.

“Nick, after everything you’ve done...I could never hate you. I—” God. I can’t believe I’m about to admit this. “I didn’t even totally hate you after that night.” I sigh. “You told me you just needed a plus one like a business thing, but

everything about that night seemed like a date. Especially that kiss.”

There, I said it.

I named the ten-ton elephant in the room.

His smirk turns into a grin.

Heat pumps under my cheeks and I smile back.

“I hoped it was more than an impulsive moment before Carmen came barreling at us. It was obvious I was there to make her jealous. I didn’t hate you. I was just—hurt.”

“Fuck, Reese. I’m so sorry.”

He moves in closer, gently pressing his palm against my face, lifting me to stand with him.

My breath becomes a shallow quiver.

My eyes are lost in gilded green eyes full of light when he turns my head, caresses my chin, and brings those lips I’ve craved for months *home*.

Holy God.

His tongue is warm, smooth whiskey on my lips. A hunter in my mouth searching for my heat, my whimper.

It’s sweet and playful and everything that’s quintessentially Nick, moving in determined strokes, conquering me from within.

My arms fly around him, my nails digging into his back, hugging him tighter. I’m becoming an animal in heat. I’d have a better chance of stopping a nuclear reaction.

Nick groans into my mouth, sheltering me against him, dragging his hands to my ass.

When he squeezes, when he grinds against me, it happens.

I’m dead.

I’ll have to tell the rest of this tale from the afterlife because that’s how bad he destroys me—before he’s even been inside me.

We stay locked in hushed whispers and fencing tongues for what feels like forever. Me, pressed against his hard slab of a body.

His tongue moving fiercely in my mouth in one forever-kiss before he breaks away with a muffled rasp. He turns his head back to the city, taking a ragged breath.

Holy shitballs.

Dazed, I bring my fingers to my lips, touch them, and drop my hand.

I've never been kissed like that.

The way we lashed tongues that night at the gala was just a preview. I don't think I even have words for what the hell just happened.

Honestly, I'm not that experienced. After Abby got pregnant, I knew that couldn't be my life. I ran away from dating to focus on school and work. I've never even gone all the way.

Still, a woman *knows* when she's been kissed by a master.

And the way I know it with Nick vibrates my bones.

The job, Abby, even Millie feel so distant in the wake of that riptide against my mouth. It's the break from life I've needed.

The only thing I want to focus on now is Nicholas Brandt and every seething rock-hard inch of him.

He looks at me like I'm prey. "Reese, I didn't plan—"

"Don't apologize," I rush out.

"Millie's here, we can't—"

"Dude. You can't just kiss me like that and then apologize."

"You don't regret it, then?" he says, his voice matching the smolder in his eyes.

I shake my head violently.

"I'm still your boss, you know," he whispers.

I shrug, a smile digging at my cheeks.

“I won’t tell if you don’t. I bet we can figure this out after my mess gets cleaned up.”

Growling, he pulls me into his lap as we collapse together on the sofa, kissing and caressing.

“Woman, you will *kill* me first. If we don’t fuck soon—before any rubber stamp for dating from HR—I’ll be confetti,” he says hoarsely.

I laugh, giving him a quick kiss again before I say, “I hope not. And I hope we won’t have to wait for HR, either, office policy be damned. I couldn’t handle that.”

His lips smother mine again, softer this time, but hungrier than ever.

And when he moves away, he just holds me for the longest time, stroking his hand slowly up and down my head like I’m something to be cherished.

The silence is intense. With anyone else, it would be awkward, but with him? It’s like the pause in the lyrics of a song that makes your heart soar.

I’m tempted to kiss him again. Just to end this silent intermission.

Frankly, I’m tempted to do a lot of things I shouldn’t, knowing we have a kid here who could wake up anytime, but the way he makes me throb...

Sweet Jesus.

I’m not used to kissing guys like this.

I’m especially not used to kissing guys who are my boss and the biggest, wettest emotional rush of my existence. I’m not sure what the rules are for this.

“Can I have another beer?” I whisper, trying to un-jam my brain.

“For sure. More chilling in the fridge.”

I get up, planning to go to the fridge on my own, but he's moving with me and our hands are still locked together.

He opens the fridge, hands me a beer, and grabs another beverage for himself—root beer, I notice.

Interesting. Looks like he's taking this moderation thing pretty seriously.

I pop the top and take a swig. "Nick, you've helped me through a really dark time. I don't think I would have gotten through this without you—"

"You would. You're stronger than you think."

"I just want to say I want to help you too. You don't have to deal with all the tabloid crap on your own. I'll help you through it any way I can," I whisper.

He shakes his head.

"Sweetheart, I made my bed. I'll lie in it, and without you rolling in the mud."

"I'm here for you."

"After our pseudo-date, I swore to myself that if you ever wound up going viral on social media, it wouldn't be because of me. I won't put you through that."

I plunk my drink down on the counter, walk over to Nick, wrap my arms around him, and lean up on my toes. My plan is to be the one doing the kissing this time, but he doesn't give me a chance.

He answers first, pressing his lips to mine, so deliciously hot. His arms tighten around my back, pulling me closer.

He kisses me so deeply my whole body trembles against him.

When he releases my mouth, I still want more. I take a deep breath instead, trying to calm down.

Oh, but he's not done.

He runs his teeth along my cheek, my jaw, and then down the side of my neck, exercising a patience I don't have.

I giggle, squirming away before it's too late.

He gives me a worried look. "You don't like that?"

"You're—you're making me crazy. I like it too much. But more...tonight? We should think about this," I whisper, a horrified part of my brain screaming at my voice of reason. "If we don't stop now...it'll be impossible."

He smiles, big and bold and proud. I watch him press the root beer bottle to his cheek, sighing like a beast.

"You saved me from heatstroke," he says, pulling me closer again. "I'm damn glad you put Millie in your room with you."

"Why?"

"Because if you hadn't, we'd be in deep shit."

"Because I'm so irresistible?" I joke.

"Fuck yes, you are. But grab your beer and follow me. Netflix or Monopoly?" he asks, raking his eyes across me. "If there's not a bed in our forecast, we'd better distract ourselves."

I snicker. "You're a Brandt. You'll beat me at Monopoly. Though I have to say, I never had you pegged for the board game type."

He shrugs. "Nothing like a family war over it after Christmas dinner. It's even better with Paige in the mix now."

I smile. For a second, our eyes connect, and I'm dangerously close to short-circuiting.

This man makes me want to rip up my rules, my concerns, and take a big naked leap of faith.

"If I choose Netflix, do I get the remote?" I ask.

"Sure, as long as you're not choosing chick flicks or too much skin. I'll die," he rumbles, a mischief dancing in his eyes that brings me to my knees.

UNTIL SUNRISE (NICK)



Netflix or Monopoly?

I'm such a dumbass. I sound like a high school kid, but I had to change the subject. Before I demanded if she wanted my cock or my mouth between her legs first.

A couple of years ago, I'd have already dragged Reese to my bedroom and fucked the life out of her.

But her kid niece is asleep in my guest room. And the fact that we've gotten physical enough means a thousand complications are already erupting into our lives like crooked teeth.

She deserves better than a rushed fuck.

Also, I don't want her thinking that's why I asked her to stay.

I'm going to do the right thing for once—even if it murders me—and that means not devouring a woman I haven't even taken on a real date we both know about.

I'm not looking forward to the ice-cold shower I'll need to survive this long-ass night.

Reese chooses *Wolf of Wall Street* on Netflix.

“This is your pick?” I say in disbelief.

“Do you not like it?”

I laugh heartily. “I love it. I don't know many girls who dig it, though.”

She scrunches her nose up. “Yeah, well, most of the girls you know are those high-maintenance model types.”

After an hour in with my well-behaved arm around her shoulder, she yawns and says she can’t keep her eyes open.

I switch off the TV, head for my room, and curse my way through the coldest shower of my life. I’m fucking shivering when I come out in a robe and flop down on my mattress.

Why did I buy such a massive bed? It’s too big for one person. Too empty.

Because you spent years never going to bed alone, dumbass, a voice says in the back of my mind. *This monk life is new. It sucks.*

Reese’s words haunt me. *You’re making me crazy.*

I wanted to haul her into this bed so bad when she said that. Hell, I would’ve settled for the nearest flat surface.

She’s turned me into a heated mess.

I close my eyes and try to sleep, but sleep doesn’t come easy.

My thoughts land on Will Frisk, the reason they’re here. Nothing seems beneath that puke, including hurting Reese or Millie.

Still, in a twisted sense, I owe him. My home feels more complete while I’m protecting the girls from his crap.

I don’t know what he has planned next—guys like him rarely give up after a single snag—but I don’t want either of them out of my sight. I need to check on them.

And scotch. I need scotch.

Another thing I can’t have, which makes me grit my teeth.

I fight my instincts for God knows how long until I remember I never finished that root beer. Sighing, I climb out of bed.

I pass by the room they’re sharing on my way to the kitchen. Millie sleeps sideways in the bed with her whole body

wrapped around a pillow, snug next to a pile of blankets.

I bite my lip to keep from laughing when I realize Reese isn't here.

Where is she? I walk through the living room and kitchen looking for her, and when I don't find her, I check the guest room again. Millie's knocked out, but no Reese.

I check the other guest room. Millie must have ran her out. Reese sleeps like an angel in there, splayed out on the bed.

I may have left a mark on her neck earlier, which is darkening to burgundy now.

Oops.

I pull on a sweater, slide into some shoes, grab my drink, and open the sliding glass door for the balcony.

It's warm enough tonight not to shrivel up like a walnut. The twinkling skyline glimmers, beautiful as always. There's a reason this is my favorite place to think.

I must be out there for almost an hour when something scuffs behind me.

"Quick Nick," a tiny voice says.

I turn around to find a barefoot Millie hugging a pink teddy bear. "I...I had a bad dream."

"You did?" I step inside and pull the door shut behind me. It's way too cold for Millie to be outside barefoot.

"Can't sleep. And I dunno where Auntie Reese went. And I'm scared." She presses her thumb to her tiny mouth.

That's a lot of "ands."

"You're lucky I used to work for the Sandman," I say, waving a hand toward the kitchen. "Come with me. I'll give you something that'll put you right down."

We step into the kitchen, and I adjust the lights so they're not blinding.

"Ever heard of spiced milk?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

“My grandma used to make it for my brother and me whenever we had nightmares. She told me it’s a magic potion, and if you drink it all up, you’ll always have sweet dreams.”

Millie gasps. “I wanna try!”

“Coming right up.” I go to work, only pausing when I hear her little voice again.

“Your grandma used to make it for you?”

“Yep.”

“Not your mommy?”

Damn. I’m lucky my mother didn’t sell me to the highest bidder.

“Nah. Our grandparents were a lot like our parents growing up. It all worked out,” I say.

“Did your mommy go away too? Like mine?”

Fuck. I look over and her face is wilted with sad thoughts.

“Listen, I don’t know your mom, but from what I’ve heard she didn’t run off and leave you.” I stop. Then again, she won’t talk to the attorney to get back to her daughter, so I could be wrong. “My mom left a lot because she wanted to. Sometimes she just wanted a vacation.”

“Where?” Millie asks excitedly.

I think travel excites her. Perfect distraction.

“Europe, mostly. But sometimes she’d visit different islands in the Pacific.”

“Wow! I wanna see when I grow up,” she chirps.

“You’ll get your chance.” I nod, pouring milk into a frother I adjust to the lowest setting.

“Did you miss your mommy?”

Once upon a time, I did.

Part of me still does, I suppose, no matter how much of a monster she was.

“Sometimes, but I was very lucky. My grandma loved me so much she didn’t want to share me with my mom. Grandma and Grandpa did a lot of amazing things for me.”

“Auntie Reese wants to share me with mommy,” Millie babbles.

The frother dings. I take the milk out, test the temperature, and then add cinnamon, sugar, and a splash of vanilla before pouring it in a small cup and handing it to Millie.

“You’re a lucky little lady. Your aunt loves you a whole lot, and so does your mama.”

Millie giggles. “Auntie Reese always says she wasn’t supposed to be a mommy. She never had to cook before.”

I chuckle. “Leave the cooking to me, munchkin. She’s happy to have you with her, though. I know that much.”

“I miss my mommy.” She looks down at her cup and drinks the milk before blinking up at me. “This is yummy!”

“Yep. Sometimes I had nightmares on purpose just to get this milk,” I say with a wink.

She takes another drink and giggles.

“I hope we can get your mom home soon so you won’t miss her anymore,” I tell her.

“Me too. Not having mommy makes me sad. I want her here with us...”

“I’m sorry. She’ll be with you soon enough.”

She holds the cup with both hands, tips it back, and finishes the milk in no time, letting out a belch that makes me laugh.

I rinse the cup out and put it in the sink. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

“Will you tuck me in?”

“Sure.” I reach down, ruffling her curly hair.

“Is my mommy bad, Quick Nick?”

I hesitate.

“What?”

“Auntie Reese said Mommy made a big mistake, and that’s why she went away. Does that mean she’s bad?”

Being around Millie, I’ve learned exactly one thing about kids—they’re unpredictable.

Gathering my thoughts, I walk her back to her room, where she plops down on the bed.

“I don’t know what your mom did or why, so I can’t say she’s bad. Everyone makes mistakes and does bad things sometimes. Even if she made a big one, it doesn’t make her a bad person, munchkin. She loves you very much.” I pull the blanket over her.

“In my dream, my mommy was a bad person. And everyone thought I was bad because I’m her kid, and then I had to go away too.”

My heart twists. This poor girl.

“My parents both made mistakes as big as dinosaurs, Millie.” Hell, how many have I made? “No one made me go away because of that. They couldn’t. You can’t help what your mom does. And as long as you’re with us, you’re not going anywhere except here, the playroom, or your aunt’s apartment.”

“Are you sure?” Her eyes are big, gleaming with worry.

“Certain. Mistakes aren’t the end. When you mess up one day, you just have to do better the next,” I say, my brain spinning off into the ether.

Is my own ad hoc wisdom still an option for me? Can I just *do better*?

And if I do, and I keep it together long enough, does all the fuckery in my past still matter?

We’re both quiet for a minute.

“Remember, this isn’t even your mistake. It’s your mom’s. No one blames you for that. Okay, Millie?” I lean over.

She doesn’t answer, and I hope she’s convinced.

Growing up with Ward, I know firsthand how much damage reckless parents can do.

“Right, Millie?” I whisper, testing her.

She’s snoring. *Good.*

I sneak out, only to find Reese standing in the doorway. I stop by her, closing the door behind me.

“You heard all that, huh?”

“You’re a sweet man.” She brings her arms up around my neck, those delicate fingers tracing my skin.

I’m not nearly as sweet as she gives me credit for. Because when she tilts her chin and goes up on her toes, I do nothing to stop her—or the raging hard-on aching to rip through my pants.

I just inch closer, claiming her lips with a sound that’s no longer human.

This is way beyond want.

I could hold this woman prisoner for a year, hammering her for half the day, and I’d still need *more*.

The kiss is long and sweet and too intense. My hands fall to her waist, grazing her shorts, fingers slipping down to heated skin.

Fucking Aye.

When she moves away, I hold her closer. She tucks her face into my chest, pale blue eyes riled, looking up at me.

She’s so fragile, and she’s counting on me. That’s the only earthly reason I’m able to rip myself away.

“Are you tired?” I whisper.

“No.”

“Grab your coat. We’ll sit outside on the balcony.”

I grab a blanket from the hall closet while she walks away. When we go outside, I crank up the fire pit against the morning chill.

We sit on the couch in front of the leaping fire and I spread the blanket over us.

“What’s the plan?” she asks. “Besides revealing you’re a total sweetheart with kids?”

I snort. “We’ll sit out here and talk until you’re tired.”

“And if I never get tired?”

“I’ll sit out here and talk to you until we watch the sunrise.”

She pulls my arm around her, brushing her hair against me.

“I’m cold. Keep me warm,” she pleads.

“Temptress,” I grind out, tugging her closer.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever watched a sunrise intentionally before,” she says, smiling at me.

I level a stare at her. “If you’ve never watched a sunrise, then you haven’t had a good enough reason to stay up all night.”

She smiles back. “That could change.”

I like that idea.

“I heard what you told Millie.”

“I just hope it sinks in,” I say, raking my beard against the top of her head. “She was afraid people would think she’s bad because her mom made a mistake.”

“What? That’s terrible. I’ll have to make sure she understands it’s not her fault, but I liked what you told her. What happens after mistakes is what matters.”

“Right.”

“Do you believe it?” She turns her eyes up in question. “Because I think you could benefit from that advice.”

Her words echo my own thoughts from earlier.

“Are you and Roland Osprey friends?” she whispers.

“What? Fuck no,” I growl back, hating to have that asshole’s name caught in our moment.

“Are you close to any of the half-wits who read his blog?”

“A lot of employees read that blog, unfortunately. And not all of them are stupid,” I say with a sigh.

“Well, if it’s anyone you’re not personally acquainted with, they need you. You don’t need them. The people who make the decisions that run the company are in your suite.”

“I wouldn’t say that. We rely on a lot of talent to keep things going,” I tell her. “What are you saying?”

“The people who matter in your life know you—the real you, Nick. They don’t care what the *Tea* says. You made mistakes. Everyone does. Guess what?” She pauses. “The other things you do matter. When your grandma got sick, you were there for her every day, sometimes more than Ward.”

“To be fair, he ran half the company and managed the Winthrope deal the most. He also had the added complication of faking an engagement...” I chuckle at the memory.

“Yeah. That was a mistake. I thought Paige was going to rip his head off.”

“Was it?” I challenge. “He didn’t lie to her. She knew what she was getting into.”

She’s quiet for a moment.

“Either way, I bet they both wish he’d handled it a little better.”

“What difference does it make? They got their happily ever after,” I say.

She looks up, a pointed light in those baby-blue eyes. “Exactly. So what difference do your fake dates and internet scandals make? You can still be happy. Ward may have had a lot on his plate, but somebody needed to be with Beatrice while she was recovering, and more often than not it was you. You sign fat bonuses anytime you hear about an employee with a problem—”

“How did you know that?” I ask, cutting in.

She pulls the blanket closer to her chin and squeezes in closer to me. “It’s cold.”

“We can go inside.” I hug her tighter, trying to keep her warm.

“No, this is wonderful. Also, people talk.”

“Huh?” I blink at her.

“I’ve been in the break room and heard people talking about how you made sure this person or that got an extra bonus after pulling through whatever crisis.” She pauses and smiles with all the warmth I need tonight. “Everyone knows it’s you. Ward’s too aloof to be that good with people, and Paige isn’t in the office enough anymore to tip him off.”

“He doesn’t object when he looks over accounting. He’d do it if he knew,” I tell her.

“But you know. It’s okay that you’re not perfect. You have a good heart.”

I wish it was all that easy.

“You should be a shrink,” I tell her.

“No way. I’ll stick with driving. When do I get to take the Maserati for a spin?”

I bring my hands to her face, gingerly tilting her head back until we’re eye to eye.

“It’s Saturday now. Later today, if you want.”

“Oh, crap. I didn’t realize it was already tomorrow.”

We settle into the twilight hours, her head on my chest, my arms firmly fixed around her. Every now and then, I run my fingers through her silky hair, trying to ignore how good it would feel to take it in a lust-driven fist.

“Do you think we could bring Millie out tomorrow night and make s’mores?” she asks.

Why didn’t I think of that?

“Great idea,” I say. “I’ll make sure I’ve got the stuff here.”

She tilts her head and gazes up at me.

My eyes lock with hers and don't let go.

The blanket falls off us when she wraps her arms around my neck and hoists herself up, closer to my face.

Kissing her out here, in front of the entire city, feels like the most natural act in the world.

Her mouth tastes like peppermint and light and I want more.

Reese repositions herself, straddling my lap, brushing the tip of my dick through my pants.

Shit.

She pushes her tongue further into my mouth, fluttering against mine, and I lavish it with a wolfish groan.

Even through our fabric, her pussy radiates soft, pliable heat. I know if I reached into her shorts, I'd find her fucking soaked for me.

I could take her right here.

I could flip her over faster than I could blink, tear her bottoms off, and bury myself in her, but I won't.

Not tonight. Not like this. Not even if it brings relief from this eternal tease.

She eases away, chest heaving, her bottom lip quivering.

"*Nick.*" My name comes out of her with a weight, more moan than spoken word.

Fuck, I want to do appalling things with her mouth.

Too bad this woman thinks there's something redeemable about me. I'm not sure, but I'll do my best tonight. *For her.*

So we cuddle and doze together, lost in this timeless night of cool restraint and flaring heat.

I don't come out of the trance until she's illuminated by an orange light, her breath falling lightly against my chest.

"Wake up, sweetheart. You'll miss the sunrise," I whisper, kissing her forehead.

She turns, swiping at her eyes, to look over the skyline. I lock my arms around her, making sure she doesn't roll off my lap, keeping her close to me.

The sun slowly lifts over the Chicago horizon, splashing every towering building with a kaleidoscope of mellow light.

"Take a pic with me," I say, smiling into the dawn.

"Why?"

"Because moments like these are that rare."

She looks at me in wonder, her eyes searching mine.

I reach for my pocket. My phone isn't there. I left it on my nightstand.

"Do you have your phone?"

"No. I woke up to you and Millie talking and went to check on her. I didn't even think about grabbing it," she says.

Damn.

I'm not ruining this moment over a phone. It's too perfect, even if there won't be anything to capture it.

After a minute, she asks, "Were you going to take a picture?"

I pick up a strand of her hair and rub it between my thumb and forefinger.

"I don't have my phone either."

"You can go get it."

"Nah. I'm too happy where I am."

"Well. I'm happy where you are too." She turns to me again, her sky-blue eyes trained on mine.

Cupping her face with my hand, I lean down and devour her lips again, prolonging the best torture of my life.

If I think of it as a glimpse, a preview, a promise that I'll survive.

I *will* have Reese Halle under me very soon.

She drifts off again in my arms just before the soft sunlight reaches us. I pick her up, carry her inside, and lay her down in her original guest bed with Millie, who's still blissfully passed out.

If I'm lucky, I'll catch a few hours of shut-eye before I start my day.

Reese sleeps peacefully, those lips I'm still hurting to ignite twitching gently.

If every morning started like this, with her next to me, looking like the dream she is now, I'd give up my dream in my head.

I'd give up so much for this woman—for them—it fucking scares me.

GONE WITH THE RAIN (REESE)



My heart beats overtime as I wait for Nick to exit Brandt Dreams so we can pick up Millie and head home to his penthouse.

Home? Am I really calling it that?

Of course, it's where we're staying until we figure out what Will wants and there's no danger, and I've been there for several days, buuut...

I catch my wide-eyed reflection in the mirror and forget to breathe.

I'm falling so fast and so hard it's dizzying.

My worries vanish the instant I see him approaching. He's early. I thought it would've taken him at least another hour in there.

Nick stalks through the rain, a militant stride in every step on his long, powerful legs.

He doesn't head for the back door. He climbs right in the passenger seat and takes my hand.

"You should still sit in the back when we're on the clock," I say, trying not to smile. "You know, so we can keep up appearances."

"Darling, do you remember how you kissed me this morning? Before we left the apartment?"

"Um. Maybe." My breath stalls.

Like I could ever forget.

He only set my everything on fire from head to toe. Just having my hand in his reminds me of the sizzle, the muscle memory of how his tongue rakes mine.

“I couldn’t get it out of my head,” he growls. “That’s why I’m not sitting in the back anymore. Let them talk.”

My heart dives and comes back up again. I want to yell at him, to remind him we don’t need more problems, but when I see his emerald eyes and that smirk haloed by dark scruff that feels so decadent on my skin...

I’m all out of prayers.

“Are you in a hurry to pick Millie up tonight?” he asks, lifting my hand to his lips and kissing it.

“Not really. What do you need?”

“I wanted to show you a park. It’s a little ways outside the city. If you’re in a hurry, though, we’ll get the kid and go home.”

“Tiffany’s still on the clock for a few hours. We have time.”

“Head for Winnetka then,” he says sharply, rattling off a park name.

“Will do.”

I punch the name into Maps. Forty-five minutes later, we pull up a gravel road that leads through an open gate. The fence is covered in green vines that never withered away in the winter. I pull up on a rocky patch in front of a half-melted pond.

“Let’s go,” he says cryptically.

“What are we going to do?” I ask, surveying the place.

Then his hand grazes my cheek, and two firm fingers tilt my chin up, bringing my eyes to his.

“Reese, do you trust me?”

A shiver zings through me. It hits me just how hard I trust Nick Brandt with everything.

“Yes,” I whisper.

He gets out of the car, shutting the door behind him.

I open mine to follow his lead after a delayed pause, but find Nick already there. He opens my door and holds out his hand for mine. Claspng his fingers, he helps me out of the car and onto my feet.

It’s this strange, fairy-tale thing as his lips meet mine.

He traces them with his tongue, slower today, like he’s holding something back. I release a slow breath, arching into his sweetness, surrendering to the mouth that used to war with mine nonstop.

When his tongue slips in with a low groan, I’m delirious.

I melt against him, clinging to the hard shield of his body.

Time stops.

Here, it’s just me, Nick, and a kiss for the history books.

It’s just this wicked friction between us as his hand finds my hip and pulls me against his leg, his abs.

It’s just a drawn-out curse as he breaks away like he might die.

“Fuck, Reese. You know what you do to me?” He’s snarling, his eyes dense forests inviting me into their secrets. “Can you even fathom how many times I’ve come in my hand thinking of you?”

Holy crap.

My knees go weak, trembling by the revelation that he’s... imagined me *that* way. Apparently for months.

God.

His grip tightens on my hips. His lips part in a hint of teeth, drawing a frayed breath. He holds me still as he glides one hand up my leg, and I struggle not to pant like a wild animal.

He grabs the bottom of my coat with one hand, takes the zipper between his other thumb and forefinger and slides it down, peeling it off before he throws it in the driver's seat.

“The coat stays.”

I remove his long, dark coat for good measure.

“Then so does yours. We freeze together.” I fling his coat into the driver's seat on top of mine.

He grins. “Sweetheart, you're dead wrong. There'll be no freezing tonight.”

Oh. My. God.

What's he planning? Every part of me tingles.

But am I in over my head?

Probably.

Whatever I am, it doesn't involve stopping.

Not when he takes my hand, leads me to the back door, and pulls me in. “Can you kiss me like you did this morning?”

“For the record, I think you did the kissing.” My voice comes out in a squeak.

He chuckles, violent and throaty, then kisses my chin.

“You're a terrible liar, but I can kiss you now if you want.” He holds my face between his hands, presses his lips to mine, then flicks his tongue against my mouth.

I open, deepening the kiss. Nicholas doesn't dare disappoint.

His tongue slashes against my own with a possessive lick, then moves inward, marking the edges of my mouth.

Those rough hands of his slide from my face to my shoulders to my back, and he pulls me into his lap with a feral look, a volcanic shine in his eyes that warns, *ready or not, here I fucking come.*

I straddle him the way I did last weekend—I try—and just like on the balcony, his bulge is under me, insanely hard and throbbing for attention.

So, this is how I die.

I never thought it would involve the hottest forbidden sex of my life with my flipping boss, but if this is my fate... mama's not complaining.

He moves a hand to my shoe and pops it off, tumbling it to the floor. He uses the other hand to get my other shoe, never dragging those molten eyes off me.

Then I giggle like an idiot, breaking the kiss.

My cheeks could almost blister.

"Sorry," I whimper.

"Why? You love to laugh, and I love the sound." His chest swells with hot breath as he untucks my shirt from my pants and yanks it over my head.

I gasp.

"It's a cold, rainy day. You'd better make good on warming me," I tease, flicking my tongue against his lips.

"I'll leave burn marks," he snarls, moving us so he can wrestle himself out of his blazer and hang it over the back of my shoulders.

I'm suddenly grateful for just how roomy these fancy custom cars can be.

He stares into my eyes until his gaze shifts over my black sports bra—

Yikes. If I'd known this was coming today, maybe I would have bought the kind of bra Abby wears on date nights. She's always been the adventurous one.

But his touch says it's not my bra he cares about.

His hand roams my bare stomach, fingertips rubbing my skin, every vivid second searing me alive.

Those hungry fingers move to the base of my neck, slipping down my bra, over my belly, all the way lower.

His finger dips under the waistband of my black pants—destroyers of sanity—but he doesn't go further.

Instead, his hand pops out of my pants and trails up my stomach, over the bra, up to my neck and down again with terrible intent. His thumb catches the edge of my bra, and with a hot glint, he pulls.

Sweet terrifying freedom.

Palming my breast, he presses the center of his hand to a pert nipple spilling over the top.

“*Ooh.*” I barely recognize my own moan.

“You want more?” he whispers, giving me a lust-crazed look.

God, do I ever.

But I can’t talk. I have to breathe. I have to—

In one rough jerk, he shoves the thick elastic bra band over my breasts, releasing them. They spill down into his hands, just as his hips power up, shoving his bulge against the fabric that’s barely separating us.

I fall into his mauling grip, wrapping my legs around his waist, diving into the firm ridge under me.

Nick covers my hard nipples with his hands, aiming his thumbs at their centers.

He tortures.

He teases.

He worships.

And when he lifts his head and pulls me down, shoving one unruly nipple into his mouth, a silent scream builds in my throat.

“Oh, Nick!” I’m almost freaking crying, bawling his name.

“Should I kiss you?” he rumbles, dragging the roughness of his beard over my breasts.

“P-please.” My head spins like I’m intoxicated, and my body goes boneless.

I don’t have words right now, but I know I want anything Nick Brandt can give.

“Here?” His tongue slides into my mouth, just long enough to miss it when he pulls away. “Or maybe you want it here.”

He places a hand under my breast, tilting it up as he bends his head down. Those teeth take my nipple, sucking harder, crueller, taking me apart with every tortured flick of his tongue.

Shit, shit, shit.

Even if I’ve never done it before, I know the sugar rush in my blood isn’t just first time fireworks.

It’s undeniably him.

Gasping, my hands clutch his head, pinning him in place.

The more he sucks, the louder I moan, ready to explode before we’ve even—

He pulls away.

“No!” I hiss, hating how he teases, even if I love it, too.

“Relax,” he mumbles, slowly and achingly bringing his mouth to my other breast.

I’m Reese putty in his arms.

He teases my other nipple, bringing me back to that white-hot zone. Then his hands move to his own shirt and I watch, transfixed, as he unbuttons it.

With his shirt open, I try to help him out of it, catching his sleeve in a tangled handful. He hasn’t undone the cuffs of his sleeves, and they won’t slide over his large hand still fastened.

Clawing at his cuff, I tear one button off by accident. It goes bouncing to the floor somewhere.

Nick laughs, those panther-like eyes beaming.

“Patience, sweetheart. I’m a pretty good teacher,” he whispers, pressing his scorching lips to my forehead as he undoes the other button.

I slide the shirt off, marveling at his naked chest.

He’s just the right kind of refined strength—the right kind of bad—an inked canvas of a man with raw muscle creased into dark tattoos. They’re painted on like he’s always ready for

battle, always ready to conquer and leave a trail of destruction in his wake.

Today, I realize I might be one more ruined heap in the wreckage of his life. But it won't be him who hurts me—not when that raging glint in his eye asks a question.

Can I worship you, darling?

His hands move to the button of my black pants as I shift my legs apart in answer. My back ripples, and not from the cold.

It feels like it's ninety degrees in here and the windows are fogging up.

He works it open, slides the zipper down, and repositions me to remove them. His hand slides under my black panties and they come off too.

With an unwavering hellfire-green stare, he undoes his pants and pushes himself off the seat to let them drop, along with his boxers.

“Are you afraid?” he whispers.

“No,” I whisper back, swallowing hard.

It's not quite a lie. Concerned feels more accurate, seeing how large he is, and knowing how fierce he can be when he's actually given a chance to break me.

Only one way to find out...

I straddle him again.

He slides his hand between my legs, shoving them apart.

All the better for stroking his fingers back and forth across my opening. He finds the small nub above my wetness and starts tracing circles.

Slow. Deliberate. Intense.

My body trembles. “Oh. Nick!”

His lips fuse to my bare shoulder.

He turns his face up and whispers, “It gets even better.”

Better? How?

I'm afraid I'll explode on the spot.

And he tests my limit as he kisses my skin, still working his fingers into my pussy, teething harsh marks on my skin from my shoulder to my breast before he seizes one nipple in his mouth again.

It's been nice knowing you.

Because *this* is his better, and it's absolutely fatal.

Bright sensations hit me from everywhere at once as his fingers sweep low, teasing my slit, and then pushing in with one stroke.

His thumb lingers on my clit while his fingers find this magic spot against my inner wall.

I don't even last a minute.

Everything rips apart in a breathless gasp and a rough command from his lips.

“Fucking come for me, sweetheart. Let go.”

Like I could do anything else.

Like I could stop the orgasm from Hades tearing through me, my legs shaking against his hand, riding his fingers into oblivion.

Nick Brandt doesn't even need to ask me to come.

I do it, unhinged and helpless, because it's what I've been craving for a year.

It's the same scalding desire that's always owned me—even when I hated it—and now the reality of that pleasure takes over, impounding me for life.

I. Am. His.

I'm barely conscious when I feel his tongue tracing my lips, his forehead pressed against mine. “Reese, will you take me? Right here in the car?”

Shiiit.

This man could take me in a *dumpster* and I wouldn't deny him. Whimpering, I throw my legs around his waist, biting my lip.

“Do it, do it. Please!” Yes, I'm freaking begging, and I don't care.

Not when I see the madness in his eyes as he rears back on his hips, grabbing something off the seat next to him.

Not when he rips the condom package he readied at some point when I wasn't looking with his teeth.

Not when Nick damn Brandt thrusts slowly and firmly and greedily into my soaked, trembling depths with a claiming kiss that holds my lips—and my screams—hostage.

“Fuck!” I shriek against him, muffled by his shoulder.

There's a flash of discomfort, my walls stretching, fighting to accommodate his fullness.

“Are you okay?” He stops, pulling back.

“Yeah. I'm...don't stop,” I whisper. “For the love of everything, don't stop.”

That caveman look reenters his eyes, and his cock shifts again, sliding back and surging home again for a second thrust.

Every inch of me floats as we find our rhythm. Pleasure comes, numbing the sharpness I felt at first.

I've never been filled like by another man, but I know it wouldn't be like this.

I wouldn't feel touched *everywhere* at once.

My legs shake against him. Another O roars in my depths.

I try to meet his thrusts, but I can't keep up with his slashing hips. So I just keep my legs open and adore each time he arches into me, urging him on with moans that just get louder.

If the park wasn't totally deserted and a steady rain wasn't beating the roof, I might be worried.

Because this man could get an entire concert out of me, that much I'm sure.

It must be intense for him, too.

If I wasn't completely gone, I'd smile at that, but all I can do is suck his tongue into my mouth when he dives in for another kiss, when his hips sweep low, grinding his pubic bone on my clit.

"Reese, goddammit!" His hand rakes through my hair, twirling it into a fist.

He pulls my hair with just the right pressure, a second before his head jerks back and every sweat-slick muscle on his torso bows.

The explosion building in my core kicks off a second ahead of his.

It clenches and throbs and shakes me to the bone.

"Nick, Nick—*Nick!*" I cry his name, the last coherent thought in my head, feeling him plunging into me.

Yes, plunging.

That's the only way I can describe how he pushes in to the hilt, smashing his balls on my butt, his cock swelling with angry promise.

I barely have a frantic second to take his mouth, to swallow his groan, to moan into his mouth.

Then the mother of all climaxes comes crashing down, sweeping me away in this undulating wave of thunder.

For the next several minutes, I have no earthly idea what happens.

How do you describe a sugar rush spun with adrenaline and wrapped in the greatest high known to mankind? That's me joined with Nick as he erupts inside me, coming with the full force of his soul.

You'd better believe he steals mine, too.

When I can finally breathe again and hold my eyes open, I collapse against him with a sigh.

He's still inside me, his arms tucked snug around me.

We stay like that for a few quiet minutes, listening to the rain slapping the car's roof.

And then I realize I've just had hurricane-force sex with my boss—who also happens to be the most eligible bachelor in the Windy City—in the back of a company car. All while my niece is with a sitter we'll probably be late for.

