

Wrong, Wright Series, books 1-3



SO WRONG IT'S

Wright



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MEGAN WADE

SO WRONG, IT'S WRIGHT

Wrong/Wright Series 1-3

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RUBY

The bass thumps, vibrating in my chest as I tap the bar rhythmically, drumming my red fingernails while the bartender lines up eighteen shots. “Come on, come on!” Tonight will end up with someone on the floor or it won’t end at all.

“Oh my god, Ruby. How many of these did you order?” Tahlia yells, the noise of the packed bar making normal conversation an impossibility.

I lean close to her ear and yell back. “Enough to make you forget about that asshole of a man who had the audacity to call himself your boyfriend.”

Tahlia purses her lips and frowns, her auburn hair falling forward over her shoulders. Today is her birthday. Twenty-five. And instead of having the time of her life, we’re drinking away her heartache after her douchebag of a boyfriend decided to dump her yesterday. Seriously, who dumps someone the day before their birthday? *Asshats* do. That’s who.

“Oh darling, don’t say the B word around Tahli-pie,” Darren—our resident drag queen who goes by the moniker ‘Coco Munro’ on stage—says, clicking his manicured fingers at my twin brother, Theo, then pointing at the row of shots with a dangerously long stiletto nail. I look at my chipped polish and wish I was as well-groomed as Darren.

“Let’s do this.” Theo steps forward, slinging a muscled arm around his boyfriend’s slender shoulders. I love Darren like a sister, but he’s prettier than me—even out of drag. He

has the kind of body runway models starve themselves for and cheekbones for days. I need to drink just so I don't feel like the Duff of the group when I stand beside him. When he morphs himself into a she, well, I don't stand a chance. Coco Munro is so pretty, a straight man would consider switching teams just for a date with her. Me? I don't get dates at all. With basic blonde hair, brown eyes, and more than my fair share of curves, I'm about as plain looking as one can get. Makeup helps. My feisty attitude doesn't. Still, I'm not about to start changing. At twenty-six, I'm rather set in my ways, and I kinda like it like that. Men are overrated.

"Maybe I should just call him?" Tahlia suggests, sighing as we line up along the bar, our shots in front of us. "I mean, maybe he just got cold feet, or—"

"No!" Theo, Darren, and I seem to yell in unison.

"OK." Tahlia's eyes startle and she tucks her phone straight back into her purse.

"On the count of three," I say, handing her a shot before picking up my own. We need to get this show on the road before she's making excuses to leave and knocking on his door. From what I've learned over the years, watching my stunning best friend work her way through one disastrous relationship after another, is that the trick to helping her move on is to keep her distracted. "Ready?"

Theo and Darren hold their shots in the air and give me a resolute nod. Tahlia sniffs hers and shrugs. "I guess."

"OK then," I start, flicking my long hair over my shoulder. "One, two. *Three!*"



"HOOOOR." The noise coming out of Tahlia's body is akin to the sound a demon would make while being exorcised. For once during the course of our friendship, I'd say no to switching my oversized body with her tiny one. Mine holds liquor *way* better.

“That’s it, baby. Get it all out,” Darren says soothingly, rubbing her back while she pukes on the ground next to a dumpster. Theo and I try to find a cab so we can get her home and into bed.

“Did she drink more than us?” he asks, sucking on the end of a cigarette that he never lights. He used to be a massive smoker, but ever since he started dating Darren, he’s been trying to quit. He claims that holding one in his mouth helps with the cravings.

“Less. She’s just a bit of a lightweight. Poor girl.” Seeing a flash of yellow round the corner, I step out into the street, ready to flag it down. But it stops about twenty yards away from us when someone gets in first. “Dammit.” I sigh as the light shuts off and it drives by the space where we stand, the dirty slush surrounding our cold feet, *occupied*.

“I’m OK. I can walk,” Tahlia says, her voice sounding hoarse as she emerges from the side of the building, leaning heavily on Darren.

“Are you sure? We’ll find a cab. Eventually,” I assure her, not really liking our chances at two o’clock on a Sunday morning. It isn’t that there aren’t any around. New York is teeming with cabs. The problem is they’re mostly taken, and the ones that aren’t don’t want to risk having some girl puke in the back.

“I’m sure. Walking will be faster anyway.”

“Come on, then.” My brother slips his arm around her waist and holds her against his strong body.

“Ugh, why aren’t you straight?” she gripes, loping along beside him. If you’ve ever seen that movie *Twins* with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito in it, you’ll have an idea as to the difference between mine and Theo’s looks. My twin is tall and beautiful with slightly darker hair than I have, a sculpted body—that I *don’t* possess—and a thousand-watt smile. In high school, girls fell at his feet. But he was never one to swing their way. He didn’t date at all until college, which is when Darren entered his life. They met at a bar when Theo was only twenty-one and have been inseparable ever

since. We should all have a love as pure as theirs. Sometimes, I think that's why I'm still single. I'm waiting to find my Coco.

"He can never be straight because he's too bent up over me," Darren jokes, walking alongside Theo with his hips swaying from side to side. He's in a pair of jeans and a fitted tank top with five-inch heels on his feet, traversing the sidewalk as easily as if he was wearing a set of trainers. Meanwhile, I'm wobbling along in my *two*-inch heels that are biting into my feet and giving me blisters on my toes while I carry both Tahlia's and my bags, sweating in forty-degree weather. I suck at this being feminine thing.

"Well, you're lucky," Tahlia says. "I keep thinking I'll find my one but..." I can hear the hitch in her voice that tells me a distraction is needed and *stat*. I am *not* having her finish her birthday celebration by crying over the douchebag who dumped her.

Just as I'm about to tell a bad joke or burst into song, the sleek black body of a familiar-looking Porsche comes in to view, looking a lot like a panther crouching in the dark.

"Tahlia." I stop walking, the others quickly following suit. "Isn't that Douchebag's stupid car parked right over there?"

Squinting against the dim lighting and the alcohol in her system, Tahlia looks at the car and shrugs. "I think so." Terrence, the guy she was dating—stupid name—was an investment banker and loved to flash money around like he was the mayor of pimptown. Honestly, I always hated the guy. He was smarmy and talked down to people. But Tahlia has been my best friend since the first grade, so I put up with him for her. But now that he's unceremoniously dumped her in the nastiest of ways, I can let my true feelings be known.

"That's his car," I declare, starting across the street, my anger on behalf of my friend churning in the pit of my stomach.

"What are you doing?" Theo calls out, a tone of warning in his voice that reminds me of our father.

“Getting a little justice.” I reach into my bag and pull out my keys.

“Ruby, I don’t think whatever you’re thinking of doing is a good idea,” Darren adds.

Coming to a stop at the hood of the car, I grin. “It’s a *perfect* idea.”

After that, their protests are drowned out by the sound of my key squeaking against the metal, it grates in my ears satisfyingly, and when I’m done, the words, ‘You are a’ glint brightly in the streetlights, positioned over the drawing of a giant cock and balls, now permanently etched into the pristine paint job of the Porsche.

“You are a dick?” A male voice sounds to my left.

“A *giant* dick,” I correct, my inebriation making me as cocky as my drawing. “Do you think I need to put the word ‘giant’ there to get my message across?”

“That depends. Who are you?”

“Wait. Are you a cop?” Suddenly concerned, my heart thuds in my ears as I tuck my keys out of sight. Taking in his messy blond hair and rumpled suit, he doesn’t *look* like a cop. But appearances can be deceiving. Just ask, Tahlia. She dates good-looking buttmunches all the time.

“Not a cop,” Rumpled-hot-guy says as he presses his perfect lips together in a straight line. Seriously, what is it with these guys and their long lashes and full lips? I actually look like a Cabbage Patch doll if I don’t wear lipstick and mascara, and here he is looking like he rolled out of bed being beautiful just the way he is.

“Homeless then? Fresh from a divorce and sleeping under your desk at work? Only own one outfit so that’s what you wear when awake or asleep?”

“What?”

“Your suit,” I say, indicating its crushed state with my index finger. “It’s rumpled.” My eyes bug out. “Wait! I know. You picked up tonight and you’re doing the hump and dash.

Well, at least one of us is getting laid. Good for you, man. Good for you. But don't let me stand in your way. Keep going before the girl—or guy, I don't judge—finds you and wants something more. Commitment is hard, am I right?"

He frowns and shakes his head. "Do I know you?"

"I don't think so. But you *could* know me. If you're into curvy gals, of course." I attempt to pop a hip and stand there looking sexy like I've seen other girls—and Darren—do. But I'm not sure it translates because his scowl deepens. *OK. Not a fan of curves then.*

"Why did you write this?" He gestures to the Porsche.

"Well," I start, spinning my keys around my finger because I'm quite proud of the detail I achieved in the ball section of my artwork. "There's an interesting story there, and it involves the fuckwad who owns this car. He's a cunt monkey—for want of a better term—and he deserves to be called out for it."

"A cunt monkey?" Reaching up, he runs his fingers through his sexy, sexy hair. I'd like to run my fingers through it too. "Because?"

I sigh. "Because he dumped my friend the night before her birthday."

The knowledge causes him to pull his head back in surprise. "I broke up with Jessica because she had a hard time keeping other men's penises out of her. As far as I'm aware, it wasn't anywhere near her birthday. Her birthday's in June."

Blame it on the alcohol, but I'm confused. "What?"

"I broke up with Jessica because—"

"I heard you." I hold up my hand to stop him. "Who the hell is Jessica? What are you even talking about?" All I'm getting from this conversation is that he was dating some woman called Jessica who doesn't sound very nice. I can't understand who, in their right mind, could step out on a delicious-looking man like the specimen in front of me. I mean, look at that beautiful body. Look at the chiseled jaw, look at those sapphire eyes and how they glare at me. Wait. *Oh god. He's glaring at me.*

“Oh dear.” I take a step back and surreptitiously drop my keys back inside my bag. “This...this isn’t *his* car, is it?” I ask, gulping at the slow shake of his head. “This...this is *your* car.”

He nods even slower, his arms folded across his broad chest as the penny drops with me. My stomach sours as I realize what a monumental fuck up I’ve just achieved. This was an all-time high—bigger than that time in high school when I put a love letter in the wrong person’s locker. Turned out it belonged to the head cheerleader and *not* the adorable nerdy boy from chess club. By lunchtime, it was photocopied and stuck on every available surface. I was mortified and refused to show my face for days. I was still finding copies of that letter stuffed in my locker even months later. High school sucked. But this...this is worse.

“I...I...I’ll pay to fix it.” Reaching in my bag, I dig out my business card with shaking hands, suddenly feeling very sober. “I mean, I can’t *pay*—not for a Porsche. You know, student loans are a killer and...um...I don’t really get paid that much. My job is pretty dead-end so I don’t see a promotion in my future. But, um, we can work something out. A payment plan...or...or something? I can quit eating...” My voice trails off as I hand him the slightly bent card.

While he inspects it, I glance over my shoulder to where Theo is still waiting with Tahlia and Darren. I can’t see their expressions, but I know Darren is laughing since his hand is covering his mouth. I twist my mouth downward. *Why didn’t you all stop me from doing something stupid?* But the moment the thought enters my mind, I know I wouldn’t have listened to them, anyway. No. I had nobody to blame here but my spontaneous-blow-the-consequences self.

“You work at WHGC?” He flips the card between his fingers so the printed side is facing me.

“I’m a lowly board operator. It’s the talent who gets all the cash, and with Spotify and Apple Music taking over, there’s not as much of that anymore. You wouldn’t believe the amount of damage those streaming apps have caused. I mean, they thought Pandora was a problem at first, but that was nothing compared to...” I trail off, wishing I’d shut up with every

word that spews from my mouth. “I’m sorry, OK? I messed up here, but I’ll fix it. I promise you.”

He makes a sound that either means he agrees or that he thinks I’m full of crap. I’m not sure which, but both would be a fair response in this situation. “I’ll be in touch, Miss Casey.” He tucks my card into his pocket and makes for the driver’s door.

“Shouldn’t I, um, get your details too?”

“How about you just wait for my call?” he returns, his voice sounding a little like a growl that startles me and turns me on at the same time. *Scary hot.*

Nodding, I stand back as he gets into his Porsche and drives off. I’ve really messed up this time. I can’t pay for a paint job to fix a Porsche! I’m barely making rent as it is. Crap.

“You crazy bitch,” Darren calls out, laughing as I make my way back to them.

Theo looks pissed. He’s giving me that big brother glare of disappointment that he has no right giving me, since he’s *younger* than me by nearly ten minutes.

“What? I’ll pay to fix it,” I snap, my arms held out defensively to the side.

“Oh yeah, with what money?”

Having no substantial retort, I go for the most grown-up response I have and poke my tongue out at him.

“I can help pay,” Tahlia puts in. “You did it for me.”

I reach out and give her arm a squeeze. “No, sweetie, that was all me. I’ll deal with it.” There’s no way she can afford it either. She lives in the same crappy building I do and earns even less than me writing about fashion accessories for *Icon* magazine. I guess that’s how she got so blind-sided by that jerk of an ex. I mean, who doesn’t want some wealthy Prince Charming-ish guy to come along and wave his magic money wand so all your struggles go away? I’d probably fall for it too. But in my case, the only hot rich guys asking for *my*

number are also planning on taking my money too. *When am I ever going to get a break?*

As we walk the rest of the way home, blisters form on my feet and a cloud of doom nestles over my shoulders. I sense a lawsuit and bankruptcy in my future. My life as I know it is now over—all because of a dick pic.

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RUBY

Over the coming days, every time my phone rings, I about jump out of my skin for fear it'll be Sir Rumples-Sexy-Skin demanding all my paychecks for the next eleventy-billion years. The anxiety is giving me nightmares, and every time I go outside, I'm scared I'll be arrested for vandalism, or that I'll have some court clerk serve me with a notice that I'm being sued.

I'm on edge.

I'm not sleeping.

And I'm never drinking again.

By the time another Monday morning rolls around, the bags under my dull-brown eyes have bags of their own. And when I try to hide them with concealer, they look more like an old man's testicles than the smooth skin the anti-aging products promised. It's times like these I wish it was socially acceptable to wear sunglasses inside.

Dragging my feet into Starbucks at the ass crack of dawn—pitfalls of working breakfast radio—I yawn so wide my jaw hurts. I should probably call in sick, but the distraction of working helps keep me from worrying.

“Hey, Andy,” I say through my yawn, lifting a hand to wave at the usual dude behind the counter.

“Want me to make that a double today?” he asks, arching a dark eyebrow.

I nod, noting that the messy bun I twisted my hair into is loose. “Please.” I yawn again. Breakfast radio is a cruel mistress. It demands we get to the station by five every morning. Thankfully New York really is the city that never sleeps and there are twenty-four-hour Starbucks all over the place.

Andy is literally my favorite person in the world at this time of the morning.

“There you go,” he says, handing me my usual Americano.

I wrap my hands around it and hold it to my nose, trying to inhale the caffeine before I taste it. “You’re a god among men, Andy.”

He grimaces. “Tell Karen that.”

“The silent treatment again?” I ask, placing my cup on the counter then upending four sachets of Sweet’n’Low into it. Andy and his girlfriend have a very one-sided relationship that I’ve heard all about over the last couple of years. One time, he didn’t notice she’d had her eyebrows waxed, so she quit speaking to him for a week and wouldn’t tell him why. All I can think is that she must be amazing in bed, because he puts up with a lot from her. That, or he’s an emotional doormat since he seems to let her walk all over him. I feel bad for the guy.

“She’s got a lot of opinions on the things I do,” he says with a sigh, his eyes looking up to the ceiling. “How I dress; what I eat; the times I go to the bathroom...”

That wakes me up. “Excuse me, the times you *what?*”

“She’s angry because I used the bathroom before she went in to do her hair and, you know...it smelled a little. I mean, I *sprayed* air freshener. But she has a lot of opinions about air freshener too, and I bought the wrong one this time, sooo...” Another sigh.

“That’s a bit OTT, Andy. I think I’d give her the silent treatment right back.”

He shakes his head. “Oh, no. I wouldn’t do that to her. It doesn’t feel nice. I don’t want her to feel bad.”

“But it’s OK for her to make *you* feel bad?” Andy is a sweet guy—completely lacking a backbone, but sweet. I don’t think it’s fair he feels like he’s in trouble half the time.

He scrunches his nose up. “It *did* smell.”

“Well, I guess you’ll work something out then,” I say, pressing the lid onto my cup with a sigh. I haven’t rested my brain enough to delve further into this. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you, Ruby.” He waves at me with his hand over his head like I’m really far away.

By the time I make it to work, almost everyone has gathered in the meeting room, ready to go over today’s schedule. Sucking on my coffee like it’s my lifeblood, I push through the door and take my regular seat next to Vee, the female half of the morning show’s duo.

“What are you doing here?” she whispers, a slight frown on her delicate brow.

“Uh...I work here?”

“You’ve been reassigned.” I almost choke on my coffee. “Weren’t you told?”

I manage to swallow before any major foul befalls me. “This is the first I’m hearing about it.”

“Someone should have called you. The station has some bigshot DJ taking over *The Drive Home*. You’ve been requested to work the panel.”

My jaw falls open. “Requested? By whom? The bigshot?”

She shrugs. “Seems that way.”

“Well, who is it? And how the hell did they know to ask for me?”

She shrugs again. “Some guy called Tanner Wright. He’s been poached from Z-100, but I hear he’s a little boorish, has an opinion on *everything*, and he isn’t afraid to say what he thinks. I listened to one of his shows, I think he gets a kick out of riling people up. Word is, he demanded that you were

moved to his show, requested you by name. Maybe he heard you're the best board operator at the station?"

"I am?" Perhaps I should have been asking for a raise before now? I had no idea.

Vee eyes me carefully. "Do you seriously not know any of this?"

I shake my head, about to ask more questions when the big boss, Gerald Brooks, walks in. "Ruby, what the hell are you doing here? Don't you check your messages?" he barks, frowning my way. "Go home."

"I—" I start.

"Stop flapping your mouth, girl. You aren't needed until three," he cuts in, never a big one for back-and-forth conversation. He's a bit like the chief in Brooklyn Nine-Nine—great at giving orders, low on personality.

Nodding quickly, I gather my things and stand.

"Good luck with your promotion," Vee whispers, giving my hand a quick squeeze before I head out the door. *Did I seriously just get a promotion?*

When I get out onto the street, I pull my cell from my bag and power it up, checking my calls. Sure enough, there's a message telling me I've been reassigned. I *really* need to check my phone more often. I could have gotten myself a few hours extra sleep! Nevertheless, this reassignment could be a big opportunity for me. I kind of thought I'd progressed as far as I would ever go in this job, but if moving to the afternoon show is a *promotion*, then it looks like my job isn't so dead end after all.

Still, why would the *talent* request *me*? It doesn't make any sense.



CLIMBING the four flights of stairs for the second time that day, I make my way to the meeting room with my heart hammering

in my chest. I'm not nervous, I'm annoyed. I spent the day listening to past recordings of this *Tanner Wright*, and honestly, I don't like what I heard. He's what the media labels as a shock jock with most of his shows dissecting current events in a way that an internet troll would. There was one particular show he did a while back that *really* pissed me off. It was back when the laws around gay marriage were changing, and he asked his listeners what their stance on the topic was. Every bigot and armchair activist listening called into the show, and Tanner Wright encouraged them to have an almighty debate. Needless to say, things got heated, and all the while, Mr. Wright just sat in the middle playing devil's advocate—like he could actually *understand* or *sympathize* with a person who was against two people being in love and having the right to marry one and other. The guy who was against the change even suggested that being part of the LGBTQIA+ community was a 'lifestyle choice'. I almost threw my headphones out the window so I didn't have to listen anymore. I was so mad!

I suppose these kinds of 'conversations' make for great ratings—controversy always does—but it isn't something I'm particularly happy being affiliated with, especially when my brother is gay, and I know for a fact he had no choice in it. He struggled for years before he came out. The fact Tanner Wright didn't object when a caller suggested otherwise really got my goat.

So, I'm pissed at Mr. Wright before I've even met him.

"Casey!" I startle at the sound of my surname, turning to find the boss glaring at me with his hands on his hips. "My office *now*."

I mutter in reply a small, "Yes, sir," scampering after him like a frightened little puppy. No one around here dares to call Gerald Brooks anything except 'sir'. He yells when he's happy, he yells when he's annoyed. And when he's angry, he positively booms. I swear I pee a little every time he says my name.

Rushing to keep up with him, I make it through his office door a second behind him, then promptly sit in the seat he

points to. *Am I fired now?*

Being the station boss, you'd imagine Gerald's office would be large with a big window overlooking a park or something. But Gerald Brooks's office is nothing more than a hole in the wall, crammed with filing cabinets and a desk that you can barely see the surface of due to all the files and coffee cups that cover it. The only window in here leads out to the bullpen, through which he can often be seen standing and glaring out at his employees.

In a way, it suits him. He's a man who doesn't give a fuck. He does things his way and has no desire to change. That's why he still conducts business like computers haven't been invented yet—paper only. Hence, the filing cabinets and files overwhelming the space.

Gerald moves his bulky body around to the other side of his desk, plucking a folder from somewhere inside the stack and slapping it on the desk in front of me. "Read it. Sign it. Then get your ass in the meeting room."

"Ah. OK." I open the folder as he takes a seat on his creaky chair.

"It's your new employment contract and non-disclosure," he clarifies with a grunt, you know, just in case I can't read the bold print in front of me that says as much.

"I'll just read it first," I say, flashing him a quick smile. He harrumphs.

You know that actor Tom Selleck? Well, Gerald Brooks looks like a salt and pepper haired, slightly more weathered version of him. He's probably the only man I've ever met who can successfully pull off a mustache and not look like a porn star from the seventies.

"Don't have all day here, Casey," he grumps.

"Do you have a pen?" I ask. A blue biro flicks across the desk and rolls to a stop on the open folder. "Thanks."

Picking it up, I start initialing each page as I scan the terms. From what I can see, it's exactly like my previous contract, except the show I'm working on has changed along

with the hours I'm working. As I get to the final page, I hold the pen over the signature line, almost ready to sign when I spot one glaring error.

"Uh..."

"Is there a problem, Casey," Gerald barks, his eyes pinning me to the spot.

I squirm in my seat. I hate being yelled at. "It's just that the job title is wrong. It says I'm a personal assistant, not a board operator."

"And?"

I gulp. "And I'm...I'm a board operator." My voice squeaks uncontrollably.

"Not anymore," he states, his voice still gruff as he reaches over and flips the page.

"But..." I prepare myself for an argument. He might be intimidating, but I'm not the type to sit back and be trampled all over when I perceive things to be unfair.

Still, he doesn't give me the chance. "And before you start complaining that this is some kind of demotion, you can stop. You got a raise." He taps his finger against the remuneration section and I just about balk.

"That...that's almost double what I was earning before," I whisper. *What the hell?*

Mr. Brooks mirrors the sentiment. "I don't know what the hell he wants with you, kid. But he insisted it had to be you."

"He actually asked for me by *name*?" I ask. "Why? I don't even know him."

He shrugs. "Who fucking knows, Casey. But whatever he wants, I expect you to keep that man fucking happy."

"Um, I'm pretty sure that's sexual harassment, sir." I don't care who this Tanner Wright is, there's no way I'm going to fuck him just to keep him happy. I haven't read the contract properly, but I'm fairly certain prostitution is still illegal and isn't in my job description.

“I said keep him *fucking* happy. Not *fuck him* happy.” He shakes his head and rolls his eyes. “Everyone is so fucking sensitive these days. But to put this shit in perspective for you kid, we’re in trouble—this station, everyone here. If this show doesn’t do well and bring in some big advertising dollars, then we’re all screwed. I’m definitely not asking you to sleep with the man, I would *never* do that. But I am counting on you to do your job, keep him happy and keep him *here*. We need this.”

I suck in a breath. This is far more responsibility than I was prepared for when I woke up this morning. Far more than I can probably handle. I can barely manage to save myself from my own stupidity on any given day. How the hell am I supposed to save the station from closing down? But the money... I can *really* use that money. Ramen noodles take your hunger away, but when they’ve been your primary source of sustenance since freshman year in college, they get a little tired. I’ll be able to afford regular, tasty groceries. *And* I might even be able to afford new clothes when those tasty groceries grow my waistline. This is sounding more like winning the longer I think about it.

“Can I count on you or not, Casey?” Mr. Brooks barks.

“You can,” I say, my voice steadier than it’s been the entire time as I sign the contract in a flourish and hand it back to him. I’m not sure I even know *how* to be a personal assistant, but I guess I’m about to find out. *Here goes nothing*.

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RUBY

A sea of faces I barely know assembles in the meeting room. Radio is a twenty-four-hour gig, so there's a lot of staff coming and going, starting work at different times of the day. I've been on the breakfast show since I started here, so I've rarely stayed at the station long enough to mingle with the evening shift. Maybe I've seen a few in passing, perhaps chatted to them at the station's Christmas party, but ultimately this is an entirely new group of people to me. I'm starting at zero again, which sucks because the breakfast show understands—and some have possibly come to love—my quirky sense of humor. I'm not an easily liked person.

Spotting a vacant chair, I sit down and smile at the woman next to me. I vaguely remember seeing a picture of her around here somewhere. I think she's a news presenter, and she confirms as much once my butt touches the chair. "You look new. I'm Rayleigh, the newsreader on *The Drive Home*." She holds out her hand, and I take a little too long to shake it because I'm fairly sure my palms are sweaty and don't want to gross her out. With a surreptitious wipe of my hand against the leg of my jeans, I insert it in hers.

"Ruby. I'm a board—I mean, I'm the, ah, personal assistant for what's-his-face."

Her eyes light up. "To Mr. Wright? Oh gosh. I can't wait to meet him. Is he as brilliant in real life as he is on-air?" she gushes. "I am a *huge* fan."

I blink a couple of times, wondering how anyone can be a big fan of a hate spreader, then I give her a straight-lipped

smile and shake my head. “I wouldn’t know. I haven’t met him yet.”

“But...you’re his PA. Didn’t you come *with* him?”

“Nope.” I pop the P, once again shaking my head.

“How can you *not* know who Tanner Wright is? Wright Media? He’s the heir to a media empire, but he works in radio to stick it to his parents or something. Total badass. Totally gorgeous, too. He was voted sexiest man alive last year.”

“Sexiest man alive? By who?”

“The internet.”

“The entire internet?”

She shrugs. “I guess.”

“But, I’m on the internet and I don’t even know who he is.”

“It was a BuzzFeed poll or something,” she says dismissively. “And if you don’t know what BuzzFeed is, you obviously aren’t on the internet enough.”

I slide down in my chair and turn away. Consider me schooled.

“He’s here!”

The entire room holds a collective breath as they turn to the door. I swear it’s like we’re waiting for the queen to walk into the room and knight us all, except it’s just some asshole who doesn’t have a filter and is supposed to save our station with his bullshit. I hate that I’m here. But I won’t lie and say I’m not interested in seeing who this guy is. When Rayleigh made the observation that I’m not on the internet enough, she wasn’t wrong. I hate the thing, and use it as little as possible. I have no social media, and the only reason I’m even online is because my cell plan comes with data. I use it for email and Spotify, and that’s about it. Spotify is actually how I researched Tanner Wright’s past shows, but now I’m thinking I should have thought to Google the guy too. But ‘Googling’ someone sounds a little too personal and invasive. I prefer to judge people based on their actions, which is why I’m judging

Mr. Wright based on his commentary since it came directly from his mouth and not from some piecemeal article.

Voices approach, and at first, I can only see Mr. Brooks. He's such a large man that he fills up the vast majority of the door frame, so we're all craning our necks trying to see around him. He's still talking as he enters, assuring Tanner Wright his new team is the best the station has to offer.

While I wait for the man of the moment to come into view, I try to figure out how I managed to get here. Selecting some obscure board operator with zero PA experience doesn't make any sense. Who in their right mind would decide to do something like that? And the fact this guy knew to ask for me by name makes it even more perplexing. But when Mr. Brooks moves to the side, everything becomes clear.

Tanner Wright is tall, broad and blond with hair messed up in a way that looks like he just had sex. The only thing missing is a rumpled suit... and a scratched-up Porsche.

My breathing ceases to be a natural function of my body as my heart thumps wildly against my chest like a baby wielding a hammer. I perch on the edge of my seat, not sure if I should run or play it cool. My mouth might never return to its previously closed position, and when I die from oxygen deprivation—or from choking on a fly—my face is going to be frozen like this forever. My parents will be forced to have a closed casket funeral, and there'll be rumors circling the community that I was doing something very unwholesome when I passed for my mouth to be open like that. Mrs. Ipswich, who's my mother's closest frenemy, will *comfort* my mother by telling her, "It could have been worse. She could have *closed* her mouth at the end." And then my mother will wail and cry, "Why? Why did Ruby have to die with a dick in her mouth?" And it will just be a mess.

I'm quick to close my mouth.

"That man is hotter than Hades," Rayleigh whispers near my ear. "If he's single, I'm calling dibs, so don't stand in my way."

I shake my head. “I wouldn’t,” I squeak, too busy trying to wrap my head around the fact that Tanner Wright isn’t just any guy. He’s the dick and balls man; the guy whose hood I dragged my key over. *He’s Rumpled-Sexy-Skin!*

In my wildest dreams, I couldn’t have imagined this scenario playing out when I came into work this morning. What are the odds that the owner of the car I defiled just *happens* to be the station’s new talent? I don’t know what they are, but I can assure you, I’d have a higher chance of winning Powerball—if I could afford to purchase a ticket.

One thing’s for sure, I am in deep, deep shit. *Wait. Is this his version of payback?*

“Good afternoon, everyone. I’d like you all to meet Tanner Wright,” Mr. Brooks booms, gesturing toward the dreamy, beautiful, nightmare man.

I’m still trying to come up with an exit plan when the show’s producer stands up and introduces himself. “I’m Terry, Mr. Wright. We spoke on the phone.”

“Ah, yes. Nice to put a face to the voice. And Tanner is fine, please,” he says as if he’s some non-pretentious guy who doesn’t own a ridiculously pretentious car and start arguments for fun.

“Oh, of course, Mr. Wri—I mean, *Tanner*. If we could set up a time to go over the schedule for the next month, I can get promos running and advertising scheduled.”

“Absolutely. Come by my office before the meeting tomorrow. I’d love to hear your ideas.” Tanner smiles, and I think every woman in the room—and half the men—sigh. Then he turns his attention to the rest of the room. “Well, it’s certainly great to be here. Gerry has told me what a great team I’m coming into here at WHCG.” *Gerry?* I gape. Did he seriously just call Mr. Brooks, *Gerry*? I can’t believe his gall. *And I can’t believe Mr. Brooks is smiling about this!* “...and with your input, I’m hoping we’ll all create something exciting together.” Wait. What are we inputting?

I do a frantic look around the room, trying to read Rayleigh's notes so I can catch up. But she covers them and scowls at me. *Rude!*

God, I already suck at this job. Should I have been taking notes too?

"Something we can help you with, Miss Casey?" Tanner's smooth voice asks from across the room. "A writing implement? Perhaps some paper? Or you just planning on scratching your notes into the table with a set of keys?"

A ripple of laughter rolls around the room as my cheeks flame with embarrassment. If I didn't hate this guy after listening to his show recordings, I certainly do now. He just called me out in front of *everyone*. Kill me now.

"I, uh..." I pause and clear my throat, refusing to look up and meet his smug expression. "There's a pen in my bag. Just down here."

And that's the point where I slither off my seat, not like a snake, but like a puddle of slime that lands on the floor beneath the boardroom table and stays there. I'm not even joking. I don't even have a bag in here—or a pen. I'm currently tucked up under the table with my knees pulled up to my chest, hoping everyone will just leave me here and continue on with the meeting. I'm the hermit of the meeting room now. The floor is my new home.

"What are you doing?" Rayleigh hisses.

"Looking for a pen and paper," I state, my voice surprisingly confident. "Carry on without me." Suddenly, her stockinged legs roll out of view, replaced by a pair of expensive looking slacks and leather-soled shoes. *Uh-oh*.

Tanner Wright's gorgeous head comes into view as he squats down in front of me. I hate to say it, but he's even better looking in the light of day, his mirthful eyes shining like the most picturesque of seas, his dark blond hair perfectly messy, and his chiseled jaw, well, *chiseled*. I'm surprised this guy isn't working in television. He's too pretty to be hidden behind radio waves.

“You OK down there?” he asks. His voice makes my nipples hard.

“Quite comfortable. Thank you for asking,” I say, rocking back slightly so my trainers lift off the floor.

“Is this your usual work attire?” His eyes take in my jeans and aged flannel.

“Yup.”

He says nothing until I force my eyes to meet his. Which doesn't take long because, again, he's *crazy* pretty. “We'll have to do something about that.”

“Sure,” I say, knowing that request is highly unlikely because my wardrobe consists of casual and club. There is no in between.

“How about I help you up?”

“Nope. Nope. Continue the meeting without me.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No. I just don't want to move.”

He laughs at that, and now my nipples are tingling. Wonderful. Then, despite my objections, he takes hold of my hands and pulls me to my feet. That nippy attraction goes from a tingle to a full-body jolt that steals my breath, clouds my mind, and makes me doubt my knees will hold me upright when he lets go. And it's odd to me that I *don't* want him to let go. Mentally, I know this guy needs to be top of my enemy list. But my ovaries have other ideas, my entire reproductive system staging a coup against my common sense. I hate to admit it, but the guy arouses me. And his smell. God, he smells so good. He smells like that day in fall when you know the snow is coming and can feel the magic anticipation of it in the air. *I wonder if that's an aftershave or if it's just him?*

I am in huge trouble here. I should probably quit. But then again, I need money. So, there's that...

“Miss Casey?” he says, snapping me to attention and making me realize that my nose is perilously close to his neck. And I may have just been sniffing him like a dog.

I pull back on a startled intake of air, unable to meet his eyes. Why, out of all the cars in New York City, did I have to vandalize the new host's car with a giant dick? And why am I now imagining his dick? *Imagining him sweaty and fucking.* Oh god. I have a problem.

Kill me, kill me, kill me. And get me a new pair of panties.

"Sorry. I'm fine," I say, pulling my arm from his grip, heat still searing through me. I shift back to get a little space so my head clears.

He narrows his eyes, scrutinizing me for an uncomfortable moment before he speaks. "Meet me in my office when we're through here. We need to discuss your new duties."

"Sure."

"Can someone offer Miss Casey a pen and paper?"

"Oh, I'm happy to help," Rayleigh says, contradicting herself for the sake of drawing his attention. "Here you are, Ruby." She smiles up at Tanner as she slides a few torn sheets and a biro my way.

"Thank you, ah..."

"Rayleigh," she says, pushing out her chest. "And I'm *always* happy to help, sir."

His mouth kicks up at the side. "Tanner is fine," he says, placing his hand on the back of my chair as he addresses the table. "In fact, I insist that everyone here drops any sir or Mr. Wright, nonsense. You call me Tanner. Or I won't answer." His hand lands on my shoulder and squeezes, leaving me to wonder if that means except me. Will he make *me* call him sir?

Forcing myself to manually breathe when he releases me, I pick up my pen and do my best not to make any further waves or eye contact as Tanner moves to the whiteboard and we get down to official business, outlining the show's main theme for the day and discussing production and strategies for the next week.

When the meeting draws to a close, Mr. Brooks stands to dismiss us like we're at school and can't go until teacher says.

“We all know what we’re doing. Let’s make this show our best, people,” he booms. “Be ready to go on air in *one* hour.”

The whole room claps and cheers, infected by the excitement of being part of a show that could blow up the airwaves. Tanner Wright’s enthusiasm for his work and knowledge of station workings is impressive, to say the least. He presents his show ideas as social commentary that invites discussion. In the end, it’s almost possible to forget what he stands for, how inflammatory his show really is. *Almost*.

For me—the real me, not my wanton ovaries—it doesn’t matter how gorgeous he is, or how intelligently he addresses his team during meetings. There’s just no way I can forget the things I heard. This man’s show insulted my family member for ratings. Indirectly or not, I can’t reconcile with that.

Sitting back in my chair as the room empties out, I watch the sycophants of this world stop to talk or *flirt* with the new talent, each of them hoping in some way to climb his ladder for their own gain.

The more I watch him, the more annoyed I become too. Gone is the lusty feeling that took over when we touched, and in its place, a deep-seated rage builds, one I know will protect me from this man’s charm from here on out. I must have some serious self-hatred going on to even allow myself to imagine getting horizontal with him after my initial reaction to his show’s content. But I am stronger than my basal urges, and this man is not for me. No matter how much money I’m getting by being here, I definitely need a new job.

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RUBY

“Ready?” Tanner looks at me after Rayleigh *finally* exits the meeting room. It was kind of embarrassing watching her fawn all over him, even insisting Tanner take her number ‘*Just in case there’s ever a news-related emergency*’ :insert eyelash fluttering here: But at least it delayed my inevitable one-on-one time with him. It also gave me a moment to search employment listings for board operator positions at other radio stations, two of which I’ve bookmarked to look at later.

“As I’ll ever be,” I say, sliding my phone into my back pocket before collecting my things and following him out.

I try not to look at his ass, I really do. But that bespoke suit of his is *bespoking* to my ovaries as it hugs those tight buns. Once again, those traitorous lady parts cause a hormonal rush of attraction to skitter about beneath my skin. Ovaries are terrible decision makers. I can tell you that much for free.

Forcing myself to look elsewhere, I continue up to the next floor and along the narrow halls lined with photos of the station’s past and current on-air talent. There are decades’ worth of history here, and I’m struck wondering what happened to the host Tanner is replacing. Was he fired to make room?

“Here you go. Your new home away from home,” Tanner says with a smile, pushing open the door to his office for me to walk through. While the station boss occupies an office no bigger than a hole in the wall, the talent gets the outer offices with windows to the outside world and actual space to move

about in. Tanner Wright, of course, was given the biggest one of all.

“My home away from home? This is *your* office, buddy. I intend to spend as little time in here as possible.” *And as soon as I find a new job, I won’t be spending time in here at all.*

“That’ll be a difficult feat when *that’s* where you’ll be working,” he says, pointing to a leather couch that’s pushed up against the floor-to-ceiling window. The office has been redecorated from what it was before, obviously to suit Tanner’s tastes. There’s a small sitting area—which is where he indicated my workspace will be—bookcases filled with vinyl albums and radio industry awards, a large cherry-oak desk with an ergonomic leather chair, and two smaller visitor chairs. It’s everything you’d expect for a big shot like Wright.

“Why can’t I work at the desk right outside?”

He picks up a rubber ball and tosses it against the thick glass windows, catching it on the rebound before repeating the process. *Well, that’s not annoying.* I hope those windows are unbreakable.

“Because I don’t want to have to call you in here every time I need to speak to you.”

“What about when you take meetings?”

He shrugs. “Sit in and take notes. You’re here to do everything I don’t have time for. Remembering the nuances of certain meetings is one of them.”

“So, what exactly are these new duties of mine to be?”

He catches the ball one handed and grins. “Well, if you can manage to stay upright instead of swooning at the sight of me —”

“I did not swoon,” I interrupt, my hands going immediately to my hips.

“It’s OK. I have that effect on women.” He smirks.

“I *did not* swoon. I *chose* to sit under the table because I didn’t *want* to see you.”

“And the whole clinging to me when I helped you up part?”

My cheeks burn like the fire of a thousand suns. “You pulled me up too fast. I was dizzy.”

With a chuckle, he resumes throwing his ball. “Regardless, if you can stay upright, your job is to be at my beck and call.”

“You want me to be your beck and call girl?”

“I didn’t say call girl. But if you insist...” He quirks his brow. I scowl.

“I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole.”

“That’s interesting, I seem to remember you offering me the chance to get to *know* you the other night—with the stipulation I like curvy women, of course.” Catching the ball, he returns it to his desk and flexes his fingers against the wood, leaning forward and leveling me with bright, mirthful eyes.

“That was *before* I knew that car was yours, and *before* you became my new boss. *Plus*, I was reasonably intoxicated, so nothing I said at that point can be held against me.”

“What about what you drew? Can that be held against you?”

My mouth opens and closes as I try to find the right words. “I *told* you I’d pay for that,” I say finally, doing my best to speak calmly. “And I intend to. There’s no need for this... this”—I gesture to the area where my workstation is to be—“bullshit job you created to fuck with me.”

“This job isn’t bullshit, Miss Casey. I needed a PA, and you needed a better-paying job so you could afford to fix my car. I helped you when I could have taken you to court and made your life harder. You should be thanking me.”

“For screwing with my career?”

“You said you were stuck in a dead-end job with little pay, struggling with student loans, and that you’d have to quit *eating* in order to pay off the cost of fixing my car. Quite frankly, Miss Casey, I don’t like the idea of you giving up

food. For the record, I *do* enjoy curvy women, so seeing those curves of yours melt away for the sake of my paint job would be a great tragedy in my opinion. So, rather than make you suffer, I *provided* you with an opportunity to make your life better. What a bastard I am.”

“I didn’t *ask* you to make my life better,” I argue, clinging to my resolve. “Yes, my pay packet sucked, but I *like* being a board operator. I don’t even know how to be a personal assistant. I can barely assist myself day-to-day, let alone be responsible for someone else.”

Pressing his mouth into a straight line, he shifts around the desk so he’s sitting on the edge in front of where I’m standing. “Listen,” he starts, softening his tone as he meets my eyes. “It’s difficult to find a PA who isn’t also a kiss-ass. Based on what you drew on my car, you aren’t one to hold back. And judging by your reason for putting it there, I’d say you’re very loyal. Those are two qualities I need in the people in my inner circle.” There’s a slight vulnerability in his expression that has my hardened heart softening toward him. What he’s saying seems kind and logical, and even parts of my brain are joining my ovaries and waving pompoms the color of Tanner’s eyes in support of him. But all of this—giving me a better job and flattering me with his assessment of my character—doesn’t change who he is and what he stands for and encourages. I just can’t be OK with that.

“While I appreciate what you’re saying, Tanner, the people I’m loyal to are my family and friends. To you, I don’t know what I am. I listened to your past shows, you know. All I learned was that you’re a bigot and a boor. You should be canceled for the content of your shows alone. Instead, you’re being celebrated as the savior of the station.”

He folds his arms across his chest, his expression darkening. “I see. You’re one of *those* people who want to quash freedom of speech.”

“Absolutely not! I’m *all* for freedom of speech. What I’m against is spreading hate.”

“Spreading hate. That’s how you view my show?”

Mirroring his position, I fold my arms across my chest, my chin jutting out defiantly. “Of course that’s how I view it. Your show promotes views like being gay is a choice. I happen to have a relative who fought long and hard with his sexuality, and I can assure you he had no choice in the matter.”

His brows hit his hairline. “Is that what I said personally? Do you have a direct quote of me saying such a thing?”

“It was on *your* show. You reiterated and expanded on what your caller was saying.”

“But did I ever use the words, ‘I think’? Because I don’t *think* I did. Show topics are *not* my personal opinion, Ruby. I’m a moderator for the open discussion of controversial topics.”

“You encourage people to voice their narrow-mindedness and you never educate them otherwise.”