And for once in my life, I'm not panicked.

I'm enjoying every filthy second of this so much I giggle.

"What?" He strokes a hand up and down my back, amusement dancing in his eyes.

"Nothing, I just...I've never done anything like this before."

"You'll get a proper bed next time. That's how I always imagined it, but Reese, I couldn't fucking wait. Not after the way you've kissed me the last few days."

Nice confession. If these are his new scandalous secrets, sign me up.

I kiss him tenderly, pressing a needy hand to his face.

"It's okay. I—I loved it. Couldn't you tell?"

He hugs me tighter, mischief gathering into a smile on his face.

I finally process his words. "Hold up. Did you say next time? Like this isn't a one-time stress thing?"

"If you think I can live without that again, you're insane," he growls.

I'm smiling into our next kiss.

"Reese, when you said you've never done anything like this before, you mean in a car, right?"

"And with my boss. And—um, ever."

“This was your first time?” His gaze sharpens.

“Uh-huh. If I’d known it was like this, I wouldn’t have waited so long. But I’m glad I did so you could do the honors.”

“Holy shitting balls. You’re telling me I just took your virginity in the back seat of the company car? Christ. I’m sorry.”

I kiss his cheek. “I’m not. Believe me.”

He brings his hot lips to mine. His kiss is intense but not urgent.

It’s slow, sweet, meaningful.

When he pulls away, he cradles me closer.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Anything,” he says.

“So I know we’ve both been through a lot the past few weeks. Do you think this was like burning through all the emotions and exhaustion, or did it—” My face heats. My words stall.

I don’t know how to ask him this. We’re still naked, this is new, and I kinda want to hide.

“Or?” he echoes.

“Do you think it means something? Because if it didn’t...”

His mouth is on mine in a flash, his tongue tracing inside my cheeks and lavishing my lips.

“Hell yes, it meant a fuck of a lot. And if you’ll have me, I want to take my sweet time with you, figuring out exactly what that something is.”

Dear Lord.

Can one man’s words give me a whiplash? And if they can’t, I think those eyes will.

“Something big?” I whisper. Because I don’t think I can survive if it doesn’t mean that.

He chuckles, skimming his hand on my thigh.

“Something huge, Reese. Something tectonic. Something with a massive fucking heap of potential.”

I shudder. I could almost cry, as silly as that sounds.

I never get the chance. In a swift movement, I’m on the seat and Nick is on his knees, half on the floor. He wraps a hand around each of my thighs and he pulls me toward him so I’m at an angle on the seat before edging them apart.

“Nick...what are you doing?”

“Making up for taking your cherry in the back of a business car by further defiling you in the back of said car. Isn’t it obvious?” He grins, letting his tongue linger in his parted lips with a wicked suggestion.

I laugh nervously.

“Man, I have no idea what you’re talking about—*oh*.”

I gasp when his head comes forward and his lips meet my opening. His tongue flicks across the tiny pearl of pleasure, a tease, and then the main course when his whole mouth goes to work.

He kisses down the cleft until he’s stroking my core.

His tongue sweeps in. I’m shaking.

It only gets worse—or is it better?—when he grabs my ass and pulls me against his face.

I’m riding his beard, his tongue, his teeth, all trained with the wildest precision.

Oh. My. God.

And his grip only tightens, sealing me against his thrusts as his tongue dips in and out, taking what’s always been his.

I’m moving against his mouth the same way I moved against him earlier.

It’s so intense I’m on the verge of tears, and it’s still not enough. I wind my fingers through his thick, dark hair and pull him closer—toward me.

He knows what I want as he rises, meeting my mouth.

His tattooed arms hook around me and he jerks me forward so my back flops against the seat. Suddenly, I'm ready, wide open for him.

There's a rushed crinkle of another condom wrapper and he's in me.

We're doing it again, our bodies two colliding lava flows.

This time, it doesn't sting, and if our kiss ever breaks it's so one of us can gasp for air.

For a second time tonight, my body clenches around him.

Once again, he carries me away in no time, pounding into me like he means to break us both, and God, do I want him to.

Later, when I check myself in the mirror, I see the living proof he definitely broke something. One eye, bloodshot with crisscrossed lines. My price paid for letting Nick Brandt shake me into the next century.

It's that good.

I come that hard.

I'm falling that fast.

When we finish, he holds me, then gropes around the floor. He finds my panties, works them over my feet, and slides them partly up my legs.

I grab the waistband and pull the rest of the way.

Heat radiates from my face. "You don't have to help me get dressed."

He kisses my knee.

"If I know you well enough to undress you, surely it's okay to put you back together."

I never thought about it like that but...having him pull clothes over my body after what we just did feels *more* intimate somehow.

But it doesn't matter what I think, because now he's pulling my pants over my legs. Piece by piece, Nick dresses

me, as good as his word.

When he's done, he pulls his pants up and fastens them, then puts his shirt on.

"Can I button it?"

The only answer I get is a knowing smile, but he makes no effort to button the shirt, so I fasten it for him, one button at a time.

We're dressed, still clinging to each other in the back seat. He cracks the door for fresh air, and I laugh as I realize we turned the Lincoln into a sauna.

Jesus. I'm going to need to clean this thing before I transport anyone else.

"Nick?"

He kisses my forehead. "Yeah?"

"I think you might have to drive. I can barely remember my own name," I whisper.

He laughs and kisses me again.

"That means I did my job."

He can't be wrong. Because I am floating. *Still floating.*

"And did I? Was it just as good for—"

His grin silences me. "I don't have another memory that sweet."

Is that a compliment?

Or is it because you wouldn't call Carmen Seraphina and the other legion of women he's had *sweet*. Hot or something, sure. But sweet?

"You're frowning," he says, leaning in so his lips almost touch my ear. "Sweetheart, you've got nothing to worry about. It was the best of my life, hands down. If we didn't have to go pick up a kid, I'd keep you here all night and deal with the guilty conscience tomorrow. Because I damn sure wouldn't have the patience for the bed I promised."

Slayed.

I'm on the verge of tears again.

I smile. "I think it's too late for the bed. I might be new at this, but I know we went a second round."

His laughter melts into a heated kiss.

"Cute that you think that's all I've got. Sooner or later, we'll set aside a whole day for you to find out," he says. "Now, come on. We have to pick up Millie before Tiffany kills us."

He climbs out of the car, helps me out, walks around the vehicle with me, and opens the passenger door. "Get in. I insist."

It's really happening.

My boss drives his chauffeur back to Brandt Ideas to pick up my niece, and our hands are twined the whole way there.

He parks in the garage and we hold hands as we walk through the door.

"Do we need to act normal—for Tiffany?"

He lets go of my hand and slides an arm around my waist.

"Whatever normal is, I'm not letting go. I get your hand or your waist. Your choice," he says with a possessive growl.

I'm smitten, and I want to say it. But I won't dare go that far. Not until I've had time to sort this out.

We barge in and apologize to Tiffany for being late. Nick promises her overtime, smooth as silk, and the nanny leads Millie away from a table with an untouched plate of food.

"She wouldn't eat dinner without you," Tiffany says. "She said she had to wait because she's having sleep milk tonight."

Millie beelines straight to Nick.

"Trolls World Tour! Movie night." She slams into his leg.

"When we get home, definitely," Nick says with a smile.

"Sleep milk?" I ask.

“It’s just milk with cinnamon, sugar, and vanilla. Old family recipe,” he tells me.

“It’s magic, Auntie Reese! It makes you have sweet dreams,” Millie says.

“Sweet dreams? I see.”

“Millie, I’m starving. Do you think we can stop somewhere and get a hamburger and a milkshake instead of sleep milk tonight?” Nick asks, humoring her.

Millie looks up at him like the lovestruck little cherub she is and smiles. She takes one of our hands with each of hers.

We walk out of the playroom together in a chain—almost like a real family—with Tiffany following behind us.

“Am I still driving?” Nick asks when we get to the car.

“Whatever you want, bossman.” I wink at him.

After a very thorough wipe down of the seat with a couple things I keep in the car for cleaning, he watches me buckle Millie into her car seat and close the door. He wraps his arms around my waist.

“I’ll drive my girls anytime.”

With one more kiss on the forehead, I climb into the car, walking on Nick Brandt’s sunshine.

SPECIAL FAVORS (NICK)



I wake up next to Sleeping Beauty made flesh.

After our time in the car, I wasn't willing to let Reese sleep alone. She came to my room after putting Millie down for the night, not long after I installed an extra security camera in the guest room for added peace of mind.

I've made my life a whole fucking lot more complicated, but with her small form huddled beside me, how could I regret it?

I lean over and kiss her cheek.

"Reese. You should probably wake up before Millie comes looking for us. She's an early riser."

She rubs the back of her hand over her eyes muzzily, blinks a few times, and opens her eyes.

"Nick?"

"Who else?" I whisper, bringing my lips to hers, tracing her bottom lip and then slipping inside.

I expected a crumb of relief from the reckless fling in the car yesterday.

Instead, it's only made me hornier. There's a permanent simmer in my blood every time we're together.

She lets out a moan. I want to give her the proper bed experience I promised. Too bad we both have to get to work.

She touches my face. "So it wasn't just a dream."

I sit up and pull her into my arms.

“Hardly. Even if it were, it’d be my dream coming true.”

“Yesterday was something,” she muses.

“Something fuck-hot? I agree.” I clasp her hand and bring it to my face so I can kiss the inside of her palm. “You still deserve better than the back seat of a car. I’m going to deliver.”

She giggles. “It was perfect. We met in that car, after all.”

I snort. “You’re unlike any woman I’ve ever met.”

It’s true. Being with her is too easy.

We always find shit to talk about, and she enjoys whatever we do. Even when we were a mess of warring words, there was a certain pleasure in that, too.

“Is that a good thing?” Her face tenses.

“The best,” I say, kissing her hand again. It’s the reason I don’t care how difficult, how complicated, how risky this could be. “I could sit here all morning listing reasons why, but you’d better slip out before Millie wakes up.”

“You’re right,” she says softly, smiling fit to kill.

“Reese?”

“Yes?”

“At work today, we need to act normal. We’ll figure the rest out soon. We won’t be a secret forever. I promise.”

She grins, showing a dimple.

“I’m not worried.” Her voice drops an octave. “I know where you sleep, so if you play me, you *will* regret it.”

“You’re making it sound fun. I’ve fucked up enough in my life. This won’t be one more regret,” I promise her.

She bounces out of bed. “Bye, Quick Nick.”

I flop back against the pillows, combing my fingers through my messy hair.

Damn, this woman.

The more she calls me that, the more I want to show her just how slow I can take it, burning her alive.

The rest of my natural life might not be enough time to torment her with all the sweet fuckery in my head.



MY OFFICE PHONE RINGS. Birdshit's name flashes across the caller ID.

Knowing I'll regret this, I answer anyway.

"Yeah?"

"You're welcome, Nicholas," he says in his oily, always too smug voice.

This guy is a piece of fucking work.

"That's an interesting way to start a conversation. How have you fucked me over today?" I snarl, already balling my fist.

"I killed the latest hit piece."

I stiffen, digging the phone into my ear. *What the hell?*

Since when does the most infamous hunter in Chicago media ever back down?

"About time," I grind out, trying to play it cool. "Guess it sunk in that I'd own your little empire of dust within a week if you didn't back off your bullshit?"

He laughs in this low, dark, booming chuckle that goes on too long. Maybe this asshole really did crawl out of a crypt somewhere.

"Believe me, my change of heart had nothing to do with your pathetic threats. My legal team would chew up your lawyers without leaving table scraps. If your overpaid attorney were worth his retainer, he'd tell you that up front."

"He *did*. He just thought he could bury you so deep in paperwork, that you couldn't afford to do anything else."

“How cute. You’d be shocked how fast my ad revenue grows when the good people of Chicago know their favorite tea master has First Amendment issues. Nevertheless, my act of kindness was a personal favor to Miss Beatrice Nightingale Brandt. Ring a bell for me and I’ll wait for my angel wings.”

I grind my teeth. This prick is incurable. I’m also baffled.

“My grandmother offered you a kill fee?” I say slowly.

This is *not* how I wanted him to fuck off.

If Ward told Grandma about my sex tape, knowing she’d come running to my rescue, I’ll bash his head in. I know I fucked up, but he didn’t have to go to her.

Nobody ought to be fighting my battles except *me*.

“No, but she’s still good friends with two of my biggest advertisers. Deep pockets and all that jazz. I can’t afford to have my strings clipped to two large luxury brands over ruffling a darling old lady’s feathers.”

“Watch how you talk about my grandmother,” I snap.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of insulting the Brandt everyone respects—even me.”

“Since when do you have a soul, Osprey? Even when it comes to protecting your bottom line?” I sigh. “This is about the video, isn’t it?”

“I can’t confirm that, and I’m not promising to hold off indefinitely on publishing a content starring you and Miss Seraphina if such an amorous curiosity rolls across my desk. This was a one-time favor to Mrs. Brandt—and to you.”

“Favor?” I snort. “So you’re still going to publish the fucking thing?”

“Were you listening? If and *when* Miss Seraphina passes it on, I’ll decide what to do then. That decision hinges on several factors, including whether or not you choose to do anything worthy of thrusting yourself back in the limelight.”

What? I don’t understand his game.

“What story did you table then?” I demand.

“I can’t comment on content that’s no longer being published, but it would’ve dropped today. I didn’t need a video from Miss Seraphina to confirm it. Suffice it to say, it would not have been flattering.”

“Come on, Birdshit, you have to give me something.”

“I’ll say it involves credible doubt that you and Carmen are rekindling an old flame. However, you seem to have a new leading lady who looks awfully familiar from a certain flap months ago at a major charity event.” He pauses, and I can practically see the brutal smile on his face. “She’s a bit untested in the spotlight, don’t you think? I looked her up, though even I feel strange about subjecting Jane Doe to your level of—shall we say, public intrigue?”

Fuck him.

How did he find out who Reese is?

“Leave her the hell alone, or I’ll do more than make legal threats,” I growl into the phone.

“Yes, yes, you’ll find me in a dark alley or something. I suppose you’ve forgotten I was a military man once, just like you,” he says with an audible yawn. “Also, don’t push my fucking buttons, Nicholas Brandt. I can still go forward with elements of the shelved story if I want. It’s saved as a draft. My benevolence evaporates as easily as it comes if you remind me how stupid you can be.”

I need to get off the line. Now. Before I commit a terroristic threat.

Thankfully, there’s a knock at my office door, all the more reason.

“Bye, Roland.” I slam the phone down, terminating the call, and turn to the door. “Come in!”

Ward flings the door open, wearing a smug expression. I wait until the door clicks shut behind him.

This isn’t going anywhere good.

He sits down across from me.

“Everything okay? I noticed Reese was late to pick up Millie yesterday, and you were with her,” he says.

Damn. I pay Tiffany enough to keep her mouth shut.

“I was here working when Reese picked up Millie,” I say, adding nothing. I won’t let him bust my balls.

“I guess that’s what I get for believing a preschooler.”

Millie’s the traitor?

“What did she say?”

“She was giving Tiffany a hard time in the hall earlier. I told her I was going to talk to Reese, and she said she’s sleepy because you and Reese left her here late. But she likes her room at your house, and if I tell on her, her aunt might make her go home.” A shit-eating grin tears across his face.

“Whatever, bro,” I say, waving my hand.

“Relax, man. I don’t care. If anything, I’m here to congratulate you, but you both might want to do a better job of hiding it from Millie. The kid talks a lot.”

“It’s not like that. I don’t want to say too much because it’s not my story to tell. But with everything going on, they’re just safer with me.”

“Safer from what?” He gives me an assessing look.

“Ward, just leave it alone. It’s not company business.”

“Oh, hell. Her sister’s mess is bleeding over, isn’t it? I’m proud of you for everything you’ve done for Reese and Millie. If you feel like it’s too much—”

“I don’t. And I don’t need your help,” I throw back.

I don’t need his approval either.

Hell, I don’t *deserve* it.

I’m sleeping with an employee and I don’t regret it. Apparently, I’d already be trending on social media again, caked in mud with her, if someone didn’t owe Grandma a big fat mysterious favor.

Ward's brotherly "pride" makes it worse somehow. Not better.

"Thanks for stopping by. I've got work to finish," I say.

"Are you okay, Nick?"

"Just busy."

"If you need to talk—"

"Ward, will you get the hell out of my office?" I don't mean to sound so harsh.

He glowers back at me, swiveling out of his chair.

He stands and walks out the door without looking back.

I lean back in my chair, rubbing my face.

You know that split-second feeling when you're tumbling down a flight of stairs, airborne, right before the sharp edges impact skin and bone?

That's where I'm at right now.

Everything perched on the precipice—likely already over it—bracing for imminent pain.

Between Ward's probing and worries over what Osprey knows about Reese, I can't focus enough to get anything done.

Until now, I haven't worried about anyone but myself. At least my reputation was hard earned, forged in careless antics and bad decisions.

Reese has done jack shit to end up at the mercy of the internet's asshole.

She's done nothing to deserve it, and her life has been hard enough.

I don't care what I have to do or what it costs me. I won't drag her into my mess.

Before I know it, the morning runs away, and it's time for me to head over to Brandt Dreams for another long afternoon.

Eventually, I'll step away from Brandt Ideas completely once my spin-off hits its stride. For now, I like being able to

check in on Millie while Reese is out driving.

Do you have time to get lunch before you need to be at Brandt Dreams? Reese texts.

My stomach sinks.

I'll never deny this girl anything. Even Roland Osprey and his minions can't make lunch too scandalous.

Yep. What are we eating today? I send back.

Even in a hell of my own making, I smile at the screen, awaiting her reply.



IT'S odd having an instafamily with an expiration date.

We've all settled into a routine. Reese chops whatever I need to make dinner, and I cook on the nights when we don't grab takeout.

We alternate days off reading to Millie, but we all hang out in her room during storytime. My reading nights started as an accident.

Reese read to her a couple of nights, and then one evening Millie pointed to me and said, "Quick Nick reads tonight!"

Who am I to deny a princess?

Look, it doesn't matter what your net worth is or how big your CEO balls are—when a four-year-old drafts you into storytime, you smile and do it.

I'm not as good at it as Reese. I don't do the voices, but Millie still smiles through the whole book.

I glance at the time on my computer. It's after six.

Reese will be here to pick me up soon.

Even packing up my briefcase feels lighter. I never pictured myself as the cooking at home, reading to a preschooler type, but it's more rewarding than late nights at

clubs where I'd wake up hungover, usually next to women I couldn't name to save my life.

The town car pulls up to the curb of Brandt Dreams. I open the passenger door and slide in.

"I made you something," Millie says from the back seat.

I turn and stretch my hand for it.

"What did you learn today, little lady?" I ask.

She hands me a piece of construction paper with two stick figures drawn on it. The taller stick figure has a hilariously long arm that reaches down, holding the arm of the smaller stick figure, who links up with a smaller one in turn.

"Guess!" Millie chirps, her eyes round marbles.

"Really? You drew us?" I grin back at her, pretending to be oblivious. "You did my hair justice, Millie. Awesome job."

In the picture, it actually looks like a black tarantula landed on my head, but who am I to play art critic? I'm the odd one out in this family who puts practicality above poetry.

Beside me, Reese bites her lip, trying not to laugh.

"What's so funny? She nailed your smile," I say, holding the picture up and tapping it. "Sucks that we have to give her back once we get things straightened out with Abby."

Reese's eyes flick from the road to me. Pink dances on her face.

"We?"

Damn. I didn't mean to say that out loud. I don't answer.

"You can't take it back now. You've already said it. It's okay to admit you're having fun, bossman," she whispers.

"Yeah, well, what's for dinner?" I grumble.

"Way to change the subject." Reese winks, slaughtering me with those blue eyes.

"Pizza!" Millie screams.

"Should I make it or should we order in?"

“Pizza Shack?” Millie asks with wide eyes.

I look at Reese.

“We have a request and I do like their grub. You’d be surprised how many billionaires eat there,” I say, remembering a time when I ran into HeronComm’s mogul, Magnus Heron, stuffing his face with his family. Like Ward, he’s matured and calmed down a hell of a lot.

Reese laughs in agreement.

We spend a couple hours playing the arcade games with Millie and eating our body weight in deep dish pizza with cheese so gooey it should be illegal. The kid falls asleep in the car on the way home.

Back at my place, Reese gets her out of her booster seat, kisses the top of her head, and carries her off to bed.

No storytime tonight with Millie so exhausted. I wait for Reese until she steps out of the guestroom.

Without hesitation, my hands find her waist, pull her in, and I damn near kiss her face off.

She whimpers deliciously against my tongue, muffling a laugh.

“You’ve been waiting for a while, huh?” she whispers.

“For you, all fucking day. Nighttime is *my* time, darling.”

My mouth attacks hers again, deeper, the lust churning in my balls heating every breath.

It’s got a stranglehold on her, too.

She sucks at my bottom lip like a tigress, teasing the inside of my mouth with her tongue before she rips it away. If it wasn’t for the tyke sleeping just a wall away, I’d slam her against the surface with my hips and take her, right the fuck here.

But I promised her a bed, didn’t I?

Sometimes I hate being a man of my word.

“Nick, you’re the best, and I don’t just mean best kisser. I couldn’t have done any of this without you. I hope you know that,” she says, glancing up at me with eyes like a winter thaw. “I hope you know that no matter what happens, I’ll never forget what you—”

I scoop her up in my arms. She makes a soft squeal of surprise.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking my woman to bed right the fuck now. Before we waste more time on words when we could be speaking with skin,” I say, my throat on fire, inhaling her.

“W-what if she just wants to watch Netflix?” Her saucy smile isn’t even funny.

“If you want TV, I’ll turn it on for you. Then I’ll bend you over in front of it, mount your ass, and fuck you until you can’t pay attention to anything but your own screams.”

I can see the heat in my eyes reflected back—no, matched—in hers.

Fuck.

I don’t need to breathe another harsh word before we’re tumbling into the bedroom. I lock my door, lay Reese on my bed, lean over her, and take her mouth.

Her lips part with a whimper, inviting me in.

Tonight, I’m greedy as hell, taking everything she gives me.

Every whimper.

Every tremble.

Every bit of pleading in her eyes.

I take her all, and give back a storm.

She crouches on her knees, reaching for the buttons on my shirt.

“You’re trembling,” I say, my eyes flicking to her fingers. “Is that what I do to you, sweetheart?”

She sucks at her bottom lip, her eyes wide, her fingers trying to work and slipping.

With a worn breath, I bury her little hand under mine, eclipsing her fingers.

“You want to answer first? Or do I need to reach between your legs and see how sopping wet, how ready, you are for me?”

“Nick,” she whines, her small tongue curling over her lips. “You make me psycho.”

Psycho.

One strange word makes my cock throb with a raging pulse.

Leaning low, I slowly inhale her. I swear I can smell how eager she is, how much she’s begging to be pillaged.

When I look down, my shirt is open. She drops a winding hand down my chest.

I place my hand under her chin, tilting her face up, and loot her strawberry mouth.

“Shit. In case you wondered, we’re one in this madness,” I whisper, shaking out of my shirt.

Even the way she looks at me undoes me a hundred times over.

Her hands move to the button of my pants as she sucks that lip, turning my blood to magma.

“Not yet.” I place a hand over them, stilling them.

My turn. I lift her off the bed and pull her shirt over her head, hurling it across the room. Her sports bra is gone today, replaced with lacey cups she almost spills out of.

“For me?” I growl, sliding a finger underneath one round tit, circling her nipple.

She nods, closing her eyes. I love how her chestnut hair spills down her shoulders.

“Since there’s someone else to see it...I thought I should make a few improvements.”

“Improvements,” I repeat gruffly. “Biggest upgrade you can make is keeping this body ready for me at all times.” There are no words for what’s next, my pulse beating like a drum.

I reach behind her back, unclasp the bra, shove it down her arms, and bend my head to her breasts.

Heaven.

My mouth tames a nipple while my fingertips encircle the other, sending her to ecstasy.

When I say I could spend an entire day etching her face into my mind, it’s no exaggeration. Especially when I send her through the full spectrum of emotion with every pinch, every caress, every heated flick of my tongue and sting of my teeth.

Agony.

Impatience.

Defiance.

Shock.

Awe.

Sweet relief.

She gives it up and then some, her eyes fluttering as I pull her into my mouth, sucking greedily. These tits are fucking mine.

For a scalding second, I can even see a flash of her glowing like a summer day, cradling a child to her chest—a baby I put in her.

Fuck. What’s happening to me?

“Oh, Nick. W-wait,” she moans, digging her nails into the back of my neck.

I pull away reluctantly. “I didn’t mean to bite you so hard —”

“No.” She smiles. “No, it’s just—”

She locks eyes and shimmies her pants down.

My eyes drop to the V between her legs like depraved hunting hawks.

Her matching lace panties hug her hips, and a diamond hole with a jewel dangling from it rests just above her triangle. I swear, her navel piercing invites me to devour everything underneath.

“You just killed me. Congratulations,” I groan.

She smiles. “The lady at the store said they would, but—”

“Reese, fuck. You didn’t need fancy panties to undo me. You’ve done it a thousand times before dressed in three layers, plus that bulky-ass winter coat.”

“Hold me,” she whispers.

I can’t deny her.

Moving forward, I’m about to tumble her down on the bed and slide into her, fumbling a hand in my pocket for a condom.

Only, she shoves her hands playfully against my chest.

“Wait,” she whispers, grabbing the button to my pants, slowly undoing it.

The zipper falls, and so do my trousers. Then she puts her hands on both sides of my briefs, yanking them down with the same hunger I used undressing her.

She cups a hand around my shaft, already straining with wicked intent against her skin.

“Shit” I breathe. “I thought I was bringing you off?”

“That’s up to you,” she says with a husky tone that turns me inside out.

I want to fuck her, but I also need her touch, my cock hounding me to give in as her hand pumps up and down my length.

I’m a dead man walking.

Chuckling, I push forward, into her strokes. When she brings those pert lips to the tip of my dick and kisses the head,

I rear back and crash down on the edge of the bed.

It's all I can do to avoid busting streamers like the Fourth of July.

A boiling growl rips out of me as I sit up.

“What gives? Less than a week ago, you were Miss Innocent.” I kiss her jaw and down her neckline. “Now you're a damned seductress. I can't decide which Halle I like more.”

She runs a finger around the sensitive tip of my cock, then grips it, pumping up and down. Her eyes shine like ice-blue pools.

“Fine. Seductress wins,” I grind out. “Show me what that mouth can do, sweetheart. Suck.”

She obeys.

Goddammit, she obeys.

Recent virgin or not, I have to believe she's given a blowjob before. Those lips cling to my shaft like a velvet ring, spiraling down my length. She gets halfway—most girls never make it that far—before moving up, then coming back down with greater confidence.

My hand twines a tangle of her hair around my fingers.

Even when she's on her knees, sucking me to the brink, being utterly defiled, she's beautiful.

And the living art of her pink mouth full of me, working, triggering neurons I didn't know I had, turns the heat lashing my balls into an inferno.

“You keep that up,” I snarl, choking on a hot breath. “You keep that up, I *will* come in your mouth, woman.”

Rather than slowing down, my confession only sends her into overdrive. She closes her eyes, bobbing her head, even fighting my hand as it leashes her hair. I'm struggling for a measure of control and failing—*fucking failing*.

Because I may have her in my fist, but every second she engulfs me, we both know who's prisoner.

Her eyes look up with a plea.

Nicholas, give it to me. Come!

It strikes without warning, a breathless fireball crackling up my spine. My instinct to fill her the fuck up kicks into overdrive, and I shove her head down on my cock as it swells.

Ropes of fire. Ribbons of ecstasy. Knives of static pleasure crisscross every nerve ending I own, ending with the guttural curse leaping off my lips.

“*Shitfuckdamn!*” It comes out as one hoarse word with the flood pouring into her mouth.

It’s a miracle she even swallows anything with how forceful it comes on—with how much white-hot heat erupts out of me.

A few seconds later, it’s running down her chin. Seeing her painted with my essence like a damned soul from a medieval hellscape when she looks so angelic annihilates me.

I’m coming so hard I see stars.

When my senses return, I’m flat on my back, Reese still wiping her mouth shyly as she strokes my brow.

“Well?”

I blink at her. “That was...”

“Unexpected?” she finishes, tilting her head in question.

“Total insanity. Marry me,” I spit, reaching up to shove my fingers through hers. “Marry me right the hell now.”

She’s laughing—and I’m not even sure I’m joking—as I spring up, feeling a new vigor to pay her back.

I fight her under me, my mouth wrestling hers, kissing her until I taste moans like soft lavender.

When she’s a whimpering mess, my tongue turns south, roaming her body and reclaiming her breasts. She rakes her nails through my hair, her eyes pinched shut, pushing my head down impatiently when I move in for her eager pussy.

My nostrils tingle, raging to breathe her in, to brand her taste in my memory.

Shifting my weight, I toss her quivering legs over my shoulders and finally press my tongue against soft lace. My teeth catch a fringe of fabric and make quick work of it.

“Oh, hell. Ohh—Nick.”

Have I mentioned how much I love hearing my name like the world’s nastiest curse on her lips?

I show her how much, sliding my tongue up and down in languid strokes, dead over the center seam of that lace, before I rip her panties down her legs and onto the floor.

“Nick.” She sighs my name again, rapt with worship.

Warm cream tells me she wants this as badly as I do.

She loves every second, how I cut hypnotic circles around her clit, how I slowly fuck her slit with my tongue, how I get rougher as her ass rises, and especially how my hands grip her thighs. I shove them against my face and go deeper with a growl, pulling her clit between my teeth, forcing her to ride my beard.

As hard as I go, she takes it like a champ, and I won’t stop for nothing unless she asks.

She kicks her legs with a shrill whimper. “Ohhh, holy hell.”

Holy hell? That I can do.

Gunning my tongue into her folds one last time, I bring her to ecstasy’s edge, then rear up in a movement so quick I’m hovering over her when she blinks up in surprise. The tip of my seething hardness waits at the entrance to her warm, wet pink, leaking pre-come like sap on her pussy.

Fuck. Where is that condom?

I start to turn around, but stop as she grabs my forearm sharply, digging her nails in.

“It’s okay. It’s safe. Please, Nick, I...I want to feel you,” she whispers.

We lock eyes. I may have had my harem over the years, but one thing I've never been is stupid. I always used protection. Thank God, too, no telling what kind of rap sheet I'd have with my clinic if I didn't.

Going in bare with anyone else would feel like madness if she *was* anyone else. But with her...with Reese damn Halle, this animalistic urge—this need—flares through me.

I know her.

I trust her.

I want her skin-on-skin like a madman needs his precious delusions.

“You know if we do this, there's no going back, yeah?” I growl, the head of my cock grinding against her opening with a mind of its own.

I'm going to want her all the fucking time, skin on heated skin.

She's so wet, so willing to wear the mark of my seed from the inside out. Yes, I know how insane I sound. I wouldn't take it back for anything.

“It's safe,” she whispers. “I'm sure of it. I always keep up with the pill.”

That makes me feel slightly better—not that I'm sure I'd have turned her down even if a pregnancy was Russian roulette.

I'm that crazy to be in her, that undone, that dead if I don't take her *now*.

She wraps all four limbs around me as I glide in, stroking deep, pushing my forehead against hers when I hit her depths.

“So. Fucking. Hot.” Each word comes out like a staccato snarl as her tightness grips me.

“Kiss me,” she moans.

I bring my lips to hers. Her delicate tongue slides into my mouth. And then I'm gone for any communication involving words.

There's only our swaying rhythm, only each thrust as I slam into her, crashing my hips into hers.

This isn't anything I can describe as mere sex anymore.

This is a battle of skin and breath. This is a sonnet written in sweat and breathless curses. This is a frolic, a dance, a bestial mating dance that makes my headboard shake so violently I think the damn thing could break.

She comes hard for me, just a few minutes in, letting out this high-pitched groan as her body seizes.

I don't know how I'm still thrusting through it, powering on with a mind more animal than man.

When she can look me in the eye again, I don't let up. I match the thrusts of my hips to the strokes of her tongue in my mouth.

We find a new state of being in the marathon to the finish.

Slow and soft and unbearably steady.

No space to even breathe between us.

No thought left except making these bodies clay flesh that exists purely to melt together.

It's only that hellfire in my balls grounding me, coiling around my throat with an urgency as my speed quickens and my strokes turn meaner. My release comes on like something clawing its way out of me, flogging my tongue, jerking my head back with a roar that echoes off the walls.

"Reese!" Her name splits me in two.

"Nick, yes!" She locks her legs around me and arches up, her pussy convulsing around my length, pulling me in to the hilt.

I frantically kiss her—consume her—for the split second of no return, catching a glimpse of her blue eyes fluttering shut before mine slam closed like a falling ax.

"Nick!" She whimpers.

I fucking explode.

We come together, our bodies twitching, two coiled machines made to trade heat. My dick pumps for what feels like forever, this feral urge to burn my name on her from the inside out whipping through my brain.

No telling how long it lasts.

I just know when it's over—when I can finally breathe and check my own pulse—I kiss the top of her head with my last bit of strength and collapse next to her in a steaming mess.

She runs her fingers softly down my neck a minute later.

I pull her to me wordlessly, falling into her eyes, marveling at the first woman I've fucked with major intention.

God. Wherever this is going, it should scare me.

But somehow it only makes me need her more, and I spend the next few hours showing her how much she's become like oxygen. More important, more vital, than my next breath.

Before sleep, we shower together.

She washes my back and I clean my hair between a thousand kisses. Once we're out, she throws on her pajama shorts and an oversized t-shirt from my closet and leans over the bed to kiss me.

Even after four fucking times, her tongue *still* tastes like a top-shelf dessert wine.

“Aren't you coming to bed?” I whisper.

“I should check on Millie...maybe stay with her if she's having trouble sleeping,” she says with thick hesitation.

Snarling, I grab her and pull her into bed with me, reaching for my phone.

“That's what the camera's for,” I say, pulling up the app. “See? Sleeping like the gumdrop she is. You can't leave me. There's also a house rule against clothes in my bed.”

Laughing, she snuggles up to me and presses her lips to my jaw.

“How did I ever live without you, Nick Brandt?”

I fold my arms around her, squeezing tight, pondering the same mystery.

SIX WHOLE HANDS (REESE)



“Have you found anything yet?” Nick asks from the hall as I empty my sister’s top drawer one item at a time.

“Nope, you?” I realize it’s stupid after I ask.

If he’d found something, he wouldn’t be asking me.

Of course, the hunt for the needle in the proverbial haystack would be a whole lot easier if we knew what we were searching for.

“Nothing,” he says bitterly.

I hit the bottom of the top drawer. I’ve found random obsolete phone cables, rechargeable batteries, and Abby’s childhood diary. I don’t even know how she managed to keep that.

Each time the system jerked us around, we were given one suitcase each. No more, no less.

Neither of us had an actual grown-up suitcase, so we usually moved all of our things in one giant shared trash bag, or sometimes stuffed into a ratty secondhand duffel bag.

Abby’s seventh grade diary was important enough to always have a place in the moving sack, though.

Still. It’s been almost two hours combing this cramped apartment, and I haven’t found anything to help my sister’s current predicament or uncover Will’s sudden interest in seeing Millie.

Sighing, I replace everything I've removed and open the next drawer.

"There isn't much left to go through," Nick says gently.

"I know."

"Quick Nick, will you come play?" Millie asks.

With Tiffany out sick today, Millie tagged along. She's been easy to entertain, but with everything going on, I don't want to be here with a defenseless child any longer than necessary.

"Nick's busy, bumblebee," I call.

"I wanna ride," she says with a pout.

He doesn't answer, but a minute later, I hear Millie squealing.

"Wheeeeeee!"

I bite back a grin. I don't have to peek in to know Nick's carrying my niece around the living room on his shoulders. A fun distraction from the miserable reality of rifling through my sister's meager belongings, trying to find a smoking mystery gun.

I don't deserve him.

While the bossman pretends he's a bipedal unicorn for Millie, I paw through the contents of another drawer.

"How about you color me a picture, little lady? I have to get back to work before your aunt banishes me to the cornfield," I hear him say. His old Twilight Zone reference makes me laugh.