“Now *that* is some serious bullshit. Why do you think there’s always one caller who’s for and one who’s against the topic on air? It’s your classic debate structure. And if you paid *any* attention to my shows, you’d also know that I *never* offer up my own opinion. I am an impartial participant who asks questions to reiterate and expand upon the opinions they *both* voice. Each of them gets equal airtime, and I know *for a fact*, that we’ve changed lives doing this show. So, don’t you *dare* come in here and act all high and mighty like you’re somehow better than me just because you’re offended on *behalf* of someone else.”

“On behalf of my *twin* brother. I think I know him.”

“Really? Did you ask him to listen to the show and get *his* opinion on it? Or are you just guessing?”

My mouth falls open, then closes again. Then it opens and closes a few more times. He’s got me there. “I think I know how my twin feels about things.”

“Fine. You’re right and I’m the asshole in the room,” he says, waving a hand dismissively as he lets out his breath. “Listen, your opinion is your own, and I don’t think I can do a lot to change that right now. You’re not the first person to

think my show represents me as a human, and you won't be the last. So, let's just start again. Boss and employee, yeah?"

A lump forms in my throat as I nod. I'm not sure how I feel toward the man standing in front of me, but boss and employee? That feels like a downgrade. Like somehow all that's come before this moment—the arguing as well as the attraction—doesn't matter anymore. I don't think we can ever truly be on the same page; we seem to be too predisposed to butting heads with each other for that. But, maybe for all my refusal and bluster, I actually *want* to matter to Tanner Wright? Even if it's just as an adversary. Or someone you could hate-fuck against a wall. The tiny cheerleading ovaries and brain bits lower their pompoms and shake their head at me divisively. All hope is lost, and now I'm just...an employee. "We can start again," I manage, feeling contrite.

"Excellent," Tanner says, as he leans across his desk and takes something from the top drawer. "This is a list of your duties." He hands a wad of stapled pages to me before pushing off the desk and pacing the floor.

That's when he rattles off his demands.

"I take my coffee black. I want it hot—not scalding—as soon as I walk in the door. I need a steady flow of room temperature water—bottled, not from the tap—while I'm on air. After that, you'll need to make sure you have lozenges and lemon tea prepared. You will be responsible for my mail, researching show topics plus any and all errands I require of you. Always, *always*, be ready when I say jump. Is that understood?" He stops pacing and looks at me with his eyebrows raised.

"Ah..." My head is actually spinning. Like, if someone was filming me, there'd be little stars circling around me and my eyes would be rolling both left and right. How can a man be charming, aggressive, jovial, suggestive, boorish, authoritarian, understanding, *and* a diva all in one afternoon? And how can I go from humiliated to aroused to hatred to contrition to *whatever the hell this is* in the same amount of time? I'm not even sure which way is up anymore. I mean, I

was *feeling bad* and wondering if maybe I misjudged him. And then he hands me *this*. And says *that!*

And why are the cheerleaders happy again? Am I into asshole bigots now?

As I flip through the extensive list of duties and demands, I start to feel like I've entered the Twilight Zone. No! It's worse, I've walked onto the set of *The Devil Wears Prada* and he's Miranda Priestly.

I hand the list of demands back to him. "I'm not doing this," I say as he catches the pages against his chest. "I quit."

A smirk pulls up the corner of his mouth. "You can't quit, princess."

"Yes, I can. There are more radio stations than this in the city. I'll have a new job in no time."

"Not when you just signed a contract with a non-compete clause in it."

Again, my mouth drops open. I'm good at this gaping thing today.

"What? Why... Why would you do that?"

"Because I've got a giant dick and balls etched into my hood telling me that Ruby Casey doesn't sit back and take shit. She retaliates." He hands me back the list, and it's my turn to smirk.

"And you're trusting me to make your coffee?"

That earns me a chuckle. "Call me crazy, but yeah, I am. I don't think you're that kind of nasty, Ruby. I think you're a warrior. You fight for what you believe in and what's right. That's why I want you here. Instead of having you out there fighting against me, I want you fighting *with* me, and hopefully in time, you'll fight *for* me too."

Great. Those cheerleading ovaries are definitely excited again. I can't keep up with myself here. "I guess there's just one thing to say," I sigh, letting the tension in my shoulders drop as I place my hands on my hips.

He grins. “What’s that?”

“Where do you keep your lozenges?”

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TANNER

I send Ruby to the nearest pharmacy to buy me a packet of lozenges that don't exist. Am I fucking with her? Abso-freaking-lutely. But seeing the look on her face when she gets back will be worth it. Hell, seeing her face when I walked into that meeting room today was worth it too. I had to pull a lot of strings to make her my PA—including taking a pay cut to cover her salary. But I don't need the money and having her hide under the table to avoid me was seriously the icing on the cake. When she insisted she wanted to stay down there, it seriously took every bit of control I had not to laugh my ass off.

I'm not sure how long I'm going to keep this boss from hell act up for. But I'm certainly having fun playing it.

Sure, I could have just sent her the bill to fix my car, could have taken her to court to ensure it was paid if I wanted to. But finding out she's a board operator at the exact radio station I just bought into was too good an opportunity to pass up. Hell, I don't even *want* her money. She can work off her debt to me by being my beck and call girl—as she so aptly put it. And perhaps by the time I consider her debt cleared, she'll think twice before taking a set of keys to a man's car. I'm doing a community service here.

Although, I have to admit that I kind of like arguing with her. She's got a lot of spunk. Sure, she'll likely fight me more often than she agrees with me during our working relationship. But that'll just be part of the fun. I like a challenge.

Not that I'm planning on sleeping with her.

Sure, she's gorgeous. My dick decided that when I caught her vandalizing my Porsche. With her glossy hair, big doe eyes, and curves all over, she's exactly my type. But, since I'm at the top of the corporate food chain, I don't fraternize with employees. Abuse of power and all that jazz—it's a lawsuit waiting to happen. And while, yes, I'm very comfortable finances-wise, I'm not about to drag my family name through the wringer just because I couldn't keep my dick in my pants. My mother—well, my *nanny*—taught me better than that. Plus, I'd never hear the end of it.

As I stretch back in my chair, picturing the shine in Ruby's eyes and the jut of her chin when she got pissed, I'm glad when there's a knock at the door. Too long thinking about Ruby equates to a little more blood flow below the belt than is appropriate in an office setting.

"Come in," I call out, adjusting myself and shaking the imaginings from my mind.

"Tanner." The station boss walks in with a polite nod.

"What can I do for you, Gerry?" I motion for him to take a seat.

"Casey looked like she was ready to kill someone when she left your office just now."

I chuckle and put my feet on the desk. "I gave her a 'list of duties'. She's out looking for a brand of lozenges that doesn't exist." I check my watch. "She has exactly ten minutes to get back here with it too."

"I'd be careful not to push her too hard. She's a bit of a spitfire, don't want her to dump a hot coffee on your crotch."

"I like her when she's fiery, and I have good reflexes when it comes to protecting my balls. We'll be fine."

"I don't know what game you're playing with this girl. But we don't need a lawsuit, Tanner," he reminds me.

"I'm well aware. And I assure you, it's just a bit of back and forth. Casey and I have...an understanding."

Gerald presses his mustached mouth into a downward curve. “Like I said, we don’t need a lawsuit.”

“I won’t compromise the station.” And I mean that. I have every intention of being the perfect gentleman around Miss Casey—even if I do get off fighting with her. Thinking something and acting on it are two different things. And I’m nothing if not in control. In fact, I’m *always* in control. It’s one of my best qualities.

Gerald looks at me with a dubious lift of his brow. “I know this station is small-fry compared to the rest of your family’s holdings, but it’s everything to me.”

“I understand. And I give you my word that everything is above board. I’m not breaking any rules.”

“OK.” He releases a heavy breath as he stands to go. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Watching him leave, I take my feet off the desk and let out a sigh. I really don’t like being questioned, but where Gerald Brooks is concerned, I’ll let it go. This time. He’s given up a huge chunk of his stake in the station to get me in here and work a little Wright family magic. My family has been in the media game since newspapers were the only media around, growing with the times until we owned the maximum share allowed by government mandate. My parents both *hate* that I’ve made myself into a ‘personality’. But since I keep a low profile in my personal life, they...*allow* it. But it’s yet another reason I don’t want some messy office sex game coming to bite me in the ass. I may be a thirty-seven-year-old man, but I’m still mixed up in my father’s business. If I do anything to piss him off, he’ll pull this station out from under me faster than you can say, ‘whiplash’. Then he’ll make a bunch of threats I can’t afford to become a reality. There are important things going on behind the scenes that I don’t need him interfering with. That’s all until he steps down, of course. A day I’m sure every person in the Wright Media Group is looking forward to. Especially me, since there isn’t a lot of love lost between us.

Letting out a sigh, I'm just about to check my emails for any important correspondence when the door to my office bangs open and a harried-looking Ruby steps through, a pharmacy bag in her hands and daggers in her eyes.

"I went to three different pharmacies and not one of them had heard of Throaty-Coatie lozenges. In fact, one of the pharmacy assistants outright giggled at me when I asked for them. So, I just bought every single brand they had. Pick one." She speaks through her teeth as she moves over to my desk and dumps the paper bag in front of me. I try to keep the smirk off my face.

Making a dramatic show of looking at my watch, I slowly stand. "On second thought, we can skip the lozenges," I say, grabbing my coat off the back of my chair.

"What?" She looks at me incredulously. "I just rushed all over getting these so I'd be back on time and you're not even going to *look* in the bag?"

"I'm needed in the studio," I say, heading for the door. "Are you coming?"

"You are *such* an asshole," she growls, dumping the entire bag in the trash as she catches up to me.

"You decided I was an asshole before you even met me, Miss Casey. Who am I to deny you being right?" And as I walk ahead of her toward the studio, I can't help but let the smile take over my face. I'm control and she is chaos.

I'm really going to enjoy working with Ruby Casey.

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RUBY

*M*y fingers are itching and my toes are tapping. Standing in the back of the control room is *not* where I'm used to being. I'm supposed to be on the boards, listening for the cues and making sure the show runs smoothly. *I* was the magic of radio. I was the one who created the seamless flow of voice, music and advertising. If I messed up, we sounded like amateurs. As a board operator I was important, useful. Now, I'm nothing more than a glorified water boy.

“Cue the music.” The producer adjusts the microphone on his headset, looking ready but nervous on this first show. “And we're on in five, four, three...”

Despite not wanting to be a part of *The Wright or the Wrong*—the name they're changing *The Drive Home* to—I can't help but get caught up in the nervous tension in the air. And, as I look around, I wonder how many people in this room know what I know, that all of our jobs depend on the success of this show.

When I glance at Tanner in the studio, his expression is somber as he readies himself mentally to perform. And when I look over at Mr. Brooks, he's chewing his nails down to the quick. *Everything is riding on this doing well.* The jobs of every person in this room depend on how well Tanner's show performs.

The reality of that truth hits me in the chest and swirls around in my stomach like an overly spicy bowl of soup. None of this is about me and how I feel. It doesn't matter what I

think about the show, or whether I like Tanner Wright as a person. Fact is, the man is here to save us all from the unemployment line. And *my* job, whether I like it or not, is to help him do that. Mr. Brooks has trusted me with the truth over the station's struggles, and I let my outrage over Tanner's past shows and my surprise at him being the Porsche guy get in the way of doing my job. Arguing with him and calling him a bigot, a boor and an asshole is probably the worst first impression—technically, second impression—that a girl can make. I'm going to have to swallow my pride and my objections and try harder.

Ugh. I hate swallowing anything bitter. It's why I put so much Sweet'n'Low in my coffee.

When the On-Air light flicks on, I watch as Tanner comes to life at that microphone, talking with his hands even though he doesn't need to. From the other side of the soundproof glass, I have no idea what he's saying, but based on this morning's meeting, the show is supposed to be about celebrities pushing their social or political agendas via social media platforms. From the uncomfortable side-eye going on and a few murmurs in the control room, I have a feeling Tanner has veered off script.

"Do you mind?" I ask Terry, the producer, pointing to a set of headphones in the charging dock.

He waves a hand at me, but doesn't look my way, his distractedness making me grab for the headset even faster. What the hell is going on?

"—PC Culture. Cancel Culture. Everywhere you look, people are fighting about anything and everything. But where does that fight end? When there's nothing left? There's a saying—if you walk down the street and find one or two assholes, it's a normal day. But if you walk down the street and everyone you come across is an asshole, then the real asshole is most likely you."

As Tanner pauses and leans back in his chair, the poor board operator releases a sigh of relief. I don't envy his position right now. He's probably going to come out in hives

after needing to react with that bleep button so many times. Funnily enough, cussing during a PG13 time slot is *exactly* how Tanner would get his own show canceled—no social media outrage needed. I glance at Terry, and he looks like he's about to explode. This is *not* going well.

“Are we to judge based on words?” Tanner continues. *“Or based on actions or intent? Should we judge inaction? What if we just didn’t judge at all? What are your thoughts? How do we come together?”* He adds in a dramatic pause and leans closer to the microphone. *“I’ll be taking calls after these messages.”*

The moment the ads cut in, Tanner removes his headphones and rolls up his shirt sleeves like he's preparing himself for the fight to come. He's not even looking out here. His focus is well and truly zoned in on his show. It's actually quite impressive to watch.

“The censors are gonna have our heads for this,” Terry mutters, reaching for the talk button. “He can't cuss like that.”

“I'll talk to him,” I volunteer, sensing that any sort of berating that pulls him out of that deep state of focus may not go down well. “I have to get him more water, anyway. He's expecting my intrusion.”

Terry pulls his hand back and straightens. “Fine. Remind him it's PG13 language, we're not the late-night shift.”

I nod then push through the adjoining door, a bottle of room-temperature water in my hand. “The boards are lighting up,” I say, opening the bottle and topping up his glass.

“Hmm,” he responds, eyes still closed as he waits out the ad break.

“You changed the theme.”

“I had something else I wanted to talk about.”

“Is this because of our argument earlier? Because I'm sorry I called you a bigot. I was out of line.”

He cracks an eye open. “You're sorry?”

“I am. About the bigot part. Not the boor or the asshole part, because those still hold true. However, I would like to point out that you called yourself an asshole first. I was merely echoing the sentiment when I called you one myself.”

A smirk pulls at the side of his mouth. “And what made you change your mind? About the bigot part, of course.”

“I thought about what you said—how you never state your opinion—and I realized that was true. I have no idea what you really think on any topics your show discusses.”

“Hence why I’m just a boor and an asshole?”

I smile. “For now.”

“No,” he says, with more timbre than I was expecting from within our exchange.

“No?”

“No. I don’t accept your apology. Nor do I want it. You said what you thought, and you meant it.”

“But... I’m taking it back. I’m telling you I was wrong.”

“Exactly,” he says, making my brain hurt just as the intercom clicks and Terry’s voice filters out.

“*We’re back in five...*”

“Oh crap. I need to get back out there,” I say, taking one step away before stopping. “Oh! And Terry asked me to remind you it’s a PG-13 time slot. No more cussing. They had to bleep you, like, a thousand times just before.”

“I doubt it was a thousand,” he says, just as Terry finishes the countdown and the On Air light switches back on. I spin and try to push the door open before the lock flicks, but I’m too late. I’m stuck in here.

“Welcome back,” Tanner starts as I turn around with a sheepish grin to meet his somewhat amused eyes. He holds his finger to his lips and motions for me to sit in the chair across from him. “You’re listening to WHGC radio for your drive home. For those of you just joining us, I’m Tanner Wright and this is *The Wright and the Wrong*. We’re taking calls to discuss

political correctness and cancel culture. Why does it exist? Where does it end? And what's the solution to the fighting we see every day?"

Before he answers the first call, he taps the headset hanging in front of me, obviously wanting me to listen in. So, I pick them up and place them over my ears.

"What are you still doing in there?" Terry hisses in my ear the second I have them on my head.

In response, I turn to the window and mouth 'sorry', unable to voice my reason while the microphone is live. I can't hear his exasperated sigh, but I can see it through the connecting window. Things aren't moving according to plan, to a producer, that's an absolute nightmare. They're all about following the schedule and running a tight ship. What Tanner is doing by changing things up signals mutiny. And my being in here means that I'm no better. Normally, if the station comes under fire over today's show, it would be both our heads on the chopping block. But with things as they are, I'm not sure what the consequence would be if the censor's fine us over any breaches. Would that just mean the end of the station and we're *all* done for? Anxiety claws uncomfortably at my insides.

For a while, I just sit quietly, feeling awkward and out of place while listening to Tanner talk to his callers as they share their views and opinions on the topic. He asks probing questions, getting them to open up and perhaps say more than they really want to. But it makes for great talk radio, and as Terry's shoulders relax, so does my own tension. It seems as though we're going to be OK.

Then Tanner introduces a woman called Julie from Staten Island...

"Welcome, Julie. Tell me your thoughts."

"You keep talking about cancel culture and political correctness like they're the same thing. That's why I called."

I sit a little straighter in my chair as my interest piques, wondering how this is going to go. Tanner seems excited by

this call too, because his eyes light up and the corner of his mouth tilts up as he speaks.

“Then by all means, explain the difference to me,” he encourages. “I’m not above righting my wrongs. Pun intended.”

Julie chuckles. “The whole point of political correctness is to make folks stop and think before they open their mouths. No one likes being treated poorly for their lot in life, so why should anyone be free to make another person uncomfortable? It just feeds into a whole other host of problems.”

“I hear where you’re coming from, Julie,” Tanner says. “And I suppose the reason why we’re discussing it in conjunction with cancel culture, is that cancel culture seems to be an extension of political correctness. I think we can all agree that the goal was to make this world kind and inclusive. But what we’re seeing instead, is this hyper activism causing more divisiveness, less freedom and more hostility. What do you see as the solution to this simmering pot of outrage that continuously boils over? Is it more rules? Less rules? Should the government step in? Should they back off? Where do we go to find peace?”

Sitting directly across from Tanner during his show, it’s obvious how carefully he chooses his words. He’s validating the caller, challenging the caller, and asking them to do all the talking. He’s not offering his personal opinion at all. Something I didn’t catch when I was listening on my own.

“We find peace by being kind. That’s it,” Julie says. “If people could quit being so nasty to each other, the world *would* be a better place. Political correctness came about because the majority couldn’t stop minimizing minorities. And cancel culture came about because too many individuals use their uneducated, bigoted voices to undo decades of progress. Why y’all *want* to be bigots?”

As soon as the word floats out into the airwaves, Tanner’s eyes twitch and meet mine. “You consider me a bigot, Julie?”

“If the shoe fits.”

“That’s interesting. You know, you’re the second person to call me that today?”

“I just call it like I see it.”

“I hear what you’re saying, Julie. I don’t agree with it, but I hear you. And I’m going to ask you the same question that I asked my last accuser—did you hear me say that I wish I could put people down and be offensive without thought or repercussion?”

“Isn’t that what this show is about? People are getting on here saying cancel culture is dumb and that political correctness is ruining everything. Seems to feed right into your rhetoric if you ask me.”

Tanner grins at that. “I think we need to explore this perspective of my show representing me as a human a little further. Ruby?” My heart practically leaps out of my throat and runs for the door at the sound of my name being called out on air.

I shake my head vehemently. *No way*, I mouth, glancing toward operations where Terry is also shaking his head. In fact, everyone in there is signaling ‘no’ at us.

Tanner ignores their protests, and mine, and reaches across the table to switch my mic on. *Crap on a cracker*. “Care to explain to the audience what prompted you to call me a bigot earlier today?”

“I...I...I...I.” It feels like I’ve swallowed glue and it’s closed my throat up.

“Ladies and Gents, I’d like to introduce you to Ruby Casey, my co-host for this segment. Say hi to the folks stuck in traffic on Grand Central, Ruby.”

“Hi,” I parrot dumbly.

Tanner grins. “Now, Ruby, we had a conversation earlier today, and you stated that you have a strong opinion about my shows and the topics we discuss. Am I right?”

“I, um, sometimes.”

“You called me a bigot.”

“Something I apologized for. However, I also called you a boor, which you’re currently proving as an apt assessment.” The words fall from my mouth without my say so, and to my surprise, he laughs.

“I can handle being called a boor.” He chuckles, the expectation in his eyes urging me to go on.

“I, um, I called you a bigot, because I feel that you incite anger unnecessarily. You pick topics that people are already fighting about and make it worse by sitting in the middle playing devil’s advocate. Each side thinks you agree with them, so nothing ever gets solved. You’re just perpetuating this evil that seems to be seeping into our bones. Hate”—I shake my head, my brow furrowed—“it’s everywhere. I felt that if you weren’t a bigot, you wouldn’t be helping it breathe.”

I meet his eyes as I take in a sharp breath, surprised that I said so much. There’s a small smile playing on his lips and a cloudiness in his gaze, staying there for barely a moment before he snaps out of it and leans closer to the microphone. “And that, ladies and gentlemen, is what we call freedom of speech. She has the right to her opinion. But do I have the right to cancel her for stating it? Especially when I feel slighted by it.” He hits the button to bring the next caller on air. “Robert from Connecticut, you’re on air with *The Wright and the Wrong*. What do you have to say on the topic?”

Pulling at my lip with my teeth, I shake my head and smile at this man’s gall. Despite going completely outside the program schedule, Tanner has done it all with absolute professionalism. He hasn’t missed a beat. I can’t help but applaud his effort despite the fact I feel under the microscope because of it.

“Hi Tanner. Long time listener. First time caller,” Robert from Connecticut says. “I’m glad you didn’t switch states so I can still hear your show.”

“Great to have you tuning in to WHGC. Tell us your thoughts, Rob.”

“You know, I see where Ruby and Julie are coming from. But I don’t think you’re a bigot at all.”

“Ahh, a little backup.”

“Well, yes, and no. Like I said, I’ve been listening to you for a long time. I think the part Ruby said about you playing devil’s advocate is a better description of what you do. I don’t think you can run a show like yours without being empathetic to both sides of an argument.”

Tanner grins and looks at me. “Hear that, Ruby? I’m empathetic.”

“Or perhaps just...pathetic,” I shoot back. The control room are quick to add a soundbite of a crowd going ‘ohhhhhh!’ I cover my mouth so I don’t laugh out loud.

“That’s also a possibility,” Tanner returns, delight in his eyes. *Is he getting off on this?* “But I do like Robert’s summation of me. How about we hear from another caller? Diane from Poughkeepsie, you’re on the air.”

“Hi Tanner and Ruby. I called about the cancel culture argument, but I think I want to defend Tanner on this bigot charge.”

“You a lawyer, Diane?” Tanner asks.

“No. I’m a kindergarten teacher. I’ve worked in the education system for almost twenty years and I’ve met my fair share of bigots. Tanner Wright isn’t one of them. He never pushes his opinions on the show. Instead, he gives the rest of us a voice. Why, I’ve thought for a long time that the current level of political correctness is too much. I’m not even allowed to hug the children anymore in case my hugs are taken in the wrong context. It’s ridiculous. I think that Tanner just wants people to look at what we’re fighting about and ask ourselves why we’re fighting at all. People are so easily offended that it’s making us all feel neurotic, like we can’t say anything at all.”

“Listen, I’m not saying that the current climate is the solution,” I say, jumping in. “But whether it’s in our daily lives, or with what’s allowed in the media and in front of our

children, there has to be something out there that holds everyone equally accountable for our actions—our *words*. Is it going too far in some instances? Yeah, I think it definitely feels that way at times. But you have to remember, Diane, not everyone is as loving as you are. There are people who are inappropriate toward children, which is why that particular rule you mentioned is in place.”

“Do you think the people who choose to be inappropriate are going to be inappropriate regardless of the rules?” Tanner cuts in, directing his question at me.

“Of course, but with more eyes on that person, knowing a rule is being broken, it creates a system where everyone holds everyone else accountable. It’s an attempt to stop these slights from being reasoned away. To the layperson, political correctness can feel stifling because you have no malice behind your actions. But to a *real* predator or even to bullies, it holds them accountable. I think it’s important because of that.”

“What about this idea that predators are just being more careful with how blatant they are?” Tanner continues, treating me much like one of his callers and trying to probe my answers with more questions. “That all these rules do is make them smarter and harder to catch?”

“I wish I had an answer for that, Tanner,” I say. “But I think I’d need to consult an expert. Maybe the crime data could tell us if any of these efforts in social change are making a difference.”

“That might be something we have to do,” Tanner says, his demeanor shifting before he takes his next breath. “But it’ll have to be something we save for another time. Thank you to Ruby for being our guest this evening. We covered a lot in that segment, but it’s time to hand over to Rayleigh for the news.” He hits the button to cut off our microphones before he pulls his headphones down to his neck.

“Wow,” I say, grinning when the On Air light clicks off and it’s safe to speak. “It’s a different experience on this side of the booth.” When he turns to me, I expect him to say something about it—a critique of my performance, perhaps?

An acknowledgment of the fact I held my own? But I don't get that at all. In fact, I don't even get eye contact.

“Make sure you have a car waiting for me as soon as the show is over. I need to be out of here within five minutes. Put the tea in a to-go cup. There's a folder on my desk with some correspondence inside. Respond to it by hand. You'll find a stamp with my signature in the top drawer. After that, you can go through the questions GQ sent through for pre-approval, flag anything that asks about my personal life as inappropriate, and send it back. I also want research notes on the new Nike spokes model. Make sure I have those emailed to me by morning. I get up at five.”

“OK.” I draw out the sound as I pull the headset off my ears. Shellshocked, I knit my brow, feeling confused as I hang it back up and stand to leave. *What the hell just happened? Was I a prop?*

“Ruby,” Tanner calls out, stopping me before I get too far and causing a tiny slither of hope to open in my chest. This is it. He's going to tell me I did great or at least say thanks. I don't know what I want him to say exactly. I just want something positive. But when he taps his finger on the side of his water glass, I realize that yes, I was definitely just a prop. “Aren't you forgetting something?”

Returning to the desk, I lift the bottle that's directly next to the glass and upend the rest of it into the barely touched glass. It overflows onto the desk and splashes onto the floor. Tanner watches it happen without reaction.

“Will that be all, sir?” I ask through clenched teeth.

“You can clean that up. Then I won't be needing you until the end of the show.”

I don't clean it up. Instead, I turn away and leave the studio as fast as I can, blood pumping in my ears as I ignore the happy compliments from Terry and the rest of the team in the control room. I can't get away fast enough.

And as I storm through the halls toward Tanner's office, I realize I really was wrong when I called him a bigot. Instead, I

think I'll keep with my initial assessment of him—the phallic symbol I etched into his car. I may have had the wrong car that night, but I certainly had the right guy. Tanner Wright is a giant dick.

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TANNER

“*H*ow were the ratings?” I ask Terry at the end of the show.

“A hell of a lot higher than they normally are on this shift, seems a lot of your fanbase made the switch with you.”

Grinning, I clap him on the arm. “That’s what we want. How about the switchboard?”

“There was a spike during your argument with Miss Casey, then it dropped by about twenty percent and remained steady. We always had more callers than we had air time though.”

“Good, good. Where’s Gerry? Did he see those numbers?”

“Gerry?” He frowns.

“Gerald Brooks—the station boss. Does nobody call him Gerry but me?” I look around the room at a group of heads shaking in the negative.

“We wouldn’t dare,” Terry says with a gulp, his aging cheeks quivering with his movement.

“What do you call him?”

He shrugs. “Sir; Mr. Brooks.”

Fuck, this place is uptight. I’m uptight, but this place...it’s *really* uptight.

“He likes being called Gerry,” I say, trying not to smirk. “In fact, I *insist* you all call him Gerry.”

“Ah. OK.”

“And can you get these numbers to him? He’ll want to know right away.”

“Oh, uh, he left for a...a meeting. But I’ll put them on his desk.”

“Just email them to him.”

“Oh, no. We don’t do that. Mr. Brooks likes paper.”

Sheesh. “OK. Then give him paper.” I reach out and give his arm a gentle pat, trying to encourage the guy. He nods but still seems petrified of me, or maybe of Gerry. I’m not sure who yet. “Listen, I’ve gotta run. I have a hot date with a redhead so I’ll be off the grid for a few hours. Great work today, people. I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

When I turn around, Ruby is standing there waiting for me, tea in hand and a pack of honey lozenges she must have rescued in the other. On her face, a scowl.

She hands me the tea, and I admit to being ready to dodge if it’s suddenly launched at me.

“Did you put lemon in it?” I ask, relieved when it’s safe in my grip.

“I did. Why do they get a thank you and I get nothing but instructions?” She cocks her head to the side, blocking my exit.

“Is the car here?” I’m choosing to ignore her question. This conversation needs more time than I have available. “I’m already late.”

She doesn’t move. “In my opinion, I made your show better—gave it substance, diversity. And I don’t get as much as a nod of gratitude? Do you dislike women in general, Mr. Wright? Or is it just me you have a problem with?”

“While this has been a very interesting first day for us both, I don’t have time to bolster your ego, Ruby. You seem to be forgetting that on this show, our personal opinions don’t matter. Is the car here or not?” I glance at my watch, I truly don’t have time for this argument, despite the fact she looks adorable with her chin jutting up in the air like that.

“It’s here.” She moves to the side and I step out into the hall.

“Have you finished your work, Ruby?”

She holds her hands out to the side. “There are hundreds of letters in that folder.”

“That’s a no?”

Her voice pitches. “Of course it’s a no!”

“Then what’s there to thank?”

I get about halfway down the hall before the light tap of something hitting me in the center of my back stops me. “There are your lozenges, you oaf!”

Crouching down, I grab the pack and stick it in my jacket pocket. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Miss Casey. Remember that I get up at five and check my email shortly after.”

Her huff of disapproval is my goodbye, and it causes me to smile. She may be full of attitude and ready to throw down at any given moment, but Ruby Casey is the singular most genuine person in this building. I like it. I like her. Even if she hates me right now.

RUBY

“*I* bought wine.” Tahlia is leaning against my door when I get home after the work week from hell. I have a folder of correspondence under my arm and a weekend full of research and fielding phone calls ahead of me.

Despite that one shining moment on-air, there is nothing about being Tanner Wright’s personal assistant that I enjoy. The man is blunt and obnoxious. He rarely makes eye contact and dismisses practically every idea I have, even though he insists I give him a thorough breakdown of my thoughts on every topic floated for the show. Even the fact that he’s gorgeous and has a voice that sounds like an orgasm waiting to happen doesn’t save him. I hate him. I hate my job. And if he suddenly fired me, I might actually feel relieved. Sure, I’d be forced to work at Starbucks with Andy due to that non-compete, but I could move in with Theo and Darren and sublet my apartment for a while. That could work, right?

Anything to end my suffering.

“You look like my fairy godmother,” I say, wanting to hug my bestie and never let go.

Tahlia smiles. “I figured you’d need this tonight. I got the best they had with the money in my purse.” Which means we’re drinking the same wine as the homeless man who sleeps by the dumpster in the alley.

“It’ll pair perfectly with the cold pizza in my fridge,” I say.

She lifts her brow and grins. “Indubitably.”

“I hate my job so much,” I complain, slouching as I hold out my free arm for a hug.

“I know, honey.” With a sympathetic look, she opens her arms to welcome me but I take the wine bottle and hug *it* instead.

“You’re going to make it all better, aren’t you?” I say to the bottle.

Tahlia laughs as she follows me into my apartment. “Tell me everything. I’ve missed seeing you this week.” With my altered work hours, I’ve struggled to get home before midnight all week. Today is the exception because Tanner left early for another date with his ‘redhead’ so I decided to finish work at home over the weekend instead of staying back.

“I can’t begin to describe the amount of mail I went through today.” I throw the folder on my table. “Well, am still going through. Who even writes actual letters anymore?”

“Little old ladies?” she suggests with a shrug.

“Does this look like a little old lady?” I pull out a photo of a busty blonde licking the barrel of a rifle in an attempt to appear sexy.

Tahlia recoils. “Oh god. Why?”

“Her letter gushes about how sexy his voice is and offers an open invitation to visit her and be the rifle in the photo. I think that means she wants to lick him.”

“He *does* have a sexy voice. And I might have been drunk last weekend, but I remember he was hot as fuck.”

“Well, he likes redheads, it seems. So, you’re in with a shot. Much to Rayleigh—our newsreader’s—dismay. She’s a brunette and desperately wanted him single.”

“Probably a blessing. I’d have to pass anyway,” she says, opening the bottle of wine. “I quit assholes after the last one.”

“Or six.” I offer her a wry smile as I take two glasses from my shelf and place them on the counter.

“Ugh. Don’t remind me. The next guy I date will be the opposite of an asshole. He’ll be... What’s the opposite of an asshole?”

I shrug. “A mouth?”

She laughs as she pours the wine. “Not a literal opposite, a figurative one.”

“Nice. Likable. Kind. Caring,” I rattle off, and she sighs, smiling as she hands me a glass.

“Yes. All of those.” We clink glasses and drink.

“You know,” I start, my mind dragging back to my work woes again. “It seems people either love him or hate him.”

“Tanner?”

“Yeah.” I move to the table and sit down, flicking through the folder. “And no matter how nasty the letter is, he insists every one of them gets a response.”

She presses her lips together as she sits across from me. “Does he check what you send?”

“No.”

“Then be an asshole in the response. That’s his platform, right? Say whatever you want, blow the consequences?”

A burst of laughter leaves my chest. “He doesn’t even have a platform. He just likes poking bears and watching them growl.”

“Then you should tell the gun-licking woman he’s into bestiality.” She giggles and I sit back, huffing out a sigh.

“You know, I don’t know how he lives with himself. All week, I’ve listened to him start arguments between people and he doesn’t even bat an eye. How can he be happy sitting in the middle of that?”

“I get it. I only listened to the first show that you were in. That was a good debate, and I’m not even being biased. I turned it off the next day when the callers were ranting at each other over respect for veterans. The stupid shit they were saying hurt my brain.”

I take a giant gulp of acidic wine as I nod. “This is seriously the worst job I’ve ever had. And I was an unpaid intern for a year.”

“Oh! You hated that.” She sips from her glass and winces. “What did you call yourself?”

“The coffee whore.”

“That’s right, because they *all* wanted you when coffee was involved.”

“Plus, I smelled of stale coffee the whole time. Just like how hookers smell like old sex. It’s a wonder I can still drink the stuff.”

“Or have sex.” Tahlia laughs.

“Not that I’d have any time for *that* anymore.”

“Well, at least you’re moving up in your career,” she says. “You could be like me and stuck writing puff pieces about the perfect winter boots instead of writing real stories with grit.”

“You know you’ll get your break, right? They can’t keep you writing for the accessories department forever,” I say, giving her hand a squeeze. “You’re too good to go unnoticed.”

“I hope so,” she sighs. “But whatever, it sounds like moving up has its own set of problems, anyway. You wanna splurge and order some *hot* pizza, then watch Netflix, or you need to vent some more?”

“Hot pizza, yes. But I need to vent because I feel stupid. I feel used and abused and I just hate it. I’m not made to be a shitkicker.” I gulp at my wine thirstily, hoping the alcohol will sooth my raging blood.

“What about the money? You said you got a raise. That part has to be good.”

“I don’t know that it’s worth it. As soon as I saw who it was, I knew this job would be a nightmare. Then I was stupid, because for a second while we were on air, I thought it might actually be fun. But when we cut to the news, he dismissed me without so much as a nod and sent me to work in the crap heap for the rest of the week. The list of things I have to complete

daily is ludicrous. I'm working more than double hours for less than double pay, so the math doesn't work out. If I'd wanted that, I would have taken on a second job. No. I'm going in on Monday and I'm going to demand my old job back."

"What if they won't give it to you?"

"Then I'll quit. It'll suck for the six months the non-compete clause is in effect. But if that's what it takes, I'll do it."

"Surely there's another way? What about paying to fix his car?"

I shrug. "He can sue me for it. I'd rather go bankrupt than spend another day as that arrogant asshole's slave."

"OK. Well, whatever you decide, I'm here for you. With cheap wine that tastes like vinegar."

With a chuckle, I reach across the table and squeeze her hand. "Thanks, Tahl. That means a lot."



"I NEED MY OLD JOB BACK."

I get to the office early Monday morning to avoid everyone who works the evening show, and time my visit to Mr. Brooks's office, so I catch him returning from the breakfast show's meeting.

"No," he replies immediately. I follow him inside his office before he can slam the door in my face.

"No? But you can't say no. I'll quit if you say no."

"You can't quit without giving notice. You're under contract."

"Then I'll give notice. How long do you need?"

"Why don't you look at this first?" He slaps an entirely *new* contract down in front of me.

“What is *this*?”

“The response to your on-air appearance on Monday has the internet talking up a storm. Listeners love you. We’re making you co-host and calling the new show ‘Beauty and the Bigot’. It’s perfect.”

I pull my head back. “Beauty and the *Bigot*? What does Tanner have to say on this?”

He looks at me as though a second head has appeared on my shoulder. “It was *his* idea. Sign the damn contract and be back here by lunch. You’re one of the decision makers now, so you need to get in early.”

“Can I at least read the contract before I sign more hours of my life away?”

“Fine. Just go and read it someplace else. I’ve got shit to do.” He’s trying to look scary, but I don’t miss the tiny glint of pride in his eyes. It has me smiling.

“Thanks, Gerry,” I say, giving him a wink as I tuck the contract under my arm and head to the office I share with Tanner, looking for somewhere quiet to read through the terms—I don’t want to get caught out with any clauses like I did last time.

When I push through the door and flick the light on, I get the shock of my life when Tanner looks up from his desk. “Do you mind?”

“What the hell are you doing here?” I gasp, my hand clutching my chest.

He lifts his brow, his features looking sharp in the harsh lamplight he is working under. “Last I checked this was *my* office.”

“Technically, it’s also mine,” I say, my eyes raking over him as he flicks the lamp off and scrubs a hand across his stubbled jaw. *Has he been here all night?*

“Not at this time of the morning,” he replies. “What are you doing here?”

“I was planning to ask you the same thing.”

“I’m always here early.” He shrugs as he levels me with his bluer than blue eyes. *God, he’s stunning.* Now that the lamplight is off, the morning light coming in through the windows is softening his features instead of making him look severe. To look at him now takes my breath away. And I catch myself imagining what it’d be like waking up next to him after an exhausting night of— “Why are you here?”

I blink a couple of times, feeling the pink touch my cheeks as I push the images from my head. “Oh. I came to see, Mr. Brooks.” I hold up the contract.

“Don’t tell me you’re pissed about that.”

“I’m not pissed. But in future, I’d appreciate you discussing these things with me before altering my career path. I’m not your little redhead.”

“My what?” His eyes flash and his brow pinches so fast the whole mood in the room changes. I’ve obviously hit a nerve.

“Your date? You mentioned twice last week that you had a date with a redhead.”

“My dating life is none of your concern.” I lift my hands to show that I understand. Then he takes a single breath before picking up his pen and returning to whatever is in front of him. “Sign the contract, Ruby. The audience liked you, and it’s good for the station to give the audience what they want. Don’t you agree?” He lifts his eyes to mine again.

“Well...yes, but...” I shift on my feet.

“But what?”

“You should’ve asked me.”

With a sigh, he pushes away from his desk and stands, walking over to me with purposeful strides. From the look in his eyes, it seems like he’s either going to kiss me or slap me. Out of the two, I’d prefer the kiss. But that would complicate things, so maybe I’d rather the slap. Actually, no, I don’t want either.

He snatches the contract from my hands and flips it open, lifts his pen and scribbles on one of the pages before handing it back.

“I trust that amount is fair.”

When I look down at what he circles, I see a figure that doubles again what I was making as his PA. The amount gives me a sudden stutter. “A-a-and y-you don’t m-m—”

“Spit it out, Ruby. I was busy before you walked in.”

“You don’t mind working that closely with me?” I force out.

“No, princess,” he says, running a hand through his already messed up hair. “I’m not the one with a problem, you are.”

“And the name: ‘Beauty and the Bigot’. You’re fine with that too?”

“Of course. I chose it.” He walks back to his desk. “Just... read the contract before this afternoon and let me know if the terms work for you.”

“OK,” I say, turning to leave him alone. But before I can even open the door, it creaks open and a set of dark eyes peek through. “Is he there?” a set of pink lips whisper.

“Ah... yeah.” I look from the door to Tanner who’s bent over his desk looking like he’s carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“What is it?” he snaps.

The door pushes open, and a small mousy-looking girl steps in. “Mr. Wright, sir?” I feel like if I touched her, I’d feel her shaking.

“What, Karen?” he barks, and she practically jumps out of her shoes.

“There’s a man on the phone for you. Menzies, something.”

“Don’t be so vague. Get his full name and number, find out what he wants, then tell him I’ll call him back.”

“Oh, um, of course.” She does a little curtsy then backs out of the room. I stifle a laugh. Between Tanner and Mr. Brooks, this whole place will be on stress leave by Easter.

“Who was that poor little thing?” I ask, my thumb pointing toward the now-closed door.

“New assistant,” he says to his computer screen. “I doubt she’ll work out.”

“Why?”

“Because she isn’t as good as you.” He still isn’t even looking at me, too busy to change his focus, but I *do not* miss the fact that he just gave me a compliment.

“As good as me?” I laugh. “I worked for you for a week.” OK, I’m fishing a little here.

“And look how far you’ve come in such a short time.” He glances up and catches my eyes, giving me a brief smile that sends tiny little jitters skipping through my stomach. That smile of his is lethal, and I’m going to have to be careful working closer with him, or I’ll forget how much I dislike him.

“Wait. Is this what making me do all that research and topic breakdowns was about? You were testing me?”

“Who knows what I’m doing half the time,” he says, back to his work. “I’m the asshole, remember?”

“I want you to be. But I don’t know, I keep finding myself wavering on that. So maybe you just want us to *think* you’re an asshole.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m a bone fide asshole,” he says. “Sometimes I just splash on a little charm to get my way. Don’t mistake it for kindness, Miss Casey, or you’ll be sorely disappointed. Don’t forget to close that door on your way out.”

“Can I ask you something first?”

He sighs and pauses again. “Does my answer really matter? I’m sure you’re going to ask, anyway.”

“How can the station afford this?” I lift up the contract. “You know: salaries for me, another assistant, and you at the

same time. Mr. Brooks told me we were struggling. Like, almost out of business struggling.”

“The new show is already bringing in new advertising money. Which reminds me, Karen should have sent you a calendar update, but in case her ineptitude didn’t get it to you, you and I have a dinner meeting tonight. Some home-loan company wanting to be big station sponsors.”

“Is that something we do?”

“From time to time.”

“OK. I’ll have to shop for something to wear. I don’t really have a corporate sponsor impressing wardrobe.” I pull at the pale blue shirt I borrowed from Theo earlier in the week since I don’t have any corporate wear, and Tanner insisted I dress in a way that was more fitting to be his assistant. Wearing any sort of business wear in radio feels kind of odd. I’m used to wearing old T-shirts and torn jeans—radio isn’t normally the most formal profession.

“Don’t bother. It’s already been taken care of. We leave right after tonight’s show.”

“What do you mean, you took care of it? You don’t even know my size.” He laughs at that.

“I could shock you with the things I pick up on, Ruby,” he says, his voice sounding a little rough around the edges. I’d be lying if I said my nipples weren’t pushing against my bra right now.

“Like what?” I blurt, thoroughly freaked out *and* turned on. This is wild.