Millie gasps. "She'll put you on time-out!"

Another giggle escapes at that one.

I search the rest of Abby's room, but no surprise, there's nothing to find.

"Any luck?" I walk into the living room.

Nick shakes his head. "No. I think I've been through everything."

“Are you sure? Everything?”

“Except this, I suppose.” He stares at a box piled with kid’s books. He leans forward, clasping a blue hardback tucked underneath a couple books on the stack, and pulls it out.

The books that were on top of it slide to the floor.

I recognize it immediately.

“Ohhh, it’s Abby’s *Alice in Wonderland*. Our mom bought it for her before she died. She always read it a few times each year,” I say.

“Good story. Grandma used to read me the same thing when I was a kid. Does Millie like Carroll too?” Nick opens the book, leafing through it. A piece of paper flutters out and falls onto the worn shag carpet.

I bend down and pick it up.

“What is it?” he asks.

I unfold the paper. A number—a familiar one—is printed plainly on the top followed by a list of what looks like names, but it’s so scribbled through I can’t read them. The word Winthrop is printed under the list.

“Wait.” I pull out my phone and do a quick check. “This looks like that phone number Will called me from. And a Winthrop Chicago header, weirdly enough.”

“Very weird,” he says, taking the paper from me with a frown. “That’s the address of the future Chicago hotel, all right. Looks like the notepad’s some early swag they printed up and handed out—they do it sometimes for the crews and marketers. How does Abby have this?”

“I have no idea.”

Nick stares at the paper, then tilts his head back, holding the scrap up to the light. He slides it back into the novel like a bookmark.

“Didn’t Frisk tell you he was out of town on a job site?”

“Yes.” I nod.

“Something tells me it’s not a coincidence if he works construction,” he says quietly.

“What are you thinking?”

“Not sure, but it bothers me. I’m going to request the work crew manifests. This doesn’t feel right to me.” He puts *Alice in Wonderland* back in the box along with the two books that tumbled out and lifts it.

“Nick?”

“We’re taking this with for a closer look.”

Fine by me. It’s the closest thing to a clue our two-hour search has yielded.

“Let’s get out of here.”

I nod. “Come on, Millie.”

I glance her way. She sits in the middle of a pile of coloring books and crayons. I grab her things and shove them in her backpack.

Nick holds the door open for us and I walk out with Millie behind me. She stops and taps on Nick’s leg because she can’t reach any higher.

“You guys. Hangry.”

Smiling, he stops, shifts the box in his arms, picks her up, and steps out, shutting the door behind us.

“Why am I not surprised? What does Princess Millie want today for her banquet?”

“Waffles!”

“I think we can handle waffles.”

I lock Abby’s door while Nick punches something in his phone.

“Ah-ha. I found your waffles, Millie.”

I give him a long warning look for spoiling her.

Then again, he’s already spoiled me rotten, so who am I to judge?



WE PULL into the cramped side street of a small diner.

“This doesn’t look like a place for billionaires,” I say.

“And I’m not your typical billionaire bad boy. Aren’t you lucky?”

I grin at him.

We walk inside and a young brunette behind the counter says, “Sit wherever you like! I’ll be right with you.”

The diner is mostly empty this time of day, so we have our pick. Nick chooses a booth beside a window and sets Millie down.

“Okay, kiddo, you’re on this side. Grown-ups on the other,” he tells her.

“Not fair. I’m almost a whole hand.” She holds up five chubby fingers.

“And I’m over six whole hands, so I make the rules.” He flashes her that disarming smile.

Millie gasps. “Will I be six whole hands someday?”

“Yep, and then you can sit wherever you want,” I say.

Nick slides into the “grown-up” side of the booth with me.

“You handled that well,” I whisper.

“I have my moments.” His side-eye makes me laugh.

I can’t help but stare into his emerald eyes.

We barely shift our focus to the waitress arriving at our side.

“I’m Melissa, your server.” She takes a folded piece of paper out of her apron and hands it to Millie. “Would you like to color?”

Millie takes the paper. “Wanna eat a waffle.”

Melissa laughs. “Well, the kids’ menu is inside the coloring sheet. Isn’t that cool?”

Millie isn’t impressed, but she does try to unfold the paper. When she can’t, she lets out a frustrated sigh and slides the paper over to Nick with a pleading look.

Nick begins unfolding it for her.

Melissa hands me a menu and sets one down in front of Nick. “Do you know what you’d like to drink?”

“Coffee,” I say.

“Times two.” A four-pack of crayons fall out of the now open placemat. “Look what I found.”

He holds the box up for Millie to see. She reaches over, and Nick hands over her loot.

I smile at the sight.

“And what would she like?” Melissa asks, nodding at the kidlet.

“You want hot chocolate, Millie?” I ask.

“Yeah!” Millie holds her hands out. “With whippy cream.”

“We can do that,” Melissa says with a grin before walking away.

Millie furiously scribbles at the paper placemat with a red crayon.

“Millie, can I see your placemat for a second?” I ask.

She looks up at me and narrows her eyes.

How did my sister manage this kid all day, every day for four years?

“I’m taking your drawing. I just need to look at the kids’ menu so I can help you order,” I say.

She drops the red crayon and picks up the pink.

“Waffle,” she says again, like that answers everything.

“I need to make sure I find you the right one.” I reach over to take the placemat.

“Stop!” She drops her crayon and slams her pudgy hands over mine. “You can’t, Auntie Reese. I’m working.”

“Kiddo. You’re four. You don’t have deadlines,” I say.

“Can I see what you’re drawing?” Nick asks ever so gently.

She beams at him.

“She’s wrapped around your finger.” No girl—even a four-year-old—is immune to Brandt charm.

Nick puts his hands on the paper and she deigns to let him slide it over.

“Very impressive, Millie,” he says with an exaggerated edge in his voice.

I lean over to see what she’s drawn.

An oddly proportioned woman with long hair sticking out of a driver’s cap and pink earrings holds hands with a much taller and equally odd-sized guy. I think his tie goes down to his feet. They’re both standing inside a big red heart.

Heat pulses under my cheeks.

Oh, God. I didn’t need that feeling.

Nick gives me a longing look and slips his arm around me. “You okay, sweetheart? You’re red.”

“Sorry.” I’m perfectly aware I’m getting redder by the second.

He chuckles, pressing his lips to my forehead.

“Can I have my picture? Not done,” Millie interrupts.

Nick is about to hand it back to her when I put up a hand to stop him.

“Wait, I need to see it first.” I lean and quickly scan the menu. “Fruit or bacon?”

“Waffle!” Millie says.

“With fruit or bacon?”

“Pineapple. Give it back!”

Nick passes her menu back to her with a knowing smile.

“What if they don’t have pineapple?”

“Grapes.”

“So, fruit? No bacon?”

“Yeah.” She’s back to coloring.

“That drawing reminds me...I wanted to talk to you about something,” Nick says, taking a pull off his coffee.

“Sure.”

“I’d like to come clean about us sooner. It doesn’t have to be a huge announcement, but I need to be honest with Ward and Susan the HR Cerberus. We have to do this the right way, just like Ward and Paige did when the time came. Also, I’d like to be able to take you out without worrying if someone with a big mouth sees us. I don’t need more secrets, Reese. For all the things I’ve done wrong, this has to be the one thing that’s right. Are you ready to be official?”

He swallows another long sip of coffee, staring at me.

My heart leaps.

“Nick...” I’m barely able to speak.

His arm tightens around my waist. His gaze looks way too intimate for a public diner, even if it’s perfectly warm and innocent.

“Yeah, beautiful?”

I move so I can press my hand to his face, pull his mouth closer to mine, and press my lips over his. He flicks his tongue against my lips and they part.

A shiver bolts through me. It’s beautiful and sudden and sensuous.

A throat clears awkwardly as Nick pulls away with a snort.

“Umm—I can come back,” the waitress says.

“No,” Nick says. “Corned beef hash and eggs for me, over easy. A waffle with fruit for the little miss,” Nick says.

“Are you ready to order?” Melissa asks me.

“Umm—” Not really when the only thing I want off any menu is another kiss from my impossible boyfriend. “Western omelet, please.”

“Toast, bagel, or biscuits?”

“Bagel.” My usual choice. They were a luxury growing up in the foster system.

“Butter, jam, or cream cheese?”

Ugh, too many choices. Especially when all I want is Nick.

“Cream cheese.”

“Perfect, I’ll have your food right out.” She walks away.

Take your time, I think to myself.

Nick turns his head so those fierce green eyes are leveled on me again. “So, was that a yes?”

I nod, unable to form words.

He inches his head closer.

I think—*hope*—he’s going to kiss me again.

Instead, he presses his lips against my ear. “You’re becoming the most important person in my life, Reese. I won’t let you down.”

Holy hell.

My eyes flutter shut at the impact of those words.

Is it too soon to hear him say the soul-shredding L-word? I’ve been dangerously close to saying it since the first time we made love, being the overly emotional ex-virgin I am. But this, here, today...

It’s a miracle my mouth doesn’t betray my heart.

For the rest of our brunch, I feel like I’ve reverted back to high school, stuffing my mouth with food and casting moony looks at this boy, the new center of my universe.

We’ve fallen hard and fast and imperfectly.

No denying it.

But doesn't that mean this is real? Doesn't that mean nothing could ever steal this away?



LATER, with Millie down for the night, Nick and I are alone in his room.

Instead of going to what's become "my side" of the bed, I pull the covers down on Nick's side and lie down. He spoons me to his hard body, linking his arms around me with a sultry kiss to the back of my neck.

"When are you talking to Ward?" I ask quietly.

"This week. Got a specific day you prefer?"

I shrug. "It doesn't matter, but—" I bite my lip, contemplating how to finish that sentence. I don't want him to think I'm second-guessing anything, but if Ward finds out we're together, what else will he know? "If he knows we're a thing, does he need to know anything else? Like everything about Abby? I know you've kept it kinda vague and general and I appreciate that."

Nick turns me so I'm facing him.

"I'll always protect your privacy. I haven't told anyone more than they needed to know this whole time. If you're worried, we can slow down—"

"No."

His eyes flash with humor.

"That's not what I meant. I don't care if everyone knows. I just want to be with you. I only asked so I'd know what to expect," I whisper.

Nick's lips find mine. His tongue traces my lips, then inside my mouth, two longing sighs colliding.

I wrap my arms around his neck.

He pulls away with a delicious scrape of scruff against my skin.

I let out a breath, trembling from the effect he has on me.

He *always* does this to me.

“I love that, Nick,” I say with a shudder.

It’s not exactly, *I love you*, but it’s so close I feel delirious.

“You’re the sexiest woman alive,” he growls, so much force in his voice I actually believe it.

“Why?”

“You know me—the real me—and you still want to be with *me*. You make me want to be better, Reese,” he rumbles.

I smile. “I’m sure most women feel that way about you. You’re a hard man *not* to want to be with.”

“Most of the girls I’ve dated just wanted to be seen with me. They never thought beyond fame, beyond money, beyond sex. It’s not the same. Not like the future I see with you,” he whispers, his breath hot against my skin.

“That sucks, but I’m only a little sorry it didn’t go well in the past. If it worked out with them, I wouldn’t have you now, and—”

“Fuck yes, you have me. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, woman,” he growls.

God, he’s unlocked a new talent. Now he can turn my body boneless using only words.

I don’t have much time to consider it though, because in one swift move, I’m flat on my back. Nick’s lips attack mine with an animal fury that has me instantly spellbound.

His tongue invades my mouth. His eyes invade my soul.

My arms wind around his neck again, hanging on against a force of nature.

I moan before his hot mouth even lands on my neck, circling to my shoulders, unraveling me one vicious kiss at a

time. With eyes like napalm pools, he flips the nightgown over my head and nips his way to my breast, marking me.

I try to regain my senses.

No easy task, even moving my hand to stroke up and down his bare chest, and feeling thankful he sleeps in only boxers.

His mouth covers one nipple, overwhelming me with just his tongue and a single square inch of captured skin until his fingers wander over my other breast.

“You know what you are?” he demands, baring his teeth.

“Already yours,” I whimper, swallowing thickly as his fingers march down my belly, skimming my thigh, bending in to brush the crease between my legs.

The answer must satisfy him—for exactly two seconds.

Because I arch up, fusing our bodies together in just the right place.

His raging length flicks against my folds, teasing me into submission, even through his boxers and my panties.

I gasp.

He sucks my other breast in a searing ring of teeth, only releasing it when I give him a shrill sigh.

“You...you weren’t supposed to stop,” I whine.

He chuckles, shifting up to kiss me just long enough to taste my mouth.

“You didn’t have to stop that either,” I whisper.

“I didn’t, but I do love your frustration. It’s part of the fun, darling,” he growls, those green eyes turning wolfish, smug, hellbent on blowing me apart.

“No fai—”

He doesn’t let me finish. His mouth seizes my other breast.

“Ohh.”

He strokes his tongue across my areola.

“Ohhhh.”

He kisses below my breast, down my stomach, diving lower. He licks a steaming line across my waist, sinking between my legs with a speed that makes me tremble in raw anticipation.

His finger finds my clit and circles it like a prowling wolf. It's only when I'm panting, trying to grind back at his hand—*begging*—that he pushes down with one brute knuckle while his tongue traces my seam and then—

Destroyed.

Possibly for life.

Whimpering, I work my nails into the sheet, my hips instinctively arching up to meet every explosive fire-brush of his tongue.

He flicks it deeper, more intent in every thrust, working his mouth in ways that leave me bewildered. However he does it, I don't care.

I just want more, matching each thrust with my hips.

“Nick...” My nails scratch at the sheets. My thighs tighten around him, desperately trying to hold him closer. “God, Nick!”

Not enough.

I let go of the sheet and desperately reach for his boxers even as my O bites through my core. My hand catches his waistband and I'm yanking them down, fighting my own release before it comes full force.

I want him inside me. I want his molten heat. I want his greed, his fury, every steaming drop from his balls.

He moves so we're face-to-face again and kisses me.

“I want you. *Now*,” I whisper, pronouncing that singular word like a prayer.

His tongue pries my mouth open with a hot grunt as he slips inside me.

Tonight, the sweetness is gone.

We're connected in all the feral ways, driven out of our minds for each other. A shared madness burns through every nerve as his hips go to work, chiseling pleasure through my flesh.

He binds me to him with his muscular arms as the harsh impact of his hips shakes me to the bone.

My nails scrape his back, urging him on, feeling him taking me hard enough to leave a few well-earned bruises. My teeth find his shoulder right before I go off, aching to mark him like he's branded me.

Coming! I muffle a killing scream against his skin the first time I go off.

And he just keeps thrusting, harder and deeper, his own lust an unholy fever. He crashes against me, never letting me down from the high, just fanning my flames as his own fire scorches his blood.

Holy shit. This man.

Nothing will ever be more perfect.

"Goddammit, Reese," he snarls sometime later. Sweat beads on his brow. His eyes alone could probably knock me up right now.

My legs fuse around him, and I can feel another climax building like a caldera in my core. Rocking gives way to frantic thrusts.

"Reese!" he calls darkly.

I arch with him, pressing my nails into his skin, throwing my head back and hissing with ecstasy as he slams into me one last time. Every bit of him swells and sweeps me away.

I reach up with one tense hand, my fingers scratching his neck, begging him to let go, *let go*.

Join me in the storm.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*" His voice drops an octave and he rasps out slurred curses.

Then there's just this throbbing, grinding, blistering wave that whites out my vision.

My body clenches. We knot together. I think we share one pulse, rippling in sinful delight, flesh bound in ways I never knew it could.

It lasts for a sweet eternity, and he holds me tighter as he collapses gently.

I wrap my still-shaking legs around him, gingerly rubbing his thighs.

"Bad news. You can't leave," I joke, but I don't just mean the way he sexed me into oblivion.

"Never dream of it, sweetheart. If I ever run, you have every reason to shoot me on sight," he whispers, pressing his forehead to mine, a preview of the slow-burn kiss that claims what's left of me.

WAR STORIES (NICK)

After talking, we decide we should clean up this Will Frisk mess as much as possible before approaching my brother and HR about us.

It's not as easy as a simple talk.

At least one of us will have to make a clean break from Brandt Ideas—and if it's me, that may mean Brandt Dreams, too. Brandt Ideas is still the parent company.

Neither of us needs a career switch while we're dealing with a menace. With Abby not talking, we have no clue what the bastard wants.

He's called Reese a couple of times, probing her, asking to see Millie ever since our standoff in the coffee shop. He backs off when she gives the conditions—in public, with me supervising.

Of course, he always dodges out.

I'm not worried about unwanted visits from Frisk since the girls stay with me now. But I'll be damned if he ever breathes the same oxygen as Reese or Millie without me.

I'm also sick as hell of him prolonging our secret.

I'm ready for Reese to be around the way Paige is for Grandma's family dinners. I'm ready to wake up to her every day and let one last look at her face put me to sleep.

I don't want to keep her hidden like a dirty secret, and I also don't want anyone else figuring it out before it's on our

terms.

Until Abby's situation gets cleaned up, what I want doesn't matter.

I've decided to let my own impatience run wild, tracking him down on my own. I'll see what I can find.

Propping my feet up on my desk, I pick up the phone to call the project manager at the construction company.

"Mr. Brandt, how are you doing?" a gruff voice answers.

"I'm good, George. I need a favor."

"Okay?"

"I want to do a walkthrough of the Winthrope site this week. I'm just not sure when I'll be able to get to it. Can you send me the work schedule for the week?" I ask.

"I can, but...why do you need the schedule for a walkthrough?"

"I'll know who I'm talking to if I have questions. I'll eventually need each week's schedule for accounting to verify billing, anyhow."

"No problem, boss. I'll send it right over. The guys on the site can answer plenty of questions for you, but if anything seems off or you don't think you're getting enough out of them, call me."

"Will do. Thanks."

The only questions I have aren't about construction.

True to his word, George has a two-week work schedule sitting in my inbox within the hour, and apparently Will the Jackass himself is working today.

I run downstairs expecting to hop in an Uber, but Reese comes in just as I'm going out. She's back early from taking Ward to the Naperville suburbs for a client meeting.

She grins at me. "Hi."

I scan the lobby to make sure we're alone, pull her to me, press my lips to her forehead, and release her too quickly. We

can't risk being busted.

"Where are you off to?" she asks.

Fuck. I thought I could go and get back before she knew I was gone. There's no way she'll be okay with me snooping around Frisk on my own.

"I was just going to my place to pick up my car," I say, adjusting my tie.

She lifts an eyebrow. "Your car? What's up?"

I shrug. "Rough day. Feeling restless. I thought I'd get behind the wheel for a change. You want to give me a lift home?"

"Sure!"

We walk to the parking garage.

"I don't have any pickups or deliveries for a while. Let me drive your car today?"

"Sorry, sweetheart. I need some alone time today to unwind."

"Oh—right." Her face tightens and her voice is guarded.

My eyes dart around the garage.

No one's around, but shit, I have to get this worked out. I pull her close, wrapping both arms around her waist, and lean over so my lips almost touch her ear.

"You know how I feel about you. Nothing's wrong. I promise. I just need to work through some company crap," I tell her, brushing my lips over hers.

She doesn't pull away. She also doesn't melt against me like she usually does, either.

"So it's not an annoying chauffeur and her super annoying niece completely invading your space kind of thing?" she whispers.

I can't help but smirk because it's ridiculous to think that.

"Fuck no. Also, my driver-girlfriend is way more infuriating than her niece."

She punches me with a laugh. I know we're okay.

"I wouldn't trade her for the world, though," I say.

She smiles like the sunrise.

"You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, Reese."

Her cheeks glow like roses as I slide my fingers under her chin, tilting her gaze to mine.

"I thought you'd be used to it by now."

She giggles. "Right. Like I'll ever get used to someone like you saying things like that to me."

"Bull. I barely deserve you," I throw back.

"Nick, if we don't go now, I'm going to kiss you right here, and...I won't care who sees it."

I survey the area again. *Fuck it.*

I steal a kiss with the force of a thousand suns.

"More tonight," I whisper, hoping I can wait for tonight. I'm tempted to make a mad dash into the penthouse with her when we pick up the car.

Thankfully, I check my baser instincts as she drops me off at the parking garage and keeps going.

Aside from two immaculate high-end cars, I keep an eight-year-old SUV for the times when I don't want to be noticed.

Like today.

It takes over half an hour to get across town and pull up to the construction site just as a beat-up vehicle I recognize from the ugly meeting at Sweeter Grind pulls out.

Dammit. I don't stop, opting to follow Frisk instead. We drive for nearly twenty minutes in meandering Chicago traffic.

I'm careful to stay two cars behind him so he doesn't notice me.

He finally pulls into another worksite—more of a demolition site, really—an old warehouse that's half torn apart.

I pull into a gas station on the corner across the street, park next to the air meter, grab the hose, and kneel beside my tire to see what happens. A few burly men in sunglasses come out and load boxes into Will's trunk a minute later from another car.

Will stands in front of his truck, nervously peering from side to side like he's on watch. The untrained eye wouldn't notice, but I watched Iranian special forces doing the same thing on satellite streams plenty of times, never knowing they were about to have a submarine-launched drone up their ass.

Just like the Iranians guarding their black ops, Frisk doesn't know he's being watched like a hawk.

The guys go back inside the warehouse. Will looks around one more time, nods to himself, and gets back in his pickup, stubbing out a cigarette with his boot.

That's my cue. I hang the hose up and hop back in the SUV. I expect him to head back to the Winthrope worksite. He's on the manifest for the whole day.

He doesn't turn around, though, and keeps driving instead.

A few miles down the road, he pulls into a tobacco shop.

I sit in the turning lane until he's out of his car and inside the store before I swing into the parking lot. I hop out of the SUV, open my trunk, and grab the tire iron.

Slipping the flat end under his trunk, I pop it open and cut across the tape on the top of the first box, wrestling it open.

Towels? They're hotel quality, neatly stacked and imprinted with swirly patterns along the sides.

What the fuck? Frisk was awfully nervous for a guy loading towels into his trunk.

There has to be more to this.

Throwing caution aside, I start digging. It takes several rows before I hit something harder toward the bottom, grabbing what feels like a block of cheese.

I frown. When my hand comes up holding it, my jaw nearly hits the fucking floor.

It's one of at least twenty white cocaine bricks holding the towels up. I move the next towel to find the same thing.

Fucking yikes.

Dumbest lowlifes ever.

I don't have time to contemplate how easily they'd get busted at the slightest police search—or even if this kind of sloppy, half-baked bullshit is what got Abby into so much trouble.

I'm also willing to bet each of the boxes contains a line of towels or some other innocuous product being held up by stacks of blow wrapped in plastic.

I pull out my phone and take several quick photos, then clip a GPS tracker to the edge of his floor mat. I bought it for this reason.

Frisk and his drama end here.

He'll come clean so Abby Halle walks free and gets her happy ending along with Reese. I just need hard evidence to seal the deal.

Moving swiftly, I stuff a brick of coke into my pocket for evidence. A backup in case Frisk and his associates manage to dispose of their cargo before I can tip off the authorities.

My phone pings, indicating the app attached to the GPS tracker is doing its thing.

It's almost too perfect. Too easy.

I'll be able to let the police know where he's going and when he gets there.

Hastily, I rearrange the towels back into place, just enough to look natural. Nothing to be done about the cut tape, but with the sloppy job they're doing, the box popping open on its own should be plausible.

If it makes him suspicious, tough shit.

I close his trunk, get back in my car, and drop the tire iron in the passenger seat.

Pulling out of the parking lot, it occurs to me I'm part-dumbass, operating on pure anger.

Swiping that brick wasn't the smartest move.

Getting my prints all over a box of cocaine bricks and taking one for the road also doesn't fall under brilliant moments in the life of Nick Brandt.

Fuck. But we need evidence, and I needed to get the hell out of there before Will returned to his truck.

My eyes flick to my mirrors. The same red pickup truck has been trailing me, up my ass for ten solid minutes.

My jaw clenches. Either I'm paranoid or I wasn't as sneaky as I thought.

I swerve into a back alley to find out which is true.

The red pickup truck turns on my tail.

I pull up to keep from being rear-ended. The alley is too narrow to slip by a stalled vehicle, and backing up means sliding into a four-lane street. He could follow me home.

Whatever I've gotten into, I can't bring it home to Reese and Millie. Better to confront him where he can't back away.

We're going to get this shit over with here and now.

I kill the engine and look back. I count one head in the truck behind me, but the windows are so tinted it doesn't mean the driver's alone.

With no plans to cower in my SUV, I glance at the tire iron next to me.

Should I take it with me?

I decide it's too obvious and shove a pen in my pocket instead, a fancy metallic one Grandma gave the entire office last Christmas. It's pathetic as far as weapons go, but I can put enough force behind it to cripple, if need be.

I drop my phone in my pocket and get out of the car.

A guy almost as tall as me with a shaved head and tanned skin hops out of the truck.

He wasn't with the guys who loaded the boxes into Will's car. Maybe he's a backup?

"Can I help you?" I snap, trying to sound casual.

"You're blocking me, man," he says coldly.

"You were behind me for ten minutes and you almost hit me."

He shrugs. "Sorry?"

My eyes flick to his hands. No indication he's about to pull a gun or anything else to get the jump on me.

Weird.

"What do you want?" I growl, dropping the facade.

He looks up and blinks at me. "Huh? Nothin'."

"Why were you following me?" I ask.

"Following you?" He bobs his head back in disbelief. "You paranoid? Why the hell would I do that?"

"That's what I want to know."

"I wasn't following you," he insists again.

"Whatever. I always nearly rear-end people to turn into an alley going nowhere, too." I drop a hand into my pocket, making sure it catches his eyes.

"Get off my dick. I thought I had a flat tire," he snaps, taking a step forward.

"We passed three gas stations in ten minutes. I'm not stupid. What's really going on?"

"Nothing. We just happened to be in the same place at the same time. Don't you believe in coincidence?" His voice hardens.

"In a city of over two million people, you just *had* to be behind me for ten minutes and didn't realize you had a flat fucking—" My eyes drop to his tires. I take a couple of steps

to check the other side. “They look fine to me. Call me crazy, but fuck your coincidence.”

He doesn't say anything. The more I glare, he doesn't seem like a thug, or even a patsy looking for some easy dirty money like Frisk.

This isn't about the drugs, my gut screams.

What else? One of Roland Birdshit's minions? No matter what he said about dropping that last piece, I doubt he's given up on me.

“Are you from *The Chicago Tea*?” I demand harshly.

He stares at me for a heavy second and then laughs.

“The *Tea*? Jesus, no. Paparazzi punks don't do any honest work. Do I look like a reporter? I don't even have a camera.”

He has a point.

“Did someone hire you?” I demand.

Again, the silent treatment.

“So they did,” I growl, approaching him. “Who hired you to follow me?”

“Dude, I didn't say *anyone* hired me.”

“They did. It's in your face. Otherwise, you would've denied it. Who the hell hired you, and how much are they paying?”

“Why?” He turns his head up, giving me an assessing look.

Why? That tells me he's willing to sell out his employer if I strike the right tone.

“Because I'll pay you double to cough it up.”

“She's paying four thousand a day—”

She? Who the fuck is she?

Apparently, this has nothing to do with Frisk or Birdshit at all.

Only one more possibility. The revelation tastes like sour milk in my brain.

“—and it’s a ten day gig. That’s the reason I took it. Don’t have to worry about lining up jobs for the next month,” he says.

“Four thousand dollars per day?” I grind out.

He nods proudly.

“Fine, I’ll pay you eight thousand per day for your remaining time to tell me who *she* is and why the fuck she needs to spy on me.”

“Up front.”

“What?”

“Cash up front,” he says, narrowing his eyes.

“Deal. Now who are you working for?”

“I said up front, Brandt. You send me ten big by app and wire the rest by tomorrow.” His look says he’s nothing but serious.

Damn. And I thought I could cut a deal. I pull my phone out and send him the money after he gives me his address.

“Okay. Talk.” I hold my breath, waiting for the answer.

“A lady named Carmen Seraphina. I gotta tell you, she’s pretty beautiful and disgustingly obsessed with you. But I guess you two have history. A woman like that wouldn’t have to hire a PI to track me down.”

“I didn’t know she was that crazy,” I grind out, mostly to myself, then look at him again. “And you’re not a very good PI.”

He puffs his chest out. “Screw you. I was a Chicago PD investigator for twenty years. I’ve been striking out on my own for fifteen. You’re the first guy who’s ever caught me following.” He hangs his head.

I shrug. “I’m former military. What was Carmen hoping to gain by hiring a private eye?”

“She’s after data. Her hard drive crashed, and she said the only copy of some old audition video—”

I don't let him finish. "What audition?"

He stares at me, his wiry mustache twitching.

"She thinks you have the only copy of something she wants. She hoped I'd be able to get in your place at some point and swipe old cameras or data cards. Ideally, I'd get your phone, too. Her file was corrupted, so she needs to retrieve another copy of the video. She said you wouldn't be willing to cooperate, so—"

"The video," I mutter to myself.

There's exactly *one* godforsaken video she's after if hers is really destroyed. And now that I know I've got the only copy of that fucking sex tape, I have to destroy it.

"Yeah, she said you guys had a bad breakup or something. You have the only working copy and won't give it to her. It's none of my business—I know this stuff can be difficult—but you should give it up, man. It's for work, isn't it?"

My head is fucking spinning. She was willing to pay this guy thousands for a blackmail asset?

She's been lying to both me and Osprey the whole time, pretending she has a tactical nuke to hold over me.

I'm partly relieved she doesn't. But the rest of me knows she'll stop at nothing to get that damned video, her own twisted mind thinking it'll force me back to her.

This needs to end. I can't have Carmen sending hired mercenaries to scare the hell out of Reese.

I shake my head.

"It's not 'work' she's looking for. And as one businessman to another, you've already done your time. You should still bill her for today."

"Nah, she was only paying when I delivered the info."

"You're lucky I'll pay you regardless. I don't have what she's looking for. She never would've paid you," I lie. "If you talk to her again, can you deliver a message for me?"

He looks at me slowly. “Sure. I guess. What do you want to say?”

I hesitate.

“Never mind. I’ll call her instead.”

He chuckles. “Now you have to tell me. I’m curious.”

“Just that this bullshit *will* end, right now. But I’ll tell her soon myself.”

“Harsh words for such a sweet girl.”

I roll my eyes. “She’s sweet like a poison berry. It’s an act. There’s nothing innocent about her. She could lead a damn mafia ring.”

He smiles. “I knew a few of those back in my day.”

Whatever. I’m not interested in his war stories.

I need to get home ASAP and take care of business—like the brick of highly illegal substance in my pocket, plus telling my psycho ex-girlfriend to back off once and for all before I throw my old SD card with the video in the fire. Hell, maybe all of them, if I can’t remember which one it is.

“You’ll have the rest of your money tomorrow,” I tell him without a goodbye.

From the car, I decide I can’t wait. I have to call Carmen.

It goes straight to voicemail.

“We need to talk. If you haven’t called me by the end of the day, you’ll hear from my lawyer. I heard about your games and I’m done playing,” I snarl, cutting it there before I say anything incriminating.

Ten minutes later, I walk through my front door and lock it behind me.

God knows I need no unexpected visitors right now.

I dial Sutton first. I need to know the best thing to do with the evidence I’ve gathered on Frisk for Abby’s case, and fast.

The attorney’s phone rings a few times, but he doesn’t pick up. I leave a message asking for a call back before pulling the

brick out of my pocket.

Then Carmen calls.

Fuck. I don't have time for this right now.

Cradling a brick of pure coke in my hand makes me feel like I'm holding a neutron bomb.

I'm safe at home, but I hate having this shit anywhere out in the open. With my phone ringing, I toss the brick into my top dresser drawer.

Then I slide the green bar to take the call from hell.

“Yeah?”

“Nicholas. You *finally* called,” she coos.

“What choice did I have when you're having me fucking followed?” I snap off.

She's quiet. Dumbstruck.

“Well?” I clear my throat impatiently.

“I didn't mean...I just...Nick, I have a photoshoot in less than ten minutes. This isn't a good time. If you're going to chew my head off over a little mistake like that, we'll have to do this another time. I can't afford to go on camera too anxious.”

“Bitch, I'm on the verge of getting a restraining order. This is your *only* time.”

I'm so completely done with this woman.

I'd rather do three more tours in arctic waters, boxed in with guys who smell like gym socks, than deal with her shit.

She gives a sultry laugh. “Oh, Nicholas, you're always such a drama queen. I'll call you tonight after my shoot, okay? We'll talk this out then.”

I don't have time for this fuckery. I punch End Call with a voice in the back of my head screaming I'm forgetting something important. But what?

I rack my brain for a minute, but with Frisk at the front of my mind, I strip my clothes off and jump in the shower,

hoping Sutton calls by the time I'm out.

At least we could end one endless frustration today, if we're that lucky.

Once I'm dressed, I text the executive assistant to reschedule my meeting and call Reese for a ride back to the office.

She answers on the first ring. "Hey, you've been gone for a while. Everything okay?"

"I'm at the penthouse and everything's better now that I know I'll see you. Can you give me a ride back to the office, sweetheart?"

"Definitely."

"Any chance you have time to come up for a minute?" I shouldn't ask, but this stress makes me ache for her.

I'd give both arms just to have her for a quickie, to take the tension of the last two messy hours out on her fine ass.

"It's midday," she flings back playfully. "I still have to run Ward and the marketing team to their next meeting in another hour or so."

"It won't take long. Just long enough to ruin your hair," I growl into the phone.

She giggles again, this delighted gasp mingled with her laughter.

I love that sound.

And even in this frenzied moment, one thing becomes crystal clear.

I don't care what I suffer to push through this.

Carmen and her drama won't shit things up with this woman, and neither will everything with Abby, Frisk, work, or even my own fool head.

I've fallen harder than I ever thought possible.

Reese Halle is irrevocably mine, and nothing will ever steal her away from me.

SAY IT (REESE)

“**A**nd they all lived happily ever after.” I read the last line, close the book, and kiss a sleeping pile of Millie on the forehead.

Nick’s voice drifts in from the office downstairs, catching my attention for the second time.

Even behind the closed door, I can’t make out what he’s saying, but...he sounds pissed. That much is obvious from the razor-edge in his voice.

Too curious, I pad through the living room. So he’s not in his office after all, but outside on the balcony.

He has his back to me, staring out at the Chicago skyline, one fist wrapped around the railing.

“For the last fucking time—get help,” he snarls into the phone. “I’m not your shrink, your prop, your prey, or even your friend. I’m damn sure not your fool. This is fucking over. Keep pressing your luck, keep playing, and there will be consequences. I can make your life just as unpleasant as you’ve tried to make mine.”

My heart skips a beat as he jerks the phone down and angrily stabs at the screen.

“Nick? What’s wrong?” I ask gently.

He spins around. His eyes take a second to focus when they meet mine.

“Nothing.” There’s a lingering edge in his voice.

“That...didn’t sound like nothing,” I say gently.

“Just tabloid bullshit again.” He gives me a thin smile.

“Who were you talking to?”

“One of Osprey’s minions. Who else?”

My face turns up. Why do I feel like he’s lying?

Does he still need to keep me out of his problems even when I’m practically living with him? Or is there another reason he doesn’t want me knowing he was on the phone with a woman?

I’m such an idiot. What did I expect?

He can have his pick of stunning women who were born and raised in Elysium.

I’m just his latest fixation—the scrawny chauffeur he mistook for a flipping frat boy.

My face must betray my thoughts.

Because he asks, “Reese, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

He stalks over, pulling me to him, cradling me to his chest. “No, you’re not.”

I bite my lip. “Are you—are you *sure* it’s just tabloid problems?”

I just want the truth.

His gaze bleeds dark-green emerald. “What else could it be, sweetheart? You’ve made me enjoy life these past few weeks so much, it’s easy to forget it isn’t all perfect.”

“I’ve enjoyed it too,” I admit. “But I feel guilty that I’m living it up while Abby’s still locked up and Millie’s scared she’ll never see her mom again.”

“Speaking of Abby, we have to meet with Sutton first thing in the morning. It’s urgent. I just couldn’t get a meeting today.”

I gasp. “Is she talking?”

“She will. I’ve got some intel on Will I think will help her massively. There’s proof the drugs were his. Once Sutton sees the evidence, the rest should fall into place.”

I nod before my brain connects the dots.

“So, if the drugs were his, he’s probably the one who hit my sister?” I say angrily.

“I can’t prove that part, but it makes a lot of sense. I think it’s why he wants Millie too. If he’s got her daughter, Abby might never get the courage to rat him out.”

“Jesus.” All the breath falls out of me. “How did you figure it out?”

His face tightens. “Well. You promise not to get mad?”

“Maybe.” I glance at him cautiously.

“This afternoon?”

“Yes?”

“My joyride?”

“Yes?”

“...I stalked the dickhead.”

“You—*what?* Why didn’t you tell me?” Heat rips through me, confusion and disappointment and fear.

“I didn’t want you there. I wasn’t sure how it would go down. I was afraid you’d be all ‘not your problem, Nick.’”

“Because this *isn’t* your problem, Nick! If you were dead-set on doing something like this, I wish you would’ve involved me.”

“If you’d begged to come along, I would’ve given in. I can’t deny you. Still, it could’ve been dangerous. I didn’t expect the idiot to make it so easy.” He stares at me, his eyes wide and questioning.

“I hope you didn’t do anything illegal,” I say with a sigh.

“We’re in this together, aren’t we? With the tracker I’ve got on his truck, we’re going to ram his dick in the door and

get Abby out of jail,” he whispers. “This is it. Period and end of story.”

“I hope you’re right.”

He silences me then, leaning down and pressing his lips to mine. His tongue rolls into my mouth like a dark delicacy.

I whimper, wanting to pull away before I get too distracted to say more, but his stupid sexy grip holds stupid hot-mess me in place. The urgency of his kiss is everything.

“Nick.” I struggle out of his arms with major effort. “You’re making me dizzy.” I take a deep breath. “Okay, you need to let me help you if you’re going to go all super spy on my behalf.”

A crease forms in his forehead.

“Help me? I don’t know what you mean.”

“Your tabloid crap. Your past. Trust me to help you deal with it and not freak out. Or at least not hold your cards so close to your chest,” I say.

“I do trust you, Reese. That’s not why I fight so hard to keep you out of it. I don’t want you trending on social media knowing I put you there,” he rumbles.

“You’re still trying to protect me?”

“Always.” His eyes gleam so dark a chill sweeps through me.

“I love—” Frick. My mouth clamps shut.

I didn’t mean to say that aloud.

“What were you saying?” A slow smile cuts across his face.

“Nothing.”

“Liar, but it’s okay. I love you, too, Reese Halle. I have since the first second you hated me,” he growls, not a hint of doubt in his eyes.

Oh my God.

I rise up on my toes to find his lips, but he beats me to it. His kiss tastes so much sweeter now.

My leg curls around his, climbing him before I even realize it.

I tremble as his tongue glides over mine. He braces his hands below my bottom and lifts me up. My legs wrap around his waist.

He pulls away from me and takes a ragged breath. “Is Millie down for the night?”

I give half a nod before attacking his lips again.

He moves us to his room while I fumble the buttons of his shirt out of their holes.

“Can’t even wait, huh?” he chuckles.

“I could, but what’s the point of that?”

“You didn’t say it, you know...”

“Huh?”

“You didn’t say it. You cut yourself off mid-sentence,” he says.

My face feels like it could self-combust.

“You knew what I was going to say,” I tease. “I just...”

He leans forward so our foreheads touch.

“Tell me how you feel,” he demands. “Or else I’ll put my mouth where it’ll make you squirm and I won’t finish the job unless I hear it.”

“I’m already squirming,” I squeak, pressing my fingers against the hard ridge of his shaft just to prove a point. I sigh because it’s heaven.

“Say it, you little devil.”

Okay.

Deep breath.

Here goes.

“I’ve been in love with you for a long time, Nick. Longer than you’ve loved me, probably.” Those words feel like a boulder lifting off me as soon as they’re out.

“I thought you loathed me.”

“I wanted to. I kind of did for a while. You were so irresponsible at first. Also, I was jealous, because you had your models and actresses and I couldn’t have you—”

“No one’s ever had me the way you do.” He cuts me off mid-sentence, his voice gruff and his wildfire lips crushing mine.

I’m boneless until he’s laid me on the bed and I’ve worked his shirt off.

My hands fall to his pants button, barely holding him in.

He sighs as I release him, then pull down his boxers. I run my finger across his naked waist, zigzagging down until my finger touches hot skin just above his shaft. I close my hand around it and slide it down.

“Reese, fuck.”

He quickly undresses me, sits on the edge of the bed, and pulls me into his lap. He traces his finger over my hot opening, sliding one rough finger over the pearl.

I’m not asking tonight. I take what I want, sliding down over his shaft.

My arms and legs fold around him.

His arms tighten around me and soon, we’re a mess of kisses and groans, and aching thrusts.

It’s the best sex ever, because when the emotion is this intense, I don’t have to worry about what I might blurt out.

There’s no holding back, no theatrics, just manic thrusts and hitched breaths and an explosive finish.

Together.

“God, I love you.” He strokes the sex-crazed hair out of my eyes.

We're still connected and my legs are jelly. I feel weightless.

He falls back, but his arms are locked around me as he pulls me down with him.

"That was—" he starts.

"The highlight of my life," I finish.

He kisses me again with a low growl vibrating against my tongue.

God, this man.

I'm still walking on pure air as we lie there—me on top of him, our arms tangled—for a nice long while. Then we shower together, and I pass out in his arms.



THE NEXT MORNING we sit in overstuffed brown chairs across from the attorney.

Nick hands him several printed pages. "Data from the GPS tracker on Frisk's truck. That's everywhere he's been in the last sixteen hours. I also put the username and password at the top of the page. You can log in anytime and see where he's going in real time. At the bottom of the page, there's another address. That's the warehouse he's moving drugs from."

Dear God. Nick wasn't joking when he said he went full stalker with Will yesterday.

"How do you know he's moving drugs from there?" Sutton asks, a weathered bull of a man.

"I was putting air in my tire at the gas station across the street. I watched a few guys move boxes of cocaine into his trunk."

"These boxes weren't concealed? Why did you think they had cocaine?" The lawyer folds his hands.

"Believe me, I checked. He was moving whole bricks stuffed under towels that day." Nick takes out his phone and

leans across the desk. He swipes his finger across it, revealing several photos.

“We may be able to use that,” Sutton says slowly, leaning back in his chair. “The photo proves Mr. Frisk’s vehicle had cocaine in it, but it doesn’t prove he was transporting it knowingly, particularly if it was concealed. However, with the warehouse as an active drop site, we’ll have to see how that plays out. And while I won’t ask if the trunk was unlocked—I don’t want to know—if it wasn’t, using that photo could open you up to liability. It may not be allowed in the chain of evidence if his attorney argues it was obtained illegally.”

Nick opens his mouth like he’s about to say something, but then closes it, frustration etched on his face.

Sutton holds up a hand.

“I don’t need you to confirm or deny anything, Mr. Brandt. It’s not pertinent at the moment, and the less I know is probably better. Frankly, we’re still facing two big problems. Abby Halle isn’t talking. She believes she’s safer in jail, and as long as her daughter’s also safe, she’s not talking—”

“Because he hit her,” I point out. “She’s probably afraid of what he’ll do next if she does open up.”

“I think she’s afraid he’ll try to snatch Millie if she talks,” Nick says.

“Do you think if I assured her we could get a protective order for her and Amelia, she’d talk?” Sutton asks.

“Maybe. I’m not sure,” I say, fidgeting with my hands.

“If a protective order gets her to open up, that will help with the second problem.”

“Second problem?” Nick asks.

“Does a protective order actually protect someone?” I ask.

The attorney stiffens.

“Well, he wouldn’t be able to come within a certain distance of her or any known residence, so it definitely helps.”

“On paper,” Nick says.

I glance over at him.

“The order makes it illegal for him to come near her.” He looks at me darkly. “I may have looked into getting one against a tabloid spy or two. I’m just not sure a thug moving bricks of illegal drugs around and hitting his ex-girlfriend has any qualms about breaking court decrees.”

“If a protective order won’t actually help her and Millie, then I don’t want you using it to get her to talk. I want her out of jail, obviously, but not at the cost of anyone’s safety,” I say.

Sutton rolls his chair closer to his desk.

“Well, there’s problem number two. Unless I can get a statement from Abby or we find some corroborating evidence, it’s unlikely they’ll issue a warrant for Will Frisk.”

“What about the pictures?” Nick asks.

“Again, it’s circumstantial and we don’t want to incriminate you, Mr. Brandt. We need something more to go on that wasn’t obtained by subterfuge. I’ll have the warehouse reported and watched. If we come up with clear evidence, another illicit transfer, then I’ll send it to the DA. At that point, they may issue a search warrant.”

“Define corroborating evidence?” I ask.

“Text messages, pictures with Frisk, finding the drugs themselves with his prints on them—or someone who claims to have acquired them from him,” Sutton says.

Nick goes ashen white.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Nothing,” he bites off.

“Are you sure?”

He doesn’t answer. He just stands and bolts out the door.

My stomach sinks. I have no idea what’s going on.

I knew something was wrong last night when he was on the phone with a strange woman, and instead of throwing up

some distance, I let him tell me he loved me and slept with him again.

I'm such an idiot.

Another memory flashes through my mind.

The night he dressed me up like all the models and influencers he hangs out with to piss off his ex. Is that who he was on the phone with last night? Carmen Seraphina?

I look at Sutton again with a lump in my throat.

"I should go—" I stop. *Go what? Go after him?* No way I'm saying that out loud. "I should check on him."

Sutton nods, letting me gracefully slip away with my tail between my legs.

I come out to the lobby, surveying my surroundings. I don't find Nick, but the receptionist says, "Are you looking for your friend?"

I nod.

"He went that way." She points to the door. "Is he okay?"

"Umm—I think so. I'm sorry."

She gives me a sympathetic smile.

I find Nick in the parking garage standing by his Maserati. He's still angry, raking a hand through his dark hair, but the color has returned to his face.

"What happened?"

Nick grabs me and presses me tight to his chest.

"Take my car and go see Abby. Try to get something out of her. Everything might hinge on it. I'll take a cab home. There's something I forgot," he whispers, this cryptic, worried look in his eye.

My eyebrow shoots up. "Like what?"

"Tell you later, beautiful. Just trust me." He kisses my forehead. "I'm going to slam this case shut."

“Jesus, Nick. You just ran out of that office like it was on fire and left me there. Now you’re sending me to Abby while you take a cab home and...you can’t tell me why?” My lip trembles.

I’m so stupid. I knew something was way off last night, but I bought into his whole changed man act a long time ago. I love him so much it hurts to believe anything else.

“I’ll explain once you’re home. I promise. I have to go,” he clips, beginning to speed walk away.

“You’ve been explaining a lot of things the past few days,” I say glumly.

“And I’ve had good reasons,” he calls coldly over his shoulder.

I don’t have the heart to argue back.

I also don’t enjoy it as I slide into his luxe car—which still smells like mint-infused Nicholas—praying my heart stays intact.

Whatever he’s hiding, whatever he’s not telling me, I hope to everything holy it won’t destroy us.

SELF-DESTRUCT SEQUENCE (NICK)



“**W**hy couldn’t I come with you?” she asks when she calls me later, her voice trembling like she’s on the edge of tears.

And who can blame her for being suspicious? With my past?

This is entirely my fucking fault.

Too bad Sutton’s meeting put the fear of God in me—namely, a God who doesn’t look kindly on well-meaning idiots who leave hot bricks of stolen coke tucked away at home.

“I love you more than anything, Reese. It’s urgent, and I’ll explain everything as soon as you’re home tonight.” I hope to fuck she trusts me.

Right now, I have to get home and figure out what to do with the brick I forgot about that has my fucking prints all over it.

Just bear with me, sweetheart. I’ve never lied to you and I don’t plan to start now.

“Fine. Whatever. I’ll talk to Abby, but then I’m picking up Millie and heading home. I’m taking the rest of the evening off,” she whispers.

“Anything to help you feel better. We’ll all be together soon, Abby included,” I promise, all the hurt building in my chest coming out in one sentence. “Take care, sweetheart.”

I click off.

Honestly, I hope it's a promise I can keep. I have no earthly clue what I'm going to do with this shit.

Flush it down the toilet, I guess. Or else risk one more trip with it to a desolate spot of Lake Michigan, where I'll let it become one with the windswept waters.

So much for evidence. This thing is a goddamned liability, and Sutton reminded me I'm too close to incriminating myself, or else making Frisk's future case a mistrial.

Shit. Even if I do flush the powder, how do I get rid of the drug-laced plastic covering with my prints? I throw my condo door open and march to my bedroom, still contemplating a solution.

Something rustles in my room. My instincts tingle.

If I thought this would be easy...

Fuck.

I'm actually speechless.

A smiling Carmen turns around, standing near my closet, holding half a cocaine brick in her hand—a very *open* brick, the white powder peppering her red dress like an inverted murder scene.

A trail of the same floury dust leaves a brutal path from my dresser to my bed.

She's strewn a fucking cocaine blizzard all over my room.

Getting rid of this shit just got a whole lot more complicated.

“What's the matter, Nicholas? Aren't you happy to see me?” she whispers.

“How the hell did you get in here?” I spit.

She smiles. “I'm an actress. Duh. The doorman gave me no problem when I cried and told him I had to tell you about a personal emergency. I showed him a few old pictures of us and he sent me up. I still have my key from years ago—”

Fuck me with a mixer. I need to borrow a time machine and change the locks, right after I finish chewing out security here and then kicking my own ass for sheer idiocy.

“He did ask about the woman and kid who’ve been staying here.” She sucks her lip, making this wretched sound of disappointment. “I guess you’re still slumming it with your secretary, huh?”

“Driver. And she’s a hell of a lot more to me than you ever were, Carmen. Reese doesn’t do psychotic shit like breaking and entering or stealing drugs,” I grind out, my vision going red.

She flays me open with that predatory smile—the one I used to think always gave me her best.

“You’re so dramatic. It’s not breaking and entering if you have a key, and...if you want to accuse me of stealing an illegal substance, you’d have to admit to possessing it first. Cocaine, Nick? This is a new low for you—”

“It’s not mine!” I growl, wondering why I bother. She won’t believe me. “Drop the crap you’re holding and get the hell out of here.”

“And leave you to a death by overdose? Whatever would the blogs say then?” She steps forward, quick like a cat, rubbing the half brick across the front of my shirt. “I knew you wouldn’t make this easy. You’d need a little persuasion, so... I’ve already saved pictures of your coke-covered room. If you want to come to your senses and talk—and agree to a rehab program—we can get through this. I’d also love to have a certain memory card I’ve been looking oh-so-hard for with our dirty little blast from the past. Just for safe keeping. Show me where it is, and I’ll delete all those nasty drug photos right here with you watching.”

It takes everything in me not to snap her neck, especially as she drags an overpainted red nail across my cheek. I fling her back before I lose control.

“You conniving bitch—stay away!” I’m roaring, the powder shaking off my shirt as my chest heaves.

She frowns with her lips, but her eyes are still sparkling with evil delight.

“Hmm—so you really want to do this the hard way?” She whispers, forcing a frown. “Oh, Nick...you poor, sick man.”

My hands curl into fists.

I turn away from her, because I'm too angry to look at her, too confused to know what the fuck I should do in this situation. Even my Navy training doesn't cover being set up by a psycho ex with access to stolen drugs my own dumbass took home in a mammoth brain fart.

“All that crying on the phone last night about how you *had* to hire an investigator to find the video, so I wouldn't release it and ruin your career...” I start slowly, turning around and staring her down. “You knew I'd never do that. I was offended you assumed I might, but you never thought I would. You're not worried about that. You want that fucking video so you can blackmail me with Birdshit and his gossip rag. He won't run the story without proof, and you don't have it without a statement from me or video evidence.” I shrug. “But Osprey probably wouldn't run it with just a statement, anyway. He's a businessman and a fucked up kind of journalist. He gets clicks on hard proof—however terrible—not hearsay.”

She folds her arms, unmoving.

“All you had to do was give me the stupid memory card...I never would've had to resort to a PI. I never expected him to find you buying drugs. I didn't know your little problem with drinking turned into *this*. But you know what, I'm not even mad. Like it or not, I've always been the only woman who could accept you with all your bad habits, Nicholas. Your little Polly Puritan will flee as soon as she knows who you are. The way you're handling this is ridiculous.” She circles around so we're face-to-face again.

I want to hoist her up and throw her into the wall, but restrain myself. *Barely*.

“Which memory card is it, Nick?” She uncurls her other hand to reveal three old SD cards she must've pulled from my

drawer. “I know how important your photos are. You always kept them close. I know *you* and your precious memories, just like I knew exactly where to find them. I bet the nervous little mouse you’re playing house with can’t say the same.”

I clench and unclench my fingers.

“First, never mention her again. Second, you need to get the hell out of here. Now. I’m about to lose my shit, and you don’t want to be here when it happens,” I warn.

She pouts like a demon.

“Or what? You’ll throw your life away with the help? For all I know, you’re snorting this crap with her.” She pauses, dragging her eyes up my frame. “Ohhh, are you going to snap like a wild animal? Will you hurt me? And why does it bother you that I still read you like a book, inside and out? Don’t take it out on me because you’re too much of a chickenshit coward to admit you’re still in love with me.”

“I’m *not* in love with you. I never was.” The words are so rough they sear my throat.

Hurt shines back in her eyes. “Like hell! You used to say it. Were you lying to me then or are you lying now? It only goes two ways, Nicholas.”

I sigh.

“I was young and stupid. You still had a shred of a soul, and you were my friend. We grew up together. I thought...I thought I was in love with you once, but you became a habit. A terrible one. No different from the fucking bottle, which you were always happy to share. It’s hard to tell what was worse when you were always there to help push me off the cliff.”

Her mouth drops with a gasp.

I’ve finally shocked her into silence.

I don’t even enjoy it.

“Asshole, if you don’t tell me which memory card it is, I’m taking them all!” she hisses.

Fuck. I can only think of one way to end this crap that stops Carmen from popping up with new threats. When I go through with it, I'll lose Reese. My career will go with her, and so will what's left of my public reputation.

"Carmen, you asked if I would hurt you?" I say quietly.

"Will you?" She blinks, hesitation on her face.

"What I'm about to do *will* hurt you—just not like you think. And it's bound to hurt me a whole lot more." I'm going to lose the only thing I've ever cared about, but there's no other way to end this, not when I'm backed into a corner.

Sighing, I take out my phone and start slowly snapping pictures of the white powder strewn across the floor, my bedspread, her dress, my shirt. I walk right past her, leaving her bewildered and stumbling after me.

"What are you doing?" she asks, catching her balance against the wall.

I get another picture of Carmen—with blinding flash—her red dress splattered with white doom.

"What the *hell* are you doing?" she asks again, spitting venom.

"Hurting myself. Hurting the woman I love who doesn't deserve this bull, and probably hurting a lot of good people in the process who looked up to me as their boss. I'm hurting you, hurting everything, and I take no delight in it. And I'd do it a thousand times over if it means ending your games before they can hurt anyone worse."

She's quiet for a long minute while I continue hovering around the condo, capturing everything speckled with white dust.

"Why are you taking pictures? You don't have my permission," she whines nervously.

I snort at the irony.

"Funny. You don't have my permission to be in my home pawing through my things either, but here you are."

“What is this?” she asks again.

I don’t answer until I’m almost done typing out a brief email to Roland Osprey with the images attached.

This is it.

My self-destruct sequence, and it’s meant to bring her down in the process.

The only way to protect Reese and her heart is to expose my train wreck of a life. Carmen doesn’t have the sex video, but even if she did, it won’t matter.

I’m getting everything out in the open while she has no leverage.

If my prayers are answered, and Sutton follows up on that warehouse, Will Frisk’s hours are numbered. He’ll be arrested sooner or later.

I’m also fairly certain Abby will be a free woman after Will’s in custody. Cops aren’t dumb. They’ll figure out he’s the culprit.

That leaves making sure Reese isn’t dragged into my shitshow once the cocaine in my room gets traced back to Frisk. That means protecting her from *me*.

Roland Osprey, vulture that he is, still refuses to write stories without total confirmation. Maybe he’s not as much of a jackass as I thought.

I feel an eerie sense of relief sending him these naked pictures of my life. In hindsight, I’m not sure why I ever feared the sex tape leaking at all, when this is just as vulnerable, and just as damning.

With the mail finished and the new photos locked and loaded, I hold my phone up for Carmen to see.

She staggers back like she’s been shot in the chest.

“Wh-what? You can’t be serious? Why would you send those pictures to Osprey? You’ll ruin us both!”

“You’re bent on destroying our lives anyhow. This way, I beat you to it, and you won’t have anything to threaten me

with anymore, Carmen. I'm doing us a favor," I grind out.

"I was trying to help, you stupid, stupid man!" she spits, shaking her fists. "And after you hammered my heart to smithereens and put it through a blender."

"Carmen, you don't want me. You want the *idea* of me," I say slowly.

"The idea of you? What the hell? A guy with rich grandparents who isn't nearly as successful as his older brother? There has to be more than one chump in the world who fits that profile. Sorry."

I'm not even fazed by her insult. I just smile.

"In that case, why are you so obsessed you'd break in and throw drugs around just to make me give up a humiliating video? You always thought combining our assets and my business with your Hollywood glamor would make us a powerhouse."

She gives me a smile I used to mistake for seductive—only now it's anything but.

Now, it's almost broken.

Now, it's more like Medusa's eyes before you're turned into stone.

"What do you see in your stupid driver, anyhow? She's nothing like me. No clout, no talent," Carmen hisses.

"She's ten times the woman you'll ever be. I needed her heart, not her connections, or her money."

Her face drops, nearly bloodless.

I don't take any satisfaction from this.

I just want it to end.

Pulling the phone back toward me, I glance at the screen, ready to hit send.

"Jesus, you're serious. Wait, Nick—" She lunges across the room, almost bowling me over.

She teeters with me, an arm slung around one shoulder, determined to throw off my balance.

I'm a big man, but she's a hellcat fighting for dear life. I miss my step when I try to shove her off me.

The way we're tilting, she'll break my fall. But she's also less than half my size.

I'll smash her to bits.

With one hand—I don't dare loosen the grip on my phone—I try to maneuver us so I'm not landing on her. Even after all she's done, I won't hurt her physically.

We still wind up in a heap on the marble floor. I'm flat on my back and she's on top of me, beating my chest with her fists.

“Oh, sweetheart. If you wanted it, all you had to do was ask,” she snarls.

Of course, she's going for the hand holding the phone.

“Get off of me and get the fuck out of here!” My eyes dart around, desperate to finish this before Reese ever makes it back here.

Carmen slides further up my body, this oily look sliding across her face, and locks her hand around my phone. “I only have one hand on the phone. My other hand is free to tease. The way I see it, this could go a few ways. You'll either let go of the phone without requesting a favor so you can stay true to your new found lovey-dove, or you'll decide you've had a change of heart and *want* me to touch you. Just like I used to. Carrot or stick. Such a fun game.”

“You're a fucking psychopath,” I spit.

“No, but I did play one on *Catch the Murderer*. It took a lot of research. Savannah loved to play with her prey, and this was one of the games I wrote for her...”

Really? She's babbling about her character right now?

“You're acting out a fucking scene with me?” I can't believe this shit.

“I’d rather not, but since you won’t let go of the phone... I’m running out of options.”

I must’ve been drunker than I ever realized to waste years on and off with this woman.

“I’m not letting go of the phone and you’re never touching me again. Why don’t you just get the fuck off me, and we’ll call it a truce?”

She smiles. “As you wish.”

Bad move, trusting her.

The witch buries her nails in the top of my hand the second I move.

“Fuck!” I grunt.

“Let go.”

I don’t.

She sinks her claws in harder.

“*Let. Go.*” Her voice is pure poison.

I refuse.

She digs her nails in as hard as she can.

Hot liquid trickles down my hand—blood—but I keep my phone locked in a death grip.

There’s a popping sound in her shoulder as she rips it away from me, and she tumbles back with a whimper.

Thank God she’s off me.

She cups both hands around the slick phone like a prize and jerks her body back. It almost slips.

Damn.

She’s stronger than she looks, but I manage to keep my grasp on it. “You know all of this wrestling with the phone may have already sent the email, right?”

“If I don’t get the phone, you *will* send it. At least this way I have a chance.”

“I’ve been careful because I didn’t want to hurt you. My patience is gone. Get the fuck up or I’ll yank you off it,” I tell her.

“Whatever.” She tugs on the phone.

With a fierce pull, it slips out of her hands and I throw it across the room, then spring to my feet. Carmen crashes onto the floor behind me.

“That hurt!” she screeches after me.

“You were warned,” I say, sprinting across the room.

She’s back on her feet and running at me again—or trying to with halting, uneven steps. “Nicholas fucking Brandt. Do not send that shit.”

She’s right behind me.

I rush back into my room and jump on my bed.

She tries to follow.

“Too late. Already sent.”

“You did not!”

“Did. Checkmate.”

Her hand goes on her hips as her eyes narrow. “What did it say? I only saw the images.”

I don’t answer. I hit three buttons on my phone.

“Who are you calling?”

She’ll find out soon enough.

“Nick, who are you calling?” she repeats.

I hop off the foot of the bed and walk out my bedroom, putting some badly needed distance between us.

She follows me, but I think I’m far enough away.

She can’t hear who’s on the other line, and soon, it won’t matter.

CLOSING STATEMENTS (REESE)



I get out of the car and walk back into Sutton's office, following my instincts.

I walk up to the receptionist's desk. "Do you think I could talk to Mr. Sutton again? I promise to be quick."

She drags her mouse and looks at her computer. "Maybe. I don't think his next meeting started yet." She goes to his office and knocks on the door, ducking inside for a moment before she returns. "He'll see you."

"Thanks." I give her as much of a smile as I can manage, but I'm out of smiles today.

Sutton looks up at me from his chair.

"Is Mr. Brandt okay?" He pauses.

Ha. I wish I knew.

"He's fine." I think. *I hope.* "Can I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"When someone talks to their attorney, no one else is around, right?"

"Correct. No one else knows what my client says to me. It's not their business," he tells me.

"But when I see Abby, we're in a room full of people?"

He nods. "That's normal security protocol. Folks in jail aren't allowed total privacy with friends and family."

“It’s just—I think if there were less people around, I could get her to talk.”

“I can go with you. I can’t promise they’ll let us in together. Sometimes they will, and sometimes they won’t. But we can try.”

“I feel bad asking this next question, but...is there any chance we could go today? Like now. Nick’s freaking out about something, and he really wants my sister to talk.”

Sutton smiles. “We all want that. If you think today’s the day, let me get my coat.”

I decide to leave the Maserati parked where it’s more secure.

He calls a cab and has us delivered to the jail in no time. We’re escorted to a private room without any holdups, thankfully. The desk and chairs are metal and bolted to the ground.

“That was easy,” I say.

“Well, this next part is yours. I hope you have more luck with her than I did,” Sutton tells me.

Me too. Millie still has nightmares a few times a week.

Nick is imploding.

Between worrying about the three of them—Abby included—I’m barely holding it together.

Abby comes in a minute or two later with cuffs around her arms and legs.

I swallow harshly. It’s hard to see your own sister chained up like a dog.

She sits down across from us with one question that’s become almost predictable. “Where’s Millie?”

“With Miss Tiffany for now,” I say.

“The nanny?”

I nod.

“I wish you’d brought her.” Abby looks through me. It’s obvious every day locked up wears her down a little more, sucking her life away.

I bite my lip. “Abby, you can see Millie again. You can go back to being her mother...if you think it’s time to tell us what happened. We both know that’s easier if she isn’t here.”

Abby jerks her head away for a minute before turning back to meet my eyes. She squeezes her eyes tight and a tear streams down her cheek. Holding her cuffed hands up, she brings them as close to her face as she can and leans forward to wipe a stray tear.

It’s my turn to look away.

God, this is brutal.

I find her gaze. “What happened? We’ll keep you safe, sis, I promise.”

For a long moment, she hesitates.

Just when I’m losing hope, she looks up, a new energy in her eyes.

“Okay. My biggest mistake was trusting Will when he barged back into our lives. He swore he’d changed though, and...and he *is* Millie’s dad. He said he wanted us to be a family again. For some stupid reason, I believed him.” She pauses, her voice hitched. “But then he started leaving big boxes around the apartment. He’d drop them for a day or two before they disappeared. They were work stuff—tools, he’d tell me, whenever I asked. We argued about it when I worried it was something Millie could get into.”

Again, she draws a shaky breath, lowering her eyes before she looks at us again.

“He...he finally told me it was weed, and this was his last run. He said he wanted just enough to build up some savings and leave us comfortable until he found a better job. Of course, I said *hell no* and told him to get the shit out of my house. I’ve been clean for too long. I wasn’t risking going backward, not to mention involving the cops or CPS. I

wouldn't give them any excuse to put Millie in the system—" Her voice rises.

"Shh. I know. It's okay," I offer gently.

She sits up straighter and continues. "Well, you can imagine he didn't like that. He'd never been violent. It took me by surprise. When I told him to get out for good and take his crap with him, he smacked me across the face and gestured like he had a gun. 'If you don't want me to store it, you can damn well help me deliver it,' he told me, and forced me to drive across town. He said it was his biggest haul ever, and I'd fly under the radar better than him. That was the night I got arrested."

She makes a choking sound, cutting off. I want to reach across the table for her hand so badly, but Sutton shakes his head, reminding me of prison protocol.

Ugh.

"Abby, it's okay, you didn't know."

"I *did* know, Reese. I knew enough. I just didn't want to. I let him bully me. Will swore he'd take Millie and sue me for custody. He said he took pictures of drugs hidden in my car, and he'd turn the tables on me with the authorities if I refused to cooperate. I'd lose Millie forever. I was desperate...I wasn't thinking. So I ran Millie upstairs to Mrs. Gamlin and acted like I had a big job in another town—" She cuts off again, a hot sob ripping through her. Tears flow from her eyes. "God, I fucked up. I'm never getting out of here, am I?"

"You'll be out soon, Abby," I say, eyeballing Sutton for moral support. "You don't have to worry. He can't hurt you or Millie. We have proof connecting him to the drug running, and the medical report proves someone hit you that night. If we move fast, we can make this right."

"My apologies. I know you're upset," Sutton says, looking up from the tablet he's been typing on furiously. "I just need to make sure I've got this down right..."

I glance over at him. He's been so quiet I half forgot he was even here.

“I didn’t want to interrupt or make her nervous,” he says, looking at Abby. “I’m going to read this back to you to make sure I’ve captured every detail, and if you’re happy with it, I’ll put the oath at the bottom, and you can sign it. That should serve as your statement.”

“That’s...that’s it?” Abby asks.

“That’s it. Hardly painless, but this is as bad as it gets. I’m sorry to do this while you’re upset, but your sister is right. The sooner we get William Frisk locked up, the better, and the faster I can get the district attorney to drop the charges against you.”

She nods vigorously.

My heart does a somersault, seeing the evil spell this man had over her dissipating alongside her fear.

I listen as they go over everything he’s written, with Abby correcting the occasional detail.

Once he’s read the whole revised statement, he says, “Let me see if they’ll let me print this here, and we can get it signed right now.”

He goes and knocks on the window in the metal door for a guard.

A burly woman swings the door open. “What do you need?”

After some hemming and hawing, Sutton wins her over, and a few minutes later, she’s back with the printed copy.

The attorney sets it down in front of Abby. He turns to the second page and points at the bottom. “This is it. The document says that everything we’ve written is accurate and that if anything isn’t true and you sign it, you’re committing perjury, which is punishable by jail time.”

“It’s all true,” Abby says, her voice raw.

“So, you’ll sign on the line under the oath and date it. I’ll send this with a copy of the anonymous report with Will’s GPS location right over—”

“You got his GPS?” Abby blinks in surprise.

I bite my lip to keep from smiling.

“Nick,” I mouth to her.

Her smile highlights the rings around her eyes. “Are y’all a thing now? Finally?”

“Sorta.” Then I remember how weird he’s been for the last day or so and my happiness wilts. “At least, we were.”

I’m not sure what’s happening anymore.

This is hardly the time or place to be pining over a man who’s always strapped my heart to a rocket.

“Give him a break if he’s done something stupid. He does too much not to care about you,” Abby whispers.

“He’s been wonderful with all this.” I focus on the table. “It’s not that. I just think he may have changed his mind.”

“Really?”

I don’t know what to say, so I keep it to myself.

Before she can question me again, the guard opens the door. “Time’s up for today, but if you still need to talk to your attorney, he can come back tomorrow.”

Abby looks at her, exasperated, and stands like it takes great effort. Relief shines in her eyes as she looks back over her shoulder. I wave goodbye, hoping it’s the last time we’ll have to do this here.

Sutton puts his tablet back in his briefcase. “I’m delighted we got this squared away, Miss Halle. This is the most productive visit I’ve had with your sister.”

I nod.

“Our car should be here.”

On the ride back, I send Nick three messages before the cab makes it to Sutton’s office. He never responds.

I’m alone in his Maserati and getting more anxious by the minute. It’s later, darker than before.

Should I call since he can't answer my messages? Would that make me look pathetic?

Sigh.

I don't know what to do, but I'll go berserk if I don't know what's going on.

Fumbling with my phone, I try calling.

No answer.

Goosebumps pepper my skin.

Abby's words about how Will swore he was a changed man echo through my mind. What if Nick's doing the same thing?

Sure, he's not a fraction as horrible as Abby's ex, but he's had his demons. What if one of them finally got the best of him again?

What if he's back to being the same guy who took me to a gala to make his ex jealous? But he said that's not why he took me. He wanted it to be a date.

He says a lot of things, though.

I'm beginning to think lying might be hardwired into the Y chromosome.

Thankfully, Abby *should* be out of jail soon, and I couldn't have done it without him. At least there's that.

Doesn't he deserve the benefit of the doubt? He said he'd explain everything tonight...

Only, I keep wondering what needs explaining. And the more I wonder, the wider the pit in my stomach opens, becoming an abyss.

Keep on going. It's all you can do.

I'll do what I planned earlier, I decide—grab Millie and head to Nick's penthouse. He'll either be there to tell me what emergency made him run out of the office like a rooster on fire...

...or he won't. And then I guess I'll cry myself to sleep on the plush bed in Millie's room while she wonders what made her aunt such a hot mess.

When I get to Brandt Ideas, Paige waits in the lobby of the executive suite.

"Reese! I haven't seen you in forever." She runs up and hugs me.

I'm so not in the mood for this kind of energy today, but Paige has always been a sweetheart so I hug her.

She steps back. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, why?"

"...you look tired."

I shake my head. "Oh, whoops. I didn't realize I looked that rough. It's been a long week. Is Ward here? I need to tell him I'm heading out a little early today."

"Nah, not rough by any means, but you're flushed," she says, wearing a concerned smile.

Bah. Putting up with Nicholas Brandt will make you see, breathe, and eat red in every shade.

"I'll talk to Ward once he's out of his meeting. Grab the kidlet and relax."

"Do you think he'll be upset if I don't talk to him myself?"

She waves a hand and scrunches her nose. "Don't worry. I'll handle Ward. Reese, if you need a break for a couple hours, Millie can stay with Tiffany and I'll drop her off later."

Her response shocks me. I'm not used to anyone but Abby—and very recently, Nick—offering to help.

"Umm—" I'm about to say Nick and I were going to spend the evening with her and close my mouth when I realize they still don't know about us. Will has to be dealt with before that cat comes out of the bag. "You're sweet, but I've got her."

"Are you sure?" Paige asks.

"Totally!" I insist.

Without another word, I walk over and open the door to the playroom. I walk in to say a few words to Tiffany, gasping as something slams into me from behind. Millie giggles as she wraps her arms around my leg. I peel her arms off of me and pick her up.

“Time to see Quick Nick?” she chirps.

“Don’t you know it, bumblebee,” I say, forcing a smile.

Inwardly, I’ve never been more afraid to see Nicholas Brandt than I am right now.

I want to tell her that her mom should be back soon, but I don’t want to jump the gun in case there are any last-minute holdups.

The thing about growing up on the bad side of foster care is, you never fully trust any system, no matter how clear-cut it appears to be.