“You leave your jackets lying around all over the place, and you take your shoes off while you work. That’s how I know your size.” I open my mouth, but I end up just nodding. I didn’t realize he was so perceptive. “Now, if you can *please* get the hell out of my office so I can have some peace, I have a shit ton of work to do before this evening’s show. And Ruby, if you can get here an hour early? I need your help prepping for the pre-show meeting. This show is yours now, too. I want you involved with every step.”

“Wow. OK.” Nerves burst like confetti filling my stomach. I’m going to be a co-host. My voice will be heard by millions on a daily basis.

My life is definitely about to change, and it’s all because I drew a dick on Tanner Wright’s car. This is so not what I was expecting to come of that night.

And now I have so many questions. Like, how do we pick our conversation topics? Do I get a say or, does he have absolute control over the material? Do I get my own office or are we going to keep sharing? What happens if the listeners decide they hate me? Do I get thrown off the air? Do I go back to being a board operator or do I go back to being a PA? Or worse, do I get fired?

Looking up from the contract, I take a breath to ask for some clarification, but let it go when I see a set of headphones on his ears. *Seems I’ve been dismissed yet again.* Something I’m coming to learn is classic Tanner Wright.

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RUBY

“*I*f I didn’t know any better, I’d think you hated me,” Tanner says as we walk back toward our office after the show. It takes time to launch a new show officially. So, today, I just sat in with him as a guest co-host, much like I did the first time, while we debated Healthcare reforms. The whole time we argued, I could see a twinkle in his eyes. He loved goading me, loved it when I snapped and told him what I really thought of him and his rich man’s viewpoint. I have to admit that our dynamic makes for great radio. The boards lit up with callers, and the producer was positively beaming by the end of it. Everyone *knew* we were onto a winning formula and can’t wait until we launch ‘Beauty and the Bigot’ officially.

“That comment would insinuate I feel something for you—which I don’t,” I scoff as he opens the door for me and stands aside so I can go in first. His new PA, Karen, trots in after us, Tanner’s tea and lozenges in hand. He tells her she’s late, then takes them without a thank you before he shoos her away. I shake my head at him. “You are such a jackass.”

“Thought you didn’t feel anything for me,” he says with a chuckle, setting his tea down on his desk before he starts unbuttoning his shirt.

“Whoa. Wait. What are you doing?” I demand, torn between wanting to see if he’s as buff beneath that shirt as I think he is and looking away.

“Getting ready for dinner.” He pauses at the center button, giving me a tiny peek of the curved muscle at his pecs. He’s

definitely a regular at the gym. “Something you should also be doing...”

“Ummm.” I try to look away, try to keep my eyes on his, but this invisible string keeps tearing my gaze down until I’m staring at that button, *willing* him to keep going and show me more. Never has man cleavage looked more alluring and intoxicating. And I *really* want to see some abs. Call me nuts, call me whatever you like. But when faced with the opportunity to stare at some hot-guy muscles, my brain doesn’t give a damn who they’re attached to. Just because our personalities clash doesn’t mean I can’t admire his body, right?

“It’s dinner, Ruby. Not a show,” he states, cutting into my thoughts and snapping my eyes back to his face. “Eyes back up here.” He points to his face, but I don’t miss the laughter attempting to break free from his expression.

“I wasn’t,” I say immediately, my cheeks flaming.

“Sure.” He grins. “Your clothes are in the bathroom, by the way.”

“Uh-huh.” I’m still staring. Then he laughs and swiftly undoes the rest of his buttons and pulls the shirt off his body.

Holy mother of god.

My knees go so weak, I almost fall to the floor. It’s also possible I make some sort of *Ahhhh* noise as my entire body joins the cheer squad my ovaries lead. Tanner Wright is s.c.u.l.p.t.e.d. He has abs that are so perfectly defined my tongue is begging me to let it lick, and that V—*don’t even get me started on that V.*

“OK. Definitely not hate,” he says with a chuckle, reaching for the clean shirt that’s hanging with a suit on the shelf behind his desk.

“I...” I bluster, shaking my head while my cheeks heat to the point where I think they might boil water. *Why do I have to embarrass myself like this where he’s concerned?* He quite literally steals my ability to think at times.

“And you’re still staring.” He’s also still chuckling.

“Where else am I supposed to look?” I snap, all of a sudden finding my wits. Seems I have two settings where Tanner is concerned—lustful or indignant. There is no in between.

“You could always go into the bathroom and start getting ready yourself.” He’s buttoning up his shirt by this point, so I’m able to think a little more clearly.

“Wait. What am I wearing?”

“The dress I had sent over for you,” he says, his voice becoming clipped. Seems Tanner has two settings when it comes to me too—playful and bossy. “Get the hell in there and get ready. Car’s here in twenty minutes, and I won’t be waiting for you.”

“Whoa. OK, Sir Grumps-a-lot.” I give him a salute before I head toward the tiny adjoining bathroom with a curious frown. I don’t think I’ve *ever* had a man choose an outfit for me before—not even my gay brother or his drag queen boyfriend. They tried, oh lawd have they tried, but my wardrobe choices have always been my own since I’m a bit of a control freak. So, this is really pushing me out of my comfort zone. I even have sweat forming on my brow as I pull the garment bag open to look at what’s inside. I mean, what if it doesn’t fit me? I’m no petite little flower who can wear absolutely anything I desire. No. Most outfits take many rounds of hunting and trying on before I find something that fits my body type.

So, imagine my surprise when I find a sleek looking black dress hanging on the back of the door, and a bag from Saks containing a shoebox, makeup and a hair straightener. “What the hell?”

I check the label on the dress. Adam Lippes. A fancy pants designer who makes plus-size clothes to drool over. “Holy hell.” The tag describes the dress as a ‘Scoop Neck Flare Dress’. And I think it’s the classiest—most expensive—piece of material I’ve ever put my hands on. What’s even more amazing is that the size is...perfect.

Working quickly due to my time constraints, I pull my shirt off and wriggle out of my pants, quickly washing my armpits so I don't smell like sweaty nerves. Then I drop the dress over my head and sigh as the ultra-soft fabric cascades over my skin. "Oh, wow."

I'm not sure if Tanner is actually a sweetheart underneath all his bluster, or if he's just a master manipulator. But somehow, exactly when I thought I couldn't take being around him anymore, he's managed to make me do a complete one-eighty. Over a dress.

Correction: over a *perfect* dress.

I have *never* worn a dress this beautiful. It's sexy without being revealing with a scoop neck that only shows the slightest hint of cleavage, and a skirt that flares out and finishes at my mid-calf, brushing against my bare legs like a lover's caress every time I move. I love it. And if you asked me how I feel about Tanner right now, I'd tell you he's amazing and thoughtful—until he opens his mouth and changes my opinion again, of course.

"I'm in love, I'm in love, and I don't care who knows it," I say of the dress, moving so the skirt swishes back and forth as I reach behind myself to pull—well, *wrestle*—the zip up. My flexibility isn't on my side, and try as I might, I can only get the zip halfway up.

"Shit." Maybe the size isn't so perfect after all. And double *shit*. I'm going to have to be an embarrassing cliché by asking the hot guy in the other room to fix it for me while hoping he doesn't notice my back rolls. "Oh, god, no," I mutter, willing my arms to stretch a little further as I suck in my breath and try to do it myself. "Please, please, please." I tip off balance and bump into the back of the door. It's no use.

"You all right in there?" Tanner asks from the other side.

"Ah, yeah. Just peachy," I say, completely out of breath and flustered.

"Fifteen minutes."

“OK.” I take a calming inhale, deciding I’ll have to finish getting ready then get him to help me with the zip when I’m done. Digging through the bag, I pull out the makeup, swiping some concealer under my eyes, a touch of eye shadow, mascara and a matte lipstick that is the perfect shade of red for my skin tone. *How the hell?* I look at the tube, wondering how Tanner knows any of this fashion stuff before I drop the tube in a little clutch I found inside the shoe box.

“Five minutes.”

“Jesus,” I mutter again, looking in the mirror and pulling my hair from the messy bun I’ve worn all day. I run my fingers through the blonde strands and fluff it out so I look somewhat styled. There’s no time for that straightener, so this will have to do.

With one last look at myself in the mirror, I smile. I don’t often look at myself and think of the word ‘beautiful’ but today, it fits. I look beautiful.

“Ready-ish,” I say, stepping out of the bathroom and doing a little pose, because I’m a girl and we do these sorts of things.

“Ish?” he asks, his eyes traveling down my body then back up again. “What am I missing?” I kind of hoped for a more positive reaction than that—perhaps a low whistle—but a little appreciative eye raking is going to have to do.

“Well, the zip got a little stuck.” I pull my hair to the side and turn around to show him.

“Oh, really?” He chuckles like he thinks I’ve done this on purpose.

“Yes, really,” I say. “It’s either a little too tight, or I’m a little too big. Not sure which one.” I give him a wry smile before I turn away and let my embarrassment bloom. It’s one thing to be a big girl and be OK with your body. It’s another thing to be standing in front of your gorgeous, buff-as-fuck boss with your back fat showing. I feel...vulnerable. And if that zip can’t make it all the way up, I actually might die. But at least I’ll have a pretty funeral dress this time, as opposed to

the closed casket/open mouth issue I had the last time I thought Tanner Wright would cause me to drop dead.

“It’s not you,” Tanner says as he tries to shift the zipper himself. “It’s caught.”

“Oh god, that’s such a relief.”

“As long as I can fix it,” he says, leaning in to inspect it more closely. I shudder as the heat of his breath flows across my bare skin. *And...there go my nipples again.* I’m going to need some industrial strength bra padding if this keeps up.

“Hold still,” he says, just as I feel a gentle pull at the back of my dress, then a wash of warmth and his...his *tongue*?

Wait. What?

I don’t know whether to yelp in shock or moan with arousal. His tongue sweeps along my spine and causes a delighted shudder to flutter through my body. “Wh-what are you doing?” I gasp huskily.

“Two things,” he rasps, just as the zip gives way, then his warm fingers touch the skin on my back as he makes a slow erotic game out of closing my dress. “Fixing your zip while proving that you might actually *like* me.”

Snapping into action, I spin around and meet his eyes defiantly. “I don’t.”

His eyes drop to my rather *prominent* nipples before returning to mine, that damned panty-melting smile slapping me in the ovaries again. “Lies,” he whispers before pulling back and heading for the door, pulling it open as if he didn’t just lick me. “The car is waiting for us.”

“Huh?” I blink. And blink.

“The car,” he repeats. “It’s time to go.”

“Oh!” I quickly grab the clutch and anything I need from my purse, rushing out the door after him while trying to shake the tingling sensation that’s still running rampant beneath the surface of my skin. *What the hell is going on here?*

TANNER

That dress. Ruby sits across from me in the town car, looking out the window while I sit here trying not to stare at her, focusing instead on answering emails via my cell. *The distraction isn't working.*

I thought the sexy number Ruby had worn the Friday night I met her was something, but this.... *whoa*. From the options my personal shopper sent over, I chose this one thinking she'd look more, I don't know, demure or something—simple neckline, flattering shape, length past the knee. But those curves of hers have taken something classic and turned it into a wet dream.

My dick wants her. Hell, I want her. It's something I've been fighting since the moment she walked into my life. I love a woman who isn't afraid to look me in the eye and fight back, love the tension it creates before the inevitable slamming of hips. A hate fuck, in my opinion, is the best kind of fuck.

When it doesn't involve a co-worker, of course.

Which is why I'm kicking myself for losing control earlier. I shouldn't have licked her like that. It was stupid. It was reckless. And it won't be happening again. Because despite what I or my dick wants, Ruby and I need this tension for the sake of our on-air dynamic. That dynamic is *everything*. It's what will keep listeners tuning in and searching our names for many months—maybe even years—to come. Not to mention the fact that my ability to keep doing a job I love *depends* on me using my show to save this station.

My being here came with a couple of provisos. My father has made no secret of his distaste of my chosen profession. He thinks my show is low brow and won't support it, which is why he only allows it as long as I keep my personal life and our family name out of the gossip rags. That's proviso number one.

When I approached him about bringing WHGC radio under Wright Media's umbrella, he wasn't willing to sign off on it. Until I told him I'd quit if I failed—proviso two.

I save this station by using my show to bolster its ratings and bring in advertising revenue, while also keeping the Wright name squeaky clean, and in return, I get to continue working where I choose, instead of in the office right next to him, miserable, and doing his bidding like every other adult in the Wright family lineage from the beginning until the end of time. No, thank you.

There are few of us who ever manage to avoid the boardroom. Myself and my cousin, Ash, who's an engineer, are the only two who've done it in this generation. However, unlike me, Ash has cut all ties with the family money. Me, I have a very important reason for keeping it—I'm trying to right some wrongs of my own.

"Here we are," the driver announces, pulling up out the front of the restaurant and snapping me out of my stress-filled daze.

"Ready?" I ask Ruby as I open the door and the noise of the street bursts in.

She nods. "As I'll ever be."

Stepping out onto the pavement, I hold out my hand to help her exit the car, trying to hide my smile at the awkward wiggle she does that flashes far more thigh than I'm sure she intended.

"Thank you," she gasps, her buxom chest heaving from the effort. My eyes drop to her chest where her bust is trying desperately to get free, and I have to drop her hand before I tug her against me and bury my face in it.

Control, Tanner.

I remind myself that I am, in fact, in control, and allow myself to place my hand on the small of her back, doing the gentlemanly thing while ushering her into the restaurant—at least that's what I tell myself. It certainly isn't just an excuse to touch something I can't have.

OK. Maybe my control is slipping.

“So, what are these guys' names?” Ruby stage whispers as we walk through the door. She smells like expensive perfume, and I don't think I bought her any perfume. I inhale her scent again, deciding it's just the scent of her. Oranges and jasmine. *I'm in trouble.*

I clear my throat. “Bill and Jeremy.”

Her eyes go wide. “Seriously?”

“Do you know them?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I'm just thinking about Ben & Jerry's ice cream. So now I'm worried I'm going to call them that.”

I press my lips together so I don't laugh. “Then call them ‘sir’. It'll be safer.”

She nods quickly, and I can feel the tension radiating off her body. She's nervous, and I instinctively move to comfort her, my thumb sliding back and forth in a calming motion, the soft fabric doing insane things to other parts of my body. *God, I love this dress.*

Needing to release her, I use that hand to cover my mouth as I clear my throat. *Again.* “There they are,” I say, pointing to a table toward the back of the restaurant's first floor.

“Tanner!” Bill spots us first and stands to greet us. I've known him for years, so he gives me a hug like I'm family—something my own family does *not* do. “How the hell are ya?”

“I'm great. And you?”

“Brilliant! You remember my business partner, Jeremy?” He gestures to Jeremy, who's kind of caught in the bench seat

against the wall and can't do much more than shake hands across the table.

"I sure do. Good to see you."

"Pleasure's mine," Jeremy says.

"And this must be Ruby," Bill continues, moving in to take Ruby by both of her hands. I have to clamp down when a growl threatens to escape out of my chest. I don't want anyone touching her, and I'm not quite sure what to do with the feeling. This is...unusual for me.

"How do you do, sir?" she says, giving a little curtsy. *Fuck she's cute when she's nervous.*

Bill keeps holding her hands. "We caught your show today and you two are just brilliant together. Better than you ever were on your own, Tanner."

I pull out Ruby's seat and gesture for her to sit down, feeling more at ease the moment she's free of those grabby hands. "You don't hear me arguing," I say, letting my fingertips brush against her silken soft skin before I pull away.

"Unless it's me," Ruby says, turning her smile toward me. "Then he argues all the time."

"Ha!" Jeremy reaches across the table and pats Ruby's hands. "You sound just like my wife. Maybe we should start a radio show of our own too."

"Maybe," Ruby says, sliding her hand free to drape her napkin across her lap. I growl over the interaction.

"So, what are we drinking?" I ask, rubbing my hands together. I'll need to drink to get through this night without yelling at someone for touching what's mine—I mean, my co-host. *Fuck.*

Get a grip.

You're in control here.

You're always in control.

"How about we ask the lady?" Bill says with a grin.

“I think whisky,” Ruby says. “The Yamazaki twelve-year-old is particularly good.”

Bill chuckles, his eyes shining as he looks her up and down. “She knows her stuff. I like her, Tanner. I really like her.”

“Well, she’s easy to like,” I say, before I realize the words are falling from my lips. The compliment causes her to smile and flush a little. Which means my dick wants me to make her blush some more.

I think my dick might be the one with all the control here. *Double fuck.*

Despite my inability to clamp down on my attraction, dinner goes off without a hitch. We chat like we were all close friends with lots of laughs, no lulls in conversation and great food. During dessert, we get down to business, nutting out a deal where they’ll become station sponsors for prime advertising time and on-air mentions.

“We could even work your brand into our conversation,” Ruby suggests. “So, it sounds more natural. Like a recommendation.”

“Yes. I like that,” Jeremy says, nodding as he twists his whiskey glass between his fingers.

“Me too,” I agree, smiling her way. Beautiful, smart, sassy. Ruby is the whole package. And one day, some lucky bastard is going to come along and sweep her out from under me. The idea of the day coming any time soon puts me in a bad mood.

“I’ll let you take the car,” I tell Ruby when the evening is done and we’ve said our final goodbyes, a lucrative deal in our pockets. “I’ll get a cab.” I honestly can’t trust myself to be alone in an enclosed space with her right now. Sitting next to her all night in a cramped restaurant with her body constantly brushing against mine has done things to me that I need to take care of in private.

“Don’t be silly.” She shakes her head. “You seem tired... quiet. You should take the car. I only live a few blocks that way. I can walk.”

“In those shoes?” We both glance at her heeled feet.

She shrugs. “I’ve walked in worse.”

“No.” My protectiveness flares inside me when she moves to walk away.

“Excuse me?”

“You aren’t walking home alone. Take the car.”

She laughs, but she does it in a way that tells me she’s annoyed and I’m not funny. “Don’t tell me what to do, Tanner. You don’t own me.” The rumble of a growl comes out of me before I can even stop it. “Did you just...did you *growl* at me?”

“You are *not* walking through the streets on your own looking like *that*.”

Her brow shoots up. “Oh wow. So, now I look like a hooker or something? Nice one, Tanner. The only thing I’m *not* doing tonight, is standing here listening to your bullshit. Argue with yourself, I’m off the clock.” She turns and starts on her way, and for the life of me, I can’t let her go alone. If something happens to her, I’ll never forgive myself.

“Tanner,” she sighs when I fall in step beside her. “Please don’t turn this into one of your things where you keep at me until I hate you again. Can we just end this night with me feeling *nice* toward you? Just once. We can fight again tomorrow.”

“I’m not trying to fight you, Ruby. I’m just going to walk with you to make sure you get home safely. You’re a valuable commodity right now.”

“I see. So, you’re protecting the station’s bottom line?”

I smile. “That’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“You know, you’re kind of all right when you aren’t purposely being an asshole,” she says after a while. “There were a few moments tonight where I actually found myself enjoying your company.”

“Careful, you might start thinking I’m funny too.”

She laughs.

“Oh, shit. Too late.”

“I’m sure you’ll do something to piss me off again. Don’t sweat it,” she says with a soft chuckle. “But what about you today? You literally *licked* my back. Maybe I should be worried you’re developing a crush on *me*.”

Oh, it’s more than a crush, Ruby. It’s bordering on obsession.

“I licked your *zipper*,” I say, glancing her way with a smirk. “Your skin just got in the way.”

She laughs. I like it when she laughs. “Either way, you lingered way longer than you needed to.”

“You have a nice back.”

“And you have a great chest.”

“Ahh, yes,” I say, taking my jacket off and dropping it over her shoulders so she doesn’t get cold. “I do recall someone standing there with drool hanging off her chin while I changed my shirt.”

“Drool hanging off my chin,” she repeats with a scoff as she slides her arms into my jacket and sniffs the collar. I fucking love that she just did that. “At least I didn’t *lick* you.”

“I could apologize for that, but I won’t,” I say, flashing a smile her way.

“Ah, yes. Because it proved your point.”

“It did. You like me.”

“You have your moments.”

I smile and slip my hands in my pockets as we walk for a moment in silence, both of us seemingly aware that a little admiration and banter is as far as this flirtation can go—you don’t shit where you eat; everyone knows that.

“Do you think we’ll end up truly hating each other?” she asks after a while, and I raise my brow in question. “Because of what we do. Arguing all the time.”

I bounce my shoulders. “Perhaps. If we can be professional and leave the argument in the studio, it doesn’t have to. We can separate work and personal.” *Am I trying to convince myself it’s OK to want her?*

She chuckles. “I don’t know about that. You and I seem to fluctuate between intense dislike and—”

The horn from a rundown-looking Ford blares to hurry us up as we step onto the crosswalk.

“The light’s fucking red, you asshole,” she yells out, raising her arms in the air to make her point.

“Hurry the fuck up,” the guy yells back, Brooklyn in his voice.

“Just wait your fucking turn, you impatient piece of shit,” Ruby spits, walking backward now so she can continue across the street while also hurling abuse.

The moment we’re safely on the other side, the light changes and the car burns rubber taking off, the driver honking the horn and holding his middle finger out the window at the same time.

“Dickface!” Ruby screeches, flipping him the bird in return. Then, without missing a beat, she morphs back into the calm façade she exhibited only moments before. “I’m just up here.” I find myself smiling in awe as she tucks her hair behind her ear.

Ruby Casey is nuts, but in the best possible way. Every day I spend around her just seems to get better. She’s completely fearless, always speaks her mind and doesn’t apologize for anything unless she actually means it. While my on-air persona makes people *think* that’s how I am, Ruby actually lives it. I want to be her when I grow up. And sometimes—like right now—I wish I’d never bought my way into WHGC so I was free to pursue her as much as I want to. Free to lick every inch of her and have no regrets doing it.

But that’s just not how my life works.

“This one is me,” she says, sliding her key into a heavy wood and glass door. “You wanna leave me here or keep

walking me up? Keep in mind that we don't have a working elevator.”

“I'll walk you up,” I say, not even giving the comment a thought. I want to walk behind her up a staircase, stand close to her as she unlocks her door, pretend for a moment that if she invites me inside, we can do something, be something...*more*.

“OK.”

We say nothing as we climb ten flights of stairs to her apartment, the scent of ashtray, urine and disinfectant making me want to take her away from here and put her in a pretty apartment building with a concierge and a doorman, a maid service and a car that drives her from A to B so I know she'll always be safe and secure. I hate that she lives in this place.

“Thanks for walking me home,” she says as she takes off my jacket and hands it back to me, leaning against a door I'm assuming is hers. “You didn't have to, but thanks anyway.”

I step back and shove my hands in my pockets, my feet telling the rest of me that I'm not allowed to enter that apartment. “Can't have anything happening to the other half of our winning team.”

“Really? I could have sworn it was because you wanted to help me out of my dress. You know, just in case the zip got stuck.” She's teasing me, testing me.

“You don't want me to help you out of that dress, Ruby,” I say, my voice a little rougher than normal, even though I'm trying to laugh this off.

“Why? Will you lick me again?” There's a cheeky glint in her eyes that has me digging my hands deeper into my pockets to hide the tenting.

A low rumble emanates from within my chest as I shake my head back and forth. “I should go.”

“Oh,” she says, like something just dawned on her. “You have a redhead.”

“A what?” I'm confused and wary all at the same time.

“Redhead. Whenever you leave early, it’s because you have a date with a redhead. So this”—she points her finger between us—“is just you joking around with me, right?”

My chest heaves a breath as I nod quickly. “Right.”

A wry smile touches her lips as her spine straightens. “That’s what I thought.” She turns her key in the lock but pauses before pushes it open. “For the record, Tanner.” She spins around to face me again. “I do have feelings. And just because I’m a bigger than your normal girl, doesn’t mean you can tease me and flirt with me, knowing you’re never going to do anything about it because you’re already seeing someone else—who I’m sure looks like a supermodel by the way—and expect that I’ll just understand that it’s all a joke and I won’t take any of it seriously. Because I will. I will take it seriously because fat girls have feelings too. And when a man buys you a dress and takes you out to dinner, even if it’s a business dinner, and he pays you compliments and makes suggestive comments *and...and licks you...* it all means something. And I know I must be crazy for even contemplating this after the way you’ve treated me since the moment we met, but I *do* think about you like that, Tanner. I think about you in a fuckable way. And this is probably the whisky talking because I’ve had a lot of it tonight, but I have to be straight up with you here.” She pauses as she looks into my eyes for one long, tense moment. I can’t breathe. “If you don’t think I’m fuckable. If you are never going to do more than tease me, tempt me and then be mean the next day”—her eyes fill with emotion and her voice cracks—“then I don’t want it. And I’ll kindly ask you to back the fuck off. OK?”

As she stares up at me with those big vulnerable eyes, brimming with unshed tears, I want to tell her that I think about her like that all the time. That ever since I met her, I’ve thought of little else. That when I jerk off, she’s the face I imagine fucking while I do. I want to tell her there’s no redhead. I want to tell her there’s only her... But before any of that can make its way out of my mouth, her apartment door opens and a guy taller and broader than me fills the frame and scowls my way.

“Where the fuck have you *been*?” He directs his comment at Ruby before narrowing his eyes at me and slinging an arm around her shoulders protectively. “And who the fuck are you?” *She has someone? What the actual fuck?*

Feeling blindsided, I take a step back, completely sober and utterly informed. She has someone. Someone with a key to her place. Then what the hell was that speech all about? *Fuck. Fucking fuck!*

I don’t have the best track record when it comes to women and monogamy, but this... I *so* was not expecting this. But I should have known.

I thought she was different.

Turns out she isn’t different at all.

“I’m just her boss.” I swallow hard, then hold out my hand to shake his. “Tanner Wright.”

“My *boss*?” Ruby’s brow creases. “I thought we were co-hosts.”

I shrug once, my pride limping like a hyena after a fight with a lion. I certainly won’t be laughing anymore tonight, that’s for sure. “I own the station, Ruby. So, I guess you were wrong,” I say as I turn around and walk away, my fantasies dissolving into nothingness with every step I take.

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RUBY

“*H*e looked *really* pissed,” Theo points out as we close the door. “Did he think he was getting lucky tonight?” He tugs playfully on my hair, but I’m not feeling playful. “Did no one tell him Ruby Casey doesn’t put out on the first date?” He grins, folding his bulging arms across his equally bulging chest. He’s teasing. But as my twin, that’s OK. And at least he’s making me smile now...sort of.

“Not even close. He’s seeing someone and I’m...” I twist my mouth downward. “I’m *me*.” And *he’s* the big station boss. I had no idea. But I guess that explains why Mr. Brooks lets him call him Gerry.

“Ruby,” Theo says softly.

“Don’t. It’s true. And I’m actually pathetic because he’s been a meddling jerk since he started at the station, and the moment he does a single nice thing, I’m looking at him like maybe, *maybe*, a guy like *him* could seriously be interested in a girl like *me*. But as always, it’s just a joke, a tease—a bit of fun, a way to bolster his own ego at the fat girl’s expense.” My eyes sting as I suck in a sobering breath. “I actually hate men, Theo.”

“Oh, Ruby-roo,” he coos, pulling me into his arms and pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “We’re not all bad.”

“You’re right,” I sniff. “It’s just the straight ones who suck.”

“Some of them are decent too. And you will find your one. You just need to quit looking inside the office. Even if he

wasn't a jerk, your boss is the *last* person you should be letting in your bed."

"It was just the promotion to co-host, this damn dress and the licking, and the *conversation*." My stomach bottoms out and I wish I could just rewind to the part before I spewed all that word vomit outside in the hall. It is seriously my fatal flaw—Ruby Casey, the girl who can *never* keep her thoughts to herself. It's a disease, I tell ya. Foot in mouth syndrome. There should be studies on how to correct it.

"Whoa." Theo releases me and looks into my eyes with a frown. "Back up a bit. Did you just say he *licked* you?"

"*That's* the part you're focusing on? You're completely skipping over the bit where I've been offered a co-host position—a *big* promotion. That's far more worthy of attention than having a man's tongue on my skin."

"Why the fuck was his tongue on your skin?" he growls, getting all big-brother-protective on me. We're obviously not moving past this.

I sigh. "He was helping me fix my zipper. It was stuck, so he licked it and got my back. No big deal, so lay your weapons down, officer."

"Shouldn't be fucking touching you," he grumps as I head into the kitchen and fill my kettle with water, setting it on the stove to make some calming tea.

"Well, I'm sure he won't be coming anywhere near me outside the studio after my outburst tonight."

"I could hear you giving him an earful. That's why I opened the door."

"It wasn't anything I couldn't handle," I say, waving it all away. "I was just setting up some boundaries. You want some tea? I plan to drink this in the bathtub, then climb into bed and forget all about gorgeous men with bad attitudes. What's got you here at this hour, anyway? You and Darren have a falling out or something?"

"He's, ah, sleeping. In your room, actually. I hope that's OK."

“Oh. Uh, I guess that depends on *why* he’s sleeping in my bed.” I try to reserve my reaction until I have the full story, but I’m definitely not happy about this. I have a pullout couch for times like these, so taking over my bed is not cool.

“He was freaking out, and I had to give him a valium.” He lowers his voice. “Our apartment has bedbugs.”

“Bedbugs!” I yelp, immediately feeling itchy. “You have bedbugs in your apartment and your boyfriend is sleeping in *my* bed? Are you mental? Please tell me you didn’t bring anything from there in here?” The last thing I need right now is to deal with a bedbug infestation.

“No. Of course not. I’d never do that. But that’s not why he’s freaking out. He has a show on Friday and the fumigator won’t be done in time. Coco needs your help.”

“And that’s why he’s taken over my bed? Because he’s freaking out over a show that’s in four days from now?”

“Do you have any idea how much time and effort goes into a Coco show. The wigs, the dresses, the *makeup*. I’m hoping you can dig through your closet for a dress Coco can wear so we can surprise Darren when he wakes up.” His eyes go wide, nodding encouragingly—who has time to be down on themselves when there’s a drag queen emergency?

“I’ll see what I have, but I’m not sure whether I’m insulted over that or honored. Are you suggesting my clothes look like they belong to a drag queen?”

Theo laughs. “No. But you’ve been a bridesmaid to the cousins a couple of times, and those dresses were pretty hideous if I remember correctly. I doubt you’re planning on wearing them again? Darren’ll cut them up and work his magic. You’ll be saving his ass.”

“That’s fine. He can have whatever he wants. Clothes, shoes, makeup...whatever. Although I don’t have a wig for him.”

“No offense, sis, but you’re a little too white to share your makeup with Coco. I’ll take Darren shopping in the morning for the wig and makeup supplies. The dress is more than

enough. You're a lifesaver." He drops a kiss on the side of my head.

"Yeah, yeah, good ole, Ruby," I mutter.

"Hey, don't be so down on yourself. You're beautiful and amazing, and one day, the right guy is gonna see that. Believe me."

"It's fine." I turn around and take the kettle off the heat, deciding I don't want tea anymore as I quickly wipe at my damp eyes before any emotion falls. "I'm just a bit tired and overwhelmed, and I think I was reading into things because... because I'm lonely, Theo. You have Darren and Tahlia has men falling all over her, so she's never single. And I'm always single, always wanting, trying to put on a brave face when sometimes, *sometimes*, I want to be the princess in the story. And you know what the real kicker is?"

Theo shakes his head as he listens.

"The new show I'm working on is called 'Beauty and the Bigot' and I'm really not sure which one I'm supposed to be," I say, my voice growing hoarser with each word until the tears fall down my face and I'm crying. Just like I didn't want to do.

Immediately, Theo pulls me into the warm embrace of his chest, my twin shushing me and assuring me that I'm the beauty in the equation. And most days, I can convince myself of that too. But tonight? I can't. This big girl just needs to cry it out.

RUBY

A week, or even a few days ago, I would have been tickled pink over getting a workspace of my own. But today, when I'm shown into my own office by Karen, of all people, I struggle to even smile about it. Because an office to myself means Tanner doesn't want me sharing his space with him anymore. And after last night, I can't say I'm surprised. I made a fool of myself when I told him I thought about him in a fuckable way. And now, well, he obviously wants his space.

Fine.

Message received, loud and clear.

I had my moment of vulnerability last night, and now it's time to pick myself up again, hold my chin up high and pull my shoulders back. Like Theo kindly reminded me, I am worthy of love and caring, and the reason I'm not finding it is that I'm looking for it in all the wrong places. It's time to push any silly fantasies aside and ensure Tanner's and my relationship remains purely professional. It's what's best for the station *and* for me. No more lying awake at night fantasizing about his strong hands doing naughty things to my naughty bits. No more imagining him throwing me against the wall and having his wicked way with me after one of our more scathing arguments. And no more feeling sad when reality hits me and I realize that none of that will ever, *ever* happen. Tanner and I are co-hosts. That's it.

I just wish I could stop feeling so sad about it.

“Mr. Brooks said to tell you, you can decorate however you want,” Karen says enthusiastically. “There’s a”—she flicks through the paperwork she’s holding against her chest—“budget allocation in here for you.” She hands me the sheet of paper. “It seems pretty reasonable, don’t you think? You could really spruce this place up a bit. Although, I quite like it the way it is.” She looks around the office that has a similar set out but is about two-thirds the size of Tanner’s office at the other end of the building. He’s gotten about as far away from me as he can without canceling our show and firing me. “Do you like it?”

“I haven’t had an office to myself before. Just a desk.” Moving a little further inside, I run my fingers along the surface of the big desk that looks like it’s been recently polished to within an inch of its life. “Do you know who got kicked out of here for me to have it?”

Karen bounces a shoulder. “It’s all the way down the other end of the corridor from Tanner’s office,” she says. “I haven’t worked here long enough to notice if anyone was using this at all. Seemed to me that this floor only has a handful of offices on it, and not all of them are full.” The faint dusty scent in the air makes me wonder if maybe this office was being used as storage before now.

“I’ve been here for years, but I’ve never really come up here until Tanner arrived,” I say, as I move toward the sitting area. My fingers trail through the leafy plant that sits in the center of the coffee table. It has little white flowers on it that smell like orange blossoms, the little tag stuck in the soil calling it Orange Jasmine. “I was always in the studio or in the bullpen.” I touch the soil and realize it’s been recently watered. “Where did this come from?”

Another shrug. “It was here when I got in this morning.”

“I see,” I say, taking a seat on the cream couch that is set next to a wrought iron and cane bookshelf that houses a small tray with crystal tumblers and a decanted bottle of whisky, if I’m not mistaken. These tiny touches are ringing little bells in my ears, reminding me of the perfect dress and the exact shade of lipstick, *his warm breath against my skin*. Yesterday, these

little touches would have sent me swoony, but today, I understand that this isn't about me as an individual. This is about Tanner Wright and his attention to detail. It's what makes him so good at what he does. He reads people, and I've obviously been an open book.

None of this means anything.

Stop thinking this means something!

"Well," I say, stretching out slightly as I run my fingers through my freshly washed and blow-dried hair. "At least I won't have to listen to his grouching anymore, right?" I force my mouth into a smile, but it wobbles and I'm pretty sure Karen can tell.

"Yeah. He's a pain in the ass all right. Good looking, though. I guess that's how he gets away with it. Gorgeous men with money can kind of do whatever they want, right?"

"I don't think that's the way it is supposed to go," I say. "I mean, I know it's *how* it goes. But I don't think it *should* go that way. Beautiful men—and women—shouldn't get a free pass just because they were born with good genes. Rich people shouldn't get a pass because they were born with a silver spoon in their mouth. Last I checked, equality was a thing."

"If only that were true," she says, giving me a smile that makes me realize she's quite pretty when she's not cowering in fear. "And if it makes you feel any better, he sent me away too."
“

My eyebrows lift so high I feel my forehead crease. "Why? Where are you going?"

"To the desk just outside your office." She smiles. "I'm your PA now. He told me that I needed to be at your beck and call."

I must be hormonal or something, because that makes me feel really emotional. "You're my beck and call girl?"

She nods. "So, any research, meetings, emails and appearances, they'll all go through me. I can even fend off your mother if you don't like her calling at work."

That makes me laugh. “I happen to like my mom, so you can send her calls through any time.”

“What about best friends?” a new voice says from the doorway, and I look up to find Tahlia standing there with a big bunch of flowers in her arms. “I hope this is OK. Some man with a mustache who was yelling at someone for calling him Gerry told me I’d find you up here.”

“Oh, that’s Mr. Brooks, the station manager.”

“He’s scary.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” Karen whispers, practically dancing her way out of the office. Seems she’s rather happy about being banished from Tanner’s side of the building. I could probably learn from that.

“These are for you,” Tahlia says, thrusting the flowers into my arms. “I saw Theo this morning, and he told me the *amazing* news. Co-host! My best friend is a co-host on talk radio.” She plonks herself down next to me as I lift the flowers to my nose and inhale.

“Thank you,” I say, setting them on the coffee table next to my orange jasmine plant. “I haven’t really had the chance to absorb it yet, but it’s a big step.”

“I’ll say. And are you co-hosting with the big dick guy?” she asks, just as a male sounding voice clears his throat and Tanner fills the doorway. Tahlia chokes on her words. “I...I...I wasn’t. I was talking about...the car. The dick on the car!” She’s practically yelling by the end of it, and then she just closes her eyes and tilts her head toward me. “Oh, god. Just tell me when he’s not here anymore.”

Tanner steps in with that signature smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth, telling me he obviously feels a hell of a lot better today than I do. “Don’t stress it. The dick is being removed from my car as we speak,” he says, his eyes doing an appreciative sweep of Tahlia’s cute and petite frame before shifting to mine and hardening. “I thought we could speak before we head down for the pre-show meeting?”

“You can leave the bill for your car with Karen,” I say, keeping my voice and breathing even. I can’t say the same for my heart—it’s hammering like a little woodpecker in my ribcage because he seems to have that effect on me—but on the outside, at least, I feel quite calm. “As you can see, I’m in the middle of something.”

A slight frown creases his brow before he gives me a sharp nod. “You have three minutes to wrap this up and get downstairs or I’ll start the meeting without you.” *And there he is.* The curt, bossy asshole I’m used to. As he spins on his heels, my eyes follow his retreating back out the door, taking a moment to steel myself against any future charm, grabbing hold of this uncomfortable feeling and making it mine. Co-workers. Co-hosts. Boss and employee. That’s what we are. That’s how we’ll stay. I know that now, and I won’t be naïve enough to let my guard down again. *I hope.*

“He’s also very scary,” Tahlia says when the door closes. “Crazy hot though.”

“Just don’t, Tahlia. I’m begging you. Don’t ever even *try* to go down that road with him.”

“Never,” she says, smiling as we stand together and she gives me a hug. “I’d never cut my best friend’s grass.”

I roll my eyes and release her. “There is no grass, Tahls. The land here is completely barren.”

“Mmm-hmm,” she says, grinning as she hooks her bag over her shoulder. “And he just stormed out when you refused to speak to him alone because he hates you and wishes you were dead. Who bought that plant that smells just like your shampoo, by the way? You?” My brow knits as she points to the orange jasmine.

“What? I don’t know. It was already here.”

“OK. Well, it smells like your hair. Someone chose it specifically.”

I take a step back. “How odd.”

“Not from where I’m standing. But hey, everything in its own time.” She heads for the door.

“You couldn’t be more wrong, Tahlia.”

“Sure, sure.” She waves a hand dismissively as she pauses in the doorway. “Wanna go to dinner this weekend? We can get all dressed up and celebrate your promotion properly.”

“Sounds perfect,” I say.

She grins back and gives me a finger wave. “Enjoy your *meeting*,” she teases, waggling her eyebrows before she disappears out the door, not realizing she’s left me feeling even sadder than I felt before. I lean over and smell the plant again. Tanner Wright is a *very* confusing man. He’s two sides of the same coin, hard edges with a subtle soft center, rude and obnoxious one moment, lighthearted and thoughtful the next. And if I don’t start protecting myself here, I’ll do more than just think of him in a fuckable way. I could very well fall in love with him.

First and foremost, I need to protect my heart. It’s the only way I’ll survive.

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TANNER

“*Three months in and *Beauty and the Bigot* is the talk of talk radio,” Brooks says, smiling at the numbers in front of him. “Marketing wants billboards and buses, and whatever the fuck else they do these days, all around the city.”*

“As long as it doesn’t have my face on it, that’s fine by me,” I say, flicking the projections report onto the center of my desk. My head aches and my eyes sting. We’ve been pouring over listener numbers and programming schedules for hours. Since its launch, *Beauty and the Bigot* is by far our most successful show and is bringing in more advertising dollars than every other segment put together. And while that’s something to be proud of, we’re still trying to find a way to stop listeners from tuning in elsewhere when our flagship show isn’t on air. We can’t afford to keep all of our eggs in one basket. Especially when things are becoming increasingly strained between Ruby and me.

It translates great on air. Our audience loves it when we argue, and the station runs social media polls where the public gets to decide whose point was more valid. Unsurprisingly, Ruby wins most weeks. I’m the bad guy, the supposed *bigot*. And I’m not sure I like being *that* guy.

See, when the idea was floated, it seemed perfect. Ruby and I shared a chemistry that felt energetic and vivacious. But ever since our confrontation outside her apartment, the energy has turned dark. And I don’t like it. I miss what we were before that night. I miss her. Well, the *idea* I had of her. The reality of her turned out to be something else entirely.

“That’s actually something they wanted me to broach with you,” Gerry continues, picking up the report I put down. “PR feels that showing you and Casey in the ads *together* is the best way to go.”

“My stance on this is non-negotiable, Gerry,” I say, my eyes moving to look out the window. The idea of going through a photoshoot trying to pretend I’m OK, when every time I’m in the same room as Ruby I feel like a pot about to boil over, just isn’t going to work. It’s hard enough sitting across the desk from her in the studio each day. Being close enough to touch would be...a mistake.

It’s been a little over three months since the night I stood outside her apartment, warring against my attraction with her. A little over three months since I received a metaphorical slap in the face when that door opened and her boyfriend stepped out. And despite the length of time between then and now, I’m still angry with her for hiding the fact she was in a relationship. I don’t play with other men’s toys, and I sure as hell don’t share my own. I feel like all the flirting leading up to that moment was somehow a trap to prove her misguided point—that I was only playing with her feelings to bolster my own ego. That’s something I would never do. And frankly, I’m hurt she’d even think that. Sure, we’d only known each other for a week at the time, but we’d spent *hours* together. How could she not understand my character by that point? I say what I mean, and I mean what I say. I thought I’d made that clear. But then, I was wrong about her too.

“I told them you wouldn’t go for it,” Brooks says.

“Then why are we even discussing it?”

“Because they suggested you wear a mask to partially obscure your face.”

I turn back and glare at him. “A mask?”

“Like in Phantom of the Opera or something. They think it’ll give the impression of a beast and be really effective given the title of the show.”

“Absolutely not,” I say, shaking my head as I think about how poorly received that campaign would be within my family. My father lost his mind when I was voted sexiest man alive by some online tabloid. He was so offended that his oldest son had been reduced to a ‘pretty boy for women to drool over’ that he hired some firm to scrub the internet clean of any photo of myself and other family members that wasn’t approved by his public relations department—*Wright Media has an image to protect, and he won’t have his oldest son ruining it.* We had a massive fight where he threatened to cut me off from the family money, his favorite method of keeping us all in line. “I can’t be in the ad campaign.”