I put Millie in her car seat and get behind the wheel.

“I wanna hammyburger,” she says.

“We’ll get dinner soon,” I promise.

“Hangry, Auntie Reese.”

Her cuteness could make me break down in tears right now.

Because I’m ten seconds from losing my mind and don’t want to deal with a drive-thru run and prolong the agony, wondering what I’ll find with Nick. But I’m not explaining that to a four-year-old.

So I turn on the kids’ satellite radio station instead and listen to Millie slaughter “A Whole New World.”

The song annoys me.

Why do princesses always get whole new worlds and happily ever afters?

When do orphans?

If Nick slaughters my heart, will there ever be a happy ending again?

“Millie, if we needed to go back to Aunt Reese’s place for a few days, would you mind?” I ask, my worries taking over.

“I like it at Nick’s!”

“You knew we’d have to go home sooner or later. When your mommy comes home, you’ll go back to your apartment.”

“She coming soon? I miss Mommy,” she says sadly.

“I know you do, baby. I’m not sure when, but I know she’ll be with you, probably sooner than we think,” I assure her.

“Can we go see her?” Millie asks, waving her little hands.

“...I don’t think we can today. It’s a little too late.”

“Why’s the jail phone different, Auntie Reese?” she asks, shifting effortlessly into question time.

I purse my lips, remembering her drawing with the oversized phone.

“It’s not the same as a real phone, baby. It can only make calls on the other side of the wall,” I tell her.

“What mistake did Mommy make? I don’t wanna make mistakes. Don’t wanna get locked up with no friends.”

Heart, meet hammer. It’s a struggle to fight back the panic, the tears, the sadness as I look at her in the rearview mirror.

“Your mom still has friends who love her very much no matter where she is or what happens,” I say.

“Who?” Her little nose scrunches up.

“Me and you...and Quick Nick,” I add. “She’ll be out soon. We’ve been working on it the whole day.”

“Why you wait so long, Auntie Reese? It’s been a year!” Millie says, scolding me with a look.

I smile and shake my head. “Definitely hasn’t been a year. Try again.”

“*Has*. Do you know how many times Miss Tiffany put me down for naps?”

“A year is twelve whole months,” I remind her. “This is closer to two.”

“Oh. Well, it’s still a lotta months...”

I grin, grateful to have her kid logic for comic relief. It actually makes me feel a little better about whatever’s up ahead.

In a way, she isn’t wrong.

For a preschooler separated from her mama, it’s been a lot.

And for me, a certain man who drops me on my head with every breath will always be too much.

JUST CALL ME ATLAS (NICK)



Carmen keeps trailing me like a lost puppy, even as I hang up the phone.

All I can do is hope like hell the police show up before Reese and Millie.

I head back to my room with Carmen following miserably behind me, where she suddenly gives up and drops into a leather chair by the window, across from my bed.

“What was in the email you sent Osprey?” she asks.

No point in fighting it. What’s done is done.

I open the message in my sent folder and hand her my phone.

Her eyes flick over it angrily. “You...you called me an intruder and a spurned *psychopath*?”

She throws my phone against the wall. I knew that was coming.

“What would you call it?” I snap.

“I’m not an intruder! I have a key. I unlocked the door and walked in. And psycho. Jesus. I’m trying to protect you. It’s all I’ve ever tried to do, saving you from yourself and that little gold-digging bitch of a ‘driver.’”

My eyes heat, fixing on her like a hunting hawk. “I said watch your mouth. She’s none of your concern.”

And soon, Reese Halle won't be my concern, either, I think, anger twisting through me.

Carmen shrugs. “She roped you in good. Ask yourself this. Do you actually have anything in common? If she didn't work for you, would you have ever met her?”

My jaw tightens.

I don't answer. I'm exhausted with her mind games.

“And you don't find it odd that she doesn't mind shacking up with her boss?” Carmen flings out.

“It took some convincing,” I say quietly.

It did, and no matter how much my life is about to go to complete shit in a matter of minutes, I'll always have the memories.

She narrows her eyes and gives me a knowing smile. “Right. I'm sure you had to persuade her oh so hard.” Sarcasm drips from her mouth.

“Do you ever shut up? It's spoiling your surprise,” I grumble.

“Surprise?” She holds her head up and leans forward in the chair.

“You weren't listening? I called the Chicago PD after I threw Osprey his chicken feed. They'll be here any minute.”

Her mouth drops. “What the fuck? You did not, Nick Brandt.”

I hold her gaze.

“Oh my God!” She stands. “Are you insane?” She throws her arms over her head and lets them drop, horror curdling her face. “I'll be arrested for your shit! And...and those stupid marks I left on your arm—”

She's silent as her eyes stick to the long scratches she left down my wrist, slowly caking over with dark clotted blood.

“But you won't be arrested for breaking and entering,” I growl bitterly. “I won't bother pressing charges for that.”

She glares at me, pacing the room like a cornered cougar.

“You’re going to jail with me and you know it. Why would you do this? You’ve just completely trashed your reputation. *Again*. Only, this time there’s no coming back. It’s not like your parents’ scandals and the crap you pulled when you were younger. If the whole city thinks you’re a drug fiend...I hope you know how bad you’ve fucked yourself.”

I smile, accepting my fate.

If it protects Reese from my mess of a life—if it nails Frisk’s case shut and helps free her sister—nothing else matters.

Carmen stops wearing a path through my floor and lets out an animalistic groan.

“Are you stupid?” she snarls at me again.

“Probably. Does it matter, though? I’ve spent my entire life running from bad press. This time, I’m facing my mistakes head-on. Even if we fight our way out of it legally, we’re fucked reputation-wise, just as you said. Neutralized. If you ever run across that sex video after that and share it, so be it. The whole world can see us fucking on top of the drug charges I’m sure will be all over the press. It won’t matter, Carmen. I won’t have a reputation to ruin, and I can’t drag down anybody else. Don’t you see it? I’m free.”

“Your secretary—”

“Driver,” I growl back.

“Whatever. You don’t think the help will be furious?”

“She’ll be upset, but in time, I know she’ll understand.” I shrug. “She’ll never have to doubt how much I love her.”

“You fucking *love* her?” Carmen’s face contorts. “You know I’m going to nail you with everything, right? I’ll hire an *army* of attorneys to bleed you dry. So many damage claims they’ll make your head spin for what you’ve done to me.”

I listen for a knock at my door, wishing the cops would hurry up. I’m officially sick of sharing hell’s waiting room with this narcissist freak.

“Have at it. I don’t see what that’ll accomplish. Your career goes kaboom the instant *The Chicago Tea* publishes the pictures I sent. Ward and Grandma won’t kick me out of the company. The board might ask me to resign, but they can’t do much about the third of the company I own, or my new startup.”

Her eyes grow wide. Something new flashes in her eyes as she realizes I’m not intimidated—fear.

“Fuck this!” she spits. “I’m not waiting around to go down with you.”

My intercom buzzes as she jumps up and lurches forward.

I go numb.

This is it.

My whole life is about to change the second that door opens. I’ll get a nice mugshot. Ward will probably invent new ways to say “dumbass” when he comes to post bail. Who knows how many months I’ll burn fighting this.

Whatever happens, I’ll pay a fine and stand by the truth.

I’ll probably lose Reese.

Then I’ll resign from Brandt Ideas to keep from embarrassing Ward and so he won’t have to defend my actions. Maybe I can rename Brandt Dreams to shake my reputation, but if it’s too much, I’ll step aside there too. I’ll start all over again.

But it’s done.

Carmen isn’t blackmailing me anymore. With everything hanging out in the open, I won’t have to hide.

My stomach sinks and my mouth feels like cotton, but it’s liberating to be finished with this fuckery.

I go to the door, half expecting to see Osprey himself show up with an entourage ahead of the police. Carmen doesn’t follow this time. Does she think she can hide?

I yank the door open and stop. A sad blue-eyed mess of chestnut hair and lovely woman greets me.

“Reese?” Her name rattles out of me.

Before I can move, Millie scurries past and runs inside. “Nick, I wanna play!”

“Millie, come back!” I rumble, spinning and heading toward her.

“No. Play!”

Reese steps through the door, batting her eyes as she gets a good look at me. “What’s that all over you? Are you—holy shit. Your arm. Are you hurt? What happened?”

I shut the door and nudge the kiddo back toward her aunt. “Reese, you’ve got to take Millie and get out of here. *Now.*”

Carmen steps into the room, her heels clicking like some monster dragging its claws.

Fuck. Here we go.

Reese’s eyes trace from me to Carmen and back to me. Her expression crumbles. Her breath turns shallow.

“Is this who you were on the phone with?” she whispers. “Is this your big emergency?”

“It wasn’t supposed to happen like this,” I say dryly, agony biting my tongue into silence.

Carmen steps closer to Reese.

“I’m not sure what occasion you’re talking about, but yes, we did talk.” She gives me a devilish smile. “Why don’t you tell the help what you did, Nicholas?”

“The *help*?” Reese pinches her eyes shut.

“I told you to stop calling her that.” I shake my head and meet Reese’s eyes. “We were talking, yeah. I told you it was tabloid problems, and that’s...all she’s ever been. Nothing more. That’s ending today.”

I’m not sure she’s listening. The pain on her face flays me open.

Where are the goddamned police? They need to get here before I drag Carmen Seraphina outside and hurl her off the

balcony.

Undaunted, the demoness grins at Reese, fluttering her cocaine-dusted hell-red dress.

“Sweetie, would you like a drink? I’d be happy to get you one. You look shaken.” She gives a slow shake of her head. “Don’t take this too hard. It’s a lesson. When billionaires play with girls like you, they’re *just* playing. I’m sure he told you all sorts of wonderful things that melted your heart and turned your legs to mush. He even claimed he loved you—”

“Shut. Your. Mouth,” I grind out each syllable, my throat on fire, before turning to the only one in this room who truly matters. “Reese, you have to believe me. She means nothing. She kept her key from when we were together and got in. She’s a lunatic, but she’s been dealt with. I need you to leave. Get away from her. I love you.”

Reese doesn’t answer, but she’s growing paler by the moment, a worried Millie tugging at her fingers.

“Auntie Reese?”

Carmen’s horrible smile stays on Reese. “You don’t have to answer. He may have even meant some of his pretty words. But his grandmother would never allow this—”

“Grandma loved Reese before I did,” I bite off. “Leave her out of this.”

Carmen looks at me. “For an hourly employee, sure. I don’t think she ever counted on having her for a daughter-in-law.” Her eyes scan from me to Reese and back. “I still can’t believe you ruined our lives for this nothing of a girl.”

I glare hot death at the bitch.

“She’s beautiful, kind, and strong. You’re not fit to give her a pedicure.”

“Well, it isn’t like she could pay for a pedicure.”

Millie looks up at me, thankfully oblivious to the throat-cutting sarcasm and cruelty flying back and forth.

“Quick Nick, wanna burger?” she asks.

Carmen's eyes fall on Millie. Oh, fuck no.

"You have a kid? Well, that makes a little more sense why you're dallying with the help..."

"She's our niece," I say. When did I start thinking of Millie as *our* niece? "Keep your damn mouth shut. She's just a kid."

Millie puts her hands on her hips and looks up with a scowl. "Who are you? Why's your dress all dirty? And your hair...doesn't anybody help you brush it?" She tilts her head back and grins at me.

It could hammer the coldest heart apart, but somehow I keep it together, kneeling to look at her.

"You're a good girl, Millie. And listen, right now, I need you to be brave. Take your Auntie Reese and go get me a double cheeseburger with a basket of fries—"

"And a milkshake?"

I nod. "A big milkshake. Can you do that for me?"

She nods like I've sent her on a quest for Tolkien's ring.

I pick her up and hand her to her aunt.

"Take Millie and go. Use my credit card and get a nice hotel. You've got to get out of here, Reese. I can't explain now. I'm in a lot of trouble and I don't want you in it with me. If you're here when the police get here—"

"Police? Oh, God." Her words are barely audible as she hugs the kid closer.

I nod. "Call Ward. Tell him I'll need my attorney. But get out of here first. Now!"

She clutches Millie and starts running toward the elevator. I'm holding my breath the whole time, peering out the door, until the elevator door closes.

Seconds later, it pings softly.

The glass door opens and four cops step out.

Fuck.

I hope to God they weren't stopped in the lobby, and that nothing from my shirt brushed off. There are no dogs yet, at least.

I'm so shitting stupid, but there's no time to dwell on it.

A second later, I've got three cops in my face. The large guy in front puts his hand on his weapon but doesn't draw it.

I raise my hands in surrender. "There's another person here. She's inside."

"Okay. We need to come in. Hands behind your back," he growls.

I nod and step aside, dropping my hands.

Carmen steps up behind me, speaking frantically. "The woman who just left needs to be arrested! It's her drugs."

I shake my head.

"They're mine. All mine. I'm willing to tell you everything," I mutter.

"He's been holding me against my will," she lies, her voice breaking with a harsh sob. I can't tell if she's even faking it anymore. "He...he asked me to come over, Officer. I caught him high, snorting coke like a maniac. When I got here, he called the police and said if he was going down, he'd take me with him."

I say nothing. It's pointless until we're in a formal interrogation, but Carmen and her ugly mouth are too dumb to realize it. She's not as great an actress as the world thinks she is, either.

A young blond cop points at her. "Are you Carmen Seraphina? Holy shit."

"Yes." She gives him that evil smile everyone finds endearing. "I bet I could work out autographs, backstage passes, whatever if you could maybe just...give a girl a second chance?"

Her cluelessness grates on my ears.

The cop leans over and whispers to his partner, “The tabloids were right. She’s a loon.”

“Get them in custody,” the man in charge growls. “Read them their rights while we start searching. I don’t want any reason for these poor little celebrities to get off on procedural slips.”

Carmen spits at me, but misses and hits a cop.

He wipes his face and glares at her before grabbing her hands and cuffing her.

“Sorry, sorry, it was for him!” she howls, flopping down on the floor, whimpering. “You hate me so much you’d destroy us both just to get me?”

“I didn’t hate you until tonight,” I say quietly. “I wanted you out of my life. If this makes that happen, so be it.”

Carmen sobs harder. I think the shriveled lump of coal in her chest finally breaks.

“It...it wasn’t supposed to be like this, Nick.”

The guy she spat on meets my gaze. “Is she high?”

“I don’t know. When I came home she was holding a half-empty bag of cocaine, but she was pouring it out. I don’t think she snorted any.”

Another cop cuffs me. It’s as humiliating as you can imagine, being overpowered and locked up.

Somehow, it doesn’t matter.

As long as Reese is okay, nothing else does.

The young blond guy kneels beside Carmen, clearly the softie. “I’m gonna help you up, ma’am, all right? We’ll get you in a good rehab program and—”

“I’m not a junkie!” She interrupts, twisting on the floor and kicking her legs.

My Miranda rights warning goes in one ear and out the other as they lead me downstairs to the patrol car.

I sink into the back seat of a police cruiser for the first time in my life with a few things running through my mind.

Roland Osprey knows to pull the police report. I almost involved Reese and Millie in a gut-wrenching story that's sure to trend.

I barely dodged a fucking bullet.

If Reese was still with me when shit went down—when Carmen was smearing cocaine all over my condo and launching herself at me like a feral dog—Millie could've wound up in the system.

The one thing her aunt worked so hard to prevent.

I nearly sent them straight to hell.

All because destroying myself is the only way to outrun my past.

“Idiot,” I mutter.

If it weren't for the handcuffs, I'd be burying my face in my hands, fingers digging in my eyes until I see stars.

Then there's Ward. He'll leave his wife at home tonight, drive across town, post bail, and rip me at least five new assholes. He'll believe a story that everyone else will always doubt, even if the facts check out.

“They weren't my drugs. I stole them from my girlfriend's sister's ex as evidence trying to get him locked up so he didn't use custody of my girlfriend's niece as leverage.”

Fuck. See how absurd it sounds?

I barely believe it myself, and I lived it.

Ward might give me the benefit of the doubt the first time I explain it. He'll make damn sure Abby and Sutton confirm every word. He'll also do his best to make sure I'm out and sleeping in my own bed by tomorrow night.

And tomorrow, my poor brother will not only be the son of accused murderers, but he'll also be the brother of a hopeless druggie in the media's eyes.

I hate it.

Sure, Ward will still be the white sheep. The responsible one. Just with one more less-than-savory relation, thanks to yours truly.

Sooner or later, Grandma will also know how hard I fucked up. If she knows the truth, she'll get it, but I can't let the news get a chance to give her another heart catastrophe. I have to tell her before she reads some garbage half-truth online.

But Carmen will back off now.

Abby will go free.

Reese and Millie can live their lives, free from being swallowed up in my quicksand.

I just have to live with knowing I've hurt everyone to achieve it.

"You're breathing pretty hard back there, buddy. You okay?" the officer asks.

"I'm fine," I grind out, taking a searing breath.

It'll be hours before I'm able to relax, and years before I can make peace with this bullshit.

Still, it worked.

Through all the agony, the pain, the bad decisions, and the sins, my sacrifice did it.

And its price reveals one glaring truth that hasn't changed tonight, or ever—how much I'll always love Reese Halle.

BIG NEWS (REESE)

“**W**hy can’t Quick Nick come?” Millie demands from the back seat.

I hold in a horrified sob.

Because apparently he’s playing games I barely understand with his snake of an ex-girlfriend, and they involve cops.

How the hell do I know?

It has been a day. I just need five minutes of quiet time to process it. But as every parent knows who’s gone through major stress with kids, I ought to just ask for a winning lotto ticket while I’m at it.

“I want Quick Nick,” Millie sputters.

Yeah. No quiet time for me today.

“Hang on, Millie,” I say softly “I have to make a phone call.”

“Why?”

I hold up my hand so she’ll pipe down. I call Ward and get his voicemail, so I try Paige.

“Hey—do you know where Ward is?”

“I’d assume at the office? I’m at my studio. Is something wrong?”

“Nick’s gotten himself in...some kind of trouble. I’m not sure what. He basically just told me to stay out of it.” I don’t

dare rattle off everything about the drugs or Carmen right now and invite more questions from little mouths.

Millie yanks at her car door, clearly frustrated. We're still sitting in a parking garage. But it's dark, and she's tiny. No one would ever see her.

Thank God the child safety lock is on.

"Hang on, Paige." I look into the back seat. "When you hear the car on, don't touch the door, little lady."

"Have to help Quick Nick. Save him from the bad hair lady," she says.

"Millie, I'm working on it right now. Don't you worry. Hang tight and let me help him." I swallow a boulder in my throat.

Carmen Seraphina had better be upstairs for a damn good reason, because if not...this jackass didn't just toy with me. He screwed with my niece's head, and he'll pay for that one.

"What happened, Reese? Is everything okay?" Paige's voice is high-pitched and worried.

I lay my head on my hand. "I don't know, honestly. He told me to call Ward and say he'd need bail."

"Bail? Holy crap...are *you* okay?"

"I'm worried about Nick and—"

"Where are you?" she cuts in.

"The parking garage at Nick's building. I tried to see him and haven't left yet." I hold in the rest of that story and it hurts.

"Why does Nick think he's being arrested?" Paige demands.

"I don't know. I have a few good guesses...but it's not a good time or place."

"Got it. We'll get this squared away, whatever it is. Stay there, I'm coming to pick you up. I'll call Ward. If he doesn't

answer, I'll keep trying. He won't ignore my calls twice," she says, and I know she's right.

I should just go home.

I'm sitting in a car with Millie already strapped to her car seat. I want to argue it makes no sense for Paige to come here.

But between the incident at the attorney's office, the intensity of the scene with my sister, the shock of finding Nick and Carmen alone in his apartment covered in what looked like freaking cocaine...and the absolute terror that he's in real trouble now, my focus is shot.

So I'll let Paige come.

I'll sit here in the driver's seat with my head on the steering wheel and wait for an actual friend.

Ten minutes later, Paige pulls up behind Nick's car. She honks the horn. I get out, take Millie with me, and then grab her car seat and get her situated in the back of Paige's car.

"I've already called Ward," she says as I settle into the passenger seat. "Nick hasn't been booked yet, and we can't post bail until that happens."

"Okay." I nod. "Thank you."

"Also, um, I can't help but notice you're at Nick's place in the middle of the evening after you took a sick day—"

"I wasn't lying about not feeling well."

Her eyes drift over to me, assessing.

"I can see that but you came to Nick's with the kid for a reason, right?"

She sees right through me. There's no point in holding back anything from her.

"We've...kinda been crashing at Nick's place ever since a run-in with Abby's ex. I thought it was safer if Millie and I stayed here." If he wants to tell anyone more than that, let him.

I give Paige a quick summary of the custody worries with Will Frisk, and hint at how close he is to winding up in jail.

“What’s custy?” Millie asks.

Whoops. I wasn’t quiet enough. “To live with someone, Millie.”

“No! I only live with you or Mommy or Quick Nick now.”

Paige looks at me, smiles, and raises an eyebrow. “Quick Nick, huh? Looks like the nickname stuck.”

I blush.

While we drive, I tell her about the ruckus with Carmen in the sneakiest way I can with Millie’s little ears burning.

“Yikes. You’ve earned yourself a drink every night for the next year,” Paige says slowly, shaking her head. “Don’t worry, Reese, we’ll get this fixed.”

I try to force a smile. I want so badly to believe her, but there’s no easy way out of this.

I can’t even begin to process how close I almost came to losing Millie along with Nick.

And I have lost him, haven’t I?

“Where are we going?” I ask, hoping to change the subject.

“Our house on the lake. There’s plenty of room, and if Nick is worried about you and Millie being alone, you won’t be there.” She’s quiet for a minute. “I will say he’s gone out of his way to protect you and the kidlet, even if it was in his own ham-fisted Nick Brandt way. I’m not sure why that b—” She stops and glances at Millie in the back seat. “*Beyotch* showed up, but...I think he cares about you, Reese.”

He told me he loves me, I remember, but I don’t dare tell her.

Paige moved into Ward’s glamorous Lake Michigan estate just outside Chicago after they got married. The drive to her house is so long Millie falls asleep. She lets out a little snore from the back seat.

“She’s so cute. I can’t wait until we finally have a baby.”

“What *are* you waiting for?” I ask.

She smiles and shrugs. “Ward’s parents are divorced. We agreed to get a few years under our belt before we bring kids into it. I don’t mind. I enjoy having him to myself.”

“You two are so perfect it’s sickening,” I say with a laugh.

Her smile just grows. “Um, thank you? Also, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Do you think Nick was using when you found him?” she whispers.

“No way. At least, I doubt it. You know my sister is in jail on drug charges, right?”

Paige nods.

“She was forced to haul drugs for her ex. He threatened her. I think the crap in Nick’s place was connected to that somehow. He admitted he followed Will, trying to get info on him to help clear Abby. He didn’t mention bringing anything home, but he’s been weird for the last couple of days...now I know it had to be Carmen.” I stare out the window as the landscape passes by, the urban grey receding into spring green and budding flowers. “It’s ironic, I guess. Abby being in jail has worried me sick. She’ll be out soon—hopefully—but now with Nick, I have to worry about him too.”

“As soon as they get Nick booked, he’ll be out in no time. Ward won’t let him rot in there for any amount of time and he has no prior issues. He’ll get bail.”

I know she’s right.

“You know, I love Millie more than my morning coffee—and that’s a freaking lot—but I’m ready to send her home with Abby. I need to work through some crap.”

“Nick and Carmen crap, you mean?”

More like Nick and I...

“Whatever,” I say.

“Reese, I know you’re freaked out about Nick and your sister, but you can’t let it drive you crazy. Nick’s going to be okay—you hear me? Ward will make sure of it,” she says with a confidence I wish I had.

“I hope so. I think some things may be beyond even Ward.”

If the criminal justice system were so easy to navigate, Nick would’ve had Abby out weeks ago. Money doesn’t solve everything.

Paige smiles. “He’s the most powerful man in Chicago—”

“There are other billionaires in Chicago, to be fair,” I say.

“It’s not just the money. He’s got a butt-ton of contacts. You know how it goes...he doesn’t have a problem with anyone until you mess with his wife, his brother, or God forbid, his grandma. With Nick locked up, they’re messing with everyone. He’ll come through, I’m sure of it.”

I smile and nod because it’s all I can do not to break.

Once we get to her house, I lay a sleeping Millie on the couch, and Paige pours two glasses of wine.

She hands me a glass. “You can put her in a guest room if you want.”

“I’ll wait until I go up. If she wakes up in a place she doesn’t know without me, she’ll panic. I can’t deal with a meltdown today on top of everything else.”

“No problem. We’ll just have to be quiet so we don’t wake her up.”

“She’d sleep through a tornado,” I say with a wave of my hand.

My stomach lurches. I’m biting back bile. My face puckers trying to hold it back, and then the nausea passes.

“Are you okay?” Paige asks.

I stare into the wine, feeling a weird revulsion when I should be desperate for a drink after the day I’ve had.

“Could I just get some water? I’m worried I might throw up...”

“Bathroom’s over there.” She points across her open living room to a door.

Keeping a hand ready to shove over my mouth, I run, just as it hits me.

Oof. That stress is coming out.

I’m lucky I make it to the toilet before I feel the world spinning. Then I lose half my body weight and wind up a sobbing mess on the floor.

Fuck this day. I want Nick!

But since irrational desires for a man who poleaxed my heart can’t help me now, I move to the sink, splashing cold water over my hands.

“Reese?” Paige knocks gently.

I twist the doorknob, swinging it open, hating how she gasps when she sees my raw, red eyes.

“Oh, crap. If you’re not ready for this, I can tell him to call back later...” I see she’s holding my phone.

“Who?” I mouth.

“The attorney, Sutton. I saw the law office on the screen and thought you’d want to take it. He has an update on Abby.”

Finding a burst of strength, I dry my face with the hand towel and take the phone from Paige, who pushes the door open. She comes in and sits on the edge of the tub.

“Hello?”

“Reese? I have good news—mostly,” Sutton says, his voice as gravelly as ever.

“*Mostly?*” I echo.

Please, for the love of God, don’t let this day get any worse.

“Will Frisk was apprehended an hour ago after a brief standoff. Authorities searched the warehouse and his vehicle,

and they came up with several lock boxes of cocaine. The warehouse has been declared a drug scene and his property's been impounded. Frisk is in custody—meaning we should be able to get Abby out as soon as possible. Maybe as soon as tomorrow.”

Relief floods my body. It's a struggle to stay standing.

“Oh my God! That's great. Thank you so much.” I'm shaking, and I feel Paige grab my shoulders for support.

“I couldn't have done it without Mr. Brandt's tracker and your sister's statement, but there's something else you should know.”

“What?” I can't imagine anything could dampen my mood right now.

“There are a few indications the drug ring involved may be connected to a larger, more organized group, a branch of a major cartel from El Salvador. I expect they'll recommend Abby and Millie go under witness protection temporarily to stay safe.”

I blink.

“Why would that be a bad thing? I want them safe,” I say.

“It's not bad, necessarily, however, they'll have to stay in it until the trial ends. Also, it can be difficult to maintain a new identity, and during the process it's ill-advised to talk to anyone they know. Including family.”

“Oh.”

Oh, shit.

Just like that, the world drops out under me.

So, my sister is coming home, but I'll see her less than I do now in jail. And poor Millie...the thought of losing her for months hurts my heart.

But they'll be safe, and once the trial is over with Frisk in prison, they'll be able to move on.

“We'll do our best, Mr. Sutton. Thanks for calling,” I tell him.

“No problem. Your sister is lucky to have you. The next time you hear from me will be to tell you when to pick up Abby. I’ll talk to you soon. Goodbye.”

I end the call, close the toilet lid, and sit down, utterly exhausted.

“What’s the story?” Paige asks, leaning toward me with concern.

I sigh, palming my face to gather my thoughts before I say, “My sister might need witness protection. Millie, too. Don’t tell anyone, obviously.”

“Oh my God, of course.”

“It’s cool, Paige. Thanks for all your help.” I reach for her hand and give it a squeeze that feels like it takes all my strength.

My tainted stomach begins to settle. I keep one hand over my belly.

“Let me get you that water. Were you sick like this earlier?” she asks, leading me into the kitchen.

“No. It’s weird. I didn’t feel sick at all until it just hit me at once,” I say, mulling it over. “Guess I’m just tired from putting up with your brother-in-law.”

“I’m no stranger to cramps and belly aches sometimes,” she says, wincing. “I hate that time of month with a passion.”

We share a sympathetic smile.

“It’s never been too rough for me, I think, so it’s not that.”

But *is* it time for my period? The last few months have been such a wreck I don’t remember.

When bedtime comes around, Millie asks for a story like usual. Of course, before I even get the book open on my phone, she asks when Nick will be back, too. I miraculously dodge the question, sucking her into *The Lion of Mars*.

She’s out like a light halfway through the second chapter.

Good, because I can’t stop my mind from wandering.

And the more it spins through today—right up to me throwing up my woes—the more I start to worry. *What if I'm in for another brutal surprise?*

When I kiss her on the head and turn out the lights, slipping out of the room, I'm just in time to hear Paige talking to someone.

Between work, finding an attorney, and getting bail taken care of, it's late when Ward comes home.

I catch them mid-kiss just as I walk in. He's holding his wife like she's priceless.

"I missed you, woman," he growls.

She beams up at him. "Me too. Just so you know, we've got a four-year-old asleep upstairs, and Reese and I want gummy bears—"

His brows furrow in an expression so serious I almost laugh.

"Let me guess. You want me to drive you both to the drugstore because it's the only place open for a mountain of gummy bears and a month's worth of dental work?" he asks, nodding at me.

"I'll drive!" I say. "I need some other stuff too."

"What is it? I can pick it up for you ladies," Ward says, trading smiles with his wife.

My face warms. "...just stuff."

Ward looks at me again, and he's about to open his mouth with a new question when Paige leans up, pressing her finger over his beard and the seam of his lips.

"Ward, when a woman says she needs *stuff*, let's just leave it at that, m'kay?" Paige says.

Heat grows fast and furious under my cheeks.

I want to die.

Paige looks at me—or probably my red-alert blush—and we both burst out laughing.

We make a mad dash to CVS. I dart over to what I need, throw it in a plastic basket with a handle, and toss two heaping bags of gummy bears over it, hoping Paige doesn't notice.

If she does, she doesn't mention it.

At least something goes my way tonight.

It's only the rest of my life that feels like a train off its track, doused in flames.



THE NEXT MORNING, I wait in the Lincoln across from the jail.

Nick nearly passes me on his way out, then stops and slowly gets in the back seat. Odd.

I can't remember the last time he chose the back.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," I say, my eyes flicking back to him.

He looks like a lot of things: worn, relieved, tense, guarded, but mostly, he just looks dead tired.

"Are you ready for some good news?" I venture, hoping it takes the edge off his brief stay behind bars.

He smiles, but it doesn't touch his eyes. "What?"

"They busted Frisk. His truck's impounded along with God knows how many pounds of coke. Abby should be released ASAP. Sutton said he couldn't have done it without you." I pause, watching how those sharp-green eyes study me. "Thank you so much, Nick. Again."

"Glad I could help. Take me to Brandt Ideas, please." His eyes sparkle when he says it, but he's so subdued today.

Jesus. Did they replace the real Nick Brandt with a double?

"Okay." I start driving for the office.

At a red light, I watch him in the rearview mirror.

He doesn't look like a man who just accomplished something we've worked at for so long. He's deflated. Distant.

Almost...defeated?

“What’s wrong?” I whisper back.

He gives one slow shake of his head before he falls back into his seat, exhaling deeply.

“What’s wrong?” He echoes slowly, before looking up at me. “Reese, I could have ruined your life last night. If you’d walked in half an hour earlier with Millie...fuck. I could’ve dragged both of you through the legal mud just because you happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Because you were with *me*. I don’t understand why you’re so happy to see me.”

I smile. “Nick, we wouldn’t have been there if you weren’t protecting us from a crazy drug dealer. I’ll take my chances with online gossip and a spiteful ex. It’s not the end of the world.”

“It *is*. That’s what I’m trying to make you understand. Everyone has a personal brand now. If you’d been there when the cops showed up, you could’ve caught hell finding a job or a loan if you ever need one. Millie could’ve ended up in state fucking custody last night, and it would’ve been my fault.”

His sigh sounds like a broken rattle.

“I’m not mad at you. The worst didn’t happen. Um, I also have other news—”

“You should be,” he growls back, cutting me off.

He doesn’t ask about my other news, and we’re almost to the office.

“Nothing that happened last night was your fault. Was it?” Maybe he knows something I don’t, but I know Nick and I doubt it.

“It was my fault. All of it. Carmen had a fucking key—”

“You said you gave her one years ago.”

“That’s not the point. If she were just a little smarter, or a little less insane—there’s no telling what might’ve happened

to any of us. You could've been hurt. Badly. You have to care about that, Reese."

"Here's what I care about—you've done nothing but protect us. You saved us, Abby included, who you've never even met. I...I love you."

I don't understand. He's taking down my head with my heart right now.

"Reese, I love you too much, and that's exactly the problem. I can't stay away from you. I can't call you for company rides anymore, either."

What the hell?

Panic rips through my blood.

"Don't worry. Your job is safe. I'm going to the office to put in my resignation right now, and you'll never have to see me again," he says, pausing just long enough to feel my heart split down the middle. "I can't keep doing this. Not to you. And knowing the media storm that's coming, it's far from over. I can't let my past threaten everyone around me. It's not right, and because I love you like nobody else...I have to let you go."

Tears brand my cheeks, uncontrollable now.

Too much to let me deal with your past, but not enough to ask me how I feel about our future?

That's what I want to scream at him. I want to yell a lot of things, but my throat feels like there's something spiked lodged in it, clawing at my soul.

He opens his door and steps out into a blinding rain. Maybe it's the coolness, but memories of that night in the park—the back seat, my first time—rampage through my head.

I blink back tears the best I can and swerve into the parking garage. I can't drive like this.

When I left after visiting Abby yesterday, I thought Nick might break my heart because he hadn't really changed.

I was so stupid and so incredibly wrong.

He broke my heart *because* he changed, and he's convinced he can't overcome his past.

He's torn me apart because he can't stand hurting anyone.

The monstrous irony eats me alive one sad pelting teardrop at a time.

ONE LAST CHANCE (NICK)

I line up four shot glasses on a folding chair in front of the couch and overfill each one with cheap tequila. I bring the first glass to my lips and throw it down my gullet. This stuff tastes like ass, but it was the only thing available when I got off the plane.

I knew breaking my addiction to Reese Halle would be torture.

Shot number two. Down the hatch.

Fuck, that burns.

I jerk back, coughing like an angry goose into my elbow.

I've resigned from Brandt Ideas. My reputation is shattered—or it will be the second the media hit pieces start landing, if they haven't already.

I've lost my career, my life, and the woman I love is probably shoving needles into the Nick-sized voodoo doll I used to imagine she had. Only, now I bet it's real.

A magic needle through the throat and gut might explain why I'm subjecting myself to this bullshit.

Why I'm *this* desperate to torch her out of my head.

She'll thank me one day. She has to. Whenever she finally realizes she's better off without me.

My phone pings just as I'm looking at turpentine-shot number three with a sneer.

I've spent days avoiding a flurry of calls from Ward, Grandma, and Paige before I hopped the flight to Florida. How long can I run?

Steeling myself, I unlock the screen.

Will you at least tell someone you're alive, jackass? You're going to put Grandma in the hospital again. Before I have a chance to respond, Ward sends another message. Also, I'm hiring a PI to find you if you don't respond. Everyone wants to know you're safe, and I don't know how else to keep Grandma from worrying.

I'm considering what to say when my phone flashes and a ringtone drums through my head. My heart jumps.

Maybe it's her. But why would it be Reese?

I shot her right through the chest. If I didn't slough off my soul that day, this stuff should do it for me.

I take the third shot and burst into another coughing fit.

Jesus Christ. My eyes flick back to the screen.

Not Reese.

Roland damn Birdshit. Haven't I given him enough?

But I'm just drunk and angry enough to hear him gloat as I punch the green icon.

"What?" I bite off.

"Any last words?"

I hold the phone between my ear and shoulder, refilling my shot glasses.

"You've got the dirt. I have nothing left to say. I'm done worrying myself sick with the court of public opinion. I've quit life and walked away. Nothing left to lose. Do your worst, Birdshit," I snarl into the phone.

"Happy to see you taking this like a mature, responsible man for once rather than whining how unfair it is, purely because you're rich with abs." He pauses before that venom

voice returns. “It almost makes me want to show you mercy. *Almost.*”

Even my laugh burns my throat after drinking rocket fuel.

“A little late for mercy, no?”

“I’m not a total asshole, Nicholas, rumors to the contrary. A strange part of me admires your courage— implicating yourself in Miss Seraphina’s drug bust to get this mess cleaned up once and for all. Believe it or not, I don’t take pleasure in publishing the stories I do. I’m here to report the truth—”

“Forgive me if I fail to see why my sex life needs reporting.”

“You’re a billionaire and a member of a powerful family who can change an entire skyline. Your actions, sobriety, and mental state matter. Plus, your relationships could curry favor,” Osprey says.

Damn. He sounds like Ward. Great wealth brings great responsibility, and all that jazz.

I stare into the shot glass with my stomach turning over.

I tried to be responsible, but money was never good enough.

The only thing that ever made me man up—that made me take a wrecking ball to the face that’s still killing me now—was *her*.

“Whatever,” I spit. “You done batting me around before you chew me up and shit me out, or what?”

“No. I’m calling to inform you I’ve decided to pivot the story as an exposè on Miss Seraphina.” The jackass goes quiet. “Considering our history, I do enjoy putting the fear of God in you.”

You couldn’t have told me that before I quit my job, dumped the love of my life, and moved to Florida?

Fuck it. Another shot.

“To be clear, I’ve had the infamous sex tape for weeks, ever since she sent it over,” he continues slowly. “*I’m* the one

who told Miss Seraphina the file was corrupted. Somehow, I had a feeling you might prove yourself worthy of more than a personal humiliation. I also held off as a personal courtesy to your dearest grandmother and—why are you coughing?”

“Nothing,” I force out, my tequila breath on fire. “Thanks, Osprey. I guess.”

“Without *The Chicago Tea* focusing on you, no one else will. That’s reason enough to scuttle your exile plans and continue living like a normal human being. This is your second chance, Brandt. Don’t fuck it up,” he growls.

The call disconnects.

Just in time. I’ve heard enough.

Too bad my phone isn’t done flaying me alive. Another text pings.

Nick, can we talk? I won’t tell your brother or Reese. I promise.

Nope. Sorry, Paige.

Dipshit, would you man up? I gave Reese a week off a few days ago. She told Paige she can’t sleep, and the way she drove that morning, I believe it.

Ward again. I frown.

I did “man up.” Osprey just decided not to have my balls mounted on the wall...for now.

Two legal offices call. They need information to wrap up my drug charge.

Yeah, maybe when I sleep off this rotgut tequila.

Swiping my arms across the table, I knock the shot glasses to the floor and get back to work on an album I’ve unpacked.

Page by page, I tear out pictures of Carmen from when we were growing up, crumple them up, and whip them at the trashcan.

Deeper into the book, I turn the page and smile.

There's a picture of Reese in skintight green leggings, an ugly Christmas sweater—like anything could be truly *ugly* on her—and a goofy green-and-red-striped hat with a white ball at the end.

She was the elf at last year's company Christmas party. I asked her to take a picture with me. She agreed, but left a gaping space between us, crossed her arms, and smiled like a captive.

Things didn't have to be awkward and cold between us.

They weren't until I took her to that stupid gala.

Some things don't change.

It's no one else's fault our relationship is over now. I hurt her enough, and I walked away before I could do it again.

I flip a few pages and stop on recent pictures of us together, the ones I just added late one night a couple weeks ago.

We're happy and smiling. Her head is on my chest. My arm around her tells her she's mine.

In one pic, I'm holding the camera at a weird angle to steal a kiss. We're in front of the Chicago sunrise after we spent the night talking on my balcony.

There are some pictures of Millie between us and a few more with just Millie and me. One of my favorite pictures is Reese kissing Millie on the forehead while she sleeps.

That shit makes my heart ache, knowing what I walked away from—the one woman I thought I could start a family with.

Another life, maybe. One where I didn't waste years of my life with my head up my ass.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I glance at the TV. It isn't on. I must be imagining the noise. No one knows I'm here.

But the knocking comes again, this time louder.

“Nicholas Brandt, if I have to replace a hip after throwing this door down, I will tan your hide. I know you’re in there.”

I must have passed out.

At least this dream promises to be entertaining, and since I don’t want my dream-grandma to break her hip, I stumble to the door and fling it open.

“Took you long enough!” She scrunches her nose, a silver-haired whirlwind blowing into my condo. “My, this place smells like the backside of a wet bar.”

“There’s only one bottle of tequila in the place and I’m only halfway through—”

No dream.

She grabs my earlobe, tugging my head down, and sails forward, leading me to the couch like a puppy. This woman is a ninja pretending to be Chicago’s most talented badass.

“What did I tell you when I gave you your first company phone?” she demands.

“Huh? That was a long time ago and yeah, I’ve had a few drinks, but nothing too excessi—ow!”

She jerks on my ear again.

“Never ignore my calls. Especially when you’ve had me worried sick about you, dear boy. You can ignore anyone else, but you *don’t* ignore your grandmother.” She finally releases my ear and smiles like the portrait of grandmotherly sweetness.

“Yes, ma’am. Message received. Also, you’re wasting your breath if you’re here to try to talk me into changing my mind,” I say, rubbing my ear.

“I’m not here to talk you into anything. I’m simply here to inform you that your resignation isn’t accepted.” She folds her arms.

“How did you know where to find me?” I ask with a sigh.

She rolls her eyes. “Do you have to ask? There were only so many places you’d go, and you’re a creature of habit. Back

to the point, you're far too young to retire and ride off into a sunset of booze and debauchery—"

"I don't know. That seems to be my specialty," I tell her.

She narrows her eyes and lifts her brows.

"Joking," I grumble, holding my hands up.

"You're a different man now. Actually, you're a *man* now. Period. All the trouble you found getting here won't satisfy you anymore," she muses, her eyes glowing like an oracle.

"Why are you really here?"

"If you won't fix your career, I can't make you. You're an adult and I'm not technically part of the company anymore." She sighs. "However, there's a bigger loose end you can't leave undone. You need to go home and take care of it, or we're going to have problems, dear."

Loose end? What the fuck does she mean?

"If you're talking about Roland Osprey and his slime machine—or Carmen and her mess—I'm not interested." I pause. "Grandma, I know you've kept Osprey from running stories about me. You need to stay out of it now. I'm a grown man. You can't fight my battles, and even Osprey called and said there isn't anything left to fight over."

Tapping her foot, frustration hisses out of her.

"Grandma?" I take a step forward, unsure what her problem is.

"I'm talking about Reese Halle, you adorable doofus." Grandma looks at me and swallows before she stabs me between the eyes. "She's pregnant."

What.

Pregnant?

Now?

Mine?

Shit!

"She's—what?" I mutter, instantly winded.

“You heard me the first time.” She narrows her eyes. “She’s pregnant, and whoever the father is, he’s no longer in her life.”

Holy fuck. Pregnant?

I reach for the wall so I don’t fall on my face. No, it’s not the tequila. My world just flipped upside down.

“Why...why did she tell you and not me?” I grind out, trying to screw my head back on.

Grandma doesn’t say anything. She leans back against the couch, holding my gaze.

“Well, now that we’ve confirmed the obvious—”

“Grandma...I didn’t know. I can’t believe she told you before me,” I sputter.

“She didn’t tell me, dear. Paige did.”

My heart jolts for the tenth time.

“She told *Paige*? Does Ward know, too? Everyone knows except me?”

I have to fight the urge to strip off my shirt and go flying out the back door until I plunge headfirst into the ocean. It’s the only thing that might stop my mental circuits from catching fire.

“Paige asked her, and after the way you apparently stormed off during your last encounter...Paige came to us because she didn’t know what else to do.”

“Why would Paige randomly ask her if she’s pregnant?” I swallow. This doesn’t make sense.

Grandma rolls her eyes and makes a clucking sound with her tongue.

“You’re such a gentle bear, but a bear nonetheless. She was nauseous at Paige’s house a couple weeks ago. She also bought a pregnancy test, but tried to hide it. Paige didn’t ask until Reese threw up driving Ward to work one day. She almost caused a wreck. He had to send her home on medical leave.”

Holy fuck.

The last time I saw her, she drove me to the office. Didn't she warn me she had news?

I never asked what, because it wouldn't change what I decided to do, and the longer I talked with her only made it harder. Then I left her a smoldering ruin after a break up speech that still has my guts hanging out.

Goddamn. *What have I done?*

I'm stiff, numb with shock. If Paige or Ward came to deliver the news, I wouldn't believe it.

There's effectively zero chance Grandma's playing.

Ward mentioned having to give Reese time off in his text. All the clues were there, and I missed every single damn one of them.

I pull a hand through my hair, wishing it could reach through my skullcap and shove some sense into my head.

"She tried to tell me," I say. "I didn't stop long enough to listen—"

"Because you're still worried with what other people think of you, and you assumed she cares what others think of her," Grandma throws back.

"It was more than that. Reese and Millie left my place right before the cops showed up. If she'd stayed a minute longer, the kid could've wound up in a mess, and it would've been my fault."

"But she wasn't there a minute earlier, Nicholas. Facts matter. And even if she had been, you would've worked yourself to the bone making sure we got that child home. You know it as well as I do."

Damn, she's good. Still...

"That doesn't make it better, Grandma. I almost put Reese and Millie through the unthinkable. How is Reese, anyway?"

"Heartbroken. Any woman would be. She's pregnant with her first baby, and she thinks the man she loves wants nothing

to do with her.” The way she stares, piercing through me, drives it home.

“I—damn. There’s nothing I want more than Reese happy, living the life she deserves.”

“So make it happen, dear,” Grandma says pointedly. “There’s only one person in the way.”

I shake my head.

“She doesn’t deserve to be tied down to a man with a revolving gossip mill. And the kid...Christ. What kind of life is that, having *me* as a father?”

My gut twists. I’m assaulted by how impossible it seems to ever undo my own warped upbringing, let alone the mistakes I’ve made.

“What she needs right now is a strong man to step up and care for her and that beautiful baby. I can’t think of anyone stronger than a man born into chaos who spent half his lifetime sifting through those jagged pieces and putting himself back together. And frankly, I don’t think you’re anywhere near done finishing the puzzle. This is your moment. *Shine.*”

I don’t know what to say, but she’s so right it clubs me over the head.

Was I ever happier than when I had Reese and Millie around? And we always knew Millie would leave us.

This is our child.

Our chance to make a family just as fucking magical.

The image forming in my head puts a rock in my throat.

Reese, holding our baby, curled up with her head on my chest. I cradle them so hard I could break, tighter than I’ve ever held onto anything else.

Could I give her that? Could I give our kid a life? Could I give myself peace?

Maybe this was always the answer. I look at Grandma again, her eyes flickering with this faith in me I’m struggling like hell to comprehend.

Maybe she's right about everything. Maybe family's always been the glue I need to hold it all together.

"Don't look so shocked. You had to know this was a possibility," she says impatiently.

Yeah, and Reese did too.

We were done with condoms almost from the start.

My gut aches. How many times did I tell her we were in it together after the best sex of my life?

Sure, it was about Abby then, but we both knew *together* meant more than just her sister's mess.

I made her a promise, and then I left her to deal with the wreckage on her own. Even when I thought I did the right thing, I walked away like a chickenshit coward.

Of all the many mistakes I've made, this is the worst.

"I knew it was a possibility. I just didn't—" I stop. Didn't what? Didn't think eighth grade biology applied to me? I have no excuses.

And when a woman I was sleeping with told me she had *news*, I should have fucking asked what it was.

"Didn't expect it?" Grandma asks, raising an eyebrow.

I nod.

"I don't think she expected it either."

"She didn't?" I ask.

What does that mean? Is she upset about it? Does she not want this? Reese is so good with Millie though. I don't think it's that, so does she not want this *with me*?

Grandma laughs. "I'm sure it's a shock for her too."

"Is she upset about the baby?"

"Not that I know of, but Paige spilled the beans because she was that concerned."

"Paige tried calling me twice a day for the last week," I say, falling to the sofa and trying to breathe.

“I know. That’s why I’m here. But also, I didn’t fly to the beach just to give you a lecture. I came here to have dinner with my grandson. In the meantime, I have a poker game to catch up on while you sort out that head of yours—preferably without any advice from Dr. Tequila. I’m going to go see my girls, and I’ll be a whole lot richer when I see you after sundown.” She stands and walks to the door, flicking a warning gaze over her shoulder. “Be showered and sobered up by then, young man.”

“Will do.” I crack a messy smile.

She walks out the door as I pull out my phone. My mission now is to get back to the love of my life and our unborn child ASAP.

I need to be on the first flight to Chicago, even if it means begging Grandma to drive my rental back to the airport.

I search page after page of flights and can’t find anything before tomorrow. That’s too long. If I don’t find a commercial flight soon, I’ll charter a jet. After sifting through way too many flights and not finding one, I call Ward.

“Now you have time to talk to me,” he growls into the phone.

“Not even a hello, bro?”

“After days of ignoring my messages, you’re lucky I don’t climb through this phone and kick your ass. Where are you?”

“Florida. I need to get home.”

“So, why are you on the phone telling me about it instead of on a plane?” he snaps.

“I’m trying,” I bite off. “Just tell me this, is Reese pissed at me?”

He chuckles. “She hasn’t said anything to me. That’s a better question for Paige. In my opinion, you might be okay. She’s more easygoing than Paige. My wife didn’t speak to me for weeks when I shat the bed with her, but then again...that wasn’t quite as serious as your predicament.”

I snort. “I’m not sure your wife thinks hearing you say she’s ‘the last person in the world you could ever marry’ is less serious.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll never leave her pregnant and alone to find out.”

Shit. I hate that he’s right.

“She didn’t tell me,” I say, knowing full well it’s my fault.

“Does it matter? Bigger question is, what are you going to do about it, brother?”

“Fly back to Chicago and convince her she still wants me. That’s why I called. You chartered a plane a few times from that husband of Paige’s friend, Mag Heron, right? I’m hoping I can get back quicker that way. If not, I’ll rent a car and drive all night.”

“Don’t drive. I’ll pull some strings and see what I can do. That way you’re guaranteed to get here tomorrow. I’ll text you a number. I can’t promise he’ll have a last-minute flight, and he’ll probably charge you for sending it to Florida to pick you up...but there’s a chance.”

“Thanks, Ward. I owe you.” I end the call and text Grandma.

I promise her a dinner date back in Chicago and ask her to grab my rental.

I’m so excited to have a great-grandchild, I’ll help you any way I can, dear, she sends.

Nick: Thanks. You’re a lifesaver.

Grandma: You’re welcome. Do not mess this up. I need plenty of baby time.

I smile. If I have my way, childcare won’t be an issue for Reese this time.

By the time I’m packed, Heron’s aide calls. We work out a price, I’m on the hook for an exorbitant sum to fly fifteen hundred miles, and Grandma is on her way over.

The weight of this chance feels oppressive, but I'm determined to win her back.

I'm about to fight my way to our forever or die.

THE TANTALIZING TRUTH (REESE)



I can do this.

I can be a single mom, take care of the kid, and the bills, and I might stop doubting myself if I could just get that stupid jerk-jerkface out of my head for five whole seconds.

I'm finishing up my morning ritual over the toilet, glugging half my weight in water, when my phone goes off with an unknown number.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Hello, hello from Area 51. How're you holding up, sis?" Abby has never sounded better in her life.

"Holy crap. I didn't think you'd actually call me. Please tell me this number isn't traceable," I say.

Sure, I'm glad as hell to hear from her, but not if it risks blowing her very expensive Federally provided cover.

"Burner phone," she explains. "The FBI guy who set us up said I shouldn't be stupid, and I shouldn't do it, but I was adamant about talking to my only sister while she's heartbroken and pregnant. Guess what I chose. He helped me set it up last night."

"Oh, thank God," I whisper. "So how are you?"

As she rattles off a few happy details about their new life in an undisclosed (and hopefully temporary) location, I head into the kitchen for bread and peanut butter. I shove a piece of bread in my mouth and start chewing so it soaks up all of the

damn acid this baby gave me overnight while making a proper peanut butter sandwich.

Sandwich in hand, I walk into the living room and collapse on the couch.

“I called Paige last night. I’m going back to work today,” I tell her, taking a bite.

“Work? Are you sure that’s a good idea? They gave you a whole week off you said...”

“They’re not going to pay me to stay home barfing forever —”

“They should. The senior partner whose name is on the building is kinda why you’re barfing, Reese.”

I roll my eyes. “That isn’t Ward’s fault, and the guy responsible doesn’t know about it.”

She pauses. I can feel her disapproval over the line.

“Are you ever going to tell him?” Abby asks.

“Ward? Yeah, I’ll talk to him today, but I’m sure Paige told him since they’re married and all. I’ll have to take maternity leave soon enough, and they’ve been so nice about everything else...I don’t want to take advantage. If he asks me to resign, I will.”

“What will you do?”

I shrug. “Uber. Lyft. Maybe both. That might not be a bad option for a while, even if the pay can’t hold a candle to my job.”

“So, when are you telling Nick?” she asks point-blank.

I shudder, folding my arms around my sides.

“Whenever. He broke up with me. He hasn’t called or texted once. I’m not rushing to contact him. Sure, he’ll find out eventually, and we’ll deal with it then like responsible adults. I might be a lot of things like a slut who sleeps with her boss, but I’m *not* desperate, Abby.”

“What’s a slut?” Millie asks in the background.

Oh, God. I bury my face in my hands.

“You’re on speaker, aren’t you?” I whine while Abby laughs. “Bad word, Millie! Sorry. Guess I get a time-out.”

“Auntie Reese can’t be a bad word!” I hear her say.

There goes the last piece of my heart today.

I sigh. “Does she still ask about Quick Nick? I hate that too. She got so attached to him, Abby...”

“She does, and I tell her he’s fine. I dunno, he seems like an okay guy. He took care of you and Millie—”

“Until he didn’t,” I snap.

“I bet he thinks he was still taking care of you, Reese. But there’s one thing I need to say...”

“What’s that?”

“What happened isn’t something you should ever be ashamed of. You didn’t just randomly hook up with your boss. He moved you in. That’s a *relationship*, sis.” I can hear her fighting back a smile. “After all the hell Will put me through, I still don’t actually regret anything.”

“What?” I do a double take. “He’s a colossal jackass.”

“He is. But he’s also my daughter’s father. Without enduring his bullshit, I wouldn’t have Millie, and she’s worth every second. I also learned a lot from our relationship.”

My lips twist. Abby has never been stupid. What the hell could Will Frisk teach her?

“Like what?” I whisper.

“Growing up in the foster system and moving around made me feel like I wasn’t worth having a home and a family...and if I wasn’t worth those simple, normal things, then something must’ve been wrong with me.”

I nod, pressing the phone closer to my head. She’s preaching to the choir.

“But when I left the system...there was no one there to help. I had to stand on my own, to help look after you, and it

was hard doing that with no self-esteem. I stumbled into bad habits as a coping mechanism. You remember how it was...”

“I do,” I tell her.

“I could work sixty hours a week and live on ramen, but I couldn’t live without my next fix,” she continues, drawing a shaky breath. “I had to grow a backbone when I knew Millie was coming. Addicts’ kids end up in the system. I wouldn’t let that happen. I had to be able to function without my cope. I *had* to learn that I’m worthy of love, sober and clean, because I love Millie. And if I could learn all of that from my crappy stupid drug dealer ex, then there has to be something positive you’re walking away with. Nick Brandt crossed your path for a reason.”

I flop back, dumbstruck by how on-point she is today.

“Your choices now are this: talk to him and see if there’s something worth fixing, or move on. Either option is only bad if you let it be,” Abby says.

I bring my knees up to my chest and hug them.

“I guess it’s option B. You know I won’t go crawling back. I’m not another one of his love it and leave it supermodels.”

“If that’s what you want. Choose wisely, sis.”

“I’m not sure it’s what I want, Abby, but it’s what I get. It’s what’ll keep me sane.”

“Just don’t work too hard before you’re ready. You can’t throw up driving down the street again. Your work car’s way too nice,” she says with a laugh.

I snicker at the story I told her earlier.

“Yeah. Ward was pretty terrified when it happened. He was all, ‘Dammit, Reese, you’re going to get us both killed. Why didn’t you just say you were sick?’” I imitate his worn-leather voice.

We laugh and make small talk for an hour until I feel human enough to drag myself into work.

Nick is a major-league jackass who left me pregnant and alone, but like Abby said...it wasn't all bad.

He saved my sister's butt and mine. Millie can even sound out whole words while reading now, thanks to Tiffany. I glance in the passenger seat at the large manila envelope.

I still can't believe I'm doing this.

Pulling into a gated parking lot, I kill the engine and pop a prenatal lollipop in my mouth. Thank God for this weird anti-nausea vitamin candy.

I'm so nervous I'd have to worry about vomiting on a normal day. I walk into a dark Gothic skyscraper I would have covered away from once. But after working at Brandt Ideas and staying in Nick's penthouse...this is just a normal high-end office.

That's what I tell myself.

I take the elevator up, find the suite, and ring the bell for the receptionist.

A woman in jeans and white heels walks up to the desk. "Can I help you?"

Clutching the envelope with one hand, I pull the lollipop out with the other. "I have an appointment with Mr. Osprey."

"About?" She cocks her head.

Does it matter? Why does he make appointments if he's still going to give people the third degree?

"The tantalizing truth about Nicholas Brandt," I say, deadpan.

She picks up a clipboard and glances at it. "Reese Halle?"

I nod.

"You lasted longer than they usually do," she says blankly.

"Huh?"

"Most of Nick's exes come through here once it's over." She laughs. "I've never met anyone as talented at pissing

women off. If it's taken you this long, then you've lasted longer than most."

I have no idea how to respond to that.

I'm sad and angry for him that every person he's ever cared about can't wait to sell his secrets. But he went through girls like tissues for a while, so maybe it was fair.

Besides, if I mention how sick it is people do that to him, she'll think I'm a hypocrite. But I had to play it up as bait.

If Roland Osprey knew why I'm really here, I wouldn't have gotten the appointment.

I also wish people would leave Nick the hell alone. I don't want to be followed like this once the baby comes, and if anyone photographs and harasses my kid for being related to the notorious Brandt Boys, I'll go to jail for assault.

But I can't say that either. It'll just invite more prying.

"Lucky me," I say.

Her face goes blank like she knows I didn't find it funny.

"You can sit over there." She points to a chair in the waiting room.

I suck on my lollipop and take a seat.

The assistant comes out before too long, and I follow her into an office that could put everyone named Brandt to shame.

Roland Osprey is...not what I expected.

He's a tall, built whip of a man with blue lightning bolts for eyes and he has the handsome evil villain thing down pat. He sits in a high pitch-black leather throne on one side of a sprawling desk, and I take a shorter chair on the other side.

"So, you've brought me the tantalizing truth about Nicholas Brandt, Miss Halle?"

I swallow. "You publish so much negative crap about Nick. I wanted to give you another story."

"Okay?"

"I'm his driver."

“I know. Miss Literally Who. That’s what my content team named you,” he says, his voice like charred bourbon.

He’s just as intimidating as Nick and Ward.

This is already not going as expected.

“I’m both, yeah,” I say.

“Well then, let’s have it.” He nods but a sarcastic grin spreads across his face.

“My sister was arrested on drug charges that made no sense. She’d been clean for years, and she has no hobbies outside of taking care of her daughter. Nick threw every resource he had behind it. He hired an attorney, a teacher for her daughter, tracked down the actual drug dealer, and uncovered a warehouse drug site. He helped save a lot of lives here in Chicago. I...I never even asked him for help.” I sigh, gathering my thoughts. “Nick was just with me the day it all fell on my head. I know it’s not the kind of thing you cover, but I thought you should know. The drugs he had that day with Carmen Seraphina—I think they’re related to the mess we were untangling. I would’ve been there with him, but he wouldn’t let me stay. I had my young niece and he didn’t want us mixed up in legal trouble—or bad gossip.”

Roland studies me for a minute in a long silence that kind of scares me.

“You’re in love with him,” the mogul whips out.

“Wha—no!” I bark back. It’s just a lot harder to get over a bad breakup when you’re carrying around a constant reminder of your ex like—you know—his DNA.

Roland smiles. I can’t decide if it’s friendly or dangerous.

“Sweetheart, you’re entirely too red for me to be wrong. Don’t worry. I had no intention of chucking your hero to the lions—”

“You didn’t?”

Roland shakes his head. “Carmen Seraphina sent me an old, very brazen sexual encounter on a memory card. I can see why he didn’t want that published. I watched my driver run

over the device and told Miss Seraphina the file was corrupted. I decided to go easy on Nicholas. My next exclusive is a bitter exposè on one broken woman's obsession and the infamy of her falling star."

My heart beats in my throat. I don't know if I want to relax.

"Thank you?" It comes out like a question.

I'm giving Roland what I can to save Nick's reputation, but I'm kind of relieved he may not even need it. I may have to raise this baby alone now, but I'll do it without owing Nicholas Brandt a damn thing.

"What's in the envelope?" Osprey asks, his eyes flicking to it.

"Evidence. Anything I could find to back up my story."

"May I?" His hand falls on the envelope.

"Sure. Keep it." I push my chair back and stand, ready to get the hell out of here.

"Miss Halle?" he calls, just as I'm heading for the door.

"Yes?"

"Between us, I've played my fair share of charity poker with Beatrice Brandt over the years. I don't think I ever had the heart to ruin Nicholas Brandt unless he did something truly heinous." Osprey winks at me. "However, now that he's grown a conscience...there's a chance you'll see him lauded in *The Tea* rather than eviscerated. Thank you, again."

I nod and then exit the sleek, too shadowy office, feeling like I've just escaped a castle complete with vampire.

While I met with Osprey, a storm rolled in.

It's the middle of the day, but it's dark as night out. Perfect. It matches my mood.

I trek through ankle-deep cold water, plop down in the driver's seat, and turn the car on, hoping the heat works quickly.

A text message pops up from Abby.

Hey Reese, big news. They have the head honcho cartel dude in custody. He'll have a trial soon. This is goodbye until he's away. Millie & I love you. Hopefully we'll be home before Christmas.

Christmas? That's almost six months away.

God.

So, I'm even more alone. I cross my arms on the steering wheel, lean into them, and battle back dry sobs.

When my tear ducts dry, I drive to Brandt Ideas, praying it's time for something like normalcy.



AT THE OFFICE, I pull up to the curb.

Ward slides in as grump-faced as ever. "You're late."

I am, and he's been more than understanding about everything going on.

I turn to face him. "I'm very sorry. It won't happen again, boss."

"If it does, you know I won't buy it when you tell me you're okay. Are you?"

I nod firmly.

"We're just going to pick up Paige, Reese." His voice softens. "It's no big deal."

"You *should* be upset with me. I haven't been doing a good job of holding it together and it's spilling over into my performance."

"Reese, you've been through hell. I can deal with that," he says.

"Thanks." I pull onto the street and head for the art gallery.

The ride passes in silence. Ward is basically the opposite of Nick. Friendlier than he used to be, but aloof. Ward works

from his phone the whole time he's in the car. The only person he puts work aside for is Paige, and that's okay, even if it reminds me of what I've lost.

The ride passes in peaceful silence.

But driving Nick's brother around all day is hard.

I'm so tempted to ask, "*Have you heard from him?*" But that would be an admission of sorts and also pathetic.

Later, I pull up next to the front door of Paige's studio.

She comes out wearing a sleek blue dress. Ward steps out and opens the door for her like her personal knight.

Once they're inside, Paige pokes Ward in the chest with her finger. "You're late. Were you too busy to put work down again—"

"Paige," he says softly.

She laughs. "I'm just joking, grumpypants. But I've always said Brandt Ideas is your mistress. Timeliness, sir."

"Paige—"

I turn around. "It was my fault, Paige. I'm sorry."

Her mouth forms an O. "Have you been crying, Reese?"

"No," I lie.

"Holy crap. Hold on."

She climbs out the back door, walks around the car, and sits in the passenger seat. She leans over. "Have you heard from him?"

Isn't that the million-dollar question? But does that mean they haven't heard from him either?

Absolute panic consumes me. *God, just let him be okay.*

I back out of the parking lot and let out a painful breath.

"I haven't."

"Idiot! I'm going to kick him in the balls, and...and I might even bring a pie into it!"

“You’re never gonna let that thing with Heron go, huh?” Ward chuckles from the back, referencing the time she slapped billionaire mogul Magnus Heron with a pie for grinding her bestie’s heart into dust.

That’s the Paige we all know and love.

“Also, you abandoned me,” Ward says.

“I’m sorry! Tell your brother he’s going to need a new pair of family jewels,” Paige says with a hostile grin.

I dart my eyes at Paige and stare at her before looking back at the road.

“You two are so funny,” I say with a laugh.

Even though I’m smiling, Nick’s stupid, arrogant face flashes through my brain.

We could’ve been cute like them.

We could’ve been a lot of things.

But now, we’re only heartbreak, and I don’t think we’re ever meant to be anything more.

BIG DECISION (NICK)

I wake up just before landing with a lance of sunlight blinding me.

Good morning to you, too, Destiny, you twisted fuck.

I grab my luggage the second I'm off the plane, moving through the airport's thick morning crowd to ground transportation. A gift shop with huge bouquets in bright colors halts me midstep.

Damn. Flowers alone can't make up for the crap I pulled, but a side of flowers with an eviscerating apology and a whole mess of groveling might.

I walk up to the counter. "Can I get the orange and yellow roses in the display case?"

"One dozen or three?"

"Three."

"Someone's a lucky lady!" The florist smiles and shuffles over to the glass case with her key.

"I doubt it makes up for the hell I've put her through," I mutter.

Her smile disappears as she returns with my flowers.

"In that case, at least you tried. Good luck."

I swipe my credit card as spools of cotton-sugar catch my eye. I think of Reese and smile.

“A bundle of cotton candy, too, please.” I grab a blue and pink cloud from the rack and throw it on the counter.

“In case she throws the flowers at you?” the florist says with a grin.

“Something like that.”

I leave with my loot.

By the time I’m home, showered, and changed—I can’t go begging for forgiveness looking like total shit—it’s almost ten a.m. Probably too late to catch her before work. The next few hours promise agony.

What if she slaps me and slams the door in my face?

Fuck.

What if I get pied like Magnus Heron? She has been hanging out with Paige a lot.

All I can do is suck it up and find out.

Later that evening, I’m knocking at her door with my sorry-I-fucking-wrecked-your-life presents.

She cracks the door. Even just a glimpse of one red eye stabs my heart out.

“It’s after six o’clock, I just got home, and I no longer work for you. Someone better be dead,” she snaps.

“Reese, can we talk? Please.”

“Since you said you can’t see me anymore, that might be hard. Go back to your car and text me. That way we can talk without actually seeing each other. Then again, usually when you can’t stand seeing someone you don’t randomly show up on their doorstep...”

“I deserved that,” I growl, slapping a hand against the door—which she diligently holds shut. “I know I messed shit up. Big-time. I’m sorry and I love you.”

She takes a harsh breath and says, “Apology *not* accepted.”

“I brought gifts.” I know it’s pathetic but I’m desperate to hold her attention. So I wave the bouquet and cotton candy

like a drowning man.

“Billionaire bad boy tries to buy forgiveness. How boring. And you know I hate that stuff.” She glares at the cotton candy.

“I was hoping you’d take a chance on it. Things *can* change,” I say with a pained smile. “Or if you won’t, give it to Millie.”

“Millie’s gone,” Reese whispers.

I blink, staggering back a step.

“Take it to Abby’s then. We should go see her. She’s probably pissed at me on your behalf, right?”

“I can’t. I told you she’s gone—both of them.”

“What do you mean gone? Will you let me in? It’s raining out here,” I say, hoping tonight’s drizzle makes me look like a wet dog and tap dances on her sympathy.

“Is anyone else outside?”

“Nope. Just a lonely sucker getting rained on because his girlfriend won’t let him in.” I try smiling at her again.

No dice.

If it weren’t for the rain, I think her hate-glare would’ve set me on fire by now.

“Huh. How many idiots are out there with you?”

“One? I’m the only idiot.” It comes out harsher than I intend.

“Sounds like it. Because your girlfriend *would* let you in, and I’m not her.”

I shake my head. “C’mon, Reese, no word games. Let me make this right. And what happened to Millie—”

Right.

The door slams an inch in front of my face.

Do I give up for tonight?

On cue, the rain picks up, bleeding through my shirt and freezing me to the bone. I don't move.

I'm contemplating my Navy training—all the ways I could infiltrate her apartment—when the door finally opens a foot.

The warmth of Reese's apartment wafts around me as she shoves it open, unseen.

"Get in here, or don't," she says.

I start to step inside.

She puts up a hand. "Wait."

She takes the flowers from my hand and hurls them over my shoulder, where they land with a *thunk* in the parking lot.

Yeah. We're off to a fabulous start.

She waves her hand at the cotton candy with disgust. "I guess that junk is technically food. Give it to the first homeless person you see."

"Where's Millie?" I try again.

Sighing, she steps aside and lets me in, shutting the door behind me.

"Witness protection with her mother. They're not supposed to contact me until it's over," she says.

"Oh, fuck. I'm sorry." I didn't see that coming, but I should have. "So, you've been completely alone."

"Since when does my loneliness matter?" Her eyes narrow.

"Were you going to tell me?"

She throws her head back and groans like I've just vomited on her shoes.

"Who else did she tell?" Reese asks quietly, her chest rising and falling.

It takes me a second to realize she knows that I *know*.

Shit. This is not how I wanted this to go.

"Ward and Grandma. Paige didn't tell me if you're worried about that—"

“Beatrice did. Got it.” She pauses, refusing to meet my eyes. “Nick, you’re off the hook. Just get the hell out of here.”

I take a step forward. “You think I don’t want you?”

Her eyes tear up and she turns away.

Goddamn, my name is mud.

“No. I don’t want a man who was ready to abandon ship until he found out he knocked me up,” she flings back.

Fucking ouch.

“That’s not why I’m here, and you know it,” I say quietly. “I told you, I’m sorry. Pregnant or not, I would’ve come to my senses sooner or later. I just needed time to—”

“Bullcrap. That’s exactly why you’re here,” she cuts in. “Granny Bea told you, and you had to come stroke your guilty conscience. I don’t need your pity or your money, Nick. I don’t need you for...for anything.”

She’s a terrible liar when she’s hurt. It punches me through the ribs.

I grab her, pull her around to face me, ignoring how she elbows me in the chest for real.

Let her hurt me. Physical wounds heal easy.

“I love *you*. You, Reese Halle. I’m here for you. I was afraid I’d hurt you, or someone else would because of me. That’s why I walked away like a complete dumbass. I tried to protect you from myself, and I was wrong. It never had anything to do with not loving you.”

She struggles for a second, then goes limp, dry sobs racking her entire body. I settle her against my chest, and I’m grateful when she doesn’t recoil.

“What changed?” she asks bitterly as soon as she looks up.

“Me. I’m a changed man and I finally figured it out. A little chat with an angel and a demon made me realize I’m not who I used to be—and I’ll never go back to being him. I’m whole, sweetheart.”

“Angel and demon?” She blinks at me.

“Never mind,” I say. Osprey and Grandma aren’t the point of this.

I stare into her blue eyes and say, “What I mean is, I’m almost whole. You’re my last missing piece, and so is our kid.”

My hand is shaking—*fucking shaking*—as I bring it down softly to her belly.

I still can’t wrap my head around being a father. The fact that I might lose my chance before it’s even started scares the hell out of me.

I won’t force my way into her life, though.

If she hates me that much, if she truly wants me gone, I’ll give her the space she needs. And I’ll still love her and our child from exile, as long as I’m drawing breath.

She blinks her tears away with a hoarse moan of frustration.

“Your gifts are always lame, but your words...why do you have to be so effing sweet?”

There’s my girl. Easy to talk to and honest to a fault.

My smile almost breaks me.