Gerald looks at me for a long moment before letting out a slow breath. “Fine. But the other option is to hire a stand in.”

“A stand in?” I shift my jaw to the side as I shake my head. “No. I don’t want some model taking my place.” I wrestle enough with the idea that when Ruby goes home, it’s to another man. The last thing I need is to *pay* for some guy to put his hands on her.

“Then what?” Gerald snaps, throwing his hands up in frustration. “You’re the man with all the great ideas. How about you tell *me* how we go about this? We need to promote the show. It’s common practice for hosts to do a photoshoot.”

Clamping my jaw tight, I try to envision myself taking part in such a thing. Masked or not, it’s going to invite unnecessary scrutiny and cause tension between my father and me—not to mention creating further trouble with the extra time I’d need to spend around Ruby. But Gerald is right, all the big radio shows have billboard campaigns. And in my previous gigs, I’ve been pulled up over my refusal to do them. Having a stand-in might be the best option.

The idea of a male model even standing close to Ruby sits uncomfortably in my gut, but I squash it down, jump on it until it fits into a too small box. *She isn’t mine.*

“Set up the photo shoot with Miss Casey and hire a model to take my place,” I say eventually. “They can stand back-to-back so her face is the only one the public can see. It’ll make

the casting process easier.” And it’ll mean he’ll have no reason to touch her.

“I’m unclear why you can’t just do that yourself, but if that’s what you want.” Gerald pushes on the arms of his chair to stand up. “You should get that assistant of yours to contact some agencies to send over headshots for your approval.”

“Get an intern to do it. I’m in between assistants at the moment.”

“That’s four in three months. What happened to *this* one?”

“Incompetence. Same as the rest.”

“Why don’t you get Casey to hire your next one? She seems to be the only person you can work with without driving away. She might be able to find someone with the same level of fortitude she has.”

“I should point out that you’re also still here, Gerry,” I say, deflecting his comment as I stand and shake his hand to end our meeting.

“Yeah, but I’m a bigger ass than you are.” He releases my hand and turns to leave, just as Ruby bursts into the room without knocking.

“Have you seen Twitter?” she blurts, and I shake my head.

“I’ve been in a meeting.” I gesture to Gerald with my eyes and Ruby’s mouth forms an O.

“You’re finished though, right?” She looks between Gerald and me, and Gerry nods.

“The floor is yours, Miss Casey,” he says, sliding his hands onto his hips while he waits to find out what her excitement is. “Tell us about this Tweety bird thing.”

“Twitter,” she corrects, glancing at him then me. “It’s blowing up over the boxing. A trans woman wants to fight professionally but they’re blocking her because she was born male. It’s sparking a *huge* debate, so it’s perfect for the show.” She’s all flushed in the face from excitement, and I hate that I can’t stop my body from reacting to how beautiful she is.

In the brief moment between her entering the room and now, I've already imagined slamming the door and kissing her so hard she falls back against it. I've imagined tugging the buttons of those jeans I wish she'd quit wearing to work open and sliding my hand inside, plunging my fingers so deep inside her that she won't even be able to think, let alone speak. I've imagined her screaming my name when she comes before dropping to her knees to return the favor...

And now I'm just staring at her, wishing she—and *Brooks*—would turn around and leave my office so I can deal with the consequences that line of thinking invokes in peace.

“Well?” She holds her hands out to the side expectantly. It takes a moment for me to straighten out my thoughts so I can respond.

“Well to what?” I growl. And I growl at her because I can't seem to communicate any other way when I'm feeling like this. She wafts in here like a breath of fresh air, a beautiful mess with her blonde hair piled on her head with a pencil sticking out of it, and after she speaks, I growl at her. Like I want her to regret coming near me. Like I want to punish her for being something I can't have.

“The boxing debate over the trans woman,” she clarifies, already sounding exasperated.

I'm exasperated too. Despite hating the way she blindsided me, I still want Ruby Casey. So much, I need regular jack-off breaks when I spend too long alone with her. It's ridiculous, and I hate that I have such a lack of control when it comes to this woman. I know she's off limits. For one, she's my co-host. And two, she's taken. *Three*, she lied—well, *omitted* information—about it. Still, I can't help the way she turns me on with that sharp mind and fiery attitude. This is getting out of hand.

“We're discussing teachers bearing arms,” I say, picking up the report again so I look disinterested, when in actuality, I'm trying not to look at the shape of her thighs and that tiny triangle of light that peeks through at the point where her pussy stops and her thighs touch. I don't know why, but that

gap drives me crazy. I want to slide my fingers through it and cup her with my hand.

She holds her hands to the side. “This is happening *now*. It’s on topic. People *want* to discuss this.”

“There isn’t time to change topics.”

“Bullshit! You change topics all the time.”

“That’s different.”

Her hands move to her hips and her cheeks redden. “Why?”

“Because it’s *my* show.” She hates it when I say that.

“Your show?” She moves toward me as her voice rises, ready for a fight. Gerald takes that as his cue to leave, muttering his excuses and getting the hell out of here before he gets caught in the crossfire. Smart man.

“My idea. *My* show,” I say when he’s gone.

“I’m the goddamn co-host,” she yells. “This show is *ours*.”

“And yet I’m the one with a big office and the final say.”

“You are such a jerk.” She shifts back. “Why am I even here? If none of my ideas are ever going to be any good, then why the fuck am I wasting my time researching topics?”

“Because you’re an overachiever who is desperate to impress.” I close the distance.

“I don’t need your praise,” she scoffs, standing her ground.

“Then quit trying to outdo everyone and just do your job.”

She leans in so close I can feel her breath against my face. “Finding topics is my job.”

“No. Researching topics is. *I* find the topics. You’re overstepping, and I’m tired of you barging in here and throwing tantrums when you don’t get your way.”

“I *never* get my way,” she spits, eyes flaring.

My eyes drop to her mouth. “Me either, princess,” I murmur, registering just how close we really are to each other.

She's physically pressed against me. I can feel her soft breasts against the hardness of my chest, and I'm standing over her, our faces so close that if I lean in maybe half an inch, my mouth will be on hers. My dick hardens at the thought, and I'm quick to turn away. "Just... do some research and send me your notes before the show."

"Does that..." She needs to pause to clear her throat. "Does that mean you'll consider it?"

"Who knows?" I move back around to the other side of my desk, sitting down so it puts some distance and a barrier between us. "I also need you to contact a few modeling agencies and get them to send some suggestions for an ad campaign we're running. Gerry will talk you through the details."

She folds her arms across her chest, that moment of tension vanishing as fast as it appeared. "Don't you have a PA for this stuff?"

"She didn't work out," I say, catching the unsurprised roll of her eyes.

"And why am I choosing a model?" Her tone switches from annoyed to mildly curious. "Can't get a date so you're paying someone?"

"I don't pay *anyone* in that respect, Miss Casey. You're doing a photo shoot to promote the show and we need someone to stand in as me."

"Because?"

"I don't need to explain myself. Just do what I'm asking. Or better yet, get *your* PA to do it. I trust you don't fight with her the way you fight with me."

"She doesn't piss me off the way you do," she says with a smirk, and I almost smile.

"Just choose whoever you think is suitable and run it past Gerry."

"Well, if it's someone standing in for you, I'm thinking getting a model is overkill. The homeless guy on 73rd will do

nicely.”

I laugh. I can't help it. It erupts out of my chest without warning, as unexpected as Ruby Casey entering my life was. No matter how often or how hard we fight, there's just something about her that gets under my skin and makes me forget myself. “Offer him a shower and five hundred bucks. You'll make his year.”

“He has no teeth. Does that matter?”

“Get out of my office, Ruby.” I'm smiling but fighting it now.

“He may also be missing an eye.”

“I don't care. Choose whoever you want.”

“And he has this floofy hair that sticks out like a mad scientist. Except he's mostly bald, so it's more like a lightning strike victim.”

“Goodbye, Miss Casey.”

With a chuckle, she turns and walks out, leaving my door wide open because she knows I hate it and does it on purpose.

I shake my head and try not to laugh. No matter what I throw at that woman, she always seems to get the last shot in. I'm endlessly impressed. And perpetually wanting. Ruby Casey is my kryptonite, there's no doubt about that. I want to be strong, quit feeling the way I do about her. But every time she's around me, I'm weak.

I wonder if she has any idea how much power she truly has over me?

RUBY

“*I* think it’s a *great* idea,” I say to Theo, standing in front of him at the gym while he does bicep curls and looks at me like I’ve gone mad.

“I don’t want my face on the side of a bus.” Brilliance struck me at the start of my lunch hour, and I couldn’t wait to find Theo and tell him. Since I was given the power to decide who features in the ad campaign with me, I decided that *he* can be the stand-in for Tanner. So far, he’s not as keen for it as I hoped.

“You’ll have your back to the camera, and it will make me—the person who *does* have to have their face on the side of a bus—feel more comfortable. Please, little bro.” I clasp my hands in front of me. “I’ll pay you a thousand dollars. You know you need the cash, so it’s win-win. Maybe even win-win-win because then you’ll have enough money to move out of my apartment.” I lift my brows up and down, trying to make this as appealing as possible. Ever since the bedbug incident, I let Darren and Theo sublet my apartment and moved in with Tahlia because Darren didn’t want to go home, too afraid that all of his Coco costumes would be ruined by another infestation. Things are cramped. Very cramped. I love my brother, but I also love my own space, and three months sleeping on the pullout couch at Tahlia’s is pushing the limits of that love.

“Interesting how the amount this job pays is *exactly* what we’re short in our moving fund,” Theo points out.

“It’s kismet!” I hold my hands out to emphasize the point.

“Don’t you think it’s hypocritical for an openly gay man to stand in for a man who claims I *chose* my sexual orientation?”

“He didn’t actually say that specifically,” I respond, wincing internally for defending my boorish co-host. Most days, I like to pretend I hate him—*pretend* being the operative word since that man is actually *really* hard to despise.

As much as I’m glad I told Tanner how his flirting affected me, I can’t say I’m not hurt by the fact it ceased to exist the very next day. No girl wants to learn that the guy she’s crushing on has no intention of following through. So, it was disheartening for me to be anywhere near him for a while. But once the show got off the ground and we’ve gotten into the swing of things, I feel like we found a new groove. A professional groove. One where we can clash on air and sometimes have a laugh outside of the studio—something I have to do to lighten the man up every now and then since he’s always so serious and growly.

Tanner needs a little levity in his work life, and well, I get to be typecast as the ‘awkward sidekick’ who makes the hot guy’s life better in a motherly sort of way, waving him off happily as he goes on ‘dates with his redhead’ twice a week. It’s just like in the movies. Except in the movies, they don’t show us that platonic sidekick at home, going to bed alone night after night, on a pull-out couch no less. They just show them filling a functional role in the hero’s life before his inevitable happily ever after. If we’re lucky—and the audience is invested enough in our quirkiness—we get a five second camera pan showing us turning to the awkward person sitting next to us at the hero’s wedding—that we probably organized, mind you—and realizing that that equally awkward person is the one who’s meant for us. *How fucking lovely.*

“Hello?” Theo is clicking his fingers in front of my face, bringing me back to the gym and the conversation we were having.

“What?”

“I asked you what he said exactly, then you went all spacey and were doing this weird eyebrow up, eyebrow down

thing.” *It’s called daydreaming, Theo.*

“I was *not* doing a weird eyebrow up, eyebrow down thing,” I retort.

“Yeah, you were,” he scoffs, tilting his head then mimicking the action. I shove him against the arm.

“I was *not* doing that! Stop!” He keeps going, as brothers do, and by the end of it, we’re both cackling.

“Answer my question,” he says, when we’ve calmed down and I’m walking with him toward the leg press. “What’s his opinion?”

“Oh, he *never* states his personal opinion. We just discuss the things social media is debating over and let the callers say the controversial stuff. We’re more like moderators in a debate.”

“So, what you’re telling me is, he’s not a bigot?”

“Shockingly, no. He’s definitely an asshole, though.”

“Oh, that makes it so much better.” He rolls his eyes as he gets on the leg press machine and positions his feet on the plate. “Tell you what, you find out one hundred percent what his opinion of me and my fellow homos is, and then I’ll give you my answer.”

“Deal,” I say, holding out my hand to shake his before changing my mind when I realize how sweaty he is. “No backing out of this, by the way. I need you.”

“No backing out. If you say he’s on Team Rainbow, I’ll be your shadow beast on the billboards.”

I grin. “You’re the best, and I’m sure he’s not a bigot in any way, shape or form.”

“I still want confirmation.”

“No problem. I’ll see you later.”

Weaving my way out of the gym, I feel confident that Theo will be doing the shoot with me. Tanner is a dick, but he isn’t the bigot he is represented as. When I started working with him, he called himself a moderator of social commentary. That

was the most apt description of him. On air, he's very careful not to put his own views out there about anything. He listens, and he asks questions, but he doesn't tell anyone *how* to think at all. I have developed a lot of respect for him professionally because of that. Even if he is rude and abrasive most of the time.

But if I'm honest with myself, I kinda like arguing with him, and he can definitely hold his own. Which works for me—and the show—because we clash regularly. And while he never backs down, he does crack occasionally, which I like to chalk up as a win for me. And when we're not arguing, I take great delight in making him laugh when he is trying to be gruff. I also enjoy doing things that I know tick him off. Like leaving his door open, and putting calls from journalists through when he's busy—he *really* hates that. I also buy sour drops instead of lozenges sometimes since he *still* makes me buy them, and I tell all of his new assistants that he *loves* pumpkin spice lattes then watch him shoot a spray of milk when he takes his first mouthful. Interestingly, he's never once blamed his assistants for this. He somehow knew it was me all along.

Since the fantasy of having Tanner Wright in my bed fell through, *teasing* Tanner Wright has become my newfound joy.

Barking at me is his. Something my nipples *and* my ovaries *still* enjoy. Traitors.

Sigh.

I really am pathetic sometimes. But then, Tanner *is* crazy hot, and just because I can't have him for real, doesn't mean my brain allows me to stop fantasizing about him. Not that my fantasies get me very far these days either—pull-out couch, anyone.

Double sigh.

I need to get my life under control.

I need to find my own awkward sidekick, someone who sees me for me and loves me completely. *Then* I'll be able to

get past my attraction to Tanner. I seriously just want someone to love. I wasn't lying when I told Theo I was lonely.



“I THINK WE SHOULD JOIN TINDER,” Tahlia says as we stand in line at the deli waiting to order. The offices for *Icon* aren't far from the station, so whenever I can, I call her up to grab a quick bite before I have to be at the station for the pre-show meeting. I'm running short on time, but I wanted to tell her all about the ad campaign and my idea to have Theo be Tanner's stand-in. She thinks it could be the perfect solution to all our problems—she wants her space back too.

“What are we gonna do on Tinder?” I ask, shuffling along as the line moves. “Bring guys back to yours and put a sock on the door college style?” It's my turn and I order a cup of soup and a grilled cheese.

“We could go to their place.” Tahlia asks for the chicken salad.

“And get murdered? No, thank you.” We collect our items and move along to the cashier.

“We could get murdered bringing guys back to my place too. It's all a risk. But one I'm willing to take because I *need* to get laid. Neither of us has had a date in over three months.”

I pay the cashier for both meals as Tahlia looks at the guy in a suit beside her who's just staring at her and smiling.

“What the fuck are *you* looking at?” she demands, a big attitude inside that tiny body.

“I'm on Tinder,” he responds, his eyes sweeping over her body lasciviously.

She balks and turns back to me. “OK. So, Tinder is a bust. But we need to do something to help out our social lives.” I've never seen a guy's shoulders slump so fast.

We take our food and head outside, eating and walking along the street.

“It’s hard being social with my life so crazy right now,” I say around a mouthful of food. “But Darren is doing another Coco show Friday night. I can leave right after my show and we can go watch that? I haven’t seen his show in ages.”

“I don’t think you quite got the part where I said I needed sex. But sure, let’s go to a drag show. Maybe we can hit the clubs after?”

“I can do that,” I say with a smile before I check the time on my cell. “Ugh. I should get back or Tanner will bitch me out for being late.”

“What’s the topic today?”

“Teachers carrying guns.”

“Oh god. That upsets me just thinking about it.”

“It’s going to be chaos.”

“Whose idea was *that*?”

“Tanner’s. He never takes my ideas on board.”

“You should have your own show so you can pick your own topics.”

“That’s not going to happen. My contract is for twelve months with a six month non-compete.”

“Eww.”

“I know. But I’m OK. Tanner’s not as awful as he sounds on air. Well, not all the time.”

She narrows her eyes a little. “I thought the land was barren. Are you two starting to get along?” The way she pronounces ‘along’ it sounds like she’s a little kid singing a jump rope song.

I shake my head straight away. “Don’t be crazy. We work together, so I’m forced to make myself see his good side. That’s all.”

“And you’re horny for him.” She’s still singing.

“I am not. *You’re* horny,” I tease.

“Hey, no need to get defensive. If I had to work with Tanner, I’d be horny for him too. He did get voted hottest man alive, you know?”

“It was sexiest. But listen, I’ve really gotta go.”

“Just when the conversation gets interesting.” She pouts. “Hey, maybe invite him to the Coco show.”

“No. No way. The last time Tanner and I socialized, it didn’t end well.”

Her eyes get wider. “Oh, my god. What happened? And why don’t I know about this? Spill or I’ll tickle you until you drop your soup on the ground.”

“That’s nasty,” I gasp. “And I’ll tell you later. I really have to get back.”

She holds her hands up and makes tickle motions with her hands, making me laugh. “Try to keep your eyes off your co-host,” she calls after me. “Actually, no. Keep them on. *On* him. And ask him if he’s on Tinder. You can swipe him or whatever it is the kids do.”

I wave over my shoulder, shaking my head. “Absolutely not! He’s dating someone, remember?”

“Boo!” she yells after me, laughing. And I have to agree, knowing Tanner is not only unavailable, but completely out of my reach, seems like a boo-able offense to me too.

TANNER

“*W*hat are your personal thoughts on homosexuality?” Ruby asks, her voice super casual as we were getting ready to go on air.

I’ve been sipping my water while surreptitiously watching her rake her fingers through her long golden blonde hair, securing it with a hair tie before she puts her headset on. It’s something she does every single time we put our butts in these chairs. The tease before the show.

Asking random questions is also something she does. I often wonder if she’s trying to unsettle me so I’m off my game once the lights switch on. But it never works.

“As I’ve said to you before, Miss Casey. *My* opinion doesn’t matter.”

She finishes tying her hair back, then folds her arms on the desk. “In this case, it really does matter. I’ve found someone for the billboard campaign, but they don’t want to do it unless I can assure them you aren’t the bigot you’re portrayed as.”

“I see.” This is the hardest part about what I do. The show gives people I’ve never met negative opinions of me. “And what do you think?”

She clasps her hands under her chin and smiles. “I see what you do firsthand, you play devil’s advocate but you don’t feed hate. I take everything I thought about you originally back.”

“That’s big of you.”

“I can admit when I’m wrong.”

Terry cuts in, announcing the show is starting in ten, nine... I lift my headset.

“Wait,” Ruby says. “That didn’t precisely answer my question.”

I meet her eyes as the theme music begins to play. “I assure you, Ruby. I take no issue with the LGBTQIA plus community. You can tell your model that.” I set the headphones over my ears, ready for the intro.

“Oh, it’s not a model, Tanner. It’s my brother. My very openly gay brother. Who’s in a relationship with a drag queen *and* has transgender friends. So, please, *please* can we discuss today’s Twitter storm?”

The theme music finishes just as understanding dawns on me. So many of her topic suggestions have been LGBTQIA+ based. She wants to discuss the transgender boxer in the hope of raising awareness and understanding within the community, maybe even change someone’s perspective. And I keep shooting her down, not because I don’t want to discuss any of it, but because I’m trying to keep the range of issues we discuss varied. We can’t keep circling back to the same thing or we’ll come off looking biased. But I can see she needs this win.

“Keep your personal opinion and your emotions in check,” I warn, watching her eyes light up before she nods excitedly.

“I promise.”

“I mean it. No tears on air.”

She scoffs. “I’ve got this.”

“OK. Here we go.” I hit the button to activate my mic and start the show. “Transgender and sport. There’s no denying that biologically, men and women are not equal on the playing field. In the ring, it’s considered downright dangerous to put a male fighter against a female. But what about a female against a trans-female? Or a male against trans-male? There is currently a twitter storm brewing over one trans woman’s right

to fight after undergoing gender reassignment surgery. Ruby, fill us in on the details.”

When I look in her direction, a small smile teases the corner of her mouth as her chest puffs proudly. Information and statistics roll off her tongue like a well-rehearsed song. And I can see her thinking, *Finally. Finally, I have a chance to make a difference...*

It’s a bittersweet moment for me, because I remember those times, remember feeling as though this platform could actually spark radical change in this world. But my idealism shutdown quickly, the same way Ruby’s will after we go to the phones. She’s about to learn the same lesson I did—never discuss topics that are close to your heart.



I FIND her in her office after the show. “Go away, Tanner. Don’t you have a redhead to go see or something?”

“That’s Mondays and Thursdays,” I say, taking a seat next to her on the couch.

She nods slightly, folding a damp tissue over and over between her fingers. “I should have listened to you.”

“Ah, what do I know? It was a good show, and you held your own.”

“I almost cried on air.” She looks at me and holds her hands out. “How was that holding my own?”

“The fact you *didn’t* cry. Discussing topics that mean something to us is always difficult. There are still some things I won’t discuss.”

“Such as?” Her big brown eyes look at me expectantly, and before I know what I’m doing, I’m spilling my guts.

“Special needs.”

She frowns. “Someone you care about has special needs?”

I nod. “My sister.”

“You have a *sister*?”

I nod again. “She’s the redhead. I was actually seeing her that night you decorated my hood. She drowned when she was small and was left severely brain damaged. Sometimes she has episodes, outbursts, and when the staff in the facility she lives in can’t settle her, they call me in to calm her down.”

“Oh, my god. And then you came out to find a drunk me scratching a dick into your car. I feel awful.” She covers her mouth. “I didn’t realize. Your suit and hair were ruffled, and I thought— Geez, I really misjudged you that night.”

“It’s OK. I didn’t exactly correct any of your assumptions. I tend to perpetuate the allusion of being in some sort of relationship to keep people like Rayleigh at bay. I’m from money, and ever since I won that stupid Internet poll...”

“Ah, yes. The internet’s sexiest man alive.”

“Yes, well, it made things worse. It’s hard to know who’s here for me and who’s here looking for a handout or a leg up in life.”

“I guess we regular people don’t think about being rich like that. We see money as a ticket to comfort and a life without worry.”

“If only that were true. Money brings responsibility and pressure and...” I shake my head and let out a breath. “Enough about me. You’re the one who had the tough show. We should be focused on you.” I place a hand on her back and rub in soothing circles.

“I just want to forget that ever happened. I was naïve to think people wouldn’t call in and be *actual* bigots. I hated that. I thought things had changed.”

“They have. And they’ll keep changing too. You just can’t expect the entire world to get on the same page at once. It might not feel like it a lot of the time, but the things we discuss on air, talking about both sides of an argument *does* help affect change. You can’t always see it, but it’s there, little seeds planted until they grow into a fully developed idea or a new belief. Your voice makes a difference.”

She dabs at her eyes and nods. “What happened when you talked about special needs?”

“Well, I gave a caller a rather scathing piece of my mind and got fired for it.”

She gasps. “I don’t believe it. You’re unshakable.”

“Now I am. It was my first radio job, so I was cocky, thought my opinion mattered. Turns out it doesn’t.” I sit back and place my arm along the back of the couch. “And why are we talking about me again?”

“Because we never talk about you. I want to know about your sister. What’s her name?”

“Camille. She’s five years older than me.”

“Were you close growing up?”

I lean forward and scrub a hand over my face. “I didn’t learn she existed until I was in my late teens. Her mother came to the house asking my father for help. Seems he’d gotten her pregnant and paid her off to stay away. But Camille needs around the clock care. Her medical bills and ongoing care costs had wiped them out. My father had an obligation to pay for his daughter, but he denied even knowing the woman. Which is how I got involved.”

“You pay for her care, don’t you?”

I nod. “I use my access to family money. It’s my way of forcing my father to do the right thing whether he realizes or not.”

“You don’t get along with your father?”

I shake my head. “Not at all. He’s an uncaring narcissist.”

“I’m sorry. One thing Theo and I are lucky to have, it’s good parents. They went out of their way to take care of us.”

“The man controls the narrative of a nation. He doesn’t need to care.”

“Well,” she says, sliding her hand on top of mine. “I care. And I think what you’re doing for your sister is incredibly honorable. I think you should expose your father for being the

deadbeat dad he is. It's ridiculous that he has all that money and power and won't use it to help his daughter. He helped make her, he's responsible for her."

"If there wasn't a consequence, I'd happily out the man. But if my father realized what I was doing with his money, he'd cut me off in a second and send Camille somewhere I couldn't find her as punishment."

"For real? He'd uproot her just to mess with you?"

"Ah, I see you've never met my father. He cares about winning, not people."

"But you care about people. Is that to spite him?"

I give her an unimpressed look, and she pulls her hand back. "No. I care because I don't want to be an elitist asshole all my life. I'm fortunate enough to have some sway in this world because of my surname, and I like to use that for good when I can."

"Is that why you came here to save the station and people's jobs?"

"Partly. But I did have a selfish reason for wanting to buy into this place. I wanted to prove that my show is worthwhile. My father thinks I do it for attention, and he hates unnecessary attention. So, I wagered my freedom on the success of this show."

"What do you mean, your freedom?"

"He didn't want to buy WHGC when I floated the idea. So, I told him that if I couldn't save it, I'd quit and work full time for him."

"Does he not understand how talented you are? Of course you were going to win that. What does he think about the success of our show?"

"I wouldn't know. I haven't spoken to him since before I started working here."

"What about your mom?"

I shake my head. “You know, I used to think my *nanny* was my mom. Boy, did I get a shock when she got married and left to raise kids of her own.”

“Tanner.” Her hand returns to mine again, and I look down at it, hooking my thumb up over hers. *God, I wish I could touch her all the time.*

“I’ve never told this stuff to anyone before,” I say, using my free hand to scrub over my face as I blow out a breath. “Camille, my father, the reason I’m here...”

“What made you decide to tell me? Because I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but we seem to argue. *A lot.*”

I turn and meet her eyes, wishing I could touch her hair. “We’re not arguing now, and for whatever reason, I trust you. I told myself I couldn’t trust you after you blindsided me with your boyfriend that night, but—”

“My what?” She pulls her hand from mine and twists her entire body to face me.

“Your boyfriend. The guy who opened your front door then made it very clear you belonged to him. Tall guy, big muscles, dark blond hair?”

“That night we went to dinner with those ice cream guys?”

I blow out a burst of amused air at her name for them. “Yeah.”

Ruby stares at me. Then she blinks. And then holds her hand in front of her mouth and she laughs.

“What’s so funny?”

“That *wasn’t* my boyfriend.” She giggles. “That was my brother. *My twin.* You mean you thought? No! After everything I said to you about being fuckable?” She shakes her head like she can’t believe this. And I can’t either. That guy—the guy who slung his arm over her shoulders and basically told me to fuck off was being protective because *he’s her brother.* Holy shit! Suddenly she stops laughing all together and just frowns. “Wait. Is that why you moved me out of your office and stopped flirting with me?”

Relief, regret and *need* flood through me all at once, and I don't even bother with an answer, I just wrap my hand around the back of her head and slam my mouth against hers, muffling any further words as my tongue pushes past her lips and I finally, *finally*, get to kiss her the way I've wanted—rough, hard and demanding. Then slow, sensual and languid. She tastes like sweet tea and breath mints, and I don't let up until we're gasping for air.

“Do you...um...” Her tongue snakes out to lick her lips before she finally opens her eyes and looks at me, a lusty haze swimming in her dark orbs.

“Yes?” Ask me to get out of here. Ask me to your place. Ask to come to mine. Anything. Just ask.

“Do you want to come to a drag show with me on Friday after work?”

That isn't what I was expecting, but the offer makes my smile broaden. “I would love to come to a drag show with you on Friday after work,” I say, earning myself a bright smile as she leans in and touches her lips to mine.

“Does this mean you *do* think I'm fuckable?” she whispers.

I respond by hooking an arm around her waist and hauling her across my lap. “It means I think you're *very* fuckable,” I growl, tangling my hand in her hair and bringing her mouth back to mine.

RUBY

The very next day, I'm landing against the door in Tanner's office as his hands slide over my hips, fingertips sneaking underneath my shirt while his mouth devours mine, searching, exploring. I feel like I could kiss him like this forever, get lost in the minty freshness of his mouth and the smooth velvety texture of his tongue sliding along mine. My skin is on fire, yearning for his touch, yearning for more than what we're doing right now.

"Jesus, Ruby," Tanner rasps. "I can't tell you how many times I've imagined doing exactly this to you. Ever since the first day you walked through that door." His mouth moves along my jaw, his lips sucking against my throat. He presses his hips against me and I can feel how hard he is. How hard I make him. And that alone turns me on even more.

I don't just want to make out with him the way we did on the couch in my office yesterday. I want to have him touch my body in a way that I only do to myself in secret. I want him to let me touch his body in that way too. The office is so not the place for it. But I want it. I want *him*.

"Me too," I gasp, almost combusting as his fingers move along the underside of my breasts. "Don't ever stop touching me."

"I don't want to, baby. But I really have to," he groans as his hands move back to my waist. "Fuck. We can't do this here." He presses his forehead to mine and we just stay there like that, breathing together, our hearts thumping in our ears.

“We’re blocking the door,” I whisper, sliding my hands up and down his back. “No one can see us.” A low rumble emanates from his throat as I hook my fingers underneath his belt and slide them around to the front of his pants, stopping at the buckle. “And if we are quiet, no one will hear us either.” I press my lips to the skin at the V-shaped opening of his shirt where his top button is undone. I love that part of his chest. Where the line from his pecs leads up to the dip in his collarbone. It speaks to me of manliness and strength, and I can’t help but run my tongue over his skin, up a little higher until I press my lips to the other thing I love about him—his Adam’s apple. I don’t know why, but an Adam’s apple that’s just the right size really gets me going. “I want you, Tanner.”

My body slams against the door again. “I don’t think I can be quiet with you,” he growls, caging me in with his arms as his hips pin me in place. “We’ve been working together a long time. You have no idea how many scenarios I’ve got running through my mind. We’d be in here for hours, days.”

“Add my fantasies to it and it could be months,” I whisper, loving the rumble of his chest and the twitch of his cock against my belly. I’ve imagined myself in this situation many times. But I never expected it to become a reality. Now that it’s happening, I’m actually struggling to believe it. Last night when I got home from the office, I had to pinch myself several times, stare at my kiss-swollen mouth in the mirror over and over again to convince myself it was real. Tanner Wright wants me. Heck, he even thinks I’m fuckable. Somebody get me a lottery ticket!

“Years,” he whispers, leaning in to kiss me again as he slides his hands down my arms and entwines our fingers.

“Then maybe we could just focus on one thing at a time,” I whisper.

A slow grin curls up the corners of his mouth as his eyes darken. “Tell me what you imagine, Ruby.”

“When we’d fight”—I move my mouth next to his ear and drop my voice to a low whisper—“I’d imagine you doing exactly this, kissing me hard and slamming me against the

door. Except, we'd go further." I move so I'm meeting his eyes, a slight blush creeping up my cheeks. I've never felt comfortable talking about my fantasies before.

"How far?" he whispers, a lustful grin on his face as he brings his mouth to my ear. "Show me what you wanted me to do."

With my heart thundering in my ears, I shift one of our entwined hands, my eyes locked with his as I bring his palm to the juncture of my thighs. He grins.

"Inside or outside?"

"Inside," I whisper, which is when he makes slow work of my button-up jeans, pulling the fly open one button at a time before he slips his hand beneath the cotton fabric of my panties and finds my seam. We both groan.

"You are so wet," he rasps, his finger moving back and forth, teasing me in a divine symphony of movement where my hips and his hand work together, rocking, swirling, touching, pressing, until my mouth falls open and he has to cover it with his or everyone in this office will know exactly what we're in here doing. Because I howl.

The moment my orgasm hits, I slap my hands against the door and I let out a howl that Tanner swallows up with a kiss, bringing me back down to earth with slow, languid movements until I can breathe again and the world comes back into focus. "That happened embarrassingly fast," I whisper.

"Or maybe I'm just that good." He smirks then twitches his finger against my sensitive clit, causing me to jolt from the sensation.

"Then I can't wait for you to show me more."

The chiming of my phone cuts into the moment, reminding us it's almost time for the pre-show meeting. "To be continued then," he says, regretfully removing his hand from my pants. "Friday night after the drag show, I want you to come to my place."

"For a sleepover?" A slow smile curves my mouth as I begin straightening myself up.

“Something to look forward to so I don’t end up losing control and fucking you against this door.”

“I like the idea of seeing you lose control, but I think I’d like to see it happen over, and over and *over* again.” I step closer to him and he groans. “Your place, it is.”

“How about we call in sick to this meeting, get Gerry and Rayleigh to do the show for us and I’ll take you there right now?”

“Tempting,” I say with a giggle, just managing to get my jeans buttoned back up before Tanner’s assistant, Henry, opens the door and it almost hits me in the back—almost—because Tanner slams it shut again before poor Henry can even get inside.

“*Knock* if the door is closed, Henry,” Tanner growls.

“I’m, er, s-sorry, sir,” he says from the other side. “I mean, Tanner. It’s just...the meeting. It’s about to start.”

“We’ll be out in a moment.”

“OK.”

“Meanie,” I whisper, smiling as I finish straightening myself up. “You’re gonna need to start giving everyone stress pay to compensate them for the years you take off their life from growling at them.”

“*You* love it when I growl at you.”

“That’s different. You and I are...two people who can’t stop making out while they’re at work all of a sudden?” I shrug because I’m not sure what to call us. We made out yesterday before the show, and then today, we’re doing it again, and now we have a plan to take things further. But there’s been no official decision made as to what we are or what this means. And I don’t want to be needy asking him to define our relationship so soon, but I have spent months feeling like I can’t have him. To find out he stopped flirting with me because he thought I had a boyfriend is not only comical, it feels like a hell of a lot of wasted time. We could have been doing this all along.

“We’re two people in a relationship.” *That’s not particularly helpful.*

“A relationship? With growling?”

He chuckles. “Anything you want.”

“I want. Because, god help me, I find your growling rather alluring.”

He quirks his brow as a sexy grin takes over his face. “We should get to this meeting.”

I drop my eyes to his pants to make sure that hefty looking tent he had going on has gone down—or is at least well hidden. “After you,” I say, stepping aside when I deem him safe for public consumption.

“No. After you.” He reaches out and turns the door handle, pausing before he opens it entirely. “You know, I’ve always enjoyed coming into work. But now...” He brings his fingers to his mouth and makes a show of sucking off my juices. “I’m going to fucking love it.”

I let out a squeak as we exit his office, almost coming for a second time as my cheerleading ovaries explode with lust confetti. I’m not exactly sure *what* the definition of this *relationship* is that Tanner and I have here. But my god, I’m going to love every moment of it. No more awkward sidekick for me. Turns out, I’m the current leading lady in *this* movie.

TANNER

After debating the pros and cons of legalizing drug use on Friday's show, Ruby and I grab a quick bite to eat before heading to the drag show in Midtown East. I drive—the first time she's actually been *inside* the car she so callously defiled—and park as close to the venue as I can, walking along the busy street with my arm wrapped firmly around her waist, one word resounding frequently in my mind. *Mine*.

“I like this dress,” I say, sliding my hand across the back of the crushed velvet and loving how it feels against my skin.

“I think it would look better on your bedroom floor,” she teases, flashing me a grin as she trots along beside me in silver heels, her blonde hair out in messy curls like it was the night our assumptions built a wedge between us, me thinking she was taken, her thinking I was uninterested.

Before that moment, it had felt like we were starting something. But when I look at her now, I know that the start of us was that very first night. The night she drew a dick on my car. Even then in my maddened and confused state, I wanted her. And if she hadn't been working at WHGC, I probably would have asked her to dinner, taking her company as payment for the damage to my car. As it is, I still haven't cashed the check she gave me for it. Something about doing that just seems wrong when the action itself is precisely what brought her into my life. I don't want to be compensated for that. That was the turning point that made everything better.

“Aren't I supposed to be the one saying that?” I ask, laughing.

She laughs and leans in closer to me. “You realize this is a bit of a big deal bringing you here tonight? Theo and Darren both want to officially meet and judge you, and Tahlia will be there too. You’ve met her. She’s the one who said you had a big dick when you barged into my office that time.”

“Ah yes, the tiny redhead who couldn’t string a sentence together.”

“Normally she’s better at talking. But yes, that’s her. She also pointed out something else I’ve been meaning to ask you about.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“She said that the plant on my coffee table smells like my shampoo.”

“I know. It’s why I put it there.”

She releases her breath and stops walking, stepping a little closer to me. “And the whisky?”

“Is the brand you said you liked at dinner. Karen is under strict instructions to keep it topped up.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious why?” I place my hands on her hips and draw her a little closer while people step around us to get by.

“Not at the time. We weren’t in a good place.”

“Just because we weren’t in a good place, doesn’t mean I didn’t care. I just...hated that I couldn’t have you.”

“Crossed wires,” she says with a gentle shake of her head. “They cause a lot of unnecessary damage.”

“Or you could argue that they saved us from rushing into things. We found a way to work together without our feelings getting in the way. I’d say that set us up perfectly for our future, don’t you?”

“Always the debater. But I do like the part where we have a future.”

“If I have any say in the matter, it’ll be a long and happy one.”

“Careful, Tanner. You’re going to make me embarrass myself by saying something too soon.”

“Oh, I want you to say it,” I whisper, bringing my mouth to her ear. “I’d fucking *love* it.”

She bites her lip, but before our perfect little moment can go any further, our bubble gets burst when a big burly guy knocks into us.

“Take it off the sidewalk,” he grunts.

“Take a step to the side, you lazy prick!” Ruby yells, not missing a beat. “There’s plenty of space.” The guy flips her off before she turns back to me in exasperation. “Jesus. Where were we?”

“I was about to tell you I’m in love with you,” I say, grinning down at her because over the last few months, that’s one fact that has become abundantly clear. I am in love with Ruby Casey, body, mind and soul. No one, not a single person in this world, has ever made me feel the way she does. She can make me horny, angry and happy all in the space of a few seconds, and I want to spend the rest of my days exploring that.

“You...you love me?”

“Yeah,” I say, brushing the backs of my fingers against her cheek. “Too soon?”

“No,” she says. “I feel it too.”

“Yeah?”

She nods. “I love you, Tanner.”

A giggle bursts out of her chest like she can’t believe we just said that, but I don’t give her any time to dissect it because I’m covering her mouth with mine and kissing her until we forget where we are. And where we’re supposed to be.

Ruby’s phone rings to remind us.

“Oh shit.” Her brother’s face and name cover the screen as she swipes a finger along it to answer. “I’m right on the corner.” She listens while something is said back to her. “I know, and I’m sorry. We’ll be there soon.”

“Everything OK?”

“Coco—that’s Darren, Theo’s boyfriend’s drag name—is MCing tonight, so it’s a big deal if the seats she reserved for us are empty when the show starts.”

“She. So do we call Darren ‘she’ all the time? I don’t want to mess up any pronouns.”

“Oh, when he’s out of drag, he’s Darren and a he. When he’s in drag, he’s Coco Monroe, and she’s a she. But either way, he’s not going to hit you in the side of the head with a stiletto if you get it wrong. So don’t stress.”

“OK. But I’m gonna stress. I’m officially meeting your family here. As you pointed out, this is a big deal.”

She entwines her fingers with mine and grins. “Yeah. It is a big deal. And a tiny teaser before you eventually meet my parents.” Her eyes go wide as she gasps. “Which will have to happen soon because you dropped the L bomb. Whoa! Full steam ahead, Mr. Wright. There’s no stopping this relationship train now.” She starts making chuga-chuga sounds before she abruptly stops. “Oh, wait. You’re my Mr. Right.”

“Shockingly, I’ve heard that one before,” I say as we get to the club and are waved straight through.

“Oh, I hate that. Don’t tell me that. I hope you responded with, ‘I’m Mr. Right Now.’” She puts on a deep voice to mimic me as we check our coats with a very tall drag queen with hair so high it brushes the drapes overhead.

“I’m not *that* much of an ass. I just said I wasn’t Mr. Right because contrary to someone’s incorrect supposition, I don’t lead people on.”

“My bad. But you’ve already put a positive spin on that misunderstanding, so I *think* I get away with it.”

“Once we get back to my place and get rid of this dress, *then* we’ll consider the matter resolved.”

“Yes, *boss*.” She rakes her teeth over her lips then gives me a little shimmy and I laugh.

“Finally! Get over here.” Theo, her twin brother, calls out to us, waving his arm frantically from a table right up front.

We do a round of quick re-introductions as I shake hands with Theo in a different mindset this time and say hi to Tahlia—who isn’t scrunching her eyes in embarrassment this time. Then I’m introduced to a few other friends of Darren’s and Theo’s before Tahlia introduces both Ruby and me to her date, Nick.

“Hey. I’m a big fan of your show,” he says, leaning across the table and shaking hands with both of us.

“Try not to hold that against us,” I say, feeling a little odd because despite the attention I’ve gotten in the media over the years, it’s not often I have people recognize me in person. I always assumed it was because I kept a low profile outside of work.

“Oh, no way,” he says. “The way you guys handle controversy is brilliant. We should all be so good at our jobs.”

“Thank you,” Ruby says, taking the seat I hold out for her.

“OK, guys. Fanboy later,” Theo cuts in, shushing us. “Coco’s about to come out.”

I note the way Theo’s legs bounce with nerves as the lights dim and a stunning drag queen steps out with a long pink wig on, dramatic makeup, and a sparkling fuchsia dress. The moment the music starts, and Coco starts lip-syncing to Rihanna’s *Diamonds*, Theo whistles and claps the loudest out of everyone in the room.

“That’s love for you, huh?” Tahlia, who’s seated next to me, says, nodding toward Theo.

“They’re obviously very devoted to each other,” I say.

“They are. And if you ever hurt my friend by *not* being as devoted to her as that, I’ll cut you, Theo will crush you, and

Coco will scratch your eyes out. We're all very protective of our girl."

I turn and give her a lengthy look. "I assure you, Tahlia, I am one hundred percent devoted to Ruby."

She narrows her eyes in scrutiny before she sits back and smiles. "OK. I just had to get that part out. You can enjoy the show now."

I chuckle, kind of enjoying how tight-knit this group is. "Thank you."

And as she suggested, I did enjoy the show. It was filled with lots of comedy and dance mixed with lip syncing from several drag queens, all of it tied together with the humorous styling of one Coco Monroe. Theo is obviously very proud by the end of it, and rushes off to meet her backstage, telling us all they'll catch up with us later.

We all move to a bar on 75th, crowding into a booth where the conversation and drinks flow freely. I abstain from more than one since I'm driving, and I can't help but notice that Ruby doesn't drink a lot either. "I want to be sober for the over and over and over again part," she says when I question her about it, causing me to smile and be glad that I have a table covering the tent in my pants. I can't wait to get her home. And claim her as mine.