“Can I have a kiss yet?” I ask, tilting her face up gently by the chin.

She crosses her arms in front of her. “Nope. I have mono.”

“Mono? How?” I blink at her.

“Kissing random dudes. Anyone I could find to get your taste out of my mouth.”

I snort. “Was it fun?”

She shrugs. “Better than the last guy I kissed.”

“You’re killing me. How many people do I have to hunt down in this city?” I growl with mock jealousy. No, not quite ‘mock.’

Even the thought of some imaginary chucklefuck having her makes my blood seethe.

She'll never belong to anyone else.

If I have to stand on her doorstep in pouring rain all night to make sure she gets the message, I will.

I'll catch pneumonia before I let her think for a second she's meant for another man.

"You make me throw up every day, so maybe it's fair I kill you instead," she says.

All bullshitting aside, I have to touch her now. I pull her closer, running my thumb along her cheek. She doesn't move away, but she doesn't embrace me.

"Are you doing okay? Is the pregnancy...bad?" I grind out. I have to know.

"It's fine. It's normal. It just sucks."

"It's done sucking, Reese," I tell her. "From now on, I'll be here to hold your hair back."

"I have headbands."

"I have one more gift that's not from the airport gift shop. I think you'll like this." I reach into my pocket and fumble around, producing the neatly folded check.

She takes it with a nervous glance and unfolds it. Her gasp turns me inside out.

"Holy hell. What even...?"

"For your dream—"

"My dream? *That* many zeroes? And you don't want to know what I dream about since the hormones kicked in—"

I stare at her seriously. "The hellfire in your face says I do."

She giggles.

"Look, I accept that some things are written in stone," I say. "Ward being a dick to me, the way I smile waking up next to you, and since you'll never be a cotton candy kind of girl..."

maybe you could be a bossy limo girl instead. That's my dream, too, and I want to buy it."

"Your dream?"

I take her hand, shoving my fingers through hers.

"My resignation wasn't accepted. And since Roland Osprey decided not to put my head on a pike for all of Chicago...if my family still needs my help, I don't want to walk away."

"Okay?" She looks confused.

"Remember the no fraternization policy at the office? I've thought about this. Hypothetically, if my driver went started her own limo service—her lifelong dream—I'd be free to see her whenever and wherever I wanted. Maybe even the back seat of a limo. There's also no reason why Brandt companies can't still hire her drivers as a client."

Reese's face goes bright red. "And if I still don't want to fraternize with you?"

"Then you'll keep the seed money anyway, and I'll never give up. I'll be waiting for the moment to swoop in and convince you to love me again. You know how Homer spent thirty years fighting monsters before he got back to his Roman princess?"

She gives me a dead look. "Um, I've barely read the classics, but I think it was Odysseus. And it was twenty years. And they were Greek. Also, you busted my heart to smithereens."

"Whatever! I loved that story as a kid and...I never meant to hurt you, Reese. Never. I'd let a one-eyed giant chew me up a thousand times before I'd ever hurt you intentionally," I say, wrapping my arms around her.

"You knocked me up."

My eyebrows go up. "I don't regret that one."

She laughs and it's adorable. Then her face grows serious again.

“You left me with basically no notice. How do I know the next time you think you’ve effed up you’re not going to just take off again? A family can’t deal with that, and neither should anybody you love.”

I swallow a groan because it’s a valid fucking question.

“I messed up bad. I see it now. Maybe in time, I can gain your trust back. I promise you one thing; I’ll never walk out on our children as long as I live. I promise—”

“*Children?* You’re expecting more than one?”

I try like hell not to smile.

“It’s your body, sweetheart. You’ve got veto power, but... if we can fall back in love and I can win you over again, then someday, I’d love more.”

She’s quiet for a long moment, pondering.

“You’re serious about sticking around?”

“If you’re cool being stuck with me.”

“If you ever leave me again—” She stabs a finger up, pushing it just below my throat.

Grinning, I pull her closer and hold her like it’s the first time.

“It won’t happen. Swear to God and I already swore to Grandma.”

“I’ll never speak to you again if you walk it back,” she warns.

“I’ll cut out my own tongue, my eyes, my—you don’t want to know. I like having organs, so I think that’s good collateral, yeah?” I say.

Finally—*finally*—her arms close around my back and she slumps into my arms, letting go. But she presses her head into my chest, crying softly.

I stroke her hair. “What’s wrong, love?”

“I want this. I want you. For things to be the same again so badly. But I’m...I’m scared, Nick. Abby gave Will all the

chances and now just look at her. I know it's not the same. You're not a drug-dealing lunatic, but still..."

Goddamn. What do I say to that?

I don't like being compared to Will Frisk, but I did leave her high and dry, pregnant, and alone.

Slowly, she leans in and whispers, "I have to do what's best for this baby and—"

"And you're not sure that's me," I finish.

"I'm sorry."

"I love you. I love our baby. I'll take care of you both the same way I took care of you and Millie. But you don't need me now. You have the money for a new company and people to help you through it. You only need me if you want me." My voice cracks. Raw.

Sorrow scorches my throat as she looks up at me, her bright-blue eyes drinking me in. I gather the words to finish.

"But I hope you need me, Reese. I hope I can chase every doubt from your mind and give you everything you deserve. It's all I've ever wanted." I hold her tight, remembering she's pregnant. "Shit. I'm not—am I hurting you?"

Smiling, she presses her body into mine as an answer.

"I want to be there with you, but I'm scared. I just—I don't know—"

"I'm not strong enough to leave you again," I say roughly.

Her chin tilts back and her round eyes gleam.

That got her attention.

"Sadly, I had a taste of what it is to live without you. I can't fucking do it again," I growl.

"Nick..."

Tears stream down her cheeks.

I wipe them away, brushing my finger on her skin.

"God. I hope I don't regret this," she rushes out.

Regret what? But before I can ask, she's up on her toes. Her arms have moved from my waist to my neck, and her lips are on mine. Heaven returns.

I flick my tongue against the seam of her lips.

She opens her mouth, inviting my kiss.

Now that I know what life feels like Reese-less, kissing her tastes so much sweeter.

She slides her leg over mine and strokes gently.

Growling, I pick her up.

She wraps her legs around me. I have to pull away to catch my breath.

"Where's your bedroom?" I rasp.

Reese holds a breath and exhales slowly. "Behind the kitchen."

Her lips are on mine again and I'm stealing every breath she has.

We stay melded, tongues tangled, as I carry her down the narrow hall and tumble her down on the bed.

She comes up on her knees. I pull the belt of her fleece bathrobe loose, smiling like the world's biggest fool. I'm certainly the planet's luckiest one.

Her hands climb up my shirt and she starts opening buttons one by one.

"Are you laughing at me because I'm not sexy? I didn't plan on being seduced tonight."

"You're always sexy, brat," I whisper.

"In three-year-old fleece pajamas?" She laughs. "I'm sure."

No lie. I'm so hard I could hit a home run.

She's got my shirt splayed open now and presses one hand to my abs, dragging her nails down with a lust-sigh that makes me throb.

“One of the things I love about you most is your honesty. You’re real. That’s more than enough. Besides, lingerie doesn’t leave shit to the imagination,” I tell her.

She blushes and giggles softly. “So you love me because I don’t try hard enough?”

“I love you, woman. Let’s stick with that.”

Honestly, I might start reciting Shakespeare if that’s what she wants—and after the way I butchered *The Odyssey*, it’d be cringe.

Buttons undone, I lose my shirt.

Then I cup her hips with my hands, lean down, and press my lips to hers, drinking her in with a feral groan. She traces my lips with her tongue.

I take every unruly bit of her mouth, reclaiming what’s mine.

She moves closer. Her arms wind around my neck. One leg slides around my waist.

She pulls me down with her lushness.

Her back slides against the mattress, but I’m worried I might break her in my fury.

“Is this okay?” I whisper, my forehead nudging hers.

She nods.

“I don’t want to hurt you or—”

“You want me.” She smiles, her expression shadowed with desire. “I can feel it through your slacks.”

I kiss her so hard it’s sinful. She shifts against my leg, damn near dry-humping me.

Fuck.

I can barely tear myself away.

“Nick, if you don’t make love to me now, I’m going to regret giving you another chance,” she hisses.

God, this woman.

It's hard to believe she was a virgin when I met her.

"I have *you*, and we've got all night, darling. Patience," I say.

Her very impatient lips find mine again and her nails dig at my neck.

I'm down on her like a thunderbolt, hands relishing her skin, lost in the passion until I flip her over.

I roll off her and pull her on top of me.

"Like this. Spread your legs for me," I order.

Biting her lip, she presses the core of her body over my hardness.

Even through the fleece pajama bottoms, my slacks, and underwear, her warmth entices me. I need more if I want to keep breathing.

I groan like a frustrated bull.

Grinning, she pushes against me again. "You like that, bossman?"

How the hell could I not?

"I've corrupted you," I say with a grin. "Once upon a time, you were so—"

Her hips swing against me again, bringing this wicked friction.

"On second thought, fuck innocent," I snarl, pulling the fleece nightshirt over her head. She's not wearing a bra. Firm, round tits hang so close to my face with her nipples already peaked and begging.

When I slide my tongue over a cherry peak, sucking it into my mouth, she falls back with a seductive whine.

"Ohhh, yeah. Yeah, I've missed that," she whispers. She cups my jaw with a needy glare.

It's my turn to grind against her, and I put my power into it.

She whimpers again as I nip her breast with my teeth.

I need to be inside her right now, but I'll hold out until she cries for it.

I want this to be a night she remembers. A night she'd change nothing about. A night so intense it torches every doubt inside her head.

Her hands move to my pants.

I snort like a caged animal as she grabs the button, insane with anticipation.

Still, I keep my hands on her hips until she's pushed my pants and boxers down past my thighs in a ragged heap.

I work the pajamas off her like a man possessed. When it comes to her panties, my patience is gone. Nostrils flaring at her scent, I rip them in half, throwing the tattered cloth across the room.

“Need you, sweetheart. Need you fucking now.” My voice is so guttural it almost scares me, my dick pulsing so hard I'm almost faint from blood loss in my head.

Goddamn. I might actually *die* from this fuck, but if I do, know I went to meet my maker happy as a lark.

We toss. We wrestle. We roll with delight.

She lowers herself over me with a fraught look.

Every muscle in my body goes taut, coiled with a tension I want to throw into her. An endorphin storm engulfs me, and there's still too much space between us.

Shifting us to the edge of the bed, I sit so I can press her body to mine. This spell only works with her skin on mine.

Her arms and legs tie around me as I move her like a doll, shoving her down on my length in one jerk.

“Nick!” It's barely a breath on her lips.

It's my name. Equal parts curse and vow.

It's a sound I never thought I'd hear again—one I'm not sure I deserve—but now that I've got it, I mean to own it for the rest of my days.

I respond the only way I can.

My lips on hers, tugging and harsh, so greedy I understand how a starving lion feels.

My tongue swipes into her mouth, begging—no, demanding—more.

Demanding everything.

And she gives it back with a fluttery moan, another swivel of her hips, riding me into pure passion.

My hand crashes across her ass. She jerks with delight, quickening her pace.

The room quakes and my vision spins.

Every last shred of my focus shifts to making her come so hard she can't think, can't worry, can't do *anything* but ride my cock across the bridge to ecstasy.

I fuck her so she knows I'm the man who'll always give her his life.

It's hard to even call it fucking when it's beyond any sweetness or sin I've ever known.

It's impossible to do anything but let it take over, this rabid desire lashing our bodies together. One rampant thrust after the next, where we collide like we want to do damage.

When she's had as much as she can take, her nails scrape the back of my neck. Her body clenches around my length and I slam into her harder, grunting through bared teeth in time to her panting breaths.

“Oh, Nick. Oh, shit. *Ohhh!*” Her mouth spills into mine again.

Her tongue moves frantically, pleading for more.

I become a human jackhammer, hurling myself into her, until her climax makes my spine a lit fuse.

My whole body stings with a blinding current until I'm gone.

I'm so fucking gone.

I throb inside her once.

Twice.

Explosion.

I erupt like a madman, knotted deep inside her, a receptor for the biggest sensory overload of my life. I feel like a human corkscrew popping, all liquid fire as I'm emptied the fuck out.

"Reese, Reese!" I'm grinding her name, rutting for what feels like an eternity before I collapse against the mattress, taking her with me.

"I...love...you," she whispers between torn breaths.

I love you too, darling.

Tonight. Tomorrow. Forever.

I pull a blanket around us. We pass out for several hours just like that, our naked bodies wound together.

She steals the blanket at some point. I wake up cold, but don't struggle to reclaim it.

She's too beautiful. She's giving me a second life, a family, and she needs her rest.

I get up and pad into the kitchen with my stomach growling like a bear. Reese has about three ingredients.

Loaves of bread, instant mac, and barbecue potato chips. I laugh and shake my head.

When I head back into the living room, something rustles across the room. I glance over to the biggest surprise of the night—Reese opening that bag of cotton candy.

"I didn't hear you get out of bed."

"Hi." She tears off a piece of blue fluff, sniffs, gives it a hesitant stare, and then pops it in her mouth.

"Don't you hate cotton candy?" I quirk a brow.

"Baby likes it. I woke up craving a few cavities and since you brought me an elephant pile of sugar...I might as well try it." Her shy smile makes me feel like my world goes right side up again.

“I was going to make breakfast. You know, real food.”

“Okay. I want toast and hot water.”

“Just hot water? No tea?”

She pulls off another chunk of blue fluff. “They don’t want me having caffeine and I haven’t stocked up on decaf yet. Something about the baby. I don’t know.”

“...have you been living on bread and instant mac?” I ask, suppressing a shudder.

“Mostly bread.”

“That’s not fucking healthy. The kid needs food, and so do you.”

She swallows another mouthful of candy and glares at me.

“Dude. You just showed up. Don’t think you’re coming in here and telling me how to do this. The baby might need more food, but the baby makes me throw up every three hours unless I eat bread or crackers or these weird prenatal vitamin suckers. Also, I don’t have room for bread every three hours plus something else, so you and your baby can smile and let mama eat.”

Damn, she’s adorable.

“Anything else?” I ask, leaning against the wall.

“Just sayin’. Is my hot water ready?”

“Working on it.” Chuckling, I walk away and paw through the cabinets for a mug before putting her plain water on the stove to heat.

She comes into the kitchen with her cotton candy and flops down at the small table.

“Give me the chips. All of them,” she whispers. “Baby likes it. I hate fake barbecue.”

The tea kettle hisses. I serve up her water and sit down beside her.

“This is going to be fun as hell,” I say, touching a fingertip to the end of her nose. “Hope you know that.”

She laughs. “I’m glad somebody thinks so.”

“You’re not happy?”

“There was never a moment where I didn’t want the baby, if that’s what you’re asking. And now that you’re back, well... this could be perfect. But I’d kinda like to skip ahead eight months. Or at least to the second trimester.”

“We’ll get there.” I take her hand and kiss it. “And I’ll be here the whole time, serving up your body weight in junk food.”

CINDERELLA-ISH (REESE)



Two Months Later

Nick sits in the chair behind his desk, and I'm in his lap. "I should probably move."

"Why would you do a silly thing like that?" He tightens his grip, holding me in place.

"Won't people talk?"

"You're having my kid. Anyone stupid enough to run their mouth is already doing it." He chuckles and closes a window on his computer screen with his free hand.

"What?"

"*The Chicago Tea* is calling you Cinderella. A compliment for once."

"They are? Why?" My breath stalls.

"Because you snagged the Windy City's most eligible billionaire bad boy, and he's completely fucking smitten. Duh."

"You're arrogant enough for your title, Prince Charming," I tease.

"They just don't know me like you do." He kisses me then.

Of course, I melt all over him.

I'm destined to meltdown for this man for life.

“They’re right,” I whisper. “And God forbid they ever do.”

He kisses me again, deeper this time, so possessive I gasp before he pulls away.

“We should get to your party.”

“The totally unnecessary ‘happy trails’ party, you mean?” I say with a snort.

He shrugs. “We just like office parties. You’ve worked here long enough to know the drill.”

“This doesn’t feel like my last day,” I say, biting a finger at the corner of my mouth.

“It’ll hit you soon enough when you’re a business owner. You’ll still see everyone. Brandt Ideas is your first client, right?”

I grin. “But I hope not *just* because we’re together.”

He shakes his head. “Nah. Contracting with a known driver was easier than hiring a new one. Plus, since you’ll have your own crew, we don’t have to find someone to keep up with the insane schedules around here.”

We share a smile. The party is mine, because Nick still technically works here, but it’s more or less his last day in this office too.

“I’ll miss working with you,” I joke.

He smirks. “Lucky for you, Brandt Dreams is your second client. You’ll still be driving me around plenty. Although sometimes it’s feeling strange to have my girlfriend driving me all over hell for business...”

“You drive me enough.”

“Only off the clock,” he reminds me.

I pat his face. “Come on now. You’re too slow for rush hour traffic.”

He pats my butt, and I stand. We walk into the lobby together, hand in hand.

Granny Bea and Paige are here today for my big send-off.

Bea hugs me instantly. “Oh, Reese, I hate losing you. But I’ll see you at my house every other Sunday for dinner, yes?”

“I’ll be there,” I promise.

“Can’t wait to have you on the girls’ team for family dinners. Somebody else needs to take the spotlight,” Paige whispers, grinning.

Ward comes up from behind, wrapping his arms around her, and pulling her backward.

“Like hell. You love Grandma fawning all over you.” He kisses her forehead.

“I’m going to the ladies’ room.”

One huge pregnancy perk: I can skip out of almost anything.

This party is sweet, but I’ve never liked crowds. And since I drove for the C-suite, mostly, I don’t know most of these underlings popping in for free food and bubbly cider.

Paige knows what I’m doing.

She’s right behind me, heading into the waiting area in front of the restrooms. She sits down on the couch. “Already had your fill of the party?”

I sit beside her.

“It’s awesome. Just...really big. I’m more of a one-on-one kinda girl. That’s why I like driving cars versus tour buses or whatever”

“But Nick takes you to all of his events.”

I nod. “I’m a work in progress. Actually, since I’m kind of trash-tabloid famous now...it’s not like I have a choice.”

“Oh, yes. It happens when you’re with a Brandt,” she says, the only other person who can possibly understand.

“Yesterday, I walked into the ice cream shop across from his building. This girl comes flying up to me and says, ‘You’re Reeserella!’ I had no clue what she was talking about. Then she screeched ‘You’re Nick’s girlfriend’ in my face and...I

was out. ASAP. Some of these crazy fans think they know us personally.”

Paige throws her head back and laughs.

“I know, I know. It’s happened to me a few times. Thankfully it’s not as bad with Ward. He doesn’t have a big media footprint these days and sends Nick to most events. I can see why you get smacked with the brunt of it.”

I smile. “He’s worth it, and honestly? A teeny little part of me loves that my boyfriend is so hot the whole world wants him. The only woman who ever bothered me was Carmen. Now that she’s cooling her heels in a top-notch mental health facility, it’s smooth sailing. The rest can slobber in jealousy.”

“Oof, talk about a falling star. I noticed she’s not coming up in movie talk anymore. That drug bust-stalker thing must have hit her hard. Good riddance. I’m glad Nick never took the bait and found someone better.” Paige shudders and then winks at me.

I laugh.

“She keeps a low profile now. The rehab place is basically some resort in Cabo San Lucas. She might have some legal trouble since she left before her court date, but it should stop any future ruckus.”

“How do you know all of this?” Paige asks.

“Nick and I got into a spat last week. I felt jealous and looked her up—dumb, I know—expecting to find her disgustingly gorgeous and still pining away for him. I saw the latest rumors.”

Paige laughs. “What were you guys fighting over?”

“The nursery. I wanted to paint it pink. He thought I should wait until we know if the baby is a girl or a boy. I told him it didn’t matter, because my son will have an awesome eye for bright colors, just like his dad.”

She leans forward. “Do you guys know yet?”

“We’ll find out next month. But we settled on dark purple for the nursery.”

“Dark purple?”

I sigh. “He bought blue paint while I was sleeping. While he was working, I took it to the store and had equal parts pink mixed into it. It came out purple.”

“Nice! How’d that go over?” she asks.

I grin. “I had a spool of cotton candy. I shared it and told him I didn’t know what happened to the paint. He was actually pretty happy since purple’s a royal color, totally fit for a ‘little prince’ or ‘princess.’ His words.”

The fight also ended with clothes strewn across the room and us feeding each other cotton candy on the floor. But she doesn’t need to know that part.

“You guys are hilarious.” Her phone buzzes and she glances at it. “Ah, that’s Ward. They’re looking for us.”

We leap up and I push the door open and walk out.

Nick stands in the hall. “How you holding up? We’re past the morning sickness, right?”

The second I close the space between us, his arms are around me.

“I’m fine. We were just talking.”

He gives me that smirky smile that’s always brought me to my knees.

“I hate to steal you away from your own party, but I thought you might want to duck out early. I have a couple surprises of my own. Go have a piece of cake, make your rounds, and let’s escape.”

“You know me too well.”

I lean up on my toes to kiss him with all of my inner butterflies soaring.



HALF AN HOUR LATER, we’re in the Maserati.

“This is how it’s supposed to be,” he says quietly.

I glance over. “What?”

“Me driving *you* around.”

I laugh. “Whatever. If I were driving, we’d already be there. Where are we going, anyway?”

“That’s a secret. Are you nervous about tomorrow?”

“A little. I mean, it’s almost the same job, driving the same people. But now if I hit the brakes too hard, it’s my liability.” I laugh, but I’m only partly joking.

It’s a scary thought. So is the mountain of business plans waiting, managing people, dealing with insurance...gah.

“Your billionaire boyfriend is always standing by to help,” he says with a wink that makes me tingle.

“Ah-ha, I knew I kept him around for a reason.”

“Brat,” he says, but his eyes are smiling.

“Only because you’re a bigger one,” I tell him.

He pulls into a park with a chuckle.

“I wish you’d mentioned this surprise. I would’ve brought another pair of shoes.” I wore a dress and heels today for the party.

“You’re perfect.”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have to trudge over grass in three-inch heels.” I get out of the car and notice a truck selling bags of my new addiction (besides Nick).

The first time I ate cotton candy, it tasted like yarn dipped in sugar glaze.

Now, it’s delicious, and even better with barbecue chips.

If I had a tail, I’d be wagging it as we walk toward the truck.

“Where are you going? We have to go to the bridge,” Nick says cryptically.

“Just a minute.”

“Reese, your surprise—”

“Candy.”

“Sweetheart, we have to—”

“Nick, what *is* going on?” I squint at him. He’s so weird today.

“Nothing. If it helps speed this up, I’ll hire the candy man to make home deliveries.”

“Don’t you dare!” I punch him playfully in the arm.

Of course, I’m laughing my head off.

Once I have my precious sugar rush in hand, Nick takes my arm and leads me off to—wherever it is he wants us to go. I’m taking in the pretty summer scenery when a small voice rings out.

“Auntie!” A *familiar* small voice.

“Whoa. That sounded like Millie.” I spin around, eyes searching.

“You’re hearing things. Hopefully they’ll be back soon.” Nick smiles.

“Right.” My gut squeezes.

Abby and Millie are safe, and I’ll see them again one day. That’s all that matters. It’s just horrible not knowing when.

“Auntie Reese!” Again, that voice—that hallucination?—it stops me in my tracks.

“Holy crap. That’s definitely Millie and she’s getting louder.” I turn frantically, calling, “Where are you, bumblebee?”

Two chubby arms crash into my leg before I know what’s happening.

I lean down, pick her up, and bury her alive in kisses.

She giggles.

“How the heck did you get here, little lady?”

“Mommy!” She points over my shoulder with a lopsided smile.

Sure enough, Abby comes strolling up beside me like it’s just an ordinary lunch date.

“I hear you’re a business owner now, sis. Congratulations,” she says.

“Abby? Oh my God.” I throw out one arm to hug my sister, still supporting Millie’s weight. “How are you *here*? Is it safe?”

“They brought down the whole cartel.” She smiles.

“In two months? That’s insane.”

“It turns out Will the Idiot was in deeper than I thought. He flipped, and so did the guy he was meeting up with. Plea deal or not, he’ll be away for a good, long while. The whole organization was busted up, and here I am.”

I turn to Nick with a slow realization dawning.

“Wait. These are my surprises. How long did you know?”

“Sutton called me the second he found out,” he says proudly. “I set this up the first day they’d be back in town. Today.”

I look back at Abby.

“Nick tracked me down after I checked in with the lawyer. And when he told me his idea for a reunion... Reese, you’re so freaking lucky to have this man,” she gushes.

I take a breather, just long enough to set down Millie and throw my arms around Nick. I swallow a squeal.

He really is incredible.

My hero, my boss, and now my personal magician.

“I hope you haven’t felt too rushed just to meet me,” I say to Abby.

“Nope. We just got back in town last night. We stayed in a motel, because... I have to find an apartment again. Fun.”

“Sublease Reese’s. She’s never there anymore,” Nick says.

I give him a dirty look and then nod reluctantly at Abby.

“He isn’t wrong. But if I ever need to come home, you’re crashing on the couch.”

Millie notices my cotton candy and starts reaching for it. I jerk it away from her.

“Nuh-uh. We’ll get extra for you. Your future little cousin loves cotton candy too.”

Millie claps her hands in delight—and I’m not sure if it’s for the cousin remark or Nick, who’s not-so-secretly opening the bag to pass her a handful of fluff.

She grins up at us.

“Reese, let’s keep walking,” he says.

“Huh?” I stare at him. “Umm—my sister was gone for months.”

“It’s a game,” he whispers, leaning toward my ear. “I promised Abby we’d play hide and seek. Right, Millie?”

Millie claps her hands. “Yeah! Gotta beat Quick Nick!”

She jumps up and down a few times. My breath catches in my throat. Before I can react, she takes off running.

“You hide. I’ll count,” Abby says, weirdly okay with this.

What is going on?

Nick takes my arm and steers me around. He leads me across a wooden bridge that dead ends at a pond. “Nice place for a summer day, don’t you think?”

“It’s beautiful. But couldn’t it have waited until I caught up with Abby? I don’t get why—”

“There’ll be plenty of time later. I needed to talk to you first,” he says, his face tightening.

Oh, what?

Why is he so serious?

Something’s off.

“Is everything okay? If you’re breaking up with me in the weirdest way possible, I swear to God I’ll—”

“Hell no.” He cups my face. “No, sweetheart. I’d die before I’d leave you again. I’ve told you that a million times.”

“Then—” Something hits my ankle and I jump.

It doesn’t really hurt, but it’s so unexpected my heel twists sideways. Balance gone, I’m toppling toward the ground.

Crap!

Nick’s arm finds my waist at the last nanosecond.

He catches me, holds me up, straightening the Leaning Tower of Me again. I must fall into him, though, because his hand moves from my waist to my hand, and when I can see straight again, he’s...on his knees?

Yikes. Did I knock him over when he caught me?

“Nick—”

Pop.

I hear a clicking noise, a tiny *whirr*. My eyes fall to my feet, and next to them, the source of the sound and my near crash landing.

Nick reaches inside the top of a small remote-controlled toy limo.

“*This* is what I wanted to talk to you about,” he tells me, looking up with the evening light like green-flame in his eyes.

“Is this one of your new marketing things?” I put my hands on my hips. “Did Abby and Millie run off to film us?”

“They’re recording, yeah, but this isn’t company business.” His smile looks so gorgeous it hurts.

“Get up,” I say with a laugh.

I don’t understand.

“Not yet,” he whispers, holding up his hands, showing me

—

Oh, no.

Oh, *yes*.

Oh. My. God.

That thing he pulled from the toy limo? It's a blue-grey velvet box. My breath catches in my chest and I start hyperventilating the instant it hits my brain.

"Jesus, Nick, I—"

"Let me finish," he says gently, holding the box up to a splinter of evening light.

He flicks it open.

Oh my God. *Forever*.

The humongous diamond catches the sunlight perfectly, spinning rainbows around it, so brilliant it's almost blinding.

"Reese Halle, I love you with my whole soul," he starts, his eyes all glinting emerald. "From the moment we met—"

I grin. "When you thought I was a frat boy, you mean?"

He lowers his face for a second and laughs.

"Yeah. You even had me then. I could always *talk* to you like no one else. That's what made it impossible not to fall this hard. I've been hooked on you since the first time you shot me down. I kept coming back through the mistakes, the curses, the laughs, the passion, the agony, the love. You put us both on the right track. You steered me toward a life worth living. You'll always be my driver, woman, in all the best ways. If you're willing to have me, forever—big-ass ask, I know—you're the only one I ever want to take the long road with."

Holy Bejeezus.

The Brandt Charm has never been cranked up this high, and I'm a total sucker.

My heart jumps ahead of my body as I fall to the ground, into his embrace.

"I love you, Nicholas Brandt."

"Is that a yes? You know I'm lovestruck with you," he rumbles.

I nod so intently my hair lashes everywhere.

He slides the ring on my finger and helps me up, never letting go. Back on my feet, I throw my arms around him and kiss him like the Titanic's band just started playing. Thankfully, we're never going down.

As long as I have this man, we can only touch the sky, the light, the love he pulls out of me.

Loud applause breaks out behind us.

I pull away from Nick, confused. Abby and Millie stand at the other end of the bridge. Abby's holding a phone, filming and rubbing her eyes. Millie's bouncing away, holding the car's remote.

Millie laughs. "I ran your foot over!"

I glance down to the limo at my feet and back at Millie. "That was you, munchkin?"

She laughs, nods, backs the limo up, and bumps it into me again.

"Okay, punk!"

Millie backs the limo up again before Abby swipes the remote away.

"Sorry. I got the whole thing on video, future brother-in-law." She gives him a thumbs up.

He smiles at her. "You rock, lady. Thanks."

Without another word, we all just melt into this big group hug, with my sister whispering "*con-grat-ul-ations*" over and over again like a mantra while we both happy cry our eyes out.

I don't mind.

I need it to ground me, to remind me this is real and lasting.

This is the start of my life with Nick Brandt. Here on a bridge on a happy summer day, surrounded by entire family for the first time ever.

I'm not that scared orphan girl anymore.

I'm a sister, an aunt, a friend, and soon I'll be the best freaking mom and wife to the man who showed me what I could be.

I just hope our wedding day is even half as perfect as this.

"Play," Millie chirps. "Play outside!"

"I should probably let her run around. We couldn't get out much the last few months," Abby explains.

I look at my fiancé—a word I never expected to use in this lifetime.

"I think we can spare a few minutes." I link my arm in his. "Shall we?"

Smiling, Nick leads, and we both follow Abby and Millie to the playground.

My sister takes the nearest park bench and Nick sits next to her. I plop down right in his lap, soaring but shy. It's a little freaky meeting the man you're marrying for the first time.

"You two are disgustingly cute," Abby says with a snicker. "So, when and where are we doing this wedding, baby sister?"

"Well...that depends." I shift in Nick's lap so I can see his face. "Is *really* soon okay?"

"Tomorrow works for me," he says, pausing as I laugh. He leans in. "Woman, I'm only *half* joking. Need you wearing both my rings the second you're ready."

We stop and kiss while Abby rolls her eyes right out of her head, hiding a giggle behind her hand.

"I already am!" I tell him. "I have no idea how. But I want to do it before I start to show...better dress options, I think."

"Reesie, don't even. You've got way better things to worry about, like keeping this hunk happy," Abby whispers in my ear.

Later that night, it's my turn for surprises. I tie a blindfold on Nick's eyes and take him for a drive in the Maserati under a massive summer harvest moon.

“Where are we going?” he asks.

“You’ll see. Don’t you dare peek!”

When we enter a park near Winnetka, I say, “Okay, blindfold off.”

He removes the scarf I tied around his eyes and smiles. “Shit. It’s too perfect. Last time we were here, it was raining like buckets.”

“We fogged up the Lincoln. I had to get it cleaned before it could go back into commission...”

“The first time we made love,” he says, giving me a look that cuts right through me.

“My first time ever.” I feel myself blushing.

“Are you *trying* to seduce me?” he growls.

I shrug, holding back a smile. “I thought it was a nice memory.”

He takes my hand and kisses it.

Who knew such a chaste kiss could feel dirty with this man?

“One of my favorites. Although, I’ve always regretted your first time was in the back of a car,” he whispers.

“And I’ve always loved that you wanted me so badly you couldn’t even wait for a bed,” I admit, loving how his fingers wind through my hair.

“Glad you feel that way, Reese. I sure as hell can’t wait until we get home tonight.”

One primal growl.

One hungry kiss.

One glance from burning green eyes.

That’s all the encouragement I need before our seats are moving back and we’re ripping at each other’s clothes.

PINK CHARIOTS (NICK)



A few weeks later, Ward adjusts my tie. “Are you ready for this, not-so-little brother?”

“Were you?”

His jaw tightens like he’s chewing the question. “Well... when Paige took me back, I’d have busted into the courthouse that very day if it was what she wanted.”

“Yeah, no question. I’m ready,” I say with a firm nod.

There’s a rapping at the door.

“Boys, are you decent? Not that it matters—I used to change your diapers. I’m coming in!”

“Thank God it’s a small wedding.” I laugh.

Ward shakes his head and opens the door.

Grandma sails inside, enveloping him in a huge bear hug.

“I’m so proud of you both, my married men!” She pats Ward’s cheek before she looks at me. “You look so handsome on your wedding day, dear.”

I move closer, giving her a bear hug of my own that hoists her off the ground.

“It’s all thanks to you,” I say. “I wouldn’t be marrying the love of my life without your help, Grandma.”

Ward makes a mock-gagging noise and gets the evil eye from Grandma.

“You’ve found your calling since Reese decided to give you the time of day. I knew something special was waiting in the cards.” Grandma grins, her silver hair bundled up like a fairy-tale beehive. “I’m so glad, Nicholas. *So glad*. And you’ve done marvelous things for her. I can’t believe how her confidence shines!”

Now she’s just flattering me. Reese *always* had her shit together.

“We should get moving,” Ward says, eyeing his watch. “If you’re late, she’ll kill you, and I’ll get stuck with cleanup duty.”

“Poor you,” I grumble, shooting him a subtle middle finger behind my back.

Ward grins.

Some things never change.

“Did you call a car yet?” Ward asks.

“We’re driving Reese’s wedding gift,” I tell him.

We walk out of the hotel, one step closer to the pier where I’m due to be hitched in under an hour. Everyone stops when we spot the shiny new car.

“Would that be Reese’s present?” Grandma asks.

I grin and nod. “Hope she likes it.”

“She’ll be delighted. Can I drive? Please?” Grandma gives me these huge, moony eyes.

I bust a gut laughing.

“Damn. Today’s full of surprises,” Ward says with a snort.

“Grandma asking to drive?” I look at him.

He nods. “She’s made me drive whenever she needs a lift since the day I got my license.”

“Well, I’ve never seen a *pink* Cadillac—and it’s a convertible,” Grandma says, fluttering a hand against her chest. “I raised you boys. Therefore, I’m driving.”

I grin and throw her the keys.

“The thing that makes me nervous is how well Reese knows cars. What if she would’ve preferred a red Lambo?”

“She seems more like a purple Viper sort of girl to me. But I guess it works,” Ward says, climbing in the back seat.

I ride shotgun.

“Probably, but they don’t usually have much space in the back, and she’ll need it soon—”

We’re both shocked as Grandma guns it, doing a donut in the parking lot.

“Grandma! I’ve to get to my wedding and deliver this thing in one piece before Reese crucifies me,” I grumble.

“Oh, you’re such a buzzkill.” She pulls out of the parking lot beaming like the sun.

Ward chuckles in the back seat.

“What?” I glance back at him.

“It’s just weird to hear you worrying about seat space. I never pictured my little brother as a family man. Glad as hell it happened, though. You couldn’t have kept up your old ways and been happy,” he says.

Annoyingly accurate.

“Park far enough away so she can’t see the car,” I say as we close in on Lake Michigan.

“I thought this was your getaway car? I’ve never met a woman who wants to walk a mile in heels and a white dress,” Grandma says, clucking her tongue.

“Ward, will you grab the car when it’s time for us to go?” I ask.

“Your best man will be busy. He can’t just leave the reception. I’ll do it,” Grandma volunteers without hesitation.