"How long do you think we have to stay and be social?" I ask near her ear, giving it a quick nip and a lick before I pull away.

"We at least have to stay until after Theo and Darren get here. They haven't had a chance to talk to you yet."

"Ah, yes. The big brother, what-are-your-intentions talk, huh?"

"I'm guessing so." She smiles and loops her arm inside mine, leaning in nice and close, her chin resting against my shoulder. "Maybe don't tell him what your intentions for tonight are. That might make things awkward."

I slide my hand along the inside of her thigh. "Can I tell you what my intentions for tonight are?"

“If you want me making a spectacle of myself right here in the bar, yes. Tell me everything.” She lifts her head and giggles. I give her thigh a squeeze and growl in her ear.

“Look who’s here!” Tahlia calls out with a squeal. “The greatest queen in all of Manhattan!” She stands and holds out her arms, embracing the man I’m guessing is Darren. He’s out of his drag costume and is instead sporting a close-cropped hairdo with glitter eyeshadow, black sequined blouse, leather pants and heels so high I don’t even think a stripper could dance in them. Darren, however, manages to walk as easily as I would in trainers.

We all follow suit, standing and congratulating Darren on an amazing show. Seems that tonight is the first night Coco Monroe was the venue’s MC, and he’d almost backed out at the last minute from nerves. “I swear, I was breaking out in hives,” he says, addressing us all. “Just ask Theo, he had to powder me down I was so itchy. Stress does not make Coco a happy girl. I can tell you that much. But I got through it. Thank you all so much for being there to cheer me on. And what’s even better, in the dressing room after the show, I got asked to do it again. I’m MC once a month for the next six and I’m so freaking excited about it.”

“Next stop,” Theo says, his hand around Darren’s waist as he smiles proudly. “A tour, we’ll take Coco around the entire country.”

“Let’s conquer New York first, baby,” Darren says, his hand against Theo’s chest as he laughs happily. “Then we’ll tackle the world.”

“I think we should all drink to that,” I say. “What can I get you?”

Darren’s sparkling eyes land on mine, then he takes a moment to slowly look me up and down, his lips pursed in scrutiny. “You, sir, will escort me to the bar so I can take a peek at the cocktail menu. And while we’re there, we’re going to have a little talk man to man since you seem to have inserted yourself into the life of someone I consider to be my family. Not to mention, using my man as your stand-in for a

billboard ad for your bigot show.... You and me, our business is all mixed up together right now.”

I slide out of the booth and drop a kiss on the side of Ruby’s head. “Then to the cocktail bar it is.”

“He’s a sweetheart,” Ruby says. “They both are. Don’t let all that bluster intimidate you. It’s just for show. Although, since you’re full of a heckuva lot of bluster most days, I reckon you probably speak the same language as each other.”

“Har, har,” I say, giving her one last kiss before I escort Darren to the bar as requested.

“Let’s make these introductions official. I’m Darren Murphy aka Coco Monroe,” he says, sliding his long-nailed hand against mine and giving me quite a powerful handshake for such a small guy.

“Tanner Wright. Lacking any other alter ego to speak of.”

“That’s a positive,” Darren says, picking up the cocktail menu and perusing the list of offered drinks.

“Good to know.”

“Tell me, Tanner. What’s the deal with you not wanting to be in this billboard campaign? Why do you need my boyfriend for it?”

“Family obligations. The station comes under the Wright Media umbrella, and as the heir to that empire, I have certain standards to uphold. Keeping my face out of the tabloids—including billboards and the side of buses—is part of that.”

“So, it’s not just that you don’t want to be photographed with Ruby?”

My brow furrows “No. If I had my way, those photos would be of me tilting her back while I kiss the life out of her so every man in this state knows that she belongs to me.”

Darren uses the menu to fan himself. “OK. I can get on board with that explanation. It’s your family that’s the problem, not my family.”

“Correct. For the record, the only thing I care about right now is making Ruby happy.”

“OK,” he says, slapping the menu against my chest. “I’ll just take a scotch on the rocks, and an assurance that you won’t do anything to hurt my baby girl. I don’t think you understand the damage a dozen drag queens coming at you could do.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I say, giving him a solemn nod despite the comedy of his words. “She’s in safe hands. I could never do anything to hurt someone I love.”

His pencil thin brows arch high. “Love, is it?” I nod. “Then, Tanner, my dear man, it’s you we should all be praying for—not that I know what good it would do. But men who fall fast and hard need all the help they can get.” He gives me a sage nod as he pats me on the shoulder and tells me he’ll meet me back at the table.

As I step toward the bar to order, another much bulkier body slides in beside me. “My turn,” Theo says.

“I’d question your commitment as her brother if it wasn’t.”

“You made her feel like shit for a long time, you know.”

“It wasn’t my intention, and it’s no excuse, but I felt like shit without her too.”

“Was it true what you said to Darren just now? You’re in love with her?”

I nod once. “I am. As far as I’m concerned, she’s it for me. I’ve never met anyone like her.”

“She’s one of a kind, all right. And it goes without saying that—”

“You’ll make me pay if I do anything to hurt her?” I finish for him, having heard this line a couple of times already tonight.

He pats me on the back and smiles. “Oh, I’ll do a hell of a lot more than that. You hurt my sister, I’ll fucking bury you.” He gives my back two solid slaps, then tells me he’ll take a

beer before returning to the table with the others. I follow shortly after, drinks in hand.

“Were they awful to you?” Ruby asks when we’ve said our goodbyes and we’re walking back to the car, blissfully alone.

“No more than I expected. I’m the new guy in the group and you’re very obviously important to them. It’s good that they care about you enough to threaten my life.”

Ruby laughs. “Oh, no. They did not threaten to kill you!”

“I tell no lies,” I say, chuckling along with her. “But I can’t say I blame them. If anyone did anything to you, I think I’d become murderous too. The feelings I have for you, Ruby, they’re overwhelming.”

She stops walking and places a hand against my chest to stop me as well. “Mine too,” she says, lifting up on her toes and pressing her lips to mine, kissing me in the middle of the street, the sweet taste of the glass of wine she had mixing with the lime soda I had.

I lick my lips as we pull apart, grinning like a man who knows what happiness is as I wrap my hand around hers and start walking again.

“Darren thinks you’ll make a beautiful drag queen, by the way,” she says after we get back to my car and I’ve opened the door for her.

“High praise, I’m sure.”

“It is.” She giggles. “And if you ever wanna be transformed, I already have the perfect stage name for you.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“Dianne Gerrus. If you say it fast, it sounds like dangerous.”

“Why dangerous?” I laugh.

“Because you’re dangerously hot.”

My chest fills with an energy I don’t quite understand, but I know it’s because of her. It’s like she makes me nervous, excited and powerful all at the same time. “You’re the

dangerously hot one here, Ruby. And if we stand around any longer, I'm gonna have to take you on the newly fixed hood of my car."

She smirks. "You still haven't cashed the check for that, by the way."

I lean in and give her a peck on the mouth. "And I never will. Now, get in the car so I can give you a fucking tour of my apartment."

"A fucking tour?"

I give her a wink. "You'll see."

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RUBY

Inhaling deeply as I press tiny kisses and nibbles against Tanner's neck in the elevator, I catch the scent of his woody cologne, mixed with that manliness of his that has me wanting to hit the stop button and get to business here and now. Waiting until we get to his apartment seems like wasted time when there's already been so much of that between the moment we met and now.

"Ready for your fucking tour?" he asks when the door chimes open.

"I like the way you keep emphasizing the word 'fucking'," I say as we step out into the hallway.

He cages me against his front door as he fishes for his keys to let us in. "That's because I plan to fuck you in every single room, on every single surface, to show you around."

My entire body shudders at the thought. "Oh, god, Tanner. Hurry up and open the door. *Please.*"

He grins then crashes his mouth to mine, spinning us inside his apartment the moment the door is unlocked. "This is my foyer," he growls as he slams me against the wall, his hands pulling at the straps of my dress.

"It's nice," I pant, loving the way his mouth moves over my skin. His foyer could look like anything for all I care, I'm too busy pulling his shirt from his pants and getting those buttons undone so I can get to the body underneath. I've been pressed against it often enough to know how rock hard it is, and ever since that night of the client dinner, I've been dying

to feast my eyes on his taut muscular frame. And this time, my tongue doesn't have to *wish* it could lick him. It actually can.

Sliding my hands over his chest, I plant my palms against his pecs and shove him back with all the strength I have, sending him landing against the opposite wall where I'm quick to tear his shirt open, the buttons pinging around the tiles and walls.

"You want this rough?" Tanner's chest heaves as I drag my teeth over my bottom lip, taking a moment to eye-fuck his body before I lean in and press my lips to his chest.

"I want this all kinds of ways," I whisper, sucking and licking at the curve between his pecs, then the ridge that runs down the center of his abs, stopping at his belly button. I cup his hard cock in my hand, releasing a moan when it jolts against me through his pants. "I want it slow, fast, hard, gentle." I run my tongue around his belly button, leading to the V at his hips that peeks above the waist of his pants. "You can do anything you want with me." I drop to my knees and lift my eyes to meet his. "I have exactly the same plans for you."

He moans, letting his head drop against the wall as I undo his belt, then unbutton his pants, working his fly open before reaching inside his boxers and *holy mother of god!* I gasp at the size of his cock, my mouth watering when it springs free, all smooth, tight skin with a thick vein and glistening tip. Unable to hold back for even a second, I lick the head with the flat of my tongue and he hisses. "Fuck me."

My hands wrap around his base before I draw him into my mouth, swallowing him back with a greed I never knew I possessed, but know I can't contain. I've thought about doing this to him so many times that I'm currently working him like a porn star whose specialty *is* blowjobs. I'm impressed with *myself* here.

I'm also turned on. So *very* turned on.

I slide my free hand between my thighs, rubbing myself through my soaked panties as my mouth moves back and forth. I hum my pleasure.

“My god. *Fuck.*” The muscles in his neck strain, and his hands move into my hair. Despite being on my knees, it gives me a sense of power, seeing a man like Tanner coming undone, hissing through his teeth and trying desperately to hold on. “I don’t wanna come in your mouth, baby.” His hands tighten, pulling my hair against my scalp as the salty flavor on my tongue increases. *He’s close.*

With a growl, he hauls me to my feet, spinning us so I’m the one against the wall now. I hit it with a thud, my arms flying out to catch myself, and he takes the opportunity to grab me by the wrists and trap me in place.

“I think I need to move this tour along,” he rasps before his lips crash into mine, his tongue taking control of my mouth as his hands move along my arms, down to my rib cage. His fingers dig in, grabbing me before he spins me again, opening the door closest to us and pinning me front first against it. “This is the study.”

I register a desk and some bookcases as his front covers my back and I feel his cock pressing against my ass. That mouth of his sears a path over my skin, starting in the curve of my neck then moving over my shoulders then down my back as my zipper loosens and his fingers slide down, down to the waist of my panties. “I feel like I’ve been wanting you naked forever,” he murmurs, shoving my dress past my hips until it pools like a heavy puddle at my feet.

Dropping to his knees, he reaches up and flicks the clasp on my bra, then I let it fall to the floor as he drags his fingers down my back, hooking my panties, taking them off me too. Then with a groan, he grabs my hips as he places his mouth against my lower back, his tongue teasing my skin.

A ragged breath leaves him. “You’re so fucking sexy.” The words rumble against my skin as he guides me so I’m turned to face him.

This is me at my most vulnerable. I want to be one of those big girls in stories who gets her chance with a gorgeous guy and all of a sudden, her inhibitions fly out the window and she’s a goddess, loving her curves and never looking back. But

as I stand in front of him completely naked, I feel ashamed of my size and I want to hide.

“Don’t,” Tanner says, when my arms curl around my middle in a pitiful attempt to cover myself. “Let me love all of you.” Tears prick in my eyes as he takes my hands and brings them to his lips, paying each one careful attention before he moves them to my sides and holds them there, kissing a trail across my belly while he whispers how beautiful I am.

I blink and tears fall from my eyes as he rises to his feet and releases my hands, cupping my face before he wipes away my streaks of vulnerable emotion and kisses each cheek. “I don’t want you to ever feel like you need to hide from me, Ruby. Every inch of you turns me on and makes me hard.” He punctuates his words by pressing his length against me, showing me what I do to him. “I wanted you before I even knew your name. I’ll want you in the morning and again in the afternoon. Then I’ll want you every day after that because *you*, Ruby Casey, are my person. And I want you. I adore you. I *crave* you. And most of all, I love you. So don’t hide yourself from me.”

He brings his mouth to mine and kisses me with a slow passion that builds on itself and ignites my desire anew. *I want him*. “I love you too,” I whisper, pushing his shirt off his shoulders so it can join the pile of my clothing on the floor. “I also adore and crave you.” I press a kiss at the edge of his jaw, against his neck, and then at my favorite spot where his collarbone dips. I know it has a special name, but right now, I’m highly unconcerned over what it is. I just want to give in. I want to be his.

I run my teeth along his jaw, and he smiles. “There’s my girl. One of the things I love most about you is how bold and fierce you are. Come out and play with me.”

Feeling emboldened by his words and the fact his cock is ramrod straight with desire for *me*, I slide my hands down the glorious muscles of his chest and push at the waist of his open pants. “I’m here. I want to finish that fucking tour.”

He chuckles as his pants drop to the floor, his belt making them land with a heavy thud. "I think we should see the lounge room next," he says, kicking off his shoes and shoving his pants to the side.

"OK," I say, grinning as my eyes rake over his glorious body, and I wonder how the hell I managed to land a man like this as I lean down to remove my heels. He's every girl's fantasy, and he's mine. Mine. Mine. *Mine*.

"Leave them on," he commands, his voice husky as he takes his dick in hand and gives it a couple of pumps as he looks at me like I'm the only meal he'll ever need. It makes me feel desired, wanted, *feminine*. And I absolutely love it.

"OK," I whisper, biting the inside of my lip as I fight down my nerves. "Which way is the lounge room?" He points to the archway on the other side of the foyer, and I take a fortifying breath, stick my chest out, then walk a few steps ahead of him with a gentle sway of my hips.

He lets out a groan and practically sprints to catch up to me, catching me about the waist before he pulls me into his arms and kisses me deep while his hands explore my breasts, his feet walking us further into the room.

The backs of my calves touch the leather of his white sofa, and he eases me down until I'm sitting and he's kneeling in front of me, pushing my knees out wide so I'm open for him.

"Beautiful, pink, *wet*." He runs the tip of his finger down my seam, circling two of them at my entrance while he watches my face carefully, pushing in slightly, his eyes going hazy as I moan and welcome him inside my body.

Releasing an erotic growl, he shifts his position, hooking my knees over his shoulders before he lowers his mouth and flicks his tongue over my clit. It's not a slow lick or a gentle suck, but a rapid flick that has my eyes widening as I let out a surprised gasp. "Holy fuck!"

He hums and I grab his hair with one hand and use the other to support myself against the back of the couch. My back curves, my head falls back and my mouth opens, a silent moan

stealing my breath and blacking out my vision. It's like he's tearing my orgasm from my body, commanding it in the same way he commands the world around him. And I have no choice but to obey.

"Tanner. Oh god!" The buildup is sudden, so intense that my hips lift and my body convulses with my release. "Tanner!" A scream tears out of my throat as wave after wave of pleasure courses through my body, undoing me so completely that I actually think I might die this time—once again with my mouth open. But, oh, what a way to go.

"Fuck, you taste so good, Ruby," Tanner murmurs, placing gentle kisses and sucks against me as he slides his fingers out and I return to earth. Then he licks and kisses his way up my body, taking a moment to pay homage to my nipples before he stands and tugs me to my feet, grinning down at me wickedly. "I think it's time to show you the bedroom."

"Uh-huh." I nod dumbly, completely incapable of any sort of coherent thought as he laughs then slides his hand in my hair, tugging my head back and kissing me with forceful hunger, sharing my taste with me.

I moan into his mouth, pulling him against me so hard that our teeth clash.

"God, I can't wait to be inside you." He reaches down and lifts me off the floor, my legs going around his middle as he takes purposeful strides to his bedroom, carrying me like it's absolutely no effort at all. He's making me feel small, dainty, which is an incredible feat all of its own.

As he lowers me on the bed, I glance briefly around his room, muted blue and gray tones offset with white furniture that are either antiques or reproductions. The full effect is lost on me when there's a hunk of a man dragging his heavy cock up the inside of my leg, but I'm sure it's all rather lush.

"Tell me you're mine, Ruby," he rasps as his tip lands at my entrance. He teases me with it, running it up and down, through my wetness and my over stimulated clit. And I rock up, whimpering in my desperation to feel him inside me.

“I’m yours, Tanner. Always. I don’t think I’ll ever be the same after this.”

“I haven’t been the same since I met you. I saw you, and that was it, my world as I knew it ended and then there was just...you.” On the last word, he pushes inside, slow, stretching, deep.

“Oh god.” Stars light behind my eyes, and I make keening noises as my body adjusts around him. It’s an out-of-body experience, and now, more than ever, I feel certain I won’t be coming back from this.

Here lies Ruby Casey. So completely full and thoroughly satisfied. She lived a good life, and it ended with a bang. God rest her orgasmic soul.

“So. Fucking. Tight,” he hisses as I stretch around his girth, my insides quivering as he slowly draws his hips back then moves in and out. I clutch my hands against his biceps, barely able to breathe as he drives me closer to heaven than I’ve ever been before.

“Tanner. My god. I’m so full.”

“You feel so good, baby. So good wrapped around my cock.”

His thrusts quicken and I dig my heels into his ass, pulling his thrusts even deeper. “Faster,” I gasp, and he responds by pumping into me with increased speed and force.

And my god, I love it. I love him. He’s gorgeous and talented, and he fucks like a god. I’m either the luckiest girl on earth or I’m already dead and this is heaven. Either way, I am here. For. This. And I *never* want to go a day without his dick in my body again. This is my life now.

“Ruby.” With each thrust, the bed jostles, thumping against the wall. Heat pools in my lower belly, my cries turning into low moans as he begins to grunt and thrust harder.

“I’m so close.”

“Me too. Baby. I need you to come with me. Hold on.”

“Oh god, Tanner. I can’t. Please. I can’t.”

“*Fuuuck.*” The word is a hiss from between his clenched teeth as he buries himself deep and spills himself inside me, my own orgasm taking hold and tearing a howl from my chest that puts that first one in his office to shame. He kisses me, but it’s not to quiet me this time, it’s a slow, beautiful, languid kiss that feels like we’re somehow sharing our life force, mixing our souls, joining together on a spiritual level as we both come down from that amazing and instantly addictive high.

“Holy shit,” I gasp, laughing because I’ve never felt so good. “That was…” I shake my head, not even sure what I can say to do that experience justice.

He just laughs and kisses me again. “Outstanding.”

Rolling off me, he stretches his body out, his left leg bent at the knee, slouching to the side and giving me an unfettered view of that beautiful cock. Even at half-mast it’s impressive. “Give me ten minutes. Maybe fifteen.”

I bite my lip as my eyes drag over his tall, muscular form. “That long?” I’m sated and a little sore, but I totally want to continue our tour. “I thought you could show me the bathroom next.”

Turning his head my way, he grins as his eyes drop to my chest then a little lower. His cock jumps. “Shower or bath?”

“Can I rub soap all over your body?”

“You can do whatever you like to my body.”

“Then a shower. It’ll give me a better view.”

“Deal,” he says with a chuckle. “I definitely want to soap you up too, gorgeous.”

“Then I’ll meet you in there,” I say, sliding off the bed as I walk to the open en-suite door, trying to move as sexy as possible. I thought I’d feel awkward, but the man makes me *feel* sexy. I can already feel my inner sex goddess trying to take over and shove all those inhibitions away. I even pause against the door and slide my heels off my feet so he can watch me lean over. I’m rewarded with a sexy growl. “Don’t be too long.”

I barely get the heat turned on before he's in there with me, hard and ready for more. My inner goddess takes the pompoms from my cheerleading ovaries. She's taking over now.

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RUBY

“*I* can’t help but notice that we’re running out of rooms,” I say the next morning. I’m sitting on top of the washing machine while Tanner stands between my legs, completely naked, his skin coated in a sheen of sweat. Since the sun came up, we’ve had a second round in his bedroom, one in the kitchen and dining, and another in the laundry room. By my count, there’s only the main bathroom, the balcony, and if we want to push it, the closets left.

He drags his teeth over my lip, nibbling slightly before releasing me, a light rumble coming out of his chest. I love his sounds, these manly purrs or *growls* that come out of him whenever he’s pleased, perturbed, *aroused*.

“You’ll have to take me to yours and continue the tour there.”

“That would be an incredibly short tour. There is absolutely no privacy at my place.”

“No? I thought you lived on your own.”

“I *did*. Right now, I have Darren and Theo taking over *my* apartment while I’m sleeping across the hall at Tahlia’s. It’s only temporary while they’re saving for a new apartment, but I have a feeling Tahlia will want her space back soon since she’s seeing that new guy. So that’ll get annoying. I don’t particularly want to be squished in with all the drag queen paraphernalia.”

“Why are you the one who is moving between apartments?”

“Well, Theo and Darren’s place was tented while they fumigated for bedbugs. So, they moved in with me, and I decided to give them my bed because there’s two of them and one of me—gracious hostess and all that. But then their staying with me lasted longer, because Darren was petrified the bedbugs would come back and get into his Coco gear, so they asked to stay until they found a new place. I said sure, because it’s my twin, but Darren has so much Coco stuff that it took over my entire apartment. So, I just thought it was easier to go across the hall and stay with Tahlia in the interim. It’s not forever.”

“In that case, why don’t you just stay with me until they find somewhere? I’m sure it’ll be a hell of a lot more comfortable.” He cups his hand around my breast and teases my nipple. “Better benefits, too.”

Taking a deep inhale, I smile and slowly shake my head. “Don’t you think that’s a little too much too soon?” I place my hand on his shoulders and slide it around the back of his neck, my fingers playing in his hair.

“Let’s see,” he starts, narrowing one eye slightly in a way that I know means he’s about to tease me. “We’ve known each other for a few months now. Spent almost every single day at work together. And in that time, we’ve fallen desperately in love but only just gave into our feelings in the last week. I’d say that’s taking it pretty slow. Time to speed things up.”

“I don’t know.” I sigh. “That feels a little like going from zero to one hundred. What if they never move out and you get sick of me?”

His cock twitches inside me. “Do you feel that?” he asks, a cheeky glint in his eyes. “I don’t think I’m ever getting sick of you. So how about you quit your arguing and let me show you the main bathroom? We can get dirty clean, then I’ll take you back home to pack a bag. And if you’re up for it, we could stop in and I’ll introduce you to Camille.”

A huge grin spreads across my face. “Are you for real?”

He nods. “I met your sibling. I want you to meet mine.”

“OK,” I say, closing the distance between us, my mouth connecting with his. “Show me this bathroom of yours. I hope there’s a big tub.”

“Oh, it’s huge,” he says, lifting me off the washing machine and carrying me through the halls.

I lift my brows. “Do you think we’ll fit?”

“Definitely.”

A smile creeps over my face. “You know, I *love* your bedroom, but depending on how this goes, the main bathroom might become my favorite part of this tour.”

“I’m struggling to come up with a favorite. I’ll likely need at least three tours of each room to decide which is my favorite to fuck you in.”

He pushes the bathroom door open and sets me on the edge of a massive clawfoot tub that he wasn’t exaggerating over the size of. It even has a double faucet to help fill it, otherwise, I think we’d need a solid hour waiting on it.

The steel is cold against my naked skin, but the warmth and lavender scent of the oil he splashes in there floats up around me, making me smile because I don’t think I’ve ever felt this cared for before.

“What are you grinning about?” he asks, turning toward me and holding out his hand once he’s finished setting up the bath.

“This. Us,” I say, sliding my hand in his and standing. “I think everyone at the station would be shocked to learn you have lavender bath oil.”

“It helps you relax.”

“And you’ve helped me relax. I love everything about how we are together, Tanner.”

“You even like arguing with me at the station?”

“I *love* arguing with you. Is that silly?”

“No,” he whispers. “I get hard as a rock every time you fight me on a topic.” He leans in to kiss me, pulling me closer

so we're pressing firmly against each other. He's all hard muscle and sinew, and I'm all soft tissue and curves. We align like our bodies were made to absorb each other. Never have I felt so complete.

"Get in," I say as I push him back a touch and lean over to shut off the faucet.

"I thought I was the bossy one." He breaks away just long enough to sink into the heat of the water, and I climb in on top of him, taking him inside me before the water washes away my natural lubrication.

We moan together as I grind against the base of his shaft. He grips my hips and leans back, his eyes hooded with desire. "Told you it was a big tub," he says in this low sensual voice that never fails to set my body on fire.

"I think this bathroom is definitely top of the list," I pant, rocking my hips, before I lean in, gently brushing my lips over the stubble on his chin then bringing my mouth to his. Leisurely, I slide my tongue inside so I can savor every piece of him. I want to memorize every part of his mouth, his tongue, his teeth. I want to make love to him over and over and over and dream about it too, because I have to agree with his earlier comment—I don't think I can ever grow tired of this either.

The water sloshes as I pick up speed, my orgasm building as my breathing increases. Tanner reaches between us and circles my clit, and I clench myself around him, whimpering and grinding, moving closer and closer to climax.

"Fuck, Ruby. How do you even feel this good?"

"Luck, I guess." A fresh bout of arousal washes over me and my hips spasm, causing me to crash my mouth against his and kiss him hard, refusing to break apart as my orgasm hits and I struggle to keep my lips moving.

"Ruby." He shudders along with me, holding me so tight that I'm overwhelmed by how completely I'm into this relationship when not even a week before I was sure it wasn't a possibility. But one conversation changed it all, and

suddenly, instead of regretting what I did to his car and the events that followed, I praise them. I've said it before and I'll say it again—I may have had the wrong car that night, but I certainly had the right guy. *My* guy.



“I’LL WAIT for you down here,” Tanner says, pulling his cell from his back pocket. “I should call ahead so Camille’s carers can let her know we’re coming. We try not to spring anything on her.”

“Understood,” I say, brushing my lips against his before I turn and push the door open of my building. “If I’m not back in twenty minutes, they’ve probably tied me to a chair because they think I’ve gone crazy.”

Tanner chuckles. “I’ll come rescue you in fifteen.”

Making my way upstairs, I’m happy to see that there’s no sock on the door of Tahlia’s apartment so I can head straight in.

“Hey, girl!” She’s sitting on the couch reading a book, cradling a big mug of coffee in her hands. “Wasn’t expecting to see you today. Thought you’d spend the whole weekend exploring that delicious man meat you’ve caught yourself.”

I can’t control the grin that takes over my face. “I’m about to do more than that. He’s invited me to stay with him until Theo and Darren find their own place.”

“Oh.” She sets her book to the side. “He’s swooping in and saving you. A regular Prince Charming, hey?”

“Seems that way,” I say, dropping onto the couch beside her. “I’m concerned this is a little too much too soon, though. I mean, I know it’s only temporary, and it’s not like we just met, but we did only just start dating. I don’t want to rush into things and mess it up.”

“I’m not sure I’m the person to be asking here since I’m the queen of rushing into things. Hello, I had sex with Nick on

the very first date and he left before breakfast, so *that's* going to make things awkward at work on Monday.”

“You met him at work?”

“Yeah. He’s a bit of a rockstar at the magazine, does massive investigative pieces that get nominated for awards and shit. He’s even got his own office, so that’s saying something. Plus, he’s cocky and only really thinks about himself, so you know, just my type.” She giggles, but I can see she’s a little disappointed right now.

“What’s this about? Do you think last night was it?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. It was fun, and he says he can talk with the higher ups and get me a shot writing for fashion instead of accessories. But I don’t know... could have been a lie.” She sighs. “But at least he scratched an itch, right? I needed a good banging, and from the flush in your cheeks, you got an *amazing* banging.”

I laugh. “Nice segue. But I’m not going into detail beyond saying the tension leading up to this moment was so worth the wait.”

“Oh, I love that for you. He looks at you like you’re the only woman in the world too. I don’t blame you for packing your bags and running off with him. We should all be so lucky.”

“Temporarily running off,” I point out, getting off the couch and moving over to the portable closet where I’ve been storing most of my clothes so I’m not traveling between both apartments all the time. “Once the photo shoot for the billboard campaign is done, Theo says they’ll have enough in their moving fund. So it may only be a week.” I pull a pair of jeans and a pale pink silk blouse out and get changed out of my dress from last night. One, because I want to wear something pretty yet casual to meet Camille, and two, because I have to go into my apartment to get my suitcase and I don’t need Theo teasing me for doing the walk of shame—even though I think it should be called the ‘strut of satisfaction’.

“Well, I’m gonna pray that it takes them a while to find somewhere because I feel like this is the best thing to happen to you since that time we ordered pizza and they were late, so they gave it to us free *and* gave us a voucher for a free dessert.”

“That was a good weekend. Meant we could buy more wine.”

She grins. “Precisely. And even though you’re a famous radio talk show host now, who can afford any wine she pleases, I’ll always remember drinking vinegar together with great fondness.”

“Oh, Tahls, you say that like I’m leaving forever.”

Her eyes well up. “I’m just so proud and happy for you, Ruby. And I’m going to miss seeing you every day.”

“Hey, just try to get rid of me,” I say, finishing up with the buttons of my blouse. “Do you think I need makeup?”

“Maybe just a little lip-gloss for the kiss chaffing. But why are you worried about makeup? Isn’t Tanner going to just kiss it right off you, anyway?”

“We’re going to see his sister. So I want to look nice.”

“Tanner has a sister?”

“Sure does.”

“That’s odd. I extensively googled the man when you first started working for him, and there was never a mention of a sister.”

“That’s because she’s his half-sister who lives in a care facility. He’s very private in public, so I think he only talks about her to people he’s close to. He’s very protective of her. That’s actually where he was that night I scratched up his car. She had an episode, and he went in to calm her.”

“Oh, and here we were thinking he was sneaking out on a booty call.”

“Right?”

“Totally misjudged the guy.”

“We did—well, *I* definitely did. Thankfully, we have that all straightened out now, so we can get on with the business of loving each other.”

“For real? You’ve exchanged I love you’s already?” She places her hand against her chest. “I’m so jealous. I wanna be your maid of honor at the wedding.”

I laugh. “Let’s not get *too* far ahead of ourselves. Remembering Tanner and I have a habit of clashing with each other. As wonderful as this is right now, I can’t afford to just decide that this is it, we’re together forever from here on out. I think that’d be really naïve.”

“Well, I’m gonna think it for you. One of us needs to be excited here.”

“OK, you do that,” I say with a smile. “Meanwhile, I’m going to get my suitcase from across the hall.”

“You need help with anything?”

“Maybe grab my stuff from the bathroom if you don’t mind?”

She gives me a salute. “Consider it done, captain.”

I head across the hall and knock since I made the mistake of *not* knocking a few weeks back and caught an eyeful of naked, sweaty bodies. *No one* should have to catch their brother in the act. It’s all kinds of no thank you.

“Are you guys awake?” I call out, knocking again. The door opens and Darren is on the other side wearing a red kimono robe and a silk turban.

“Welcome to your humble abode, my dear goddess of hot men,” he says with a smirk. “How was your night? More importantly, how was your man? And should we drink coffee or shots?”

I laugh as I walk into the living area. “I’ll give you one word to describe all things, and that’s ‘wonderful’. However, refreshments are unnecessary since I’m kinda in a rush. He’s invited me to stay with him while you guys are using my place, so I need a suitcase.”

“Oh, sugar. You don’t have to *move* out. We’ll go sleep at Tahlia’s on the pullout if you want your space back.”

“No, no. I’m totally fine with you both subletting my apartment for as long as you need. I wouldn’t have moved to Tahlia’s if I wasn’t. But Tanner is kinda hot, and I kinda enjoy spending time in his bed, so this is *no* imposition.”

“Aren’t you worried that it’s too soon though?”

I stop moving toward the bedroom where my suitcase is and turn back to face him. “This is nuts, isn’t it? I should tell him no.”

“Tell who no?” Theo asks, exiting the bathroom with a towel around his waist and a frown on his face. *Here we go. Big brother time.*

“Tanner wants her to move in,” Darren says, pursing his lips.

“No,” I interject. “He’s just offered to let me *stay* with him while you guys look for your own place.”

“That’s great,” Theo says, shocking the life out of me.

“It’s great?” Darren says. “Honey, she just started dating the man.”

“And they’ve been dancing around each other for months,” he points out. “Need I remind you, *Coco*, that we barely spent a night apart for *three* months after we got together? She’d likely be at his place most nights anyway at this point, so why not pack a bag? We’ll have our own place within a couple of weeks, anyway. No big deal. Tanner isn’t going to hurt her.”

“Wow,” both Darren and I say in unison. Theo normally hates any man who comes near me.

“Do I need to be worried here?” Darren teases.

Theo laughs and leans in, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “Never. I just think Tanner is a cool guy, and I *know* that Ruby is head over heels for him *and* that the feeling is mutual. And I want my big sis to be happy.”

“Oh, my god. You guys are all gonna make me cry. Was I *that* obviously lonely before?”

They both look at me and nod.

I shake my head and sigh. “I’m scared I’m gonna mess this up, you know.”

“You won’t, sugar,” Darren says. “You are a catch. Tanner knows it and we know it. You’ll be just fine.” Both men give me a hug, then we all laugh at how serious we’re being before we break apart and I finish gathering my things.

I’m just zipping up my suitcase when the door buzzer goes and Theo tells Tanner that we’ll be right down.

Helping me carry my bag down the stairs, Theo hands it to Tanner at the main door, then shakes his hand. “Take care of my sister,” he says, his tone serious as he holds Tanner’s gaze. “Return her in one piece. The only way you get to keep her is if you put a ring on her finger. You hear?”

“Loud and clear,” Tanner says, while I just stare at them both with my mouth open.

“I’m not an object to be bargained with,” I say, laughing at their audacity. “What century were you born in?”

“Hey, I’m just looking out for you,” Theo says. “You want me not to care?”

“How about you go upstairs and propose to *your* boyfriend instead of putting pressure on mine?”

Theo laughs, then heads back inside. When I turn to Tanner, he’s smirking.

“What?”

“I’m your boyfriend,” he says, sliding my suitcase into the trunk of his car.

“Oh. Should I not have said that?”

He wraps his hand around the back of my head and pulls me in for a kiss. “Say it all you like. It’s true.”

I try to fight my grin but lose. “OK. Boyfriend.”

He kisses me once more, then gives my ass a squeeze before telling me to get in the car. “You’ve got a very excited sister to meet.”



“WHAT IS YOUR *NAME*?” Since the weather is nice, we meet Camille outside the facility and her carer comes for a walk with us, hanging back discreetly in case she’s needed.

“Ruby,” I say with a smile, walking alongside her wheelchair. Tanner pushes, doing a couple of tricks that tip Camille back and have her in fits of giggles. He explained to me on the drive over here that her brain injury caused developmental disabilities as well as paralysis down one side of her body. She’s unable to do a lot of things for herself and needs constant care to help her navigate the world.

“Like a diamond but red.”

“Yeah,” I say. “My mom used to call me ‘precious’ when I was little since I was named after a gemstone.”

“My mom used to call me Camille.”

“Well, Camille is a fantastic name.

“It’s a beautiful name,” Tanner adds, leaning in so Camille can see him. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him smile as much as he has in this short time we’ve been visiting with Camille. Being around her, caring for her, obviously brings out the best in him. “My favorite name.”

Camille throws her head back and laughs, loving her brother’s attention. “Can we get ice cream?”

“Sure we can,” he says. “You want your favorite? Pistachio?”

That has her in giggles again. “No. Not *pistachio*. Chocolate. I only like chocolate.”

“OK,” he says. “Vanilla it is.”

Camille shakes her head and laughs. “Chocolate, chocolate, chocolate.”

“OK. I’ll get you chocolate. Anyone else?” Tanner looks to me and Camille’s carer, who declines the offer. However, I accept and go for a chocolate too.

“I’ll be right back,” he says. “You two ladies can talk girly stuff while I’m gone.” He presses a kiss to the top of Camille’s head as he steps on the brake to keep her chair still while he heads over to the ice cream vendor, pausing to give me a quick kiss too.

When I look back to Camille, she’s grinning with delight. “Are you gonna marry my brother?”

“I don’t know yet. But I like him a lot.”

“I think you should marry him. And then I can be your flower girl and you can dress in a pretty white dress and I can have a pink one. And I can have flowers in my hair. And you can too.”

“Sounds like you know a lot about weddings.”

“Sometimes my Barbie doll marries my Ken doll. But sometimes she likes Action Man or Wolverine better.”

“You like dolls?”

“Yeah. And TV. And painting.”

“What do you paint?”

“Flowers. Can you bring me a new Barbie next time you come? I want one with hair like mine.” She lifts a hand and tangles it in her wavy auburn bob.

“If that’s OK with Tanner, I’m more than happy to get you a Barbie doll with red hair. Does that mean you like me and want to see me again?” I smile and she nods.

“Yes. Because I like outside, and I like ice cream, and I like it when he’s happy.”

“Tanner? Isn’t he happy most of the time?”

“He smiles because he likes me, because I’m very funny and beautiful and because I’m his big sister. But he isn’t happy. He’s happy today.”

“Two chocolate ice creams.” Tanner returns with our order and hands them out, squatting down so he can help Camille eat hers. “What’d I miss?”

“Girl talk, Tanner,” I say.

“Yeah!” Camille says, her mouth pressed against her ice cream. “No boy talk.”

“Oh, I see how it is. Pushed out by my two favorite girls just because I’m a boy. No fair, girls. No fair.” He pretend pouts and both Camille and I laugh.

“Camille was just telling me about her Barbie dolls,” I say, giving her a wink. Her eyes light up.

“Yeah. And Ruby said she’ll bring me one with hair like mine.”

“Oh, she did, did she?” Tanner’s eyebrows lift. “So, it’s bribes you’re taking now? Is that what it takes to win Camille’s approval?”

“No, Tanner,” she says. “No bribes. I like Ruby just because *you* like Ruby. The Barbie is for fun.”

“OK. I can do fun.” He hands me the ice cream cone and gives me a wink before he unlocks Camille’s wheels and twirls her around in her chair. “Is that fun?”

Camille nods emphatically, laughing so hard that she snorts. Which makes me laugh so hard that *I* snort. And pretty soon, we’re all in fits of giggles.

“Come and visit me next time too, Ruby,” Camille says once we’re back to eating our ice creams. “Tanner is lots of fun with you around.”

“Ruby makes me a better man,” Tanner says, sharing an intimate smile with me. And I swoon a little harder, finding that with each passing moment, I fall in love with Tanner Wright even more.

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RUBY

“Oh my god, stop. You’re going to make me late.” I laugh as Tanner undoes my blouse just as I finish buttoning it up—for the third time.

“I can’t help myself. I prefer it when you’re naked.” He slides his hands around my waist and dips his head into the curve of my neck, kissing me against my pulse point until he moves to my mouth and demands entry. This is precisely why I don’t apply my lipstick until we’re in the car most days.

The man is voracious. On our first night together, I had a moment of insecurity where I felt ashamed of my size and wanted to hide. And I know that I should have learned to love myself *without* a man showing me how desirable he finds me, but I’m a cliché and found my sexiness in the way he looks at my body with overtly carnal need. He makes me feel like the hottest, most beautiful, most *wanted* woman in the world. And I fucking love it.

“Admittedly, I prefer that too. But I have to get to the photographers to meet up with Theo and Darren. I can’t be late this time.” Tanner and I have been late to the studio every single day since I packed a bag and came to stay with him. We make love every morning upon waking, every night before we go to bed, after breakfast, before dinner, and Tanner likes to sneak in as many naughty trysts throughout the day as we can manage. Like, in the thirty minutes between the pre-show meeting and the show’s start, in the back of his car after the show and anywhere else we manage to find ourselves alone. We’ve christened his desk, my desk, and after staying back

late one night to get through some paperwork, we christened the giant table in the meeting room. I have a dirty little fantasy of giving him head while we're on air, but I know that will never happen since we have a control room full of people watching us, but it doesn't stop me from thinking about it, and getting off when I do.

I know we shouldn't be messing around with each other at work, but since technically Tanner owns the studio, I think we can get away with it without causing too much of a stir. Plus, that little edge of danger in getting caught is super-hot.

Also, I think I'm equally as voracious as Tanner when it comes to this sex business since I haven't once turned around and said no. Well, except for right now...

"What time do you finish?" he asks, sliding his hand beneath my blouse and cupping my breast. His thumb moves over my nipple and I lose focus for a moment. My body is always so ready for him.

"Ah, lunchtime, I think. I was gonna...Oh god. Yes. That feels good."

He tugs the lace of my bra down and dips his head and takes my nipple into his mouth. "What were you going to do at lunch?" he rasps, shifting my blouse and bra as he moves to the other side.

"I was going to meet up with Tahlia if she's free."

"You'll be meeting with me." His tongue swirls around my nipple and my hands go into his hair.

"OK. Why?"

"Just meet me and you'll find out." His hands move to my sides and he scrunches the fabric of my skirt up my thighs.

"Tanner," I gasp. "What are you doing?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm making you late," he says, grinning up at me before he drops to his knees and buries his face between my legs.



“ABOUT TIME,” Darren says, his arms folded across his chest as I race across the street to meet them, takeout coffees in my hands to make up for my tardiness. “We’ve been here nearly thirty minutes already.”

“They’ve been here five minutes,” Karen interjects, her trusty clipboard against her chest. “I’m the one who’s been here for thirty.”

“You weren’t supposed to tell her that,” Darren hisses, half joking. “We’re trying to guilt trip her here.”

“I brought coffee as an apology. I lost track of time.”

“I’ll bet you did,” Theo says, smirking as he takes the tray from me and hands them out.

“Are we ready to get this shoot over and done with?” I ask, pulling the door to the photography studio open and gesturing for everyone to go inside.

“I am *dying* to get this done,” Darren says, trotting along ahead of me. He’s only wearing three-inch boots today, so he’s even lighter on his feet. “When Theo gets paid, I’m putting a down payment on a gorgeous loft that’s only a few blocks away from my club. It’ll make getting to work so much easier, *and* it’s got great natural light, so when I’m sewing, I won’t have to mess my eyes up. I can’t wait for you to see it.”

“That’s if we get it,” Theo says, walking behind me up the stairs. “There were about fifteen other couples at the inspection. We’re gonna have to offer more than they’re asking or we’ll miss out.”

“The rental market is the pits,” Karen puts in, leading us from the very front. “My boyfriend and I live in a studio apartment that is dank and cramped. Really puts a strain on things at times. It literally smells like you eat and shit where you sleep. I hate it.”

“I didn’t know you had a boyfriend, Karen,” I say.

She swings her head back and smiles. “That’s because you never asked. But that’s OK, you’ve been rather...*busy* with Mr. Wright lately.”

Darren barks out a laugh “Oh my god. How did I not twig that he’s Mr. Wright?”

“Do you want to know what’s even funnier?” Theo says. “That night when she scratched up his car, she had the wrong car.”

“And?” Darren shrugs.

“She had the wrong car, but she had the right guy,” Theo says with disbelieving laughter. “How am I the only one who gets that?” And I can’t help but laugh. Theo and I may not look like twins, but it’s times like these when I realize how alike our thinking really is.

“I promise you, Theo,” I say. “I’ve thought exactly the same thing.”

He laughs and holds up his hand for a high five. “Twinning!”

As our hands clap, Darren starts laughing. “Baby, you are far too big and brawny to be holding your hand up and saying things like ‘twinning’. But I love you for it.”

Theo grunts.

“I love you for it too,” I say with a wink, causing him to laugh.

When we get up to the photographer’s studio, we’re greeted and sent through to wardrobe and makeup. It takes a good hour of primping and preening, but by the end of it I have to admit I look banging. They’ve got me in a hot pink suit with black edging and a white silk tank underneath. I kind of look like a Barbie doll with my blonde hair sitting in curly waves over my shoulders and plum lipstick on my lips. And I can’t help but think that Camille will get a real kick out of seeing these posters when they go up around the city. It’s just a shame that Tanner isn’t in them with me. I think she’d like that even more. But I understand that a lot of what he does is to

keep the peace within his family so he can continue to pay for Camille's care. He has a very noble heart.

Once I'm all ready, I find Karen, Theo and Darren standing in front of a white backdrop while the photographer takes some test shots to get the lighting right. Then it's all systems go with Darren and Karen standing off to the side while Theo and I stand back-to-back with various poses until the photographer feels he has enough to fit the brief.

It takes less time to get the shots than it took to prepare for them. But from what the photographer shows us on the monitor, he definitely got the goods. I don't feel cringey about a single one. "You look like a model," Karen says, smiling as we look at the proofs together.

"I feel like one right now. Never thought I'd say that in my life."

After a quick conversation with the photographer where Darren insists he come to a Coco show, we all head downstairs, agreeing to meet up over the weekend to find out whether Theo and Darren got their loft. I shoot a message off to Tahlia too, and she replies asking if she can bring Nick. Looks like that early exit wasn't a brush off after all.

When I step outside, the whole world feels brighter. My career is bigger than I ever thought possible, I have family who cares, friends to lean on, and the love of a hot as hell radio presenter slash media empire heir who's currently waiting for me on the sidewalk leaning against the side of his flashy car. He looks good enough to eat.

"Oh, hey there, Mr. I'm-too-important-to-be-photographed-for-billboards," Darren says, sashaying up. "We were just talking about getting together this weekend. Hope you're not going to keep our Little Miss Radio-star away from us like you have this past couple of weeks?"

"I have to confess to wanting to keep her all to myself for longer than that. But I think I can share her time for an hour or two. Then I'll whisk her away again, hiding her at my place." His blue eyes are dark and always wanting as they land on mine. I swear the entire world falls away whenever his eyes

are on me. It just feels like our bodies call to each other, and he's all that I know.

"Maybe not for too much longer," Theo says. "We're putting in an application for our own place after this. So, if we get it, she'll have her place back."

"Is that so?" Tanner's eyebrows lift as he turns his gaze to Theo. "If there's anything I can do to help, don't hesitate to ask."

"How are you at lifting furniture?" Theo asks.

Tanner smirks. "Excellent. I have the number for a great removal company that I'm happy to pay to do it for you."

"You trust fund babies," Theo jokes, waving his hand. Darren catches it.

"But we will very happily accept your offer to help us move, Mr. Right-for-all-of-us," Darren puts in. "My nails don't hold up well carrying furniture and boxes. So, if you're willing, and seriously offering, I will happily accept." He adds a curtsy in for effect.

Tanner laughs. "I'm more than happy to get movers for you. And if you want to give me the address, I'll see if dropping my name can open any doors for you, get you cheaper rent or at least to the front of the line."

"If I wasn't a taken man, Mr. Wright," Darren gasps. "I would kiss you right now."

"Fuck. I am taken and I'm willing to kiss you," Theo says, making us all laugh.

I step in between them. "How about I get to be the one who does the kissing?" I turn around and press a gentle kiss to Tanner's lips. "Is that sufficient enough?" Everyone except Tanner says yes. He's always wanting more.

We say a quick goodbye, promising to catch up later. Tanner opens the passenger door for me, and before I get inside, I remember his comment from this morning. "What did you want me to meet you about? Was it a dirty reason or a real reason?"

“Dirty reasons are real reasons.” He grins. “But I did have a non-naked reason for wanting to talk to you as soon as your shoot was finished.”

“And what’s that?”

He reaches inside his jacket and pulls out a sheet of paper. “I heard whispers, but I wanted to wait until it was official to tell you.”

“Tell me what?” I ask as I open the paper.

“We got a nomination. Well, we got a few. Best talk show, best new show, best radio station and best new rising talent—that last one is you, by the way.”

I stare at the official letterhead in awe, gob smacked. “Oh, my god. This is amazing. I’m so proud of us—of you! You did it, Tanner. You took a failing radio station, and you made it a success. Have you told your father this yet?”

“No,” he says, taking the paper out of my hands. “The first person I wanted to tell was you. You’re the reason we got here, and therefore the most important person. And when we get into the office, we’ll tell all of them together. Gerry will want drinks tonight, but I’ll take you out to dinner to celebrate in style after that. Then I’m going to take you home and celebrate over and over with your body, until we’re both so exhausted, we pass out covered in each other. Then we’re going to get up in the morning and I’m going to take you shopping for the perfect dress to wear to the awards ceremony—fair warning, I’ll likely fuck you in the change rooms—and then we’re going to go out with your brother and friends, spend another weekend enjoying each other’s bodies, and maybe, just maybe, we’ll make it to work on time a few days next week. *Then*, if my father is lucky, he’ll learn about the nomination after we’ve already won next weekend. He ranks rather low on my list.”

“I can see that. But what about your mom?”

“She married the man. And she stayed married to him. She’s made her choice. So, I’m simply making mine.”

I place my hand against his chest. “OK,” I whisper, not wanting to push the matter any further and upset him during a happy moment. I lift on my toes to kiss him gently, feeling incredibly sad that a man you’d think has everything is missing something so vitally important—parental love. I couldn’t even imagine what growing up without that was like.

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TANNER

*I*t's the first time I've ever had a woman on my arm at an awards ceremony, and the press is out in force, snapping thousands of pictures and asking Ruby and I to comment on rumors that we're dating.

"Don't tell them anything," Ruby whispers as we make our way up the red carpet with polite smiles on our faces. "It's not worth causing waves with your father."

When I look into her eyes, she smiles with genuine understanding. This beautiful woman on my arm, with her hair and makeup expertly done, and a gorgeous silk suit gown in pink that ties with a sash at her waist, is so completely willing to hide our relationship from the reporters that there isn't even a hint of sadness in her eyes. Besides desperately wanting to get her back home and tug that sash open so I can devour the body underneath, I also have an overwhelming need to kiss her. So I do.

"Let them all know," I say, tugging her hand to stop her before I wrap an arm around her waist then slam my mouth into hers dramatically, tilting her back so one of her feet kicks up in the air. The paparazzi love it and the shouted questions get louder and more frantic. But that's all they're getting from me.

When I stand us both back up, Ruby is a little unsteady on her feet, but the smile on her face tells me she thoroughly appreciated the gesture.

"Guess it was worth causing waves, huh?"

“You’re worth it. I won’t pretend that we’re not together. Not for him. Not for anyone.”

“Just when I thought I couldn’t love you more,” she says, as we entwine our hands together and continue inside.

The evening is long and rather boring, filled with speeches and a lot of vacuous conversation, but when our categories come up and we win three out of our nominated four—one of which was best new talent for Ruby—it ends up being a pretty fucking fantastic night. Still, I spend most of it counting down the moments until we can get out of here. That dress Ruby is wearing does all kinds of things to me. It hides everything but a peek of cleavage, but that sash at her waist is teasing me.

The moment our limo picks us up, I slide up the privacy screen and tug on her sash, opening my baby up.

“You are so bad,” she says with a giggle as I bury my face in between those luscious breasts.

“And you, my beautiful co-host, are a hot commodity,” I say as I kiss and suck against her skin. “Word on the street is you’re the hottest new talent around. Not to mention one half of this year’s best new show.”

“Oh, I heard something about the guy on that show. Supposedly he’s the sexiest man alive or something. I’ve often fantasized about the man behind the voice,” she teases, gasping as I pull the cup of her bra down and lave at her pert nipple. “And what it’d be like to have him in my mouth while he’s on air.”

I pop my head up and lock eyes with hers. “For real?”

She nods. “I literally squirm in my seat every single show just thinking about it.”

“I imagine fucking you in the studio up against the window,” I rasp, my dick lurching at the idea, desperately wanting to break free.

“Oh god yes. I want that. But there’s always someone there.”

“Not in our studio, they aren’t,” I say, loving the cheeky smile on her face as I turn around and knock on the divider. “Change of destination. WHGC radio station and step on it. We’ve got an emergency broadcast to deliver...”



“OH GOD. YES, YES, TANNER. *YES!*” With her leg hooked over my shoulder, Ruby’s back arches up as her climax hits. She claps her hands on her breasts, squeezing them against her chest as she calls out and I unload myself inside her, not being able to hold on after such a spectacular sight.

“Fuck. You feel so good around my dick, baby. I don’t think I’m ever going to grow tired of this.” I roll off her, dropping my weight next to her on the bed. It’s been a night of celebration—sex in the studio, champagne and more sex in the back of the limo, more champagne and even more sex once we got back home, and now, as the sun starts to peek in through the window, we just might be ready to get some sleep. I can’t stop wanting her.

“Me either. My god. You are, well, a god in bed, Tanner. How do you do that speedy thing with your tongue?”

I turn toward her and smile. “You like that do you?”

“Um, yeah. It’s... wow. Like, it’s better than one of those sucky sex toys that focus on your clit.”

“Better than a sex toy, huh? I take that as high praise.”

“It is. If I could review your prowess on Amazon, I’d headline it as ‘Five stars because ten isn’t enough’. That’s how good you are in bed.”

“Careful, Casey. I’ve already got a pretty giant ego. Don’t want to make it worse.”

She laughs. “Impossible. When you look up egotistical in the dictionary, there’s already a picture of you in it. It can’t get any worse.”

Chuckling, I slide my arm around her, pulling her closer. “I’m so in love with you, Ruby Casey. Move in with me.”

She pulls her head back. “Permanently?”

I nod. “I don’t want you to go back to your apartment next week. I want you to move in here with me.”

A slight frown creases her brow. “I don’t know. I mean, staying with you for a few weeks was one thing, but moving in for good? That’s a *big* step, Tanner. And in the grand scheme of things, we’re still so new. Maybe we’re rush—”

I silence her by planting my mouth against hers and kissing away her objections until her body softens, and she sighs into my mouth. “It’s not rushing when you know,” I whisper, kissing her lightly again. “But if you want, we could *really* rush things and I could start insisting you marry me.”

“That would actually make your sister obscenely happy. She wants to be our flower girl.”

I can’t help the smile that curves my mouth knowing that. People often underestimate Camille, but she’s very insightful. “She does?”

“Yeah. But that doesn’t mean I want to get married. We have to take our time with something here. I mean, you haven’t even met my parents yet.”

“Oh god,” I moan. “Don’t remind me. I’m happy to meet yours, but that means I have to reciprocate. And I really don’t want to subject you to that.”

“I’m big girl. I can handle it,” she whispers, touching the side of my face with her hand.

“Can you handle moving in?” I brush my nose alongside hers. “I don’t want to wake up without you, Ruby. Not after I’ve learned what it’s like.”

“OK. But on one condition.”

“Anything.”

“I keep my apartment for now. Just in case. I want to fall into this wholeheartedly with you, but I still need a safety net.

Can *you* handle that?”

“I can. And it’ll work out, baby. I know it will. We’re perfect together,” I murmur against her mouth, kissing her slow and long, my body waking up for just one more round before we both finally cave to sleep.

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RUBY

“*H*ow’s everything going with Nick?” I ask Tahlia while I box up my things. It’s a good week later, and Theo and Darren have just finished loading the moving van to take everything over to their new place. Tanner is coming back with the moving van once they’ve unloaded, so we’re all moving on the same day. Two birds with one stone.

She bounces a shoulder. “I don’t know. He’s very hot and cold, so I don’t know if it’s going to work out.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he’ll ignore me for days on end, then all of a sudden, he’s all over me, asking question after question like he wants to know absolutely everything about me. He asks about my family, my friends—like, he’s super interested in you and your show—then he’s just...gone again.” She sighs as she tapes up a box and labels it ‘living room’.

“How do you feel about him when you’re together?” I’m wrapping glassware in newspaper and setting it in a crate for the short journey to Tanner’s. I’m not taking everything I own, just my favorite pieces because I want my things mixed in with his. It’s the only way it’ll feel like *our* place, and I want to do this living together thing properly.

“I really like him. But then, I don’t know. Maybe I just like the idea of him. And maybe I’m just lonely because everything is changing and I feel like I’m getting left behind.”

I stop what I’m doing, my head tilting to the side. “Oh, honey. I’m not abandoning you. I’m still gonna be your best

friend.”

“Oh, I know. It just won’t be the same. You’re not across the hall anymore. And Theo and Darren are gone now, too. I’m just feeling...Blergh.” She sticks her tongue out. “But I’m so happy and pleased for everyone. Especially you. I mean, you should have seen how excited we all were watching the live stream of your awards show. The whole building probably heard us cheering.”

“I’ve no doubt,” I say, crossing the room to wrap her in my arms. “And I’m sorry he’s not making you feel as special as you are. You deserve so much better. Did he even attempt to help you move out of accessories into fashion like he said?”

She shrugs as I release her. “I don’t know. I think he was just telling me what I wanted to hear so he could get into my pants. I’ve gotta stop falling for these guys.”

“The right one will come along,” I say, rubbing her lightly on her upper arm. “And it’ll be when you least expect it. Just like it was for me.”

“Gosh, I so wish I had your luck. Tanner seems utterly perfect,” she says, releasing a sigh, then a yelp when my door bursts open and the man in question thunders into the room. He’s dressed casually in sweats and a T-shirt since we’re moving in together, but the storm in his expression means he’s still an intimidating sight when he’s angry, even without the usual suit.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, immediately. I haven’t seen him this agitated since...since...well, I’ve *never* seen him like this. “Is it your father? Oh god. I *knew* we shouldn’t have kissed like that on the red carpet. What happened?”

He slams an open magazine in the center of my kitchen table. “What the fuck is this?” he growls, jabbing his finger at a photo of he and I visiting Camille. The headline reads, ‘Wright and very Wrong: The Secret Shame of the Sexiest Man Alive.’

“Well, firstly, that’s the most ludicrous headline I’ve ever seen. You have a name, and you most definitely aren’t

ashamed of Camille.” I gulp at the end of it, knowing that humor isn’t the appropriate response, but I don’t know how else to deal with this level of agitation.

“How did it even get here?” he growls, and normally I find his growling sexy, but right now, I’m finding it downright accusatory.

“Wait. You don’t think I had anything to do with that?”

“You’re the only one who knew,” he states, opening the magazine out further so I can see it’s a full exposé. “If something happens to Camille because of this, if I lose her because you told someone where she is, I will *never* forgive you.” He straightens up, his chest heaving.

“Tanner,” I say, moving closer to him. “I understand you’re upset right now, but I would never, ever talk to a journalist about Camille. I know how important she is to you. I know what’s at stake.”

“Well, someone found out. And you are the *only* person I’ve told. So one plus one equals two, Ruby.” He flinches away from me, his eyes dark and filled with fire.

“It wasn’t me!” I yell, panic gripping at my chest as I realize exactly what’s happening here. He’s breaking up with me.

“It had to be, Ruby. Because I didn’t tell. So that just leaves you. Who the fuck did you tell?”

Hot tears burst from my eyes. “I didn’t,” I cry. “I wouldn’t.”

“Oh god, Ruby.” Tahlia’s hand claps over her mouth. “It... it was me.”

Tanner’s eyes flash. “You *told* her?”

“I...” I start, unable to speak because, yes, I did tell her. She’s my best friend, and I never expected it to go any further, but yes, the truth is, I told her. “Yes.” I force the word out.

“She works at fucking *Icon* magazine for fuck’s sake!” he booms, flipping the magazine over and waving the cover at us before he throws it on the floor, letting out a ragged breath.

“I’m sorry,” Tahlia cries. “I—”

“I hope my sister’s happiness was worth whatever promotion you got out of this,” he spits, pointing a finger Tahlia’s way before turning on his heel and heading for the door.

“Tanner!” I call to his retreating back. “Wait!”

“I’ll have the movers bring your things back here,” he says, a parting shot that hits me right in the chest, stealing my breath, my words, *my heart*, before he storms back out, slamming the door behind him.

I slump on the floor. “He just fucking broke up with me,” I cry, looking at Tahlia in disbelief. “What the hell?” *I can’t breathe*. I scramble to pick up the magazine and look at the article, trying to read it through my tears like it will somehow hold some clues on how to fix this.

“It was Nick,” she says, seeming to appear out of nowhere on the floor next to me. “That’s why he kept asking about you.” I just look at her, my mind and body going completely numb. “I’m so sorry, Ruby. This is all my fault, and I hate myself for being stupid enough to fall for his shit. But don’t you worry. I’m going to fix it. I don’t know how right now, but I’ll work it out. Somehow. I promise.”

“He dumped me,” I gasp, wrapping my arms around my knees. “Fuck.”

RUBY

It took me almost a week to drag myself out of bed. Not only had Tanner broken up with me, but come Monday morning, I was without a job—Tanner left the station, canceled the show and fired me for breaching the non-disclosure agreement, or so the press release said. The only saving grace is that my non-compete clause was waived, but I can't bring myself to accept any of the offers to work at other radio stations. I don't think I can be happy at a radio station without Tanner. That man kind of ruined me for everyone and everything. I don't think I'll ever get over him.

And that's not to say I didn't fight for him. I called, I texted, I visited, I *emailed*. But he wouldn't see or speak to me. As soon as that article landed, I was dead to him. So much for loving me, huh?

I think that's what hurts the most. That he talked like we were forever, and then the moment I did something wrong, he cut me out and didn't even want to hear my side of things. I mean, it's not like I told Tahlia about Camille *knowing* her boyfriend would do an exposé about her. And Tahlia never dreamed Nick's curiosity about Tanner and I was anything nefarious. He sold himself pretty hard as a big fan of the show, so she didn't think anything of it. It's just unfortunate that it was Camille who got caught in the crossfire. She didn't deserve to have her life upended the way it was. She was happy and well cared for, and now...I don't know where she is. I'd ordered a Barbie Dream House to give her for her birthday, and when it arrived, I took it to the facility she was living in and asked if they could give it to her—not telling her

it was from me, of course, because I didn't want to overstep—but they said she wasn't there anymore. They agreed to forward it though, so at least I know she still got her gift.

All of that was three months ago. And now, after wallowing away my savings, well...I work at Starbucks with Andy from midnight to six am every day. I'm hurt, but I really miss Tanner. I just want him to walk in through that door and tell me to 'get the hell in the car'. I'd give anything to hear him growl at me again.

"You OK?" Andy waves a hand in front of my face as I wipe down the counter and contemplate whether I could make a career out of being one of those girls who eats on camera for money. I could shove fries and burgers in my mouth for a fee, and what's even better, I'd never have to leave my apartment again. That could work.

"Sure. Why wouldn't I be?" I say, blinking away my thoughts as I meet his dark brown eyes.

"You've just been wiping that same spot for the last twenty minutes. Four customers have come in and you haven't even blinked."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"It's fine," he says, taking the cloth from me. "How about you take a break while we're quiet? The next shift is about to start anyway, and Karen is coming to meet me so we can have breakfast together before she goes to work."

"For real? Oh my god, I finally get to meet Karen?" I think I smile for the first time since my life fell apart. Then I remember my PA was called Karen too and suddenly I'm sad again. It's hard to make it more than a few minutes without something reminding me of Tanner. Even the word 'hard' reminds me of him. So it's hard when I think about how hard things are. I'm in a conundrum.

"She wants to meet you too. She's been hella busy with her new job, but she really wanted to come and see who I'm working with since you're a girl. She likes to check up on me ever since Samantha."

“What happened with Samantha?”

“She touched my hair.” He runs a hand over his unruly do. He kind of looks like the character ‘Napoleon Dynamite’ on a bad day, so I struggle to imagine why Samantha wanted to touch him. “Karen doesn’t like it when girls put their hands on me. She gets jealous.”

“Duly noted. I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

Emotional eating is my jam, so I have my mouth entirely full of a cinnamon morning bun when a familiar voice says my name. “Ruby?” I turn to find Karen—my former PA Karen—standing beside me. “Oh, my god. It *is* you. I mean, I knew Andy was working with a Ruby. But I never imagined... Wow. How are you?” Karen slides into the seat across from me and smiles. I try not to choke while I swallow my morning bun without chewing.

“You...you’re...oh my god—you’re Karen?” I blurt, coughing a little as some cinnamon sugar gets caught in my throat.

“Wait. You two know each other?” Andy asks, disbelief coating his words. “What are the odds?”

“Higher if you give a little more information about the people you’re working with, *Andy*,” Karen snaps, and her tone even has me sitting up straighter. *This so isn’t how she acts around the office.*

“I...um...would you like a coffee, sugarbum?” he asks in the sweetest voice. I shove more morning bun in my mouth and just watch the scene unfold.

“Yes, thank you, spunkeroonie. I’d also love a morning bun like Ruby has. Do you think you can get that for me?” Her tone is all saccharine sweet now. I have whiplash.

“Of course. Coming right up.” Andy jumps and gets to work.

“I’m so freaked out right now,” I say as Karen turns her smile on me.

“By our relationship dynamic?” I nod and she shrugs. “I know it seems odd, but we work. And he’s *terrific* in the sack.” She says the last part leaning in close so only I can hear. “Don’t let him know I told you, he’d be embarrassed. But I know I can trust you not to steal him away from me since you’re still in love with...you know who.”

I look away, licking the sugar off my lips. “And, how is he? I heard you went to Wright Media with him. Executive assistant now? Nice title.”

She presses her mouth together in an understanding smile. “He’s not fine. In fact, he’s scarier than he’s ever been. The entire office is petrified. I’m the only one who can talk to him, and that’s only because I understand how unhappy he is. Plus, he pays me really well to put up with him. It meant Andy and I could get out of that god awful apartment.”

“Good for you,” I say, forcing my mouth to curve upward even though my eyes are teary. “Good for you.”

“Do you want me to...tell him you say hi?”

I shake my head slowly. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Shit. I’m gonna cry if this line of conversation continues.

“OK. Well, for what it’s worth, I think he really misses you.”

“I miss him too.”

“Then...why don’t you patch things up? You were so wonderful together.”

Taking a deep inhale to steady my breath, I keep my mouth fixed in a smile to control my emotion. “Because Tanner doesn’t want to. He blames me for that article—and inadvertently, I am to blame.”

“How? Did you write it? Contact the reporter and give him information?”

“No. But I told Tahlia about Camille, and then Tahlia didn’t realize she was being hoodwinked when she mentioned it to the guy she was seeing. It was an accident, but...” I sigh.

“It doesn’t matter. He pointblank refuses to speak to me. There’s nothing for me to do. And I tried. Believe me.”

“OK. Then what next? Surely there’s another way.”

“This is what’s next, Karen. I’m done. It’s over.”

“So, you’re just going to spend the rest of your life working in Starbucks with Andy?”

I shrug. “Looks that way.”

“Hmm. I thought you were tougher than this, Ruby,” she says, getting up as Andy brings her order over. “I thought you’d fight harder.”

“And I thought you were more of a pushover,” I say, looking her up and down. “Turns out, you’re a bit of a badass, and I’m a big ole pile of defeated goo. We were both wrong.”

“Maybe,” she says, moving to another table to fawn over her spunkeroonie. I watch them and get a spark of jealousy, knowing I’ll never have that for myself. The one thing I was definitely wrong about was my Mr. Right. Turns out, I was just a temporary custodian of Tanner’s heart. He was never truly mine.

The kicker is, I was his. And I always will be ...

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TANNER

“*Y*ou are the dumbest man on the planet,” Karen says after storming into my office and dumping my mail on my desk.

“I beg your pardon?” I have to blink twice before my eyes deceive me. Besides Ruby, I have never in my career had a staff member speak to me the way Karen just did. I should fire her on the spot.

“You heard me. You are dumb and pigheaded.” She places her hands on her hips. “Oh, and you’re an asshole.”

“Need I remind you that you are entirely replaceable, Karen. Explain yourself or walk out the door and keep going until you exit the building.”

“I just saw Ruby.” My heart jolts in my chest, and suddenly, I realize that it’s been a dead husk, unbeating behind my ribcage, missing Ruby while also being irreversibly angry with her for jeopardizing Camille’s care. As it was, the press made it difficult for her to remain where she was and I had to move her into my apartment with two full-time carers until things died down. It wasn’t ideal since my apartment doesn’t offer the same programs or access to specialist care that the facility did. But we made it through, and now Camille is back where she’s most happy, enjoying her barbies and painting classes with her friends. She even has a fancy new dream house for her dolls that wasn’t there before. She felt sure it came from Ruby, and maybe it did. I just don’t want to know about it. Just like I don’t want to talk about Ruby to Karen right now.

“Don’t you have work to do?”

“She’s working at Starbucks. Did you know that?”

No. I’ve done all I can to not learn anything about Ruby after I stormed out of her apartment. I’ve avoided all calls, all attempts at contact from her, her brother, *and* her friends. And then I got a new cell just to make sure I wasn’t tempted to give in and talk to her. Because she betrayed my trust, and that betrayal affected my sister. I can’t be OK with that.

“What Miss Casey chooses to do with her life is none of my business.”

“Chooses? That ridiculous non-compete is forcing her to work for a fraction of what she was earning at the station. She made a *mistake*, Tanner. She trusted her best friend who was tricked into trusting a man who *obviously* targeted her just to get to you. She loved you. And from what I can see, she’s the best thing that ever happened to you. You were better, smarter, happier, for every day you spent with her. And in the end, you treat her no better than one of the many PAs you fired when they got the temperature of your tea wrong. You not only flicked her aside, but you robbed her of her livelihood. You are a callous prick, and you don’t need to fire me, because I quit. I don’t want to work for you. Wallow in your own shit. I’m done.”

She spins on her heel and heads for the door. For a moment, my voice is caught in my throat, but then I manage to force out enough words to make her pause. “I waived the non-compete. She could work at any station she wants.”

Turning back to face me, she quirks a brow. “Except the one she spent her entire career at.”

“I lost out too, you know.”

“Oh?” She looks around the massive corner office situated directly next to my father’s. It’s lavish, and I get paid plenty to be here, but it’s the last place I want to be. When the article dropped, my father gave me a choice—the station or Camille. I chose Camille, which means I’m now my father’s corporate

slave. And I fucking hate it. “Your life looks hideous. I feel horribly sorry for you.”

“This isn’t my life. It’s the life my father chose for me.”

“And Ruby’s life is the life you forced on her out of petty spite. I don’t know why, because I don’t think you deserve one ounce of care from that woman after how you’ve acted, but for some *insane* reason, she still loves you. She still misses you. So maybe, while you sit on your high horse, you can think about that. Have fun finding someone else to put up with you. I think I was the last person in the entire city.”

“You’re still quitting?”

She nods once. “Want me to stay, sort out your personal life.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“It’s not that hard either. Make a fucking phone call. Hell, go and get a cup of coffee before you come to work and see how *looking* at her working at a Starbucks makes you feel. Whatever it takes. Just get your head out of your ass and do *something*. You belong together. And you’re miserable apart. You can’t keep pretending. Fix your shit.”



“HELLO?” After almost giving up pressing the door buzzer on Ruby’s apartment, a crackly voice I believe belongs to Tahlia comes over the intercom.

“Ah, hey. I was after Ruby,” I say, a slight waver in my voice. I’m fucking nervous.

I’ve just left the office early after spending the day with Karen’s word swimming around in my head. Part of what made me fall in love with Ruby in the beginning was that she always called me out on my shit. And I didn’t realize how much I missed it until Karen came in and did the same thing this morning. Ruby wasn’t one to mince words, and I quickly came to rely on her as somewhat of a moral compass. She was unfailingly honest at every turn, and I trusted her implicitly. I

suppose that's what made the information leak feel so deplorable. I never expected it to come from her. Never from her. So, I reacted the way I always have when someone doesn't live up to my expectations—I fired her. From her job, from my life. And I'd be lying if I said I haven't regretted it every day since.

“Tanner?”

I rub a hand over my head sheepishly. “Yeah.”

The door buzzes open. “Come on up.”

I really am an idiot. The moment I step into the building, everything I've been suppressing comes flooding back, and I miss her so much it actually hurts. There's a heavy thudding in my head, a tense ache in my belly, and a heaviness of my body that tells me this place is where I left my heart.

When I gave it to Ruby, it was hers to keep. No takebacks. I've been living without it ever since I threw that magazine on the floor and exited her life. *I really am an asshole.*

With every step I take, the memory of that moment becomes clearer in my mind. I've been suppressing that hurt look in her eyes. I've been denying the memory of the tears rolling down her cheeks. I've been pushing aside the vision of the utter devastation on her face. And now I see it. I see it all clear as day. It hits me so hard that I have to stop halfway and place the heels of my hands against my eyes to keep my own emotion in check. I hurt her, I loved her—I still love her—and I took all of my anger and my fear over what could happen to Camille, and I aimed it right at her.

The saying is to cut your nose off to spite your face, but with Ruby, I cut my heart out to spite my chest. I've been an empty husk ever since.

“Hi Tanner,” Tahlia says, meeting me at the top of the staircase when I hit the landing. “Long time, no see.”

Frowning, it takes me a moment to swallow the lump in my throat, so I nod. “Is she here?”

“She's at Theo's.”

“And I suppose Theo wants to give me a black eye?”

“Maybe. Darren definitely wants to scratch your eyes out, though. He’s very protective of Ruby. We all are.”

“And yet, I’m still alive.” I offer her a half smile. And she gives me the tiniest of laughs. This is not a comfortable moment. I feel like I’ve messed everything up, thrown away the best gift at Christmas, taken something precious and shiny and left it in the rain to rust. *I fucked up.*

“She forbade it.”

“Do you think she’ll talk to me?”

“If you can get past her brother and the drag queen.”

“OK.” I actually manage to smile at that. “It was good to see you, Tahlia.” I nod once then turn to leave.

“That article was all my fault,” she blurts, stopping me before I get too far. “I was dumb and naïve, and I thought Nick actually liked me. But he was just using me to get information on you. I have the worst luck with men, and I’m so incredibly sorry that my poor judgement has affected you negatively twice now. And I truly hate myself for causing trouble for your sister. For you. And especially for Ruby. I really want to fix this. But I just don’t know how I can. I mean, I’ve written article after article and submitted them everywhere I can. No one wants to run it.” She rushes into her apartment for a moment then returns with a folder, handing me a heartfelt story titled, ‘*I Was Used to Bring Down a Good Man*’. “I posted it everywhere that accepted free submissions. I just...I wanted to tell people the real story. But they don’t seem interested.”

“Thank you,” I say, closing the folder and handing it back to her. “I appreciate this. You have no idea how much. And I want to apologize to you too. I was...irate, and I was scared, and I took it out on both you and Ruby.”

“I understand. Camille is your family. I left my job at Icon, by the way. I don’t want you to think I got a promotion out of your pain.”

“I appreciate that too. Where are you working now?” I ask, hoping she isn’t struggling due to my callousness the way Ruby is.

“BuzzFeed. Funnily enough, we’re running a sexiest man poll again soon. Your name came up.”

My mouth kicks up in a smirk. “That’ll give my father something to have a fresh coronary over.”

“I actually...” She presses her lips together and pulls another sheet of paper out of her folder. “I also wrote *another* story. One with more guts. It’s about your father and his refusal to pay for Camille’s care. I thought—if you’re willing to let me submit it—that he should be the one paying for his own sins, not you. I mean, I know you love Camille and that it isn’t an imposition for you to make sure she’s looked after. But I think the way he’s manipulating you so you can do the *right thing* should be brought to light. Maybe putting this out there could help?”

The paper shakes slightly in my grip and my breath stutters in my chest. My father owns so much of the media that I’m not sure who’d have the balls to go against him. But at the same time, I’m so tired, so fucking tired of bowing to his will just to keep paying for Camille’s care. If this all blows up, then I’ll pay for Camille out of my own pocket and take the man to court. This has to stop. It’s been going on for far too long.

“Do it,” I say, handing it back to her before I can change my mind.

“You mean it?”

My stomach draws tight, but I still manage to nod. “Yeah. I’m tired of not being in control of my own life, tired of being the one to pay for *his* inability to step up. Somehow, he needs to be made to stand up and face his sins.”

RUBY

*M*y phone buzzes with a text from Tahlia. **You're about to get a grumpy visitor.**

“What?” I shoot up from my seat and Darren stops his sewing to look at me.

“Tell me you didn’t just get bit by some nasty little bug,” he says. “I don’t think my heart can take any of that nonsense again.”

“No,” I say, tearing my eyes away from my phone. “I think...I think Tanner is coming.”

“What? Here? Does he know?” Darren has started waxing his eyebrows off to make his drag queen makeup easier to apply, but they still manage to arch up and hit his hairline. “When?”

“I don’t know. Soon? Tahlia said we’re about to get a grumpy visitor.”

“Oh, that could just be that damn cat. Doesn’t mean it’s Tanner—who’s still at the top of my shitlist, by the way. He hurt you, and until I see him groveling at your feet, I don’t even wanna know.” He holds his hand up like he’s blocking a bad feeling.

“I think we should let Ruby decide where on the shit list Tanner should reside,” Theo says. “She’s the one with stakes in this game, after all. And I don’t really want to upset you, baby, but I’m pretty sure grumpy cat passed away.”

Darren gasps. “You take that back!”

“No. It’s true. Look.” He gets up and takes his phone over to where Darren’s sitting at the sewing machine, showing him the screen.

“Well, that is just the saddest thing I’ve ever—” The door buzzer sounds and all eyes land on me.

“You want me to answer it?” Theo asks, his tone soft and understanding.

I swallow down hard as butterflies burst to life in my stomach and attempt to fly out of my mouth. “I can do it,” I say, moving to the handset on the wall. My heart pounds against my rib cage as I pick it up and hold it to my ear. “Hello.”

“Ruby? It’s Tanner. Can we talk?”

My hand covers my mouth as my eyes fill with tears. I’ve been longing to hear his voice for months. I’d even gotten to the point where I thought I’d never get the opportunity to speak with him ever again. But now, all of a sudden, here he is. But why? After three months of nothing, why now? Then it hits me. Karen.

“That depends. Are you here to yell at me again?” I ask, my hand against my chest. I can feel the thudding of my heart.

“No. I’m here because I love you and I’m miserable without you.”

“How miserable?” I ask, needing to hear it because I’ve been miserable too.

“So miserable. Even on the sunniest days, it feels like the dead of winter without you in my life. Please, Ruby. Let me come up so we can talk.”

“You hurt me, Tanner.”

“I know. I was an asshole, and I’ll never do it again. It’s no excuse, but I’ve spent so long trying to keep Camille safe, happy, and out of the public eye. Having that threatened sent me into an irrational tailspin. I know I reacted harshly, and I know I threw all of my hurt and anger at your feet. But if you can just give me another chance, I’ll spend the rest of my life

proving that I am your Mr. Right. Just like you're my Miss Right."

Without another second's thought, I hit the button to open the door. I mean, I should probably make him grovel a little longer, make him take out a billboard campaign declaring his undying love for me. But he's already said everything I need to hear—he's sorry, he misses me, and he regrets everything he said. Plus, he just came from Tahlia and that's ten flights of stairs he went up and down, *and* the elevator is out here too, so he'll have to run up *another* twelve flights of stairs to get to me. So I think between that and the speech over the intercom, that's working hard enough. Especially when I did him wrong too. I should never have told anyone about Camille without checking with him first.

I open the door, expecting to wait for a minute or two before he reaches us, but he must be some kind of stair climbing champion or something because the moment I step out, we collide. And it's not just any collision, it's a full-on arm wrapping, jumping collision that ends with his mouth on mine and my legs wrapped around his waist.

"Fuck, I missed your mouth," he says, pressing his forehead against mine as I cling to him like a monkey, refusing to let go.

"I missed everything about you. Absolutely everything. And I'm so mad at you for leaving. I'm furious at you for throwing what we had away. But I'm elated that you're here," I cry, my voice getting tighter and tighter with each word. "Does that make me pathetic? Because I feel pathetic, but I just... I missed you. I missed you."

"Baby, you could never be pathetic. You're perfect. I am the asshole here. I reacted like a total dick and I'm so incredibly sorry. I should've given you the chance to explain, should've at least waited for the fallout before I reacted. But I just... I fucked up. Please tell me I didn't ruin us. I mean, I'm hoping the fact your legs are wrapped so tight around my waist is a good sign." He gives me that signature smirk of his and I just want to kiss it off his face, kiss him until neither of us can breathe anymore.

“It’s a good sign,” I confirm. “But I need to know, is Camille OK?”

He nods. “She’s fine. Things were a little topsy-turvy for a while there, but I took care of things. She’s back in the facility now. Happy and cared for. And she swears black and blue that you bought her a Barbie Dream house.”

I tilt my head to the side. “That’s because I did. I bought it before, for her birthday. So when it arrived, I took it there, and they said they sent it to her. I felt horrible because I thought your father had sent her away like he threatened to. But I’m relieved she’s still there.”

“I had her staying with me for a short time. It wasn’t easy for her, but we got through. You know, she asked about you every day. Talks about you every time I see her. I feel like maybe she knew us better than we did.”

“She has great intuition. The first time we met she asked me if I was going to marry you, and you know, I think I just might. “

A massive grin curves up the sides of his mouth. “You’re not going to wait for me to ask? “

“You can ask,” I say with a huge smile on my face. “But just know, you’ve already got my answer. And this time, I don’t feel like it’s rushing into things. I waited three long months without you for this. And I want it all back. No more waiting. No more yelling at me then cutting me out of your life. If we’re going to do this again, we’re going to do it together all the way. You don’t get to be the boss anymore. “

“How about co-hosts?” he says. “Or better yet, co-station heads. I may or may not have just wiped out a chunk of my savings to buy WHGC so I can’t be forced out of it again. I also spoke to Tahlia and I think I’m ready to speak out against my father. Wright media can go to one of my cousins for all I care. I can do this all on my own. I’m done being their puppet. The only thing I’m not done with is you. I never want anything to come between us again. “

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” I say, pulling my head back a little so I can look him clearly in the eyes. “Because when our baby is born, he or she is going to need their dad around. So if we’re going to do this together, we need to do it right.”

His eyes almost bug out of his head and his mouth falls open, reminding me of my own penchant for gaping. It’s an unusual sight to see Tanner doing it, though. “You... You’re pregnant?”

I nod. “I just found out this morning. I was actually over here talking to Theo and Darren about how I was going to see you to break the news. But now you’re here. Like somehow the gods of fate were pushing us back together.”

“Fate,” he says, placing his knee against the wall to support my weight so he can cup the side of my face in his hand. “To the dick on my car, to the radio show and the baby in your belly. It’s all meant to be, Ruby. Fuck. I’m gonna be a dad.”

“And I have to push a watermelon out of my vagina. But yay! We’re gonna be parents.” We laugh and he spins me around.

“I love you, Ruby Casey.” He leans in close and I smile.

“I love you, Tanner Wright,” I whisper just before he brings his mouth to mine in a slow and sensual kiss.

“OK. We like him again,” Darren sighs from his vantage point in the doorway of their apartment. “But if you do one more thing to hurt this girl or you turn out to be a deadbeat baby daddy, I swear, I will send every drag queen in the city after you. You won’t be able to blink without seeing glitter and feathers come flying your way. So take that as a dire warning.” He places his hands on his hips and nods definitively.

“Duly noted,” Tanner says.

Theo places his hands on Darren’s shoulders and steers him away. “OK, Coco. We hear you. How about we give these lovebirds some privacy?”

“Thank you, little bro,” I say, grinning at him, loving how supportive he’s been over everything that involves Tanner and me. He gives me a wink.

“I’m happy if you’re happy, sis. “

“Oh, I’m happy. Actually, I’m more than happy. I have my Mr. Wright. I’m perfect.”

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EPILOGUE

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RUBY

One year later...

“Are you ready?” I ask as I straighten the flowers in Camille’s hair. We’ve got her signature red bob in ringlets and she told me just before that she feels like the most beautiful fairy in all the land. I have to agree.

“I have my flower crown. Check,” she says, touching her hair with her working hand. “I have my dress. Check.” She touches the dress. “And I have my petals. Check.” She touches the basket we’ve attached to the side of her chair so she can toss them as she’s wheeled down the aisle. “I am ready to be your flower girl, Ruby.” She tilts her head up and gives me a glowing smile.

“Fantastic,” I say. “You’re going to be great.” I turn to Tahlia. “How about you? Are you ready to be Maid of Honor?”

Tahlia repeats the same motions Camille did, touching her flower crown, her dress and checking that she’s holding her flowers. “I sure am,” she says, giving Camille a wink.

“And what about you, little munchkin?” I say to my three-month-old son, Bradley, who gurgles in Darren’s arms.

“Oh, this little ring bearer is going to steal the show,” he coos, tickling Bradley’s cheek with the tip of his finger. “He’s so beautiful I just want to eat him up. Aren’t you just the cutest? Yes, you are.”

“I never expected you to be such a mother hen, Darren,” I say.

He flutters his long lashes. “What can I say, I’m the queen of many things.”

Bradley gurgles in response.

“And what about you, Darren? Are you ready to walk down that aisle too?”

“I will be the *best* bridesman you have ever had,” he says, popping his hip. “Plus, I’m really looking forward to seeing Theo standing up there as Tanner’s best man. It’ll make it easier to imagine him at our wedding. I’m still kind of reeling that he proposed last night.” He flashes the diamond on his finger.

“I am so happy for you guys. This has been a long time coming.”

“I’ll say.” He stares at the ring, and I remember how long I spent staring at my ring when Tanner proposed to me.

It was the day of our first baby scan. We went into the doctor’s office and saw our baby on screen for the first time. Up until then, I had known I was pregnant, but something about seeing that little growing life inside me, moving around with miniature fingers and toes, just made everything so much more real. I cried, Tanner cried, and afterward, he took me out to lunch and popped the question while down on one knee. Despite telling him I planned to marry him when we got back together, I still had no idea he was planning to propose. It was a complete surprise and a beautiful moment I will cherish always.

“I think the biggest question is,” Karen starts. “Are *you* ready to walk down that aisle?”

Smiling, I do a slight twirl, holding out the ivory skirt of my dress. “I’m more than ready. Marrying Tanner is the final tick in the box of my happily ever after.”

Despite our somewhat rocky beginning, Tanner and I have become a solid unit, both at work and at home, as a couple and as co-workers and parents. We are a team in the best sense of the word, and it really helps that we love each other so completely and have such a wonderful support system around

us. Theo and Darren are seriously the greatest babysitters around. And since we still struggle to keep our hands off each other, we're more than happy to let Uncle Theo and Auntie Darren moon over their nephew for an hour or two here and there. He's a lucky boy to have so many wonderful people in his life who care about him.

"OK then," Karen says, clapping us along. "Let's get this show on the road."

We all bustle through the back halls of the church, standing just beyond the door to the chapel as the music starts and the doors are pulled open. Karen pushes Camille up the aisle to complete her flower girl duties, and there's a light round of applause that I *know* Camille will be loving because she's a big fan of being the center of attention. Her nurses say she's the comedian in the group of her friends.

Next is Darren with Bradley, followed by Tahlia, then, of course, it's my turn.

"Ready, pumpkin?" my dad says, offering his black-suited elbow to me as the music changes. He has so much pride in his eyes that I feel like a little girl again, taking my first steps. When he and Mom met Tanner, they welcomed him like a second son, and I think that's something Tanner really needed in his life. Because as expected, when I met his parents, the reception was...frosty. So much that Tanner refused point blank to invite them to the wedding. And after the fight we had to enter to get Camille the trust fund to support her needs, I don't blame him. His father is toxic to say the least, and this is the happiest of days. Only people who love and support us are welcome.

"As I'll ever be," I say, sliding my arm in the crook of Dad's and smiling broadly. The moment we step through the big church doors, the world just falls away.

Waiting for me at the end of the aisle is the love of my life, the father of my child, the maker of my dreams, Tanner Wright. So much has changed in the last twelve months. Stepping away from his father was not an easy task for my man to achieve, and the fight for Camille's security almost

sent him personally bankrupt. But he worked hard, and he fought for what he believed in. And now Camille's trust has been set up and we never have to worry about her care being snatched away again. And Tanner never has to work for a company he despises again.

Within just a couple of weeks of our reunion, we rebranded our show and redid the billboard photo shoot, this time featuring both Tanner and I for a new show called '*He Said, She Said*'. It has a similar concept to *Beauty and the Bigot*, except this time we always have callers on teams and Tanner's callers debate against my callers. It makes for great radio with heated conversations that sometimes turn into arguments, but as soon as that On Air light switches off, we're just us again, still locking ourselves away in our office and banging it out until we fall in a sweaty heap, completely exhausted, and ridiculously obsessed with each other.

"You look so beautiful," Tanner says as he takes my hand after Dad has officially given me away. "Think we can sneak away and see what that dress looks like on the floor? You think anyone will notice?" He gives me a cheeky wink, then presses a kiss to the side of my cheek. "I'm so hard thinking about fucking you tonight as my wife."

"Oh god. I'm starting to wish we chose faster vows," I gasp, my knees quivering at the promise in his tone. He pulls back with a chuckle and the priest begins, taking us through our vows and the exchange of rings before finally pronouncing us as husband and wife.

"You may kiss the bride!"

"Don't mind if I do," Tanner says, hooking his arm behind my waist and tilting me back, kissing me so hard that I almost forget to breathe. We stand back up to uproarious applause.

"I love you so much, Mr. Wright," I say, smiling from ear to ear as I lean against him and look into his gorgeous blue eyes.

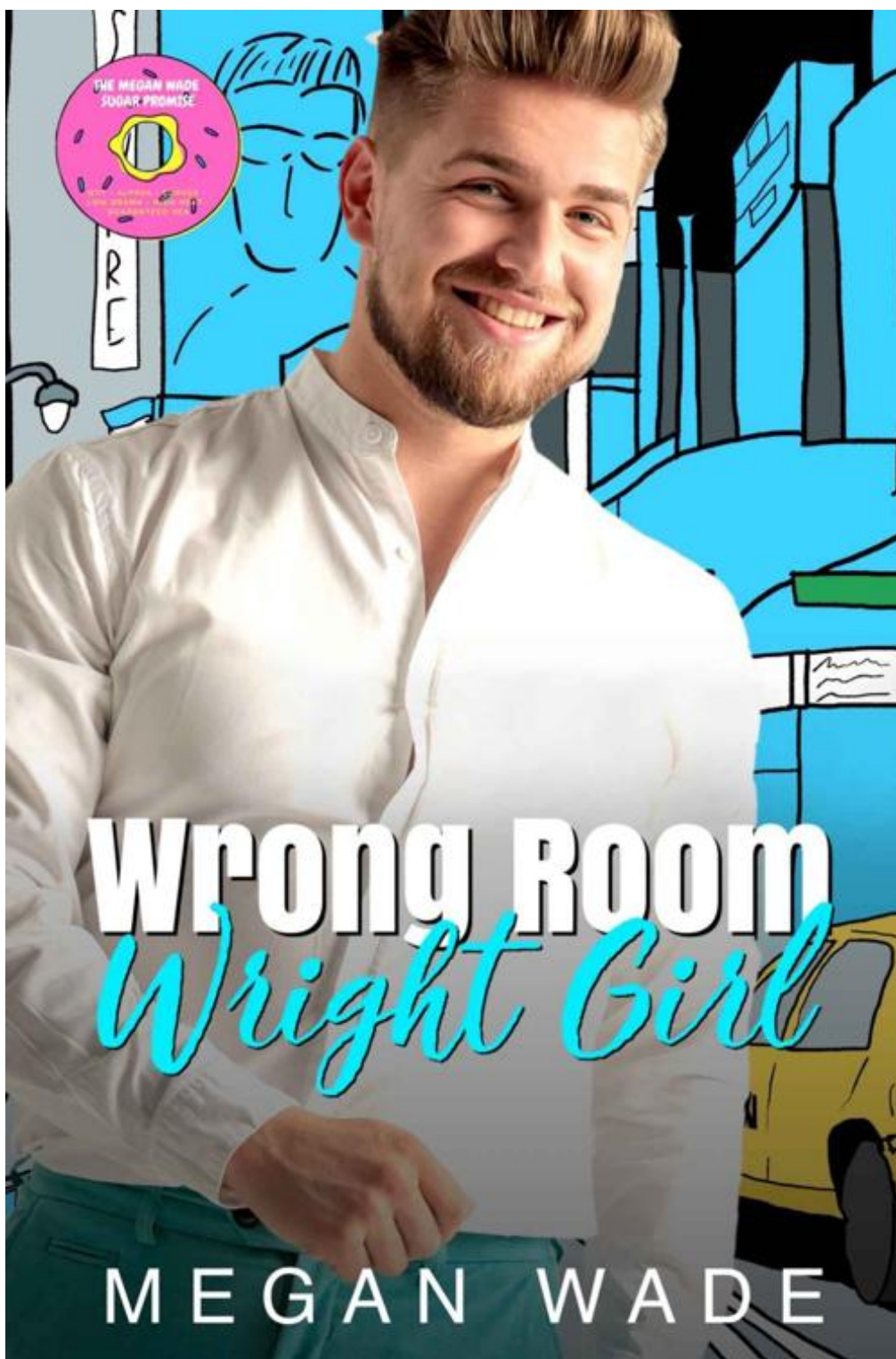
"And I love you, *Mrs.* Wright. God, I love calling you that."

“I love hearing it. We’re married.”

“Yes, we are. And this is just the beginning, baby. I plan to spend the rest of my life making you the happiest woman in the world.”

“Oh, Tanner. I already am the happiest woman in the world. I literally have everything I could ever want. And it’s all because I dragged my key over the hood of some guy’s car one night.” I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it a thousand times before I stop: I had the wrong car that night, but I *definitely* had the right guy. And I’ll be grateful to Tahlia for her terrible taste in men for the rest of my life, however, from the way she’s making eyes at Tanner’s cousin, Ash, across the aisle, I have a feeling that maybe my best friend is finally about to find her Mr. Right in the form of a husky engineer who blushes every time they make eye contact. I have great hope, but only time will tell...

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ASH

There's only been a handful of times I've stood up at the front of a church, a brand-new suit or tuxedo pinching at my waist as I stood tall, squared my shoulders, and sucked my gut the way my father always told me to. The first was as a teen for Dad's second marriage, then again for his third, and then for my sister's wedding a decade later. My *younger* sister's wedding, something my father kindly pointed out before my next bridal party foray at his *fourth* wedding. By then, my sister was already on her *second* marriage, and I was in my early thirties and still single. Things weren't so great between Dad and me at the time, and they hadn't been ever since I refused to follow in his footsteps into the family business. So, when I said that *maybe* I stayed single because I didn't want to fail at marriage as spectacularly as he has throughout his life, he declared that the final straw and wrote me out of his Will.

So, I didn't stand up at his fifth wedding—nor was I invited to it, thank god—and the next time my ugly mug graces the front of the church as a member of a Wright man's bridal party is today for my cousin Tanner. He's the only other Wright male to give the family a middle finger salute and walk away from their media-monopolistic billions to forge his own path.

Besides my sister—who's now sworn off marriage after her second divorce before thirty—Tanner is the only member of the Wright family I've kept in contact with over the years. So, I'm more than pleased to bear witness to his first, and definitely *only*, marriage to the very beautiful Ruby Casey.

She's the love of his life, his co-host on their show, *He Said, She Said*, and an all-round awesome gal. Tanner is one very lucky man.

As happy as I am for my cousin, I'm also fucking jealous. Despite walking away from his guaranteed position at the top of the ladder in Wright Media in a spectacular burst of smoke and flames when he outed his own father as the deadbeat Dad he is, Tanner landed squarely on his 'sexiest man alive' feet. His radio talk show is the most listened to in the entire country and worth millions in advertising revenue. The man just smiles and someone offers him a million-dollar deal, so he knows nothing of the struggle that comes with going against the family from the get-go. So, while I love the man, my naturally blue eyes are green as fuck. He's rich. He's good looking, and despite coming from the same gene pool, next to him I look like Humpty Dumpty *after* he fell off the wall.

And that's not to say I'm hideous—or that I look like a smashed-up egg—it's just that I'm not pretty enough to win any sexiest man awards like my cousin. Sure, I could go to the gym a little more and eat a little less, but seriously, who has time for that shiz? And really, it won't change much, it'll just make me look like the Hulk to his Bruce Banner. Not that Bruce Banner is particularly good looking, but you get where I'm going—I'm a bruiser, he's a model. Nothing is going to change that.

Back when I was working my way through college—dear old Dad cut me off when I refused to study business and media and chose engineering instead—I worked as a security guard and then as a nightclub bouncer. I'm six-four and naturally barrel chested, so it was the perfect job for me that also fit around my studies. If it wasn't for my baby face, I probably would have excelled at that too. Instead, I spent a lot of time proving I could hold my own, and let me tell you, fighting drunk assholes every night was not my idea of fun. I couldn't snatch my degree out of the chancellor's hand fast enough. *So long, Caltech!*

Now, I'm in my forties and I still look like a chunky kid. My sister says that she *wishes* she had my skin, but when I

keep getting mistaken for a college grad when I'm going for a job interview, the baby face is a bit of a hindrance. I sport a beard just so I don't look pre pubescent.

But I digress. I'm supposed to be focusing on my cousin's wedding, not holding a pity party for one. It's just so damn hard not to sulk when you can *hardly fucking breathe in this cummerbund*. Why are they so tight? Why don't they make dress pants with elastic in the waist? Why do we even *have* to wear dress pants? When I get married—if I ever get married, we're doing it in our pajamas.

Looking around the packed-to-the-rafters church, I take a deep breath, forcing the air to my chest instead of letting it flow into my stomach, willing the bridal music to start so this show can get on the road, and I can quit being on display and feeling so out of place. Not only is the groom the Internet voted sexiest man alive, but his best man is Ruby's twin brother who's almost as pretty as his sister, then the third groomsman is a barista named Andy, who isn't helping me feel less obvious because I swear it's like he shrinks into himself and is using my size to hide behind. He's an interesting fella who only seems to have one topic in his repertoire—his girlfriend Karen, who's a bridesmaid on the other side.

I know that normally we'd have all met each other prior to now. But work commitments got in the way and my flight from Atlanta was held up so I only landed in Newark late last night. I've seen my hotel room for a couple of hours' worth of sleep, and then I came straight to the church after breakfast. And now, well, here we are. It's almost go time.

"I'm so fucking nervous and this isn't even my wedding," Theo whispers as he squares his shoulders, his jaw clenching as his eyes move to the double doors of the church when they open, preparing for the bride's precession to begin.

"You're next though, right?" I whisper, knowing he proposed to his long-term boyfriend, Darren, the night before.

"Yeah." He glances at me and smiles. "I'm either crazy or in love. Not sure which yet."

“I’d hope it’s the latter,” I say, as Andy pops out from his hiding spot behind my left shoulder.

“Between this wedding and the rock you gave Darren, Karen is going to get all kinds of ideas. She’ll be on my case to propose before the day is out, I know it,” he says, visibly sweating.

“I don’t understand why you haven’t already proposed,” Tanner whispers back to him. “You already live together, and from what I’ve seen, she owns you, man. Make it official.”

“She’s also very scary, Tanner. You should know that since she’s your PA,” Andy retorts.

Tanner’s lips quirk before his attention snaps to the open doors, a hush falling over the entire room as the opening strains of the bridal march start playing. There isn’t a forward-facing set of eyes on the church as Tanner’s sister—my cousin—Camille, is wheeled down the aisle in her ribbon-clad wheelchair, a basket of rose petals tied to the armrest so her working arm can throw petals while Karen pushes her in time with the music. The joy in her eyes brings a tear to mine. She’s the same age as me at forty-two, but she’s been mentally disabled for most of her life and was previously hidden from the spotlight for reasons Tanner is better at explaining. But it’s wonderful seeing her look so happy and free.

“Ash!” she calls out, a huge grin spreading across her face as she waves at me. The entire congregation ripples with laughter. One thing you can say for Camille is that she spreads joy wherever she goes. It’s her superpower.

I wave back, of course, and when she makes it to the end of the aisle, I’ve been tasked with maneuvering her wheelchair into the tight space, so I take a quick moment to lean in and speak to her. “Check you out,” I say. “The prettiest redhead in the room.”

“I am!” Camille’s eyes light up. “But only until Tahlia gets here. She’s like the Barbie with red hair that Ruby got me for my birthday,” she says, giggling before throwing her final handful of petals over my head. I blink, pulling back in

surprise. “That’s wedding magic, Ash. It’s so you can find a wife too.”

“Oh, thank you,” I say with a chuckle. “I need all the help I can get.”

“I know,” she says, still smiling. “It’s because you’re so old.”

I laugh a little louder than I intend at her honesty, but I can’t fault her logic. I imagine I’m less and less of a catch the longer I remain single. “Save me a dance at the reception?” I say, smiling at her emphatic nod before I return to my position and await the rest of the wedding party.

While I was helping out Camille, Darren has started walking down the aisle with Tanner and Ruby’s three-month-old baby boy, Bradley, in his arms. The baby has a tiny tuxedo on, and a little pillow attached to his wrist that has the rings securely tied to it. Darren is also wearing a tuxedo, but he’s jazzed it up with a bright pink half-skirt that touches the floor behind him, a matching pair of pink stilettos and pink glitter eye shadow that really contrasts with his ebony skin and the gold highlights he’s brushed over his cheeks, nose and chin. I glance at Theo, who’s just watching his fiancé strut down the aisle with a look of awe on his face.

“See?” I say, tapping him lightly with my elbow. “You aren’t crazy at all.”

Theo beams and nods, his eyes never leaving his love. Darren blows him a kiss and takes his position next to Karen and Camille, prompting us all to return our gaze to the entry doors. And that’s when my jaw drops and my entire mind goes numb as a tiny redhead enters. This is obviously the Tahlia Camille was talking about, because she really does look like a beautiful doll. Her red hair is curled and pinned on top of her head with tendrils coiling down to touch her pale-skinned shoulders that look so soft and milky that my fingers itch to touch them. She’s so tiny I could wrap one hand around her waist and my fingers would meet in the middle, but she’s also completely precious and everything inside me feels like treasuring everything about her. My reaction is so visceral that

I feel like dropping to my knees in front of her Wayne's World style and screaming, 'I'm not worthy! I'm not worthy!' Failing that, a good rendition of *Foxy Lady* could also fit this moment. I'm completely blown away.

Tahlia steps precisely to the music, smiling at those as she passes like she's a member of the royal family and was born to be watched. She's wearing the same type of stilettos and half-skirt that Darren has on, but she's teamed it with a glittery, slate gray dress that hugs her tiny frame and reflects the lights, making her look majestic as she moves.

The touch of a finger at the base of my jaw, shutting my open mouth for me, snaps me out of my daze as I turn to Andy who's giving me a knowing grin. "I think I drooled a little too when Karen walked down the aisle."

"That's Tahlia, right?"

He nods. "She's single."

I shake my head. "Way out of my league."

"That's what I thought about Karen when I met her, too. But she keeps choosing me. So, I think I'm gonna ask her to marry me later."

"I thought you were scared of her?"

"I am," he says. "But I'd rather be scared of her all my life than live a single moment feeling anxious without her."

My eyes move to Tahlia as I nod, wondering if there is any way on this earth a beautiful, doll-like creature could ever find herself attracted to a big, burly bastard like me. And when her eyes lock with mine and a deep blush blooms in her cheeks, my insides flip and I think that maybe, just maybe, Camille's 'wedding magic' did something.

TAHLIA

As the wedding vows are said, I get a little misty-eyed watching my bestie get married to the love of her life. Ruby and I have joked a few times about how grateful she is for my crappy taste in men. It was retaliating against a guy who dumped me right before my birthday that led to her and Tanner's first meeting. But I'd like to think that fate would have brought them together without a phallic symbol scratched into the hood of his Porsche, especially since he was the new owner of the radio station she was a board operator at. It would have only been a matter of time before their hearts collided, I know it. They're just too perfect for each other.

Seeing them exchange rings and promise themselves to each other forever really makes me want that kind of happiness for myself. I want the kind of love that knocks your socks off, the kind of connection you know you can't live without. No more falling for arrogant guys with their flashy smiles and even flashier wallets. It never gets me anywhere but downtrodden, and I've had enough of that.

Rich assholes have been my Kryptonite for as long as I can remember, and it's not even the money that draws me in—I'm not that shallow—it's the asshole part that gets me. These guys that are so filled with confidence that they make me feel like I'm the luckiest girl in the world just to have been special enough to turn *their* head. A rich asshole walks into the room, and he feels so unobtainable, so out of my league, that I go out of my way to impress him. It's pathetic really, and the last time I let a rich asshole into my life, it almost cost Ruby her relationship with Tanner. I swore from that moment on that I

was never going to trust the quiver in my loins again. From here on out, I date with my head. Then maybe I can fall in love with my heart.

If I were to write a news article on my current situation, the headline would be, ‘Vagina town. Shut for Business!’ and the rest of the piece would detail the ways in which the mayor of said town can’t be trusted to make fully informed decisions. She gets a bit of D then sends all the moaning whores—also known as hormones—out to flood the streets with their sparkles and glitter, blinding the eyes of her citizens—me—to the reality of the situation. Namely, that I’m dating a narcissistic douche who’ll step on his own mother if it’ll lift him higher.

I am *so* done with *that* kind of relationship.

So. Done. Which is why, when my heart does a little pitter-patter and my belly does a flip of excitement when I lock eyes with Tanner’s cousin, Ash, I try to squash my body’s reaction down and fast. He’s a bigger, brawnier, and from the looks of things, a *younger* version of Tanner. Which, since Tanner is marrying my best friend, should be a good thing. But Ash is a Wright, and that means he also has Wright money, and most likely, Wright arrogance too—something Tanner wasn’t without in the beginning of his and Ruby’s relationship, let me assure you. And while it turned out great for Ruby, for me, good looking, rich and arrogant men have only ever led to trouble and disappointment. So, one thing I’ve finally learned after living twenty-five years on this earth is that I must avoid those qualities at all costs. No more rich assholes for me!

No more rich assholes. It’s a new resolution, so it’s something I need to keep repeating in my mind as the wedding procession starts to leave the church. The closer Ash gets to me, the harder it is for me to remember the words. He’s magnetic, and the way he smiles and his blue eyes crinkle at the sides has the phrase shifting to, *One more rich asshole*. And it takes a lot of mental fortitude to shift it back. Thank god the man lives in another state, because I’m about to be partnered with him for the rest of the wedding celebrations, and my mental fortitude is obviously weak as fuck. I haven’t

even looped arms with him and my knees are already quivering. We have photos, the meal, speeches and of course, a dance together before the night is out. If he's even half as charming as his cousin is, I don't stand a chance.

No more rich assholes.

Maybe just one!

No! Be strong, Tahlia!

I look up at him with a wavering smile as he offers his arm.

“The cutthroat reporter, Tahlia Adams, I presume,” Ash says, his deep rumbling voice doing wicked things to my nipples the moment it enters my ears. *Oh, god, I'm in so much trouble here.*

“You've heard of me?” *That came out really breathy...*

“Of course.”

“And you're the enigmatic Mr. Wright, I presume.” My eyelashes flutter involuntarily as I look up at him. I'm trying not to flirt here, but I realize I've failed at that immediately, so as I slip my hand into the crook of his offered arm, I wince and kick myself—not an easy thing to do in unison while wearing a fitted dress and high heels.

“Enigmatic.” Ash chuckles. “I like that part. But Mr. Wright? Don't go holding my surname against me. I'm not my father, I assure you.”

“I've never met your father, so I'm not sure if that's a good or a bad thing.”

“He's a lot like Tanner's father. And since you wrote the scathing article on *that* Wright patriarch, I'm guessing you have a well-informed idea of the kind of man we're dealing with.”

“And that explains why you're off hiding in Atlanta.”

“You've done your research.” He drops his gaze, and I notice a dimple pop in his cheek even though it's hidden by a nice thick beard. *A beard that makes the insides of my thighs*

prickle at the thought of having his beautiful face buried between them... Wincing again, I shake my head and the thoughts away. *This is an actual sickness!*

“Oh god! I wasn’t stalking you online or anything. Ruby mentioned you were flying in. That’s how I know.”

“It’s fine.” He smiles and my entire reproductive system lights up. I am no longer in control of my body. “I’m in Atlanta because that’s where my job is. It’s also where my mother lives, and it’s only a couple of hour’s flight away from my sister, Camille and this asshole.” He lifts his chin, nodding toward Tanner as he and Ruby disappear out the main doors, the rest of us in tow.

“Oh. You have a secret sister too?”

“Half-sister—she’s from my father’s second marriage—but she’s no secret. She works at Wright Media like the rest of the family and hates every moment of it.”

“Why doesn’t she leave then? Go her own way?”

“And risk getting cut off and written out of Dad’s Will the way I did?” *Cut off? Written out?* My brain grabs hold of that tidbit. *Does this mean he isn’t a rich asshole?*

“Your Dad cut you off? What did you do?” I can’t help the questions that fly from my mouth. It’s probably none of my business, but I’m actually getting excited. If he’s not rich, it means all I need to ascertain is if he’s an asshole. And if he’s not an asshole, that means that for once in my life, I’m attracted to someone outside my ‘type’. This could be the moment I break the cycle! Hallelujah! If this is true, I can let my lady parts lead the charge here without worry.

“I refused to fall in line. Chose to be a medical engineer instead of a cog in the Wright Media wheel. The moment I applied to CalTech and got in, he was done with me.”

“Oh, my gosh!” I feel bad for him, but at the same time, I’m kind of praising myself. All that soul searching over the past few months might have finally opened my eyes. I have an instant attraction to a man with morals—what is this life? I’m so excited I could fist pump and pat myself on the back. But

we're having a serious conversation, so I refrain. "Do you still talk to your sister?"

"I do. But she hides the fact, so she doesn't piss off dear old Dad and risk her cushy job," he says, glancing at me. "Her own words, not mine."

"And yet she hates the work."

"She does. But she says she'd shovel shit every day if it means a fat bank account and early retirement." Now *he* winces. "Shit. This is a terrible conversation for a wedding recession. Not to mention you're a reporter. Fuck. Please don't write about any of this." He turns his worried blue eyes my way. "I have no idea why this is all coming out of my mouth. You just make me nervous and I'm vomiting words." He claps a hand over his mouth and giggles. He *giggles*. And I melt.

"I make you nervous?" I can't help but laugh. It's become abundantly clear that Ash Wright is not what I expected at all. I think that maybe, for the first time in my life, I'm interested in a regular—albeit ruggedly handsome—guy. My uterus does a happy twirl. *Go me!*

"Um, yeah. Incredibly," he says as we make our way through the huge double doors into the maze of corridors that'll lead us to the side of the church where the cars are waiting. "I may share a surname with Tanner, but we're night and day personality wise. I do not share his confidence at all when it comes to beautiful woman."

"You think I'm beautiful?" I'm grinning and he's turning red. I am actually swooning so hard right now that I hug myself to him a little. *He's mine. I'm keeping him.*

"Fuck. Why can't I shut up around you?" He wipes a hand over his face, grinning as he shakes his head. "And this is only going to get worse once we start drinking. Anything I say tonight needs to be off the record, OK?"

Throwing my head back, I laugh, liking everything about this guy so far, and loving that my initial impression of him was so incredibly wrong. "I'm not that kind of journalist, I

promise. I work for BuzzFeed in the list department, so I'm no more cutthroat than a kitten with an eye patch. Your secrets are safe with me. Well, except for the 'beautiful woman' part. I'm going to write that on a post it and stick it to my mirror so I see it every morning when I wake up."

"Yeah?" He tilts his head toward me, and I nod. "In that case, give me a post it and I'll write it *for* you. '*Beautiful badass*,' it'll say. You should never look in the mirror and think anything else." *Swoon*.

"Where have you been all my life, Ash Wright?" I say, looking up at him as we step out of the church.

He looks down at me and smiles. "Atlanta."

With a smile that won't quit, I turn to the sound of confetti poppers going off as Ruby and Tanner walk toward the first car. The area has been cordoned off so the paparazzi can't get too close, but they're still hanging about the perimeter with their telephoto lenses, no doubt sending pictures off to their editors as fast as possible to be the first to break the story.

"You know any of them?" Ash asks as I look toward the guarded barricade where all the press is gathered.

"No. Writing about Tanner's dad was as close as I got to a newsroom. But that was onetime thing that got me blackballed since Wright Media has so much control."

"Is that something you still want to do?" he asks, stepping to the side so I can get into our car.

"Of course. Writing lists is the pits. But it pays the bills—barely—and at the end of the day, what I did helped Tanner help Camille, so it was worth it to see everyone happy." I've messed up a lot in my life and my career. I've been a sub-par friend and a terrible judge of character. But publishing that article was probably the only great thing I ever did. I stand by it whole heartedly. I flash him a half-smile as he settles into the back of the car beside me and we're closed in.

"I'm sorry my family is keeping your talent down," he says, his gaze softening as sincerity coats his words. For some

reason, his candor makes me blush and want to change the subject.

“Oh, it’s fine. I wasn’t going anywhere fast, anyway, if I’m honest. No big deal.”

“It was a very big deal, Tahlia,” he says, placing his hand on top of mine. “Just look at Camille.” He points out the window, where we can see Camille laughing as her carer helps get her and her wheelchair loaded into the purpose-built van. “Then look at Tanner and Ruby.” I shift my gaze and find them staring at each other lovingly before pressing their lips together for one last kiss before they get into the first car that we’ll all follow to the reception venue. “You see how easy they smile? What you did gave them that. You’re a hero.”

“A hero in a really weird dress,” I say, deflecting while I twist my hips to show off the pink tulle half-skirt Darren insisted we all wear, along with our matching stilettos, of course. “I love Darren, but drag queens should not be allowed to choose bridesmaid dresses or shoes. I can barely walk. I’m petrified I’m going to trip on this tulle and break my neck.”

Ash releases a hearty chuckle. “In that case, I think you need to give the weird half-skirt to me,” he says, holding out his hand before looking out the window and checking that no one’s looking our way.

“Why?” I ask, smiling as I do what he says and hand it to him.

“You’ll see.” Giving me a wink, he rolls the offending fabric into a tight pink ball, waiting until we hit the road before he opens the window and releases the tulle into the wind. I whip around and watch it float away and get caught in a tree.

“Darren is going to kill me,” I gasp, my eyes wide as I watch the skirt disappear from sight.

“We’ll tell everyone I was a klutz and stepped on it,” he says, winding the window back up as he reaches for the provided champagne and hands me a glass.

“Just when I was starting to think you were a good guy, Ash Wright, it turns out you’re a very bad boy,” I say, laughing as he fills my glass with bubbles.

“A boy?” he says, setting the bottle back into his holder before he turns back to me, his glass in hand. “I know I’ve got a baby face, Tahlia, but I’m definitely a man. I can prove it to you if you need me to.” My insides quiver from the promise in his words as we lock eyes, and he taps his glass to mine. Then we drink, chatting and giggling together like long-lost friends until we reach our destination and catch up with the others. P.S. I think I love him already.

“What in the world happened to your skirt!” Darren cries out the moment he sees me in just my dark-gray dress.

“Oh, ah,” I stammer, looking to Ash, who happily steps in.

“Funny you should ask...” he starts while I cover my mouth and try to not to laugh, thinking that there’s a whole lot more to Ash Wright than meets the eye.

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ASH

“*Y*ou don’t like dancing?” Tahlia asks while I awkwardly sway during our required time on the dance floor as members of the bridal party. Tahlia is quite honestly the most beautiful girl I’ve ever been in close contact with. And so far, I’ve made it through the ceremony, the photos, the speeches and the meal without making too much of a fool of myself. But on the dance floor, my inability to coordinate my limbs can’t be hidden. Unless I don’t move too much.

“I love dancing, actually. Just when it’s someone else doing it,” I force out, feeling sweaty and nervous. I’m petrified I’m going to crush her dainty toes with one of my big feet, not to mention being worried I’ll put a stain from one of my clammy paws on her pretty dress. This needs to be over. Now.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I think you’re doing just fine,” Tahlia returns, her small hands resting on my shoulders. “You might want to loosen your muscles a little, though. You’re gonna give yourself a neck cramp.” She mimics me by pinching her shoulders up and twisting her head to the side comically. “You’ve gotta be loose.” She demonstrates by lowering her shoulders and moving her neck from side to side in fluid motions. “Just move with the melody and forget about who’s watching.”

I bark out a laugh. “If I danced like no one was watching, people would start thinking they let an elephant out of the zoo. Or worse, they’d dive under tables thinking an earthquake was

coming. No thank you, I'll stick to swaying like a marble statue in the breeze."

That at least earns me a laugh. "It's really not that bad, Ash. I promise you."

"You wouldn't be saying that if I busted out a move and your toes got in the way."

She smiles and rolls her eyes, lacing her hands behind my neck with a sigh. If I wasn't so worried about my sweat levels, I'd wrap my arms around her and pull her in close just so I can breathe her in. But I don't even want to risk that. I need a visit to the men's room, a hand dryer and some deodorant, stat. Until then, I'll keep my hands firmly on her waist where they can do the least amount of damage.

When I was growing up, I was promised I'd become accustomed to my size, that I'd grow into my looks. But that was never the case, since I've been clumsy and awkward all my life. Once, I tied my *own* shoelaces together and fell on my face in front of a group of investors I was supposed to show around the lab at work. I was mortified, and after that, my colleagues thought it'd be hilarious to have me working on left side prosthetics only 'because I have two left feet'. I've never lived it down, and I'm still not laughing. I'm really good at developing left side prosthetics, though.

"Mind if I cut in?" Theo, the bride's twin brother, asks as the song changes, and I'm a little too quick to oblige. Practically shoving Tahlia at him while I make fast excuses before I get the hell off that dancefloor.

I hazard a glance back over my shoulder, a jealous pang hitting me the moment I see Tahlia laughing as Theo twirls her around then draws her back against him, like moving like that is the most natural thing in the world. I know there's nothing to be jealous about—I have no claim to Tahlia, and Theo isn't even straight—but still, I can't help the dive my self-confidence takes before I barge my way through the men's room door.

"Oh. Hey." Andy's eyes meet mine via the mirror he's standing in front of, and the look on his face has me stopping

in my tracks. He looks how I feel.

“Everything OK there, buddy?” I ask, moving to the wash basin beside him.

He shrugs and pulls some paper towel from the dispenser on the wall. “Karen said no,” he says, scrunching the paper into a ball and dropping it in the trash. I baulk.

“To your proposal? Holy fuck, man. I’m so sorry.”

He crinkles his nose up before he swallows hard, his Adam’s apple visibly bobbing in his throat. Suddenly I feel like a total dick for being all woe-is-me over not being able to dance. Andy has much bigger problems. “She said she doesn’t need a piece of paper or a lavish wedding to prove we’re together. She’s happy just as we are.”

“OK. So, it’s not about you, she’s just against marriage, then?”

“I guess,” he says, bouncing a shoulder again. “She never really said, so I just thought that since we’ve been living together so long, marriage was the next natural step. Now...I don’t know.”

“Is that a deal breaker for you?” I fold my arms over my chest and lean a hip against the sink. “I mean, can you be happy as you are?”

“I guess.” He frowns. “I just...I don’t know. I thought we’d be forever, but if she doesn’t want to get married, does that mean she’s just in a holding pattern until something better comes along?”

My brow lifts and almost touches my hairline. I’m so not the person who should be counseling him on this topic. I’ve barely had a handful of semi-serious relationships in my time, and not once have I been on the cusp of asking anyone to marry me. I’m out of my depth. So, all I can do is jump to the most logical thing.

“I think,” I say, rubbing a hand across the back of my neck before I continue. “That we need to start drinking. This is a party. Let’s save all the shitty reality for the morning.”

Andy's dark eyes meet mine, and he releases a tense laugh. "You know, I think you're right. Fuck it. I'll worry about my relationship in the morning. Let's get blind drunk."

"The answers might not be at the bottom of a bottle, but an empty bottle means you can't even remember the question. Am I right?" I say, clapping Andy on the back as he laughs a little freer this time.

"Hells yeah! It's why god *invented* alcohol," he says, leading the charge as we head toward the bar and order whisky straight up, some fancy Japanese stuff that is the bride's favorite, we're told.

"To finding your peace," I say, tilting my glass toward his as my eyes stray toward the dancefloor where Tahlia is now dancing with someone else. It's the story of my life. Find a pretty girl, get along with her like a house on fire, then find out she prefers someone—anyone—other than me.

"To forgetting today ever happened," Andy returns, bringing my attention back as he taps his glass against mine before he downs the contents and orders another round, telling the bartender to keep them coming.

"To forgetting it all," I mutter, knocking the whiskey back and pushing silly ideas of wedding magic and smiling women out of my mind.

TAHLIA

“Oh god. Whose idea was it to wear a corset all day?” Ruby gasps, wriggling around as I help her loosen the ribbons on the back of her dress to give her a little more breathing space.

“You did,” I say, smiling while my fingers re-tie the bow and she’s all done. “There. Good as new.”

She heaves out of breath and places her hands on either side of her ribs as she turns to face me. “Thank you so much. I can actually take in a lungful of air now.”

“What are besties for?” I say, turning with her to lean on the railing that overlooks the grounds where we had our photos done earlier today.

“This feels like one big fairy tale,” she says, wistfully looking off into the distance with a sigh. “I never thought this could be my life. I’m married, I’m a mom.” She laughs and shakes her head. “A couple of years ago I thought being able to afford a ten-dollar bottle of wine working as a board operator was as good as it gets. I wasn’t even expecting to find my Prince Charming. I was kind of resigned to just being alone and doing my thing, you know?”

“Yeah. I know. But you deserve this, Rubes. All of it. You were selling yourself short, thinking this couldn’t be your life before. And now that it is your life, I’m so incredibly happy for you. Even if I’m also a little jealous. You’re living every little girl’s dream, you know.”

Ruby laughs then turns around, her back against the railing as she looks inside the reception hall through the big glass windows. It's dark outside now, so the party going on inside looks like something projected onto a big TV screen. I can even see Ash sitting up at the bar with Andy.

Ash.

It's funny, I didn't take him for a big drinker, but then, I only just met him today, and I've already been wrong about him twice already. Maybe that says more about my ability to judge people than it says about him though. I kind of expected that once he left the dance floor, he'd do whatever he needed, then find his way back to me. But he's been perched on that stool next to Andy for the last hour, and he hasn't even tried to look for me. Not that he had to. As I said, I just met the guy today, but I'm also not going to lie and say that I'm not a little bit hurt over it. I thought we had a connection. But at the end of the day, he lives in Atlanta and I live here in Manhattan. No matter what romantic notions I had earlier in the night, none of it was ever going to work out due to the sheer logistics of the situation. I was seriously kidding myself thinking anything meaningful could happen.

"You and Ash seem to be getting along well," she says, watching me watch him through the window. I tear my eyes from his back and turn away with a sigh.

"I thought so too. But I don't know. Maybe I read the signs wrong there. Not that it matters. Logistics and all that." I flash her a smile, then rest my elbows on the railing, my eyes attempting to make out the shadows in the dark grounds. "I don't even know what I'm looking for, Rubes. Maybe I need someone a little more mature. And a little closer to home."

"More mature? Ash is forty-two. What are you after? A sixty-year-old?"

"What?" My eyes go wide, and I look back at the bar. Suddenly Andy isn't there anymore, and it's just Ash, his broad shoulders hunched forward like he'd rather be anywhere but here. "I thought he was in his twenties like us."

“Me too, when I first met him. But nope, forty-two. Tanner says he’s crazy shy. It’s why I was surprised to see him talking so much with you. Thought maybe it was kismet.”

I smile then rest my head on my best friend’s shoulder, missing her even though she’s right here. Back before she met Tanner, it was her and me against the world. We lived in the same apartment building on the same floor, and we had all the same troubles and held each other’s hands through it all. I don’t wish for a minute for her to give up what she has now to return to our old life, but I do miss having her all to myself and seeing her every day. Her world is changing, and mine is staying the same. I feel a little...lost.

“I think he likes your whiskey more than me,” I whisper, looking up at the sky and wishing there were more stars.

She rests her head on mine. “Your turn will come, you know,” she says, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “You just haven’t met the right guy yet.”

“Don’t get me started.” I lift my head and roll my eyes. “I’m excellent at finding the toads.”

“Toads you say.” She taps her chin and smirks. “How about the worm at the bottom of a tequila bottle?”

“Oh lord. Ruby, do you remember how sick I was the last time we had tequila? Darren had to hold my hair back while I spewed in an alley and Theo had to practically carry me home.”

“It’s also the night I met Tanner,” she says with a smile. “So how about we recreate the moment and see if some of that luck can rub off on you? Consider it the official handing of the Mr. Wright baton.”

“I thought catching the bouquet was the official hand off.”

“Tom-ay-to, tom-ah-to,” she says. “You in or not?”

Laughing, I shake my head. “Sure. Let’s go and order some shots.”

“Excellent,” she says, a giggle bouncing her chest as we link arms and ready ourselves to go inside. But before we get

far, a streak of pink catches our attention as it goes sprinting across the grounds. “What the?”

“Is that...Karen?” I ask, just as another figure rushes out.

“Well, it’s not Darren, and Camille went home hours ago,” Ruby muses, just as the yelling starts.

“I never asked you to ask me, Andy,” the pink streak, who I’m now sure is Karen, says as the second figure—Andy, of course—catches up to her and grabs her arm. “What would possess you to think this is what I wanted? We’ve never even talked about it.”

“What’s going on?” I ask in a whisper as Ruby and I hold our heads together.

“I have no idea,” she whispers back. “But I don’t think we should be watching.”

Of course, we keep watching...

“You never said you *didn’t* want to get married,” Andy replies, his hands at his side. Ruby and I exchange a wide-eyed glance. “How was I supposed to know how you felt if you never told me?”

“You know how I feel about you, Andy. I tell you every day.”

“You love me. Then why won’t you marry me?”

“Because I don’t want to be married. I just want to be us. Perfect us. Just as we are.”

There’s a slight pause, then Andy steps closer, and I think they speak some more but we can’t hear from where we are. Then all of a sudden, they’re on each other, kissing like they’re each other’s last meal before they fall the ground and clothes start coming off.

“Ohmigod,” I gasp, turning away and closing my eyes.

“Oh god. I so did not want to see that,” Ruby winces, grabbing my hand and rushing us both to the door. The moment we’re inside, we burst out laughing.

“What in the world has you two gagging like a couple of geese?” Darren says, sauntering up and looking like he just woke up fresh as a daisy.

“You don’t want to know,” Ruby says, her hand to her chest. “But we need tequila. Stat!”

He purses his lips and clicks his long-nailed fingers. “Say no more, sis. Shots it is.”

“You clicked?” Theo says, appearing out of nowhere in response. I love this about these two. Everyone needs a love like Theo and Darren.

“Baby, we’re celebrating this night the way our adventure started—with shots of tequila.”

“Oh yeah. I am so here for that,” Theo says, rubbing his hands together and nodding.

“Why do I feel like I’m missing out on something really great here?” Tanner says, joining our small gathering and slinging an arm around his wife’s shoulders.

“We’re about to do shots,” Ruby says, smiling up to him.

“Thank god we don’t have to be parents in the morning,” he says, pressing a soft kiss to Ruby’s lips.

“Don’t remind me. I feel so weird that we’re not going to see Bradley until tomorrow night. I just keep telling myself he’s having a blast with Mom and Dad.”

“You know he is,” Theo says. “Mom would actually get into a catfight with Darren over who is the greater baby entertainer.”

“It’s me,” Darren says, fluttering his lashes. “Hands down.”

“Of course it is, baby,” Theo says, giving Darren a smooch that has that green-eyed monster in me flaring up and wishing I had that kind of relationship too. I feel a lot like a fifth wheel right now.

“OK. Shots! I’m so not drunk enough to be the only single one at a wedding,” I say, pointing to the bar and leading the

charge. When we get there, I'm not sure if I should be inviting Ash to join us, or if maybe I should just let him be. I'm not sure where I went wrong with him, but I obviously did something to upset him. Or maybe I just came on a little strong...

"Cousin!" Tanner takes care of my dilemma by clapping a hand on his cousin's back. "We're doing shots and you're joining in."

Ash sits back and frowns. "Shots? What kind?"

"Tequila," Ruby says in a singsong voice.

"Are you for real, man? I'll probably die if I start shotting tequila. Do you realize how old and well used my liver is?"

"Oh, come on, cuz. You've got some fight in you yet," Tanner teases, causing Ash to roll his eyes.

"Maybe. But, *tequila*?" Ash argues. "Do we want to get messy?"

"Last time we did this was at my birthday last year," I tell Ash, hoping that maybe I was just reading into his standoffishness and that light fun we had was still there. "It definitely got messy. But it was that night that Tanner and Ruby met, so this is to honor them."

Ash takes in a slow breath as he meets my eyes, then nods. "OK. I'll do one for the bride and groom. But then, I'm out of here." His words are met with a hefty objection from the rest of us. "I'm running on no sleep, guys. I'm exhausted."

"And I'm only gonna get married once," Tanner says. "You can sleep when you get home. Tonight, my favorite cousin, you're going to party with us. It's my wedding and I won't take no for an answer."

Ash rolls his eyes. Much in the same way I did when Ruby suggested this to me earlier. "In that case," he starts. "Line them up."

"First one to vomit has to pay the tab," Ruby calls out when we pick up our shots. It causes us to laugh because it's

an open bar. But at the same time, I get a little wistful since that's exactly what she said the night she met her soulmate.

“Don't let me barf,” I whisper to Ash. “I beg you.”

He gives me an almost imperceptible nod. “I've got you,” he says, my belly heating before we lock eyes and drink...

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ASH

“*I* thought you didn’t like dancing,” Tahlia mumbles, her mouth smooshed against my chest as I hold her and we sway together on the dance floor while some Fleetwood Mac song plays over the speakers. Most of the wedding guests have left at this point, so it’s only the hardcore partiers who are still sticking around. And even then, we’re fading.

“I’m really fuckin’ drunk,” I murmur against the top of her head, my arms tightening around her body.

“So that’s the secret to getting you to loosen up, huh?”

I smile. “I do a lot of shit I wouldn’t normally do when I’m drunk.”

She looks up at me with half-lidded eyes and smiles a lopsided smile. I get this incredibly intense desire to lean down and kiss her. But even drunk me doesn’t take those kinds of risks. I don’t know how many opportunities I’ve missed in my life, but I’ve never been the kind of guy to make the first move romantically unless I’m certain it’ll be reciprocated. Probably why I’m a forty-two-year-old bachelor. I’ve gotten plenty of shit over it from friends throughout the years, but all I know is that I’m shitty at reading and reacting to those subtle signs women give. I’m too busy second-guessing whether it’s a true signal for me to make a move, a thought about something else that I’m misreading, or just gas... “I really need to pee,” Tahlia says suddenly, confirming the reasons behind me hesitating. *Not a signal. She just needed to pee.*

“OK, then.” I release my grip on her, feeling a little defeated the moment she places her hands on my chest and spins away from me, but OK with it at the same time because we’re drunk and...well, I’m not *that* kind of guy either.

After I watch her teeter across the dancefloor toward the bathroom, I head back to our table once she’s safely inside so I can take a load off. I don’t know how women do this in heels, because *my* feet are killing me.

“Why hello there, Mr. Wright Now,” Darren quips, dropping into the seat next to me. His energy levels seem unchanged from what they were at the start of this day to now. I’m envious. “I hope this means you’re waiting for our Tahlia to freshen up so you can go upstairs and rock her world.”

“I doubt Tahlia thinks I can rock her anything,” I deadpan, giving him a smile as I let out a tired sigh.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course, she does. We can all see the vibe she’s sending your way.” He leans in a little. “We also think you two make a great match.”

“Is that so? And what vibe do you think she’s sending?” I ask, raking my fingers through my beard as I pick up my cell and check that my room key is still in the case. I’m really gonna have to call it. Regardless of the signs or the vibes, tonight is not that night.

Darren narrows his eyes. “I don’t know if you’re serious or if you’re being facetious.”

“I’m not being facetious.” I slip my cell into my side pocket. “I just don’t know what a—how old is she? Twenty-five?” Darren nods. “OK. I don’t know what a twenty-five-year-old woman could want with a forty-two-year-old man who isn’t much to look at, doesn’t have much to offer, and is also set in his ways.”

“You’re forty-two?” he gapes. “What the fuck moisturizer do you use?”

“None.” I laugh, shaking my head as he makes a show of inspecting my skin. “I just look like a perpetual kid.”

“Wow.” His mouth opens like he wants to say something more, but shakes it off and gets back on topic. “Listen, I think you’re missing the point here—a pretty girl just spent an entire evening glued to your side and hung on your every word. How do you *not* see that as a sign she’s into you?”

“Even if she is, Darren, we’ve both had *a lot* to drink tonight.” I pick up a glass of water and sip, trying to do something nice for my liver and kidneys. “I don’t think what you’re suggesting is a good idea.”

Suddenly, understanding dawns on his glittery face. “Of course. Whiskey-dick. I mean, I’ve never experienced it. But I do know that it’s a thing. Especially when you’re of a certain age.” He reaches out and pats my knees, giving me an empathetic nod.

“Whiskey-what?” I start, my face scrunching up before I get what he means and start shaking my head. “No. I don’t have that issue. My...*it*...works just fine. I’m just not a ‘Mr. Right Now’, and even if I was, I’m not gonna take advantage of a drunk girl.”

“Oh, my stars. You’re a *gentleman*. OK. I’m swooning over you now.” He fans at himself. “But don’t get any ideas, I’m an engaged man.” He flashes the rock on his left hand.

“I wouldn’t dare,” I say with a chuckle, getting up as Tahlia exits the bathroom and wobbles back in our direction with a smile on her face. Even drunk and a little messy, she’s still gorgeous. My heart thuds heavy in my chest, and my dick definitely doesn’t want to be a gentleman, but I have my faculties about me enough to know what’s right and wrong, so I’m going up to my room to get some sleep before I have to fly out again in the morning. And I’m going to do it alone.

“Are we leaving now?” Tahlia asks once she’s makes it back, her big green eyes looking up at me like she’s a little puppy I want to take home and take care of always. My heart kicks up to a gallop, and I’m rethinking the gentlemanly thing. Especially since even *I* can read the signs she’s giving me now. *Stay strong, dude.*

“I’m dead on my feet, so I’m heading up to my room,” I say. “Do you want me to walk you back to your room? Or you wanna to stay here with the others?”

Her expression changes as her eyes move from me to Darren. Darren holds out his hand to her. “You should stick around, baby girl. I mean, Ruby hasn’t scratched up anyone’s car yet, so I don’t think the night is over until it’s been recreated authentically.”

Tahlia laughs as she drops into the chair I just vacated. “Well, in that case, I guess I’ll stick around here a little longer,” she says, sending a half-smile my way. “It was so great meeting you, Ash. I had a lot of fun tonight.”

“Me too,” I say, nodding as I slip my hands in my pockets and step back, noting that my cell is no longer there. I look around, feeling sure that’s where I put it, but when I find it on the table, I realize I must be more drunk than I feel. I lean in and pick it up again. “Maybe I’ll see you in a few weeks at Bradley’s christening?”

“Oh, yeah. Of course,” Tahlia says. “Darren and I are still fighting over godmother privileges. So, it will be a big thing to see who Ruby and Tanner pick.”

“You know it’s Theo and me this time,” Darren says. “You can have the second kid. Me and Bradley have a special bond.” He flutters his lashes and turns away with a pout. Tahlia laughs.

“I’m still gonna fight you over it,” she teases before turning back to me and smiling. “So, I guess I’ll see you in a few weeks?”

“For sure. No tequila next time?”

“I don’t know,” she says with a coy smile. “Maybe I’ll want you to dance?”

With a soft chuckle, I lean in and brush my lips against the top of her head, catching the faint scent of her fruity shampoo. “Be good without me, OK?” I say as I straighten, and she nods. “And don’t let her puke.” I aim that last part at Darren who smirks and gives me a nod.

“I’ll take great care of her.”

“OK,” I say, before projecting my voice to the rest of the room. “Thanks for a fun night, guys. I’m dead tired, so I’m out of here.”

There’s a flurry of disappointed noises, goodbyes, and see you soon’s that follow me out the door. Then I’m in the elevator, enveloped in quiet while I kick myself for walking away, while also convincing myself that leaving was the best and right thing to do. I like Tahlia. I like her a lot. And a drunken fuck that she might regret in the morning isn’t what I want. Still, it’s lonely walking up that hall alone and back to my room. Worse still, when I slot my key into the door and the card doesn’t register. “What the hell?”

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TAHLIA

“*H*e is so hot,” Darren says, fanning himself with his fingers as we watch Ash leave. “And he just told you to be good. Doesn’t that turn you on? It turns me on. Holy freakin’ man.”

“He *really* turns me on,” I say. “But *why* doesn’t he like me?” I let out a groan, slumping in the chair while I feel sorry for myself. “I need another drink.”

“Oh, he does like you, boo,” Darren coos, lifting his hand and signaling to Theo, who nods then puts an order through the bar. I swear he lives to serve his queen. It’s glorious. “He’s just... I think he’s one of the good ones.”

I frown and sit up again. “What do you mean? Did he say something?”

“Well...”

“Here we are.” We’re interrupted when Theo brings over a couple of tall glasses filled with colorful liquid and topped with umbrellas and a pineapple slice. “I wasn’t sure if this was a celebratory drink or drown-your-sorrows drink. So, I asked for this strongest, prettiest cocktail they had to cover both bases,” he says as he hands them over.

Darren takes a sip and nods appreciatively. “Oh, baby. This is delicious,” he says, taking another sip. “And strong. I wholeheartedly approve.” He nods toward me and I take a sip, the sweetness hitting my tongue before the strength of the alcohol hits the back of my throat, making me cough slightly.

“Wow. That packs a punch. Just what I needed. Thank you, Theo. You are a godsend.”

“So they tell me.” He says with a grin before a furrow crosses his brow and he squats down next to my chair. “This your phone?” He holds up my cell after scooping it up from the floor.

“Oh crap. I must have knocked it off the table. Is it OK?” I ask, taking it and checking that the screen isn’t cracked since I only just got it last week and haven’t even changed the wallpaper from the default. Thankfully, all looks fine, and my room card is still slotted in the case. So, no harm, no foul. “You just saved my ass.”

“Another day, another damsel,” Theo says before he shifts to the seat beside Darren. “So what are you two girls lamenting over here?”

“I don’t think we’re lamenting,” Darren says, snuggling a little closer to Theo as he sips his drink.

“I was lamenting,” I add, leaning forward a little to talk across Darren. He rolls his eyes.

“She shouldn’t be. I was just about to tell her *why* I think Ash is one of the good ones.”

Theo’s brows lift as he nods. “OK. I’m here for this story.”

“Well,” Darren continues, loving his expanded audience. “I sat here next to him and suggested that maybe he’s Tahlia’s Mr. Wright Now—you know, funny pun on the surname and the timing—but he made it very clear that he doesn’t do one-night stands, and even if he did, he would never take advantage of our girl in her inebriated state. Which, considering how clearly Tahls here was ready to ride cowgirl on that man, tells me he’s not only a good guy, he’s a *great* guy. It takes a big man to walk away from a sure thing.”

“He’s definitely *big*,” Theo adds, giving Darren—who gasps—a knowing look.

“Oh my god, right? Did you see the size of his hands?” Darren says. “I know a few queens who’d cry knowing he’s straight.”

“Right?” Theo adds. “And let’s not even start on those feet. Ho-ly *fuck*.”

“I knooooow,” Darren breathes, eyes wide as he places a hand against his chest. “I was tempted to time my bathroom visits so I could sneak a peek.”

“Wait. Are you two talking about his dick?” I ask, which just makes both of them turn my way and nod slowly. I sit up a little straighter. “Well...how big are we talking?” I know enough to understand that like boobs, they come in all shapes and sizes. But I thought it was just luck of the draw. I didn’t realize hand and foot size played a direct role in this. The things you learn...

“I didn’t get eyes on it,” Darren starts. “But—”

“Oh, I did,” Theo says, the side of his mouth kicking up as Darren’s head jerks toward him.

“You didn’t!”

“I did. And it was a total accident too. We just happened to be in the bathroom at the same time and—”

“Tell us, tell us! Oh god. Tell usssss,” Darren says, practically bouncing on his seat with excitement.

“Like a baby elephant’s trunk,” Theo says knowingly. “He probably has to tuck that thing down the leg of his pants to get around.”

Darren clutches my arm. “Girrrrrl. You’ve hit the cock jackpot—the cockpot, or the jackcock. I don’t know which, but *girrrrrrrl*.”

“A baby elephant’s trunk?” I repeat, my eyes going wide as I try to imagine such a thing. “And that’s not hard, right? So, it’d only get bigger?”

They both nod.

“You should be grateful he showed restraint tonight, baby girl,” Darren says. “Tiny thing like you will need to do some prep work to take that man-meat inside you.”

“Holy fuck,” I breathe, not sure if I should be relieved or seriously put out. I just let the golden goose of cocks slip through my fingers... I lift my straw to my mouth and drain the glass. *Holy giant cock, batman!*

“Oh baby, I think we’re gonna need a couple more of these,” Darren says to Theo as I reach out and take *his* cocktail, draining that too.

“On it,” Theo says with a chuckle. “Don’t blame your headache tomorrow on me though.”



“THERE IS a house in this place right here! It’s caaaaaaled the Rising Sun!” I sing at the top of my lungs as Theo carries me over his shoulder with Darren following behind and cackling.

“And it’s been the ruin of many a poor gay boy!” he adds in his deep baritone.

Before Theo puts in, “Great god, and I’m that one.”

We burst into a fit of giggles as Theo stops and sets me on my feet.

“Give me your room key,” he says.

I look at him with bleary eyes. “Thish isn’t my room,” I slur, my fumbling fingers unable to get the card out. Theo takes it from me. “Mine is five-oh-six. This is five...oh...*nine*.” I drunkenly point at the number on the door.

Theo holds the keycard between his fingers. “Well, it says five-oh-nine right here on the card. And look”—he slots the card in the door—“it opens it too. Get inside.”

“I love it when you boss me around.” I giggle, taking the key back from him as he pushes the door open. “Don’t you think it’s kinda dumb they wrote the room number on the card? I didn’t notice it there before. But anyone could use it. I’m gonna call downstairs and tell them it’s dumb, dumb.”

“You need some help getting changed, baby girl?” Darren asks, his smile telling me that maybe everything I just said

didn't come out as coherent as it did in my mind.

I look at him through one eye. "No. I'm fiiiine. I can even touch my nose with my finger." I demonstrate by poking myself in the eye.

"OK. Maybe we should stay with you tonight," Theo says, moving to come in the room. I put my hand against his solid chest to stop him.

"No. No. You two go and be in love!" I'm singing my words here. "I'm just gonna sleep and pretend I'm not gonna end up a lonely cat lady. OK?" I step into the room and let the door close, saying, "Bye-bye," just before it clicks shut and I'm plunged into darkness.

"Oh. Fuck," I mutter, feeling for the wall for the slot thingy where I'm supposed to put my keycard, but I can't find it in my inebriation, deciding instead to just follow the wall because I know the bed is just past the hall.

After a few stumbles, giggles and a couple more bars of *The House of the Rising Sun*, my knees hit the bed and I fall flat on my face on the soft mattress, feeling sure I can hear myself snore before I even fall asleep...

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ASH

*M*y eyes pop open as I'm pulled from slumber by the very distinct feeling that I'm not alone. And the moment the sleep haze clears from my mind, I swear I can hear a soft snore on the bed beside me, so I lean over to turn on the lamp.

“Holy shit!” Suddenly wide awake, I leap out of bed the moment the light illuminates the room. Tahlia is face down on the mattress, still fully dressed and sleeping—well, passed out—peacefully. Her face is all smooshed into the pillow, her mouth is open and she's drooling up a storm. I laugh at myself there, because my god, I still think she sexy. *What the hell is wrong with me?* This so isn't what I was expecting when I got on that plane from Atlanta. I thought I'd attend the wedding, congratulate the bride and groom, then be back on my merry way come sunup. But now, I've got this tiny, gorgeous redhead who's almost half my age, delivered right to me like it was my dreams who called her. *How the fuck did she even get in here?*

A quick check on the screen of my phone shows it's almost three in the morning. Seems the party went on for a while longer since I left not long after twelve.

My eyes travel down her gorgeous body, lingering places I really shouldn't be looking if I'm half the gentleman I think I am. *Fuck.* Temptation really does come in all forms and when you least expect it.

Turning away, I scrub a hand down my face and pace back and forth alongside the bed, trying to figure out how the hell this happened and why. Sure, when I came up here earlier, I

was wishing the gods would see it fit to send me a gift so sweet, but that was when it was just a fantasy. I didn't think it could possibly *happen*. The reality of it is kind of... unnerving, and I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do.

Was there a genie at the bottom of that tequila bottle?

Has Camille suddenly become magical, and those rose petals actually did something?

Or did I just leave the door open and a drunk girl wandered in?

The possibilities are many and varied. Including the option where *I'm* the one in the wrong room.

I stop pacing and shake that last idea off pretty fast. I had a shower when I got back in—jerking off over the little minx lying on my bed included—and my toiletries were here, as well as my suitcase since I changed into my sleep shorts. So, it's not me in the wrong room, it's definitely her. But how?

Chewing on the inside of my lip, I scan her sleeping form, my dick reacting to that round ass of hers. I turn away and grab a pair of gray sweatpants, tugging them on so I can at least cover *some* of what she's doing to me. "Fuck," I mutter, pulling on a sweatshirt too. "What the hell am I doing here? What the hell am I *thinking*?"

I blow out a breath and tell myself I'm a dirty old man who has no right looking at this pretty young thing at all. Darren said she's twenty-five. That's a big age difference. Almost a full adult human. If I wasn't feeling sober before, that thought alone does it. But to add insult to injury, I also remind myself that she's tiny and beautiful and I'm big and well...not beautiful. It's the reality check I need. The poor girl would probably have a fit if she woke up here in the morning and thought she's gotten horizontal with the black sheep of the Wright family. How fucking disappointing.

"Tahlia," I whisper, reaching out and touching her shoulder, trying to rouse her so I can get her back to her room. "Tahlia. You're in the wrong room." And I am definitely not the right guy—despite my surname. "Tahlia?"

She shifts a little, and I think she's about to wake, but all I get is a snort in return. She's out cold. Maybe I should call Tanner? No. It's his wedding night, and he probably doesn't want to be interrupted to deal with this. If I had a number for Theo or Darren, I'd call them, but...

Wait.

Her cell is clutched in her hand. So, if I can manage to free that from her grip, I can use it to get in contact with Theo and Darren. Maybe they know what room she should be in so I can get her back in there safe and sound. Away from me and my dirty thoughts.

I give myself a mental slap in the face.

Moving to the opposite side of the bed, I reach over her and take a hold of the top of the phone. I move it maybe a quarter of an inch before her grip tightens and I freeze up, feeling like I'm doing something really creepy and invasive.

"You're helping her, you idiot," I say to myself, steeling myself to try again. This time, I use two hands, one to peel her fingers away, and the other to free her phone. It's a success on the second go, and I tap my thumb against the unlock button, hoping against hope that she doesn't have a security lock setup. Shockingly, it unlocks. "Huh."

My thumb moves to the contacts list, but then my eyes stray to the sleeping beauty and my curiosity about her sends my thumb to her photo gallery before it pauses, shifting to her messages, hovering while guilt churns in my gut then sends it straight back to that contact list where it belongs.

The moment I tap however, I'm struck by a sense of familiarity that has me exiting the contacts list and tapping straight on the photos without any hesitation. My ugly mug shows up on screen, along with a hundred random photos I've taken and memes I've saved.

I flip the cell in my hand, realizing that *this* is how she ended up in my room, and it's also why my key wouldn't work earlier. Tahlia and I have the same phone. We also have the same simple black phone case. Somewhere along the way,

we've traded phones along with our room keys. *Well, I'll be damned.*

Chuckling to myself, I pocket my cell, then walk around to my side of the bed, picking up the charging phone and opening it up. I already know it doesn't lock because I set an alarm on it before I fell asleep, and when I open her photos, what I already know is confirmed—this is Tahlia's cell. I laugh at the mix up again as I flick my thumb against her screen, seeing her camera roll scroll up the screen. It's filled with photos of her and her friends, selfies, funny memes and...*holy fuck.*

I look to the ceiling, knowing that I need to swipe away before I look again. But the man in me has already committed the image to memory and even with my eyes closed, I can see her posed in the bathroom mirror in a sexy set of lacy lavender lingerie. My dick also knows what I saw and is standing to attention like I'm a teenager with zero control. *Fuck.*

Hitting the home button before I look back at the screen, I promptly move to her contacts and find Theo's number. I tap it and hold the cell to my ear, listening to it connect and ring. And ring. And ring. Until it rings out, connecting me instead to voice mail. *Shit.*

The same happens again when I call Darren. *Fuck.*

Placing her cell back on the nightstand, I run a hand back and forth through my hair, knowing that I'm not going to get a lick of sleep with all this going on in my room. So, I do what any decent human would do and wrap the blanket around her body to keep her warm and take her heels off her feet. Then I get a glass of water and set it on the nightstand beside her, placing her phone closer to her too, before I go back around to my side of the bed, pick up my book, then sit on the chair *beside* the bed.

With one last look at Tahlia and her smooshed up face, I smile then crack the spine, using the lamplight to read until I either fall asleep again or it's time for me to go catch my flight—whichever comes first.

TAHLIA

*M*y mouth feels like I've been licking sand, and I'm fairly certain the pillow has fixed itself to the side of my face, my drool the glue. I need water. *So bad.* And I also really need to get out of this dress. It's so tight, and oh god, my underwire is digging into the center of my chest and torturing me. Bras are stupid.

Kicking my feet to get the blankets off, I swing my legs off the bed and sit up, twisting from side to side, trying to get the zipper of my dress down. Zippers in the back of dresses are stupid too. You have to be a contortionist half the time to get them down.

I flick my fingers back-and-forth, unable to get a grip on the slider. That's when I just quit and drag the whole thing up over my head, cursing my decision when I get stuck on my shoulders. "Fuck. Fuckity fuck," I mutter, stumbling all over the place while I wrestle with the scratchy fabric. There're sequins and glittery bits that are like little razors against my face.

"What are you doing?" a deep rumbly voice asks, making me freeze, both glad and humiliated that my dress is currently up over my head.

"Who the hell are you and what are you doing in my room?" I demand, trying to wriggle my dress back down. I get it lowered just enough to peek over the hem and see Ash standing beside the bed with his hands on his hips. "And why are you wearing a matching gray tracksuit?"

He glances down at his clothes and twists his mouth downward. "It's what I brought with me to wear back home."

My eyes move down his full length, landing on the bulge the gray sweatpants do *nothing* to hide. *Holy hell, Darren and Theo were right. Hello, papa!*

"Not dressed like that you're not," I say, the one eye I can see him with glaring at his attire.

"What's wrong with it? I just bought it so it's brand new. Plus, it's soft and comfy. I'm just gonna be on a plane."

"In public!"

"And?"

"And every woman from here to Atlanta is gonna get an eyeful of your goods! Do you have any idea what gray sweatpants *do* to women?"

A smirk kicks up the corner of his mouth. "Says the girl who's standing in my hotel room with her dress around her head?"

"Well, I'm not planning on going out in public tempting every man I come across, am I?"

He chuckles. "If I didn't know any better, Tahlia, I'd think you were trying to stake a claim." He speaks as he moves around the bed and stands in front of me.

"Maybe I am."

He smirks and shakes his head. "You don't want me, tiny. I'm too old, ugly and crotchety to have anything a beautiful twenty-five-year-old would want."

"I think I should be the one to decide what I want, Ash."

"Which way do you want the dress to go?" he asks, ignoring my comment with amusement in his voice.

"Up. I want the dress *off*."

"OK," he says, working his fingers beneath the fabric as I twist and bend, finding my way out of the horrid thing.

“God. Thank you,” I gasp, finally feeling free. “Now you can burn it.”

He laughs and tosses the dress to the side. But when his eyes land back on me, it’s obvious that he likes what he sees—gray sweatpants and all that...

“I should get you a shirt to wear,” he says quickly, averting his gaze as he swallows hard and turns away. His hand goes to the back of his head, then he takes one step toward the exit before stopping and turning back, clicking his fingers like he just realized where he left his suitcase. I also can’t help but notice the way he tries to adjust himself without me seeing, and I get a surge of lusty power just knowing I was capable of doing that to him. I’ve spent all night wanting him and hoping he wanted me back. Seeing the evidence of that want makes me want to tempt him even more. So, with a nervous intake of breath, I reach my hands behind my back and unclasp my bra.

“It’ll be huge on you. But this’ll have to do until we can get you back to your room,” he says as he walks out of the bathroom, his head down as he focuses on the shirt in his hand. I let my bra fall to the floor, and the sound of it on the carpet causes him to lift his gaze and freeze. “Ahhh...” He’s staring at my breasts with wide eyes—wide, *hungry* eyes—and there’s no amount of adjusting that can hide just how hard he is for me now.

“I don’t want to go back to my room,” I whisper, pulling my shoulders back as his tongue snakes out to wet his lips and a pool of heat settles between my thighs. I want him to use that tongue on me.

“Er...OK. You can... You can...” He forces his eyes down, focusing on the shirt again as he works it between his fingers, opening the neck out as he moves toward me. “You can take the bed.” He drops the shirt over my head. “I have to leave at seven, anyway. I’ve got an early flight.”

Disappointment blooms in my chest, then falls as a pit in my stomach when he turns away. “I thought you wanted me?” I blurt, a childish accusation in my voice, because rejection stings. Something I know because I’ve experienced it far more

times that I care to admit. My choices in men have been horrible and messy, but I honestly thought that Ash was different. I thought there was a real connection here.

“Oh, sweet girl,” he whispers, turning back around. “I do. More than you know. You’re like my birthday and Christmas all wrapped up in one tiny, beautiful package. But I like to keep my gifts, and this...” He pauses and looks around the hotel room. “This isn’t me. I have exactly one hour and eighteen minutes before I have to fly out of here and go back to my life in Atlanta.”

“Which is exactly why we shouldn’t be wasting time.”

His expression softens, and he steps a little closer, hooking his finger underneath my chin and tilting my face up so my gaze meets his. “For what I want from you, Tahlia,” he whispers, his warm breath tickling against my skin. “There’s not *enough* time.” And with that, he presses his mouth to mine. It’s soft at first, like he’s kissing me goodbye, but then he teases my mouth open with his, and I wonder if I’ve ever truly been kissed before.

One of his big, meaty hands slides up to cup the back of my head, his other hand resting on my collarbone as his thumb glides against the sensitive skin on my neck. And as his tongue probes every recess of my mouth, I feel thoroughly possessed and completely wanted.

I let out a whimper, my hands lifting to his chest and my fingers curling into the fabric of his sweatshirt. I want to feel him everywhere, have his skin against my skin, savoring every tiny moment we have together. But when my hands glide down to his waist, my fingers brushing lightly beneath the hem of sweatshirt, he sucks in his belly and pulls back.

“I should go,” he says in a rush, putting a good yard of distance between us as he blows out a breath and rubs his hand back and forth through his hair. “Yeah. I have to go.”

“But it’s not even seven yet,” I say, glancing at the hotel clock on the nightstand as he starts rushing around the room.

“Yeah, but... traffic,” he says, clearly agitated.

“At six am on a Sunday?”

“Yeah. I just don’t wanna risk it. I can’t miss my flight.”

“Why? Oh god. You have a girlfriend, don’t you?” I cover my mouth with my hands. *I knew this guy had to be too good to be true!*

“What? No. There’s no one. I’m single. In fact, I’ve been single so long, you could almost class me as a virgin again,” he says with an awkward laugh that’s followed by a wince. “Pretend you didn’t hear that.”

“Ash,” I call after him when he disappears into the bathroom and comes out with a carryon suitcase, muttering to himself about making a fool of himself and whether he has everything. Oddly, I find this entire nervous freak out rather adorable. So far, Ash is a bit of a paradox. He’s awkward yet manly, dominant yet respectful, closed off yet open, carnal yet cool. And all I really know for sure is that I want more. I’ve never met anyone quite like him. He sets my mind *and* my body on fire.

“OK. I’m good,” he says, finally meeting my eyes.

“What about your shirt?” I say, running my fingers along the hem. It’s big enough that it touches my knees, so I have to lift it a little and show off a bit of thigh. I’m fairly certain I’m rewarded with a growl coming out of his chest, but he shakes it off.

“Keep it,” he grunts, a furrow crossing his brow as he tears his eyes away from me and heads for the door.

“Ash, wait,” I say, spotting his phone still charging on the nightstand.

“Tahlia,” he growls, a warning tone in his voice that *really* turns me on. “I need to go.”

“You forgot your cell.” I practically leap across the bed to get it for him.

I hear the shuffle of his feet moving before he reappears at the end of the hall that leads to the door. Finding me stretched across the bed. His eyes turn so dark, tortured and needy that

my heart kicks up to a gallop in my chest. I hold his phone out to him.

“You know, this is how you ended up in here?” he says as he takes it. “We have the same cellphone and case. They got mixed up along with our room keys.”

“Great minds think alike and all that, huh?” I say, smiling up at him from the bed as I lean on my elbow.

His eyes move all the way along my body, from the tip of my head to the bottom of my toes then all the way back up again. It feels ...sensual. “Yeah,” he says with a nod and a heavy swallow. “Anyway. I should go.”

“OK. Safe flight.”

He nods and steps away before stopping again and turning back. “Tahlia,” he starts, and I sit up, giving my him complete attention.

“Yes, Ash?”

“Nothing.” Frowning, he closes his eyes and shakes his head. “I’ll...I’ll see you at the christening, OK?”

“OK.”

When he turns away again, I get up on my knees, feeling like a magnet being drawn to him and only him. I can’t let him go. “Ash. Wait.”

He spins around, and this time, I don’t give him any time to think. I just launch myself at him, jumping off the edge of the bed and into his arms, my mouth landing against his as I do. His bag and cell drop to the floor as his hands fly out to catch me, and he responds, kissing me back like a man possessed. I *definitely* think I’m in love.

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ASH

I should've kept going. I should've walked out that door without kissing her or even going back to get my cell. I know without a doubt that nothing good can come of this. There are just too many variables going against us. The least of which is the fact that under any other circumstance, a gorgeous young thing like Tahlia would never think twice about looking at an oaf like me. But weddings make people vulnerable. They make them feel lonely. And this, right here, is the result.

"Are you certain this is what you want, Tahlia?" I ask while I lower her to the bed, then grind myself between her wide-open legs.

"Yes. Yes, Ash. Oh, god, yes, I want this." Just the sound of her voice sends a jolt of pleasure right down to my cock. But she's so small compared to me. She can barely even cross her ankles behind my back, so there's no way I can just fuck her without a hell of a lot of prep work first. I'd split her in two.

"I'm too big for you, tiny," I whisper, kissing her before any words of protest can leave her plump mouth. "In *every* way." I grind my hips against her again to illustrate my words.

"Ash—"

"Don't argue with what I know, Tahlia. I'll hurt you if we do this now." I move my mouth down her neck, sucking and licking along the way. "But I can take care of you, make *you*

feel good. In fact, it'd be my honor to watch you come undone.”

She gasps, arching against me as I kiss between her breasts, my massive hand capable of palming both of them at the same time. But I force myself to be gentle, flicking my thumbs across the cotton covering her body, teasing the tight bud of her nipples as I move my mouth south and lift the hem of the T-shirt, revealing those sexy, soaked, black panties that are gonna live in my dreams from now until the end of all eternity. She's the most gorgeous woman I've ever been in this position with, and I'm not naïve enough to think I'll ever get a chance like this again. She might look back on this moment over the coming days and feel embarrassed that she threw herself at the *least* desirable Wright man on the planet, but if I treat her like a queen and give her the time of her life, maybe she'll look back and remember my tongue more than she remembers the rest of me.

“Lift your ass, tiny,” I whisper, hooking my fingers in the black lace and peeling her panties down her legs with reverent movements, drinking in every detail about this moment so I can jack off to it later. Already, Tahlia has given me enough material to keep me sneaking away to the bathroom for years to come. But she's the gift that keeps on giving, and when I kneel between her parted thighs, I'm treated to the sight of the most perfect sight—dripping wet, blush-pink lips that seem to part slightly and whisper sweet nothings in my ear. *Taste me, Ash. Taste me. You know I'll be sweet.*

I let out a groan and slide down the bed, settling myself at her apex as I inhale her intoxicating scent. *Ambrosia*. I'm desperate for a taste, but my eyes are too busy taking in the feast all on their own. I reach out and glide my tip of my finger through her glistening seam, circling her tight little entrance before bringing it up to her clit and lifting my eyes to watch her response.

“Oh, yes.” She's up on her elbows, watching me with an eagerness I really wasn't expecting. I felt for sure she'd be lying back on the pillow with her eyes closed, focused only on the sensation of what I'm doing to her and not the act of me

doing it. I'm so turned on that I'm really second-guessing these gray sweatpants right now...

"You're so fucking beautiful like this, Tahlia. So fucking hot." I drag my finger back down from her clit and slide the tip of it inside her. She arches up and moans like my thick digit alone is enough to fill her up. I doubt she'd even manage to take more than two of my fingers if I tried. For some reason, the idea of that really turns me on. I like the thought of breaking her in, stretching her slowly so she'll fit my cock like a glove. It takes all of my willpower not to place my hand on her chest and hold her down while I fuck her hard with my hand until she creams all over my palm. I want to make her writhe and scream, and my desperation has me on edge.

"Oh, god," she moans, her teeth dragging over her bottom lip. "More. Give me more, Ash. So good."

Flashing her a wicked grin, I slide my finger in a little deeper, loving the way she hisses then moans when I swipe my tongue through her folds from my buried finger to her pulsing clit. "You taste as good as you smell, sweet girl," I moan, before swirling my tongue and moving my finger against her G-spot.

She wraps her thighs around my head and thrusts her fingers into my hair. "Holy gods of cunnilingus," she gasps out, tugging me closer, riding me like my face is the saddle and the fistfuls of my hair are the reins.

I moan, loving every second of it as she works her hips frantically, cussing like a dirty girl instead of the sweet girl she is. I love that I bring this out in her and double down, adding a second finger as I pump my hand back and forth, suctioning and flicking her little bud as she quivers and shakes, her screams getting and louder and louder the closer she is to release. We're gonna get a noise complaint from the people next door soon, but I don't give a fuck. I keep working her delicious sex unremittingly until she arches up, and a scream erupts from her throat.

"Ashhhhh! Holy fucking helllllll!"

I feel like the king and her body is my kingdom as I withdraw my fingers then grip her around her thighs, flattening my tongue against her opening and licking up every drop of cream she has for me. It's fucking delicious as it flows over my tongue while she writhes and writhes, her thighs tight around my head and her hands caught between pulling me closer and pushing me away. "Whoa. Wow." She suddenly releases her grip and sags against the mattress, still panting. "That was..."

I drop my forehead against her belly, our harsh breathing echoing about the room as I trail my fingers back and forth along her swollen outer lips. *I want more.*

I'm about to open my mouth to speak, to tell her she's gorgeous and touching her like that, watching her, *tasting* her was amazing. Or maybe I'm about to invite her back to Atlanta with me—I don't fucking know what I'm truly thinking besides knowing that this...this *taste, this tease*, of her isn't enough. But when the alarm goes off, signaling it's time for me to leave, I know I don't have a choice. The fairytale is over; the beauty kissed me and I'm still the beast.

"I have to go," I rasp, pulling away from her and stumbling out of the room before she can even manage to get a word out. Then I just keep going, caught in a daze, until I'm seated on the plane and the flight attendant is going through the safety procedures. I scrub a hand across my mouth and drop my head against the headrest. I can smell her on my skin the entire way home.

TAHLIA

“*I* feel bad. You were actually insisting that we were putting you in the wrong room, but Theo and I just thought you were being a drunk dyslexic since the number was written on the room key,” Darren says while we’re having coffee early the next week.

“Oh, I’m glad you got the wrong room because the right guy was most definitely inside,” I respond with a wistful sigh because I’ve been completely Ash obsessed ever since he gave me the most amazing orgasm with just his hand and mouth before promptly getting up and leaving me there spreadeagled on the bed. It took me a full five minutes before I could even start moving again. Never has a man thrummed my bean with Shakespearean precision before. I half expected a chorus of angels to float down and sing with joy, or a research team studying the male’s ability to deliver a female orgasm on the first try to show up and take notes. The way that man played with my body was absolute perfection. But the exit strategy? Now, *that* could do with some work.

I’ve had guys do the fuck and dash on me before, but I’ve never had them do a get *me* off and dash before. I don’t know whether I should be angry or if I’m in love. But since I’m well known for my poor choices when it comes to men, I definitely need the advice of our resident mother before I have any further contact.

“I’ll bet he was.” Darren chuckles as he picks up his coffee mug and sips, pinky in the air. “Were we right about those feet?”

“I didn’t get to see, but from the feel of things, yes.”

“It’s always the quiet ones who have the biggest dicks,” he muses, pursing his lips thoughtfully before he suddenly puts his mug down and baulks. “Wait. What do you mean you *didn’t* see it? Are you telling me you went into that hunk of a man’s room and *nothing happened?*”

“Oh, something happened.” I waggle my brows. “But I’m the only one who took any clothes off.”

Darren’s eyes light up. “Oh, my god. Tell me more. Actually, tell me everything. I want to know every juicy detail.”

I press my lips together as I pick up my mug and try to hide the massive smile that takes over behind it. “He...took care of me,” I say. “Like, *really* took care of me. And only me.”

“Nothing for him?”

I shake my head slowly.

“Squee!” He actually says ‘squee’ as his feet dance on the tiled floor. “How, girl? I said I want details, not vagaries.”

“I’m not sharing this one, mama,” I say, using my pet name for him. “It was special. I want to keep it all for myself.”

He leans on his hand and flashes me a bright smile. “I love that for you, boo. But I hate it for me. You’re the only single girlfriend I have left these days. Everyone else is coupled up to the hilt and you’ve been my only source of information for what it’s like out there on the single side of the fence. I need to live vicariously through you, and if you don’t give me details this isn’t a fair trade.”

“A fair trade?” I can’t help but laugh. “What information are you handing over that makes learning every detail about my previously apocalyptic sex life a fair trade?”

He sits back and crosses his legs, flicking his hand over his shoulder like his lifting imaginary hair. “Why, my dear Tahlia, I’m giving you the pleasure of my Coco company. Not everyone gets me for the cost of a cup of coffee.”

“You paid for this,” I point out with a smirk.

“Oh shush. I just like hearing your messed up straight person stories. They’re so angsty. Watching you and Ruby date over the years has been like living one of those Nicolas Sparks movies front row center.”

“People *die* in those movies, Darren. People keep calling it romance, but if there’s no happily ever after, it’s not romance. It’s a cardinal rule.”

“But they’re all lovey-dovey and romantic *before* the dying happens.”

“That’s because they’re *love* stories. You can have a love story without it being romance. Romance, as a genre, has to have a happy ending.”

“So, like a massage at one of those seedy parlors?” he says, tapping his chin thoughtfully.

“Not that kind of happy ending.” I giggle. “You’re my favorite queen, Darren. But sometimes, you are such a boy.”

“Yes, yes. Well, I do have the equipment for it. Oh, and speaking of horse-sized penises...” He grins and I laugh at his segue. “Talk to me more about your Mr. Wright. He’s obviously good with his hands...” He waits and watches me as my cheeks heat. “And maybe his tongue...” My face burns and he sits back, satisfied with his ‘answers’. “OK. Now we’re getting somewhere. And how did you leave things? Are you planning on continuing this tryst when my godson gets christened?”

“You just had to slide in the fact that Ruby and Tanner chose you and Theo to be Bradley’s godparents, didn’t you?”

“Of course. All accomplishments should be celebrated.”

“Well, I’ll get the next one, I guess. But to answer your question, I don’t know. We didn’t discuss what, if anything, happens next. He had an early flight, so he left pretty quick and...I guess we’ll just see.”

“Oh.” The square in his shoulders slumps.

“What?”

“Well, I can’t help but draw a parallel between this and whatever-that-guys-name-was-who-used-you-for-information-about-your-friends. He came and went and *took* as he pleased, right?”

“Oh, no. They oranges and apples, I promise you. Nick was selfish and arrogant from the get go. He was *only* ever interested in me when it suited him, and he wanted something. There wasn’t even really a courting period. It was just a decision that we were dating, really. And I think it’s always been like that for me. I meet these men and they kind of sit me at their side, and that’s just where I belong until they’re done with me. But with Ash, it was this wonderful day of feeling connected while dancing *around* that connection before fate stepped in and brought us together and...” I let out a sigh and relax against my chair. “He’s just different, OK?”

“My god, woman. You have got it bad for this guy. And don’t get me wrong when I say this, because I really liked him at the wedding—he seems like a great big teddy bear with a ferocious growl buried deep inside him—but if he does anything to hurt my favorite girl, or if he treats you like any of those assholes you’ve already dated, then I will make him rue the day he was born. And having said all of that, I’m wondering if maybe we should stalk his social media.”

“What? No! I’m not that kind of girl. No.” I’m saying the words, but my hand is already going to my cell. “I mean, would he even *have* social media?”

“He’s forty-two. He’s at least got Facebook even if he doesn’t have Instagram. We can just look at Ruby’s profile because I’m sure she’s linked to him on there.” Darren takes my phone from my hand and taps a manicured finger against the screen. It takes a few seconds and several taps and swipe before he grins triumphantly. “And... friend request sent,” he says, delighted with himself as I snatch back the device.

“You didn’t!” I press my phone to my chest and hope we can both disappear together. “You’re gonna make me look so desperate.”

“No, boo. I’m letting him know you’re interested in more than just that little diddle he gave you after the wedding. No harm in being forward. You know, a lot of men actually like forward woman.”

“And how many forward women have you dated, sir?” I respond with my brows lifted.

He smirks. “Touche. But to be fair, I’m a queen and I *really* dig forward men. So…”

“I will be so upset with you if this scares him away,” I sulk, looking at my phone and wondering if I should just cancel the request—will he still get a notification if I do?

“Trust me, girl! I *know* men. And I *know* Ash likes you. He’ll be happy about this.”

I glance up at him and sigh. “Why am I so nervous right now?” I ask, making him laugh just as my phone pings with a notification. “Oh, my god. He just accepted my request.”

“Yaaaaas.” Darren lifts both hands in the air. “Investigation time! Let’s check out what your big hunk of man meat likes to post about and what kinds of pages he likes. Oh, and if he’s in any groups.” Darren snatches the phone back again and we huddle together as he scrolls Ash’s timeline and comments on the content.

“Sounds like you’ve done this before,” I point out, giving him a sideways glance.

Darren turns to me and places his hand on his chest as if offended. “And you’re telling me you haven’t?”

“Well... Yeah. But not to this extent. I never even considered the pages and groups angle.”

“If it’s any consolation, it doesn’t look like he’s in any groups at all. And the pages he likes are so old, he probably did them when he set up his account when Facebook used to make you like pages to show your interests. His recent timeline is a mishmash of funny memes and articles about advances in medical grade prosthetics—”

“Oh, do you think that’s why he was reluctant to take his clothes off? He has a prosthetic?”

“I don’t think so,” he says. “There’s a picture right here of him at a party in a pair of shorts and a tank top, and I can’t see any prosthetic. But he’s a medical engineer, right? So maybe making prosthetics is part of what he does for a living?”

“That makes a lot of sense. I mean, I knew he was an engineer, but I didn’t know he was a medical engineer. Actually, I didn’t even know that medical engineers existed.”

“Oh, I did. Way back in the day, I dated one, and he was very proud of his work. Explained the intricacies of how a prosthetic foot works to balance the wearer out and was insistent that robots would one day take over the world Matrix-style. A little crazy, but he gave good...you know.” He sits back and chuckles. “Now, I’m not saying all engineers are crackpots, but that one sure got weird by the end. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“You were just filling in time, waiting for Theo to turn up and sweep you off your feet,” I say, nudging him lightly with my elbow and loving the way his mouth quirks up in a smile. Knowing you’re with your soulmate can do that to you, I guess.

“Ohhhh. This is interesting,” he says, sitting straighter suddenly, his focus solely on my cell.

“What is.”

“Well, it’s a photo of Ash and some woman—a *very* pretty woman with ink black hair. I wonder who she is...”

“He said he was single. Oh my god, show me,” I say, quickly snatching the phone back so I can take a look. The moment my eyes land on the screen, I realize I just accidentally liked the photo, too. “Oh, no! Shit. Crap. Fuck! How do you unlike a post?” I hold my finger on the illuminated ‘like’ and a bunch