We all laugh like we haven’t for years.

“Guess we know what we’re buying for Mother’s Day,” I whisper to my brother.

We park half a mile away and walk the rest of the way to the pier, where I'm so fucking gobsmacked I can't think.

Reese waits for me like a dream on the pier. So stunning I almost need CPR.

Her wedding dress falls around her in cascades of champagne-colored silk that ends just above her knees. It drops to a triangular point above her ankles in the back. The waistline is right under her full breasts—and I'm enjoying the fact that they've only gotten rounder during pregnancy.

It's not the elaborate dress I've seen at other hotshot weddings, but for us, it's perfect.

I'm damn near running up the aisle. We decided to put a twist on the typical *here comes the bride*, and have her wait for me at the makeshift altar.

I'm on her with everyone staring, cupping her face and leaning in, overwhelmed like never before.

"I love you so much. You're a hell of a bride, and thank God you're mine," I whisper, about to attack her lips when Abby clears her throat.

"Hey, Casanova, you're supposed to wait until the end of the ceremony for that. We're still doing a few things by the book," she says.

"Sorry." I didn't even realize she was there.

We have roughly a dozen people, a tiny audience, but all I see is *us*.

Something body slams my knee.

"Quick Nick, are you ready to be my uncle?"

Smiling down, I lift Millie and kiss her cheek. "You'd better believe it, munchkin."

She points at Ward. "Is he my uncle too?"

"Uh..." My gruff brother surprises me by saying, "If you want me to be."

"Okay! But Quick Nick will always be my favorite."

“Isn’t he always everyone’s favorite?” Ward shakes his head.

Grandma comes up. “Oh, Reese. You’re beautiful.” She hugs my bride.

“Thank you, Bea,” Reese says.

“I’ve interrupted you enough. Please carry on,” she says, moving to the small row of chairs.

Reese holds a rose bouquet with one hand and shakes her other hand out.

“I’m glad we went with a small ceremony,” she whispers to me.

“Hope you’re not nervous.”

“To marry you? No way. It’s just the audience that makes me jittery.” She lowers her voice. “Um, they’re going to see us kiss.”

I flash her a devilish grin.

“I’ll be chaste—and save the *real* kiss for later—if that’s what you want.”

“Listen, we need to get this started before I laugh or gag or something,” Ward grinds out. Paige shoots him a dirty look from the seats.

“Do I get to be on stage now?” Millie asks, waiting at the start of the short aisle.

“Stage?” I put her down.

“It’s not a stage, little one.” Abby rushes over and bends down, finger-combing Millie’s hair. “Just like we talked about. You walk to the center of the white chairs and stop when you get to the first row.”

Abby escorts her away and then returns to us.

Millie starts down the aisle in a peach dress, white shoes, and pigtails. The pigtails win smiles from everyone, including me, but I smile wider because she’s carrying the remote-

controlled limo I used to propose. It's decorated with pink ribbons and flowers, and no one ever put the top back on.

"Why does she have a toy?" I ask.

"You'll see," Abby says.

She pulls rose petals out of the limo and throws them, changing hands with every step so they're distributed evenly—or at least she tries.

"Oops!" Millie puts a hand over her mouth.

She turns around, grabs a handful of flowers from the pier, spins back around, and chucks them ahead of her.

Reese giggles, covering her mouth with her bouquet.

Paige steps into the aisle from a white chair.

"There's my wife." Ward sighs. "It's weird walking another woman down the aisle."

"You're my brother. Deal with it."

He slaps my shoulders. "The things I do for you."

"I'm sorry," Abby says. "This was my sister's idea. Not mine."

"No worries."

Paige bends down next to Millie, says something to her, and leads her to where she's supposed to stand before returning to her seat.

"She's going to be a damn good mom," I whisper.

Ward smiles. "I know."

The music swells, loud wedding notes soaring over us. Ward leads Abby down the aisle first. They pass Millie and each of them stand at one side of a black circle arch perched on Lake Michigan.

"Abby says the sunset will make a beautiful picture over there," Reese whispers.

"It will, but I won't be looking at the sun."

Her cheeks glow neon red.

“Ready?” I whisper.

She nods at me, her blue eyes sparkling.

I loop my arm through hers and walk her down the pier, just like we planned. Since she doesn't have parents, I'm escorting my bride to the place where we'll say our vows.

We stop at the arch in front of a smiling pastor.

It's a small wedding, but Reese still holds her bouquet up with one hand and hides behind it.

I grin at her but don't say anything. I don't care what anyone else sees. Only that she leaves as my wife. *Mine forever.*

“You're supposed to give me the bouquet,” Abby whispers.

Reese looks at me and raises a brow.

I nod at her.

She passes the flowers to her sister, glances at all the eyes on her, and her hand trembles in mine.

“I've got you,” I whisper.

She smiles, and something in it makes me weak.

Trust.

She knows who I am and where I've been and how hard I've fucked up. The miraculous part?

She doesn't care. She's tying her destiny to me, and come hell or high water, I won't give her a single reason to regret it.

Millie wanders up and wraps herself around her mother's leg.

“Go back, baby. You have to be a good girl for Auntie Reese and Uncle Nick,” Abby says, already wiping a tear.

“Awwww.” The word is stretched out, high-pitched, and somehow still singsong in the way only a four-year-old can manage.

She comes between Reese and I, one chubby hand on each of our legs.

“Nick, no one will play with me.”

Our audience laughs. Reese gnaws her bottom lip, and I suppress a laugh.

“If you stand there very quietly, you can play the wedding game with us, okay?” I say.

She pauses, then gives me a determined nod.

“Okay!”

With that, the rest of the ceremony goes flawlessly.

Every breath crackles with anticipation and I’m sliding a diamond crusted ring on Reese’s finger. Then she slides a thick gold band over mine.

I wait, exhale, and wait some more for the words I’m dying to hear.

“You may now kiss the bride,” says the preacher man.

I’m a human blur, pulling my new wife into me. My lips impact hers with a force that says *forever, woman*. The first of many vows with tongue and teeth I swear I’ll renew each day of our lives.

She’s never tasted better, her mouth sweeter than a strawberry tort.

“That was chaste?” she whispers with a parting gasp, good humor sparking in her eyes.

“You complaining?” I whisper back.

“God, no.”

She turns her head slightly and stares out at the white chairs in front of us, full of happy guests, then looks back at me. She swallows so hard it’s visible.

“Okay, maybe just a little. I never wanted that kiss to end,” she says sweetly.

Laughing, I lean over so my lips are above her ear. “You’re mine all night, sweetheart.”

She slaps my chest. “*Shhh*. We’ve got company.”

“They’ll know what I said anyway. Your blush gives it away,” I say, kissing her again for good measure while people cheer around us.

She gives me a shy smile when I finally release her lips.

“It’s my humble pleasure to present to you—for the very first time—Mr. and Mrs. Brandt!” the pastor says.

The guests wave black-and-white checkered flags at us as we walk back down the aisle, parting like a small sea for us. I wave, but really, my mind is totally focused on Reese.

“Nice touch with the race car flags,” she tells me. “This is like no wedding I’ve ever seen.”

My heart swells ten times bigger. The flags were my last-minute idea, and I know my girl.

People congratulate us as they pass, heading to their cars.

Soon enough, it’s just Ward, Paige, Abby, Millie, Reese, and me lingering behind in a pavilion a little ways off the pier.

“Should we go? I’m not sure if it’s a good idea for everyone to beat us to the reception,” Reese says.

“Grandma’s bringing the car up now. She must have taken it around the block.”

Reese grimaces. “Dang. I didn’t schedule a driver for today. I’m so sorry. I don’t know why I forgot—”

“Sis, stop,” Abby cuts in. “I took care of everything, remember?”

Just then, a hot-pink torpedo on wheels pulls up with Grandma at the wheel, strands of her silver hair blowing in the wind.

“Whoa! Granny Bea got a hot new car,” Reese says, doubling over with laughter.

“Not quite.” I smile at her. “That’s yours. My gift to you.”

“*You didn’t!*” She gushes, eyes wider than I’ve ever seen. “Oh, God, you did. But why?”

“Like I said, it’s your wedding gift.”

Stunned, she bounds over to the convertible. Grandma kills the engine and gets out just as Reese meets her. She throws her arms around Grandma with a twirl that makes me grin.

“Thank you so much, Bea. It’s magnificent!”

“You’re welcome, dear, but Nicholas bought it. I just had the privilege of taking her for a spin.” Grandma passes the keys, lifting her oversized shades with a wink.

Reese motions to me impatiently. I climb into the passenger side.

“You got a ride to the reception?” I ask Grandma.

“Well, maybe I should ride in the back,” she says, still standing next to the car’s side, looking around. “Then again...”

She goes quiet with a bright smile when she sees there’s room in Abby’s car with Millie.

“Grandma, go. Have fun with your new great niece,” I tell her, reaching out to squeeze her hand.

She doesn’t need to be told twice when adorable kids are involved. She’s practically skipping to their car.

“I can’t believe you bought me a pink freaking convertible. Every girl’s dream,” Reese muses, pumping my hand.

“As long as it’s your dream,” I say, pressing her hand to my lips.

The reception fills the restaurant of the grand hotel we’re staying in.

When we walk in, a hostess stands beside a pink board that says, Claim Your Parking Spot. Each name card has a toy car on it.

The hostess smiles at us. “You two are at the wedding party table. You don’t need a placard.”

“Damn. I wanted a toy to take home,” I grumble.

Reese giggles. “We’ll get you one later.”

Tucking my arm around her, I lead us to our table.

The tablecloth is white. The border looks like a road separated into two lanes by pink lines, and there's even a pink ruffled skirt under it. The napkins are also pink, wrapped by a chrome napkin holder with a toy car glued to the top.

I get my wish after all. Reese and I have white limos waiting at our spot.

A small water bottle with a hot-pink ribbon tied around it and a black-and-white-checkered border waits at each place setting. A black heart centers the pink wrapper with our names in white letters.

I do a double take, squeezing my wife's hand.

My wife. Holy shitbuckets.

I'm going to enjoy every bit of reminding myself I'm a married man.

More guests file in as everyone gets settled, folks who come to give us their best who weren't at the private ceremony.

Sabrina and Magnus Heron stroll up to us, each carrying a white card attached to a model Aston Martin.

Brina hugs Reese. "Congratulations."

Mag slaps me on the back.

"You finally got the ball and chain. Welcome to the club. I wish you'd told me you needed my jet for a lady. I'd have never charged you." He looks at Reese and back at me. "She's a beauty."

"No hard feelings, Heron. Everyone came out ahead with the plane, but the biggest winner was me." I say, just as the champagne flutes make their way to our table.

I clink my glass against his and then give Reese a knowing smile. I promised her I'd only have three drinks tops. Then it's back to non-alcoholic sparkling cider.

I'm a changed man, all right, thanks to her, and I aim to keep it that way.

“Where is everyone?” Brina asks.

She must be looking for Paige.

About that time, the rest of our family comes staggering in. Only Millie stops to take a placard before running to our table.

“Uncle Nick, look! I got another car.”

“I see that. We’ll get together and show off our collections soon,” I tell her, ruffling her curly hair.

Abby sits next to Reese. Millie stays next to me, still chattering on about her toy cars and how she wants to “vroom, vroom like Auntie Reese someday!”

Ward takes the seat beside her. Paige links her arm through Sabrina’s and they disappear together with Mag following at a distance a little while later.

Grandma takes her rightful place at the head of a long table worthy of Camelot.

My eyes fall on the centerpiece—what else?—a pink Cadillac overflowing with fresh flowers. There’s one at every table.

Abby beams at us, admiring how much I love her sister. It’s heartening to know her only family can rest easy, knowing Reese will always be taken care of.

“Open it!” Millie hands me a water bottle.

I twist the cap off and hand it back to her.

“God, Nick, I love the centerpieces,” Reese tells me later for the third time.

“I was afraid you might be more of a Ferrari girl.”

“Hell no. This is perfect. We need to do a road trip down Route 66.”

I smile because it’s so fucking Reese, and I make a mental note to make sure she gets her way.

There’s another table along one side of the room with the same road-trimmed cloth and fluffy pink skirt. This one has a pale-pink sign that reads, Fuel Stop.

I can't make out everything from here, but I see a glass water container labeled "coolant" and a three-tier wedding cake, each layer wrapped in a pink ribbon, and capped with a miniature couple on top sitting in a limo.

The bride is in the driver's seat. And beside the table, there's an old-fashioned cotton candy machine that makes me smile.

No question, we both poured our hearts into giving this wedding—and each other—the little quirks we deserve.

"Dare I ask what's over there? It smells like heaven," I say.

"Cotton candy, champagne flutes filled with white jelly beans, and hubcap dispensers of random candies over on Candy Lane. You can see the cake, additional coolant, and a washtub filled with glass sodas ringed with car-shaped bottle openers, skewers—"

"Hold up. Stoplight skewers?" I ask.

"Kiwi, pineapple, and a strawberry on a stick. You're welcome," she says, pausing to peck me on the cheek. "Plus, there's popcorn and chocolate donuts from the best shop in Chicago arranged to look like tires."

I let out a low whistle, more amazed than ever with the woman I love.

"How did you pull all this off in just a few weeks?"

"Delegated well. Check out the other side of the room," she says, pointing.

I see another sign that reads Pit Stop, already piled high with our gifts.

"Abby helped a little." Reese shrugs.

Her sister laughs. "You don't walk away after planning a kid's birthday party on fifty bucks learning nothing. It helped that I billed Nick for the charges. But I saved you guys a crap-ton of the money designing all the prints myself!"

We both thank her again and I kiss Reese's head.

Just in time for the grub. Servers cart around heaping plates of burgers, fries, onion rings, and several other sides.

“Sorry if it’s not as fancy as you hoped, Nick. I asked my sister what kind of food she wanted, and she said concession food,” Abby says.

“I agreed with casual. You girls did the job,” I tell her.

“Have you ever thought about event marketing, Abby?” Ward asks. “Nick used to help manage that team, but he spends most of his time with Brandt Dreams and Fluff Rides.”

Reese hits me with a smile brighter than the sun when she hears her new company name.

“I’m about to start taking classes to be a wedding planner, but...event planning is close. I’d like it, I think.” Abby sighs. “But whatever I do, I think I have to be able to do it from home. That’s one thing I’ve learned to appreciate after everything that’s happened.”

“I could work out a freelance contract. I’m okay if you do the planning from home, but you’ll probably have to go to the events to make sure they’re running smoothly, at least for a while. You’re part of the family now. We’ll all pitch in to figure out something for Millie,” Ward tells her.

“Oh, wow, I...you’re offering me a job? Thank you!” she says.

“If you can pull off events like this in a matter of days, it saves us all a ton of grief,” my brother says.

I couldn’t be happier to see our joy rubbing off on the biggest dickwad in the world. But shit, do I love him.

“Just keep your schedule open, Abby. My wife’s high maintenance and we’ve got a baby on the way,” I say with a wink.

“High maintenance?” Reese glares at me. “Liar!”

I grin. “Yeah, but I love you.”

She leans over and drowns me in another kiss that transcends every smile and easy laugh in the room.

After dinner, the big moment arrives when Reese tosses her bouquet.

We all gather around outside, watching the flowers take flight. Abby catches it, looks down in disgust, and hurls it into the air again.

“Aw, why’d you do that? I wanted you to have it,” Reese says.

“Yeah, no. I’m not getting mixed up with a man for a while.”

Reese raises her dress some, so I can remove her garter, with pleasure. It’s got the familiar black-and-white checkerboard pattern.

Clasping my hand around the garter, I lean closer, ripping it down her leg with a wolfish grin.

“I could take you right now,” I whisper up at her when nobody else is paying attention. I throw the damn thing over my shoulder, not caring if it lands on the moon.

“Do you have to say that here?” She’s staring down at me, her cheeks cherry-red.

“Hell yes, I do. You’re the perfect woman and it’s our wedding day.” I stand, enveloping her in my arms, whispering. “Let the honeymoon begin, darling.”

IS THIS REAL LIFE? (REESE)



At the airport, we're hand in hand, each of us dragging a rolling suitcase busting at the seams.

"Do you have the boarding passes?" I ask.

"All we need is ID. We're flying in style on a private jet, darling," he says with a boyish grin.

"You're spoiling me sick," I squeak.

"I'm spoiling *us*. It's our honeymoon and we *need* privacy."

A delighted gasp spills out of me.

"Have I told you that I love you? I mean, aside from the other ninety-nine times today?"

He pulls me against the wall, brushing my lips with his. "Make it an even hundred and it's still not half as much as I love you, woman."

God, this man.

Most girls only dream of fairy tales. I'm living one.

And my immaculate prince leads me to the sleek plane gleaming under the stars, passing our luggage off to the waiting attendants.

Hands on my hips, he guides me over to a red velvet couch I flop down on, kicking my legs up.

I'm beyond punch-drunk.

The plane looks more like some kind of lavish hotel rather than something that flies.

“It’s loaded with snacks and drinks. Anything we’d want before we land in Key West. It’s a light crew since this isn’t a company event, so I’ll play flight attendant,” he explains.

“Sounds good.”

Nick leans over the couch and takes a blanket from a cabinet bolted to the side. He folds it around us.

I’m not cold, but I don’t protest.

I lean into my *husband*—yeah, still getting used to that—as he slides an arm around me. “This is nicer than Heron’s plane. I borrowed it coming back from Florida when I begged you for a second chance—and I’m pretty damn glad I did.”

“You took a private plane back?” I whisper.

“I tried to go commercial flight first, but I couldn’t get one soon enough. I *had* to get back to you, Reese. No delays.” The heat in his voice makes my heart somersault.

Even so, I can’t resist a tease.

“You could have just...not left me in the first place,” I say, trying and failing not to smile.

“Biggest mistake of my life. I hope I’m still making it right,” he growls, kissing my neck.

“Hmm, I suppose you convinced me the day you proposed.”

“You weren’t sure of me until then?” he says, pulling back and catching me in his gaze.

“I needed time,” I admit. “I was a little afraid if something else popped up, you might skip out again.”

“Bull. You’ll need a herd of samurai sharks to make me leave you or this baby alone again—and even then I’ll go down swinging.” He leans over, pressing his lips to mine.

“Samurai sharks, huh?” I blink.

He grins.

I answer him by leaning in, deepening the kiss, giving up my mouth.

Oh, holy hell.

Without breaking our kiss, his fingers find my shin and glide up it until he's drawing circles on the crevice of my thigh.

Releasing my mouth, he stamps a tender kiss on my forehead.

I close my eyes, holding my breath in delirious anticipation.

His hand edges so wickedly close to where I want it—where I *need* him—but he's still so far away.

My next harsh, shaking breath makes his fingers crawl closer, until they're under my satin panties. He traces up and down my seam—once, twice, three times.

Each more agonizing than the last.

“Is there a room on this thing?” I whimper.

Without a word, he picks me up in the blanket and carries me to the back of the plane where—Jesus, I was just kidding, but apparently it's real.

A gorgeous bed awaits, surrounded by window seats. That's where we topple over just as the plane charges down the tarmac.

I dig my nails into his neck, desperate for more but too afraid to ask.

His fingers return to the heat between my legs.

I release a jagged breath.

Prepare for takeoff. No, I don't mean the plane.

He unknots my hand from the blanket and takes it in his free hand. His finger shoves my panties aside, slipping into me up to the knuckle.

“Nick,” I whimper.

His thumb presses my clit, tracing mad circles as his finger pumps in and out, expertly poised on the spot that always touches off an earthquake.

My eyes pinch shut and I'm gone.

Surrendering to madness, to ecstasy, to *him*.

He presses a soft kiss to my temple, even as his hand works me over like the devil.

"Benefits of flying private. You convinced yet?"

"Yes!" I hiss, my fingers tugging at the sheets, bracing for the storm he's putting into me at thirty thousand feet.

With his eyes shimmering like forests, just as wild and forbidden, his tongue slides between my lips. There's a hunger in his kiss, especially in the worn moan he drags out of me.

Every time his hand moves, I'm arching into it, sighing against his growl, each one louder than the last.

Somehow, I find the poise to undo the top buttons on his crisp white shirt.

"Fun fact: I'm not taking your wedding dress off until we're at our place," he says with a wild gleam in his eye.

"Whyyyy?" I grind against his hand. "I want you. Here. Now."

"I want you, too, but I always swore I'd carry my bride over a proper threshold," he says, pressing his forehead against mine.

Damn him.

I'm tempted to tell him to leave the stupid thing on and take me under it, but the way his hands glide up and down my bare skin when we make love is half the fun.

"I'm burning up. I'll never survive three hours of this," I say.

He moves his hand again, frigging my clit with a friction that makes me see stars.

“So burn for me, Reese. Come real sweet for me first and come harder when we land,” he snarls, a delicious darkness in his eyes.

“But I...I need more,” I whine again, aching to seduce him, to make him lose control.

“I took your virginity in the back of a car. We’re doing our wedding night right.” His hand moves away from the magic spot.

“Ughhh. You weren’t supposed to stop.”

“Sit up.”

I obey. What’s he doing?

Nick disappears under the blanket. He removes my shoes one at a time.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

The satin panties coming off are a clue. So is the way he pushes my legs apart, kissing up my thighs, crawling under my dress like a man possessed.

Hot breath and the perfect scratch of beard graze my wetness.

The tip of his tongue presses against my clit and then slides back, right before thrusting so deep it makes me gasp.

“Oh—oh holy flipping Mackerel.” My thighs pinch his head, and yes, I’m well aware I’ve reverted back to middle school slang, thank you.

The speech parts of my brain belong to Nick Brandt right now, just like the rest of my body.

He’s on a mission tonight.

And he doesn’t quit until my whole body trembles, playing every throbbing inch of me with that tongue.

Only when I’m gasping, on the precipice, he stops.

All I can feel is this heavy silence—this *reverence*—and then a reminder that no matter what happens, I’ll always, always be his.

Because Nick Brandt's mouth brings me off so hard with my clit caught between his teeth, I become one long scream.

Pleasure bolts through me, swift as a sword.

At thirty thousand feet, I think I qualify as a shooting star. You'd better believe I shine for my husband.

When it's over, he kisses his way back out from under the tangle of my dress.

He presses the skirt back down with an innocence that makes me laugh before placing another one of those entirely dirty kisses on my forehead.

I'm still vibrating as he pulls me into his arms.

"Told you the dress wouldn't come off until I got you home," he says with a smugness that'd be rude if it weren't so true.

"That's...going to be hard to top." I collapse against his chest.

I'm wrong, though.

It's not hard to top at all four hours later in Florida.

When his huge body eclipses mine, when he's baring his teeth, when he's got his hand gently pressed to my throat, pinning me to the mattress with every sharp thrust of his hips.

"Reese!" he grinds out, all green-eyed fire and sharp curses.

I swear.

Nothing, nothing, *nothing* will ever compare to the awed sound of my name on his lips when he comes inside of me, clinging to me long in the night, one round of passion blurring into the next.

It's a nice surprise to find a second wind after the longest, happiest day of my life, and it lasts deep into the night.

The next morning, I wake up with Nick propped up on his arm, staring at me.

"Good morning," I venture. "Is something wrong?"

“Fuck no, besides ruining the view of my beautiful wife asleep.” He chuckles when I softly slap his cheek. “How was your wedding night?”

I roll to my side and kiss his lips.

“Perfection. Yours?”

“Incredible.” He pushes hair out of my eyes and leaves his hand in my hair. “What are we doing today?”

“I could go for an encore,” I say shyly.

He kisses me. “We could always go for that. This is also one of my favorite places in the world and I want to share it with you.”

“I’ve never been to the Keys,” I say. “Okay, let’s do all the things you love, especially if it involves a beach. I’ve never been on a real Florida beach before.”

Growling with delight, he presses his lips to mine.

“Let me guide your way, sweetheart,” he whispers.

“You’re hot enough so I’ll actually pay attention on your tour,” I tease. “What did you do when you were here before?”

His gaze sharpens. “Last time, I drank cheap tequila at my condo up north and wished like hell you were here.”

My heart breaks a little. I smile.

“Before, I mean.”

“I do a lot of fishing when I’m here. There’s a sunset festival downtown that’s a lot of fun, too. Otherwise, I used to lounge on the beach, but we’re both off alcohol and caffeine until the baby comes. If you’re up for a day trip, we could drive up to Daytona so you can see the Speedway.”

“I do love cars,” I say, biting my bottom lip in thought. “How about you teach me to fish first?”

“With pleasure,” he rumbles, helping me out of bed and into a very slow, very intense shower together.

After brunch, we head back to the beach house. There’s a private beach behind it—actually a delightful rarity for the

Keys. We take turns lathering each other in sunscreen, and Nick shows me how to cast the line from our spot on the balmy sands.

“I didn’t know billionaires made such great fishermen.”

“I hooked you, didn’t I?”

“Oh my God, stop. At least let the baby come before you start cracking dad jokes.” I stick my tongue out at him.

“Fine. It’s relaxing,” he says with an unrepentant smile. “You’d be surprised how many big ideas started off with someone soaking in a view like this.”

He isn’t wrong. The ocean ripples, almost as turquoise as his eyes in this sun.

I sit in his lap and pull his arms snug around me.

We stay like that for nearly an hour before the rod bends.

I perk up in excitement. We reel our catch in together.

Okay, it’s *mostly* Nick reeling, but I help.

The fish that emerges from the shimmering waters is huge, flapping its tail so hard Nick goes into caveman hunter mode. I let go when I realize I’m in the way.

“Wow. What is that thing?”

“Dinner,” he says with a wink.

“What? We can’t kill it.”

He stares at me. “What do you think fishing is?”

“Put it back!” I urge, rubbing his arm.

He continues struggling with the rod and reel, but the monster fish has left the water.

“Can’t leave the hook in its mouth,” he says. “Goddamn. This thing must be over ten pounds. Can you get a picture before I send it home?”

I grab my phone and snap a few pics of Nick removing the hook from the sea beast with his million-dollar smile. It flops

like it's break-dancing on the sand. He shoves it back under the waves, where it disappears.

"That could have been a feast. You're welcome." He shakes his head.

"Sorry." I smile at him.

"I'm joking, darling. You don't eat bonefish."

"Why?" I stare back at the ocean, where I swear the fish leaps up one more time in gratitude before splashing down.

"Too bony. They taste pretty shitty," he says.

"You're right about one thing—this is relaxing. Reminds me of driving."

Later, we do a dinner cruise, sailing into a magnificent red sunset.

It's the start of an otherworldly two-week honeymoon that drifts by way too fast. It's hard to believe this is my life, and harder every time someone stops, stares, and recognizes *the* Nicholas Brandt, complete with Reeserella.

Apparently, *The Chicago Tea* has a bigger circulation than I thought.

We make it to Daytona to see the races. We also swim with dolphins, explore the islands, and go to a conservatory for injured turtles where Nick drops a donation so big it makes me shed a tear.

My first trip snorkeling is scary at first, but he's with me. It's okay. He never lets go of my hand until I'm good and ready. He even buys a special camera for pictures when we visit an underwater Jesus statue just off Key Largo.

Our days are filled with museums, conservatories, nature, dream beaches, and wonders I never imagined.

Our nights are filled with so much sheet-ripping sex it leaves me boneless and amazed. His stamina will always be *legend*.

When our last night comes, I can't believe it.

We watch tightrope walkers, bag pipers, and banjo players perform at Mallory Square while the sun dips over the sea.

Nick grabs my hand and leads me to a street vendor where he buys two hulking bags of cloud candy.

“Two?” I do a double take.

He pulls pink fluff out of the bag, and I eat from his fingers.

“One for now, one for later.” We stroll the square collecting souvenirs and head back to the beach house.

I dump our loot on the coffee table in the living room, shuddering at the thought that I’ll have to pack it before the night ends.

“Should we hit the beach one last time?” Nick asks, mischief in his eyes.

I smile. Heat pulses under my cheeks, and I wonder if my head has room for more beautiful memories.

“Sure thing. Just let me change,” I tell him.

I slip on a bikini Nick bought me our second day here. Of course, it’s more string than fabric so I haven’t worn it yet. It’s definitely an eyeful for his enjoyment—not that I mind.

When I step out of the bathroom, he’s in dark-blue trunks, holding a beach towel and the open bag of cotton candy we didn’t finish at the street fair. His eyes drop to my chest and linger.

He swallows.

“You finally wore it for me.”

I bite my lip.

He steps toward me, closing the space between us. Lacing his fingers through mine, we step out the back door and pad across the warm white sand. He drops the towel and cotton candy far enough away so it won’t get wet.

I leave him behind, running into the undulating waves.

Laughing, he treads water, catches me, and pulls me to his broad chest. He rests his hands on my hips and I close my arms around his waist.

My eyes fall to his lips.

“Water’s still warm,” he says.

“Whatever will we do?” I tease.

He takes my mouth in answer, seizing my bottom lip with his teeth.

I move my hands down his chest.

He unties the bikini top and tosses it on the shore. His hands move from my hips to my breasts, thumbs circling my nipples.

It isn’t enough. It never is with him.

My head falls back with a sigh, and Nick Brandt does what he’s always done best.

Worship me.

He makes me believe—every single time—that I’m truly something precious in his eyes.

He kisses down my neck, my clavicle, marching down until his mouth catches my areola.

God.

He sucks, nips, and lavishes.

Moaning, I slide my hands under his waistband and cup his firm ass.

He picks me up with a low growl, carries me to shore, and lays me on the waiting towel.

His trunks fall in a heap around his ankles and I feel every delirious inch of his hardness.

I’m losing my grasp when he drops to his knees, right between my thighs. Flicking off the bikini bottom, he runs his hand over me, teasing two fingers at my entrance.

“Fuck, you’re ready,” he whispers.

Before I can even breathe, he's in.

For him, I might always be ready.

I tangle my arms around him and lean up to catch his mouth. His tongue moves in a slow, rising burn against mine, matching the rhythm of his hips.

We slip into a tempo of crashing flesh and warring teeth and filthy words, and it's glorious.

He only breaks our kiss to grip my shoulders—the better to hold me down while his thrusts sweep me away, faster and *faster*.

I wrap my legs around him, panting, trying to take him deeper. He's on me now, harder, the weight of his balls thumping my skin.

Guttural delight tears up his throat when I tense, when fire ignites in my belly, when I can't hold back.

“Oh God!” I push up against him, my pussy clenching, fused to his thrusts.

I go crashing headfirst into white-hot ecstasy with my nails racing down his back, screaming at the stars, and then thrashing, convulsing, shrieking as he joins me in the maelstrom.

He throbs, mounted deep inside me.

He shakes, every gorgeous muscle bowing.

My everything clenches, wishing we could melt together.

For a little bit of forever, we do, molten and half-crazed, two wild things tearing at each other as he empties himself inside me.

Holy hell. At this rate, it won't be long at all before we've got more than one kid.

When sanity returns, he repositions us so I'm on top. We kiss in a slow, wordless meandering of tongues.

We bask in the afterglow, just breathing, until he picks up the bag of cotton candy and insists on feeding me more.

He wraps the towel around me.

“Tomorrow, it’s back to reality,” he says, kissing my neck. “Work, doctor visits, baby planning, making dinner together, being Mrs. Brandt. Ready for the adventure, sweetheart?”

“Not sure.” I grin. “It’s going to be kinda hard not to jump you all day. With these hormones, I might have to get a set of handcuffs to keep you home.”

He laughs, swiping a hand over his face.

“Shit, I can’t believe you said that. I’ve corrupted you.” He kisses me, his eyes dark in the night.

“No argument. I can’t think of anything better than being your wife,” I say, laying my head against his chest.

He closes his arms around me and lifts me up so we’re face-to-face. I can’t decide what’s more beautiful—the starscape blazing above us or his emerald eyes, all for me, promising entire worlds.

Whatever world I choose, as long as I live, it’ll always be the one I inhabit with my bossy, charming, bad-tempered, funny, and unbearably sexy man.

I’ll always be at the wheel of this life, and he’ll always show me the way.

“As long as you’re mine, I’m so fucking glad you feel that way,” he says, closing his lips over mine.

Yeah, forget the stars.

His eyes beat them, hands down, and they’re filled with the sorcery of love that’s shifted my whole universe.

For me. For our family. For *us*.

I’ve found my perfect grump and I’m his to the end.



THANKS FOR READING PERFECT GRUMP!

Wondering what family life looks like for the Brandts long after the honeymoon?



Find out in [this special flash forward story.](https://dl.bookfunnel.com/bhgmbn3pjl) - <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/bhgmbn3pjl>

Then read on for a preview of the older grumpalicious Brandt brother as Ward collides with Paige Holly in Bossy Grump.

BOSSY GRUMP PREVIEW

Dark Knight (Paige)

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

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

Ugh, it's not.

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

Why does everyone have an awesome life but me?

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

Stud or dud? she replies.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Whatever.

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

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

It’s almost gone.

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

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

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

“Ah, babe. Let me get one more shot first.”

Babe.

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

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

“The bar wasn’t even part of the plan, you know,” I say.

“Yeah, well, you said you like spontaneous...right? Museums are just so boring.” He rolls his shoulders, batting

his eyes like he's ready to fall asleep. "I can't handle that shit without a little fun first."

Wow.

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

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

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

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

What gives?

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

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

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

Babe.

Again.

Blargh.

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

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

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

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

The bartender comes and hands him the shot glass.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Art can work miracles.

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

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

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

Odd.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Never better! Just one too many shots."

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

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

Dearest of Lords.

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

"We could do this another time."

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

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

Whoa, he almost got it right.

It was almost sweet.

I almost smile.

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

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

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

Okay. I guess we *are* celebrating.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh my God!

Thank everything it's bolted down.

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

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

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

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

His obnoxious laugh booms, echoing through the room.

Awesome.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Well, hello to you, too, Grumpyface.

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

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

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

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

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

At least he's a happy drunk.

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

I'm desperate to pull away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anything, really.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Umm—what? Yes, you did."

If I sound bewildered, I am.

He shakes his head, a horrible smile pulling across his lips. "Nahhh, that was my buddy, Reed. Dude had a better date

tonight with a hot accountant and I'm down on hookups, so— here we are.”

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

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

I can't help it.

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

“Babe, calm down,” he says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You do?" I ask quietly.

"Yeah, sure, c'mere." He tugs on my hand that's suddenly in his grasp.

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

Fuckity. Can this day get any worse?

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

"Chill. I'll hold this for you, so you don't have to worry about dropping it again."

I reach for it with my free hand. "It's okay. I'll just shove it back in my purse."

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

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

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

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

"Huh? I mean, I guess. It's like, *the* tower. What's not to like?"

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

"What will?"

"The photo."

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

"You're nuts, babe," he says with that insufferable smile.

What is happening?

Literally the only thing in this corner is the massive black-and-white photo of the once Sears Tower and a photo booth that lets you take a picture against it. But no one ever does that since you could just go take a picture outside the real tower for free. The dude is acting like a tourist.

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

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

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

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

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

Nameless lets go of my hand.

Sweet relief.

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

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

Jesus, no!

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

Again, that sickening laugh.

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

Aaand I lose it.

I'm boneless, jerking and wiggling, trying to break out of his hold, but he's freaking strong. I stomp on his toes and lurch

back, but he must have released the pressure of his arms because this time I spring backward.

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

Then I conk my head on a sculpture.

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

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

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

Not good.

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

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

“Can you stand?” a deep voice asks.

A man.

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

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

“Angela?” he asks.

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

My stomach drops.

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

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

I try again, this time with wide eyes and raised, wagging brows. “Max, my man! I haven’t seen you since the day we went to the rooftop bar with—” I pause to emphasize the next word. “Angela! Angela, remember?”

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

Sigh. Can anything go right?

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

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

Nameless takes another step toward me—us.

I hold in a gasp.

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

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

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

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

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

Holy crap.

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

“What the fuck ever. You don’t scare me, dude, but you’re not worth the shit,” Nameless snaps, scuffing his shoe on the floor. “Who the hell spends a Friday night at a stuffy-ass museum, anyway?”

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

Wow.

Wow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Right. And wouldn’t give it back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No. Your new job, where is it?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Who?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I didn’t know grumpy gods smiled.”

“Grumpy gods?”

Frick. Did I say that out loud?

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

He’s said it a couple times now.

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

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

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

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

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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.

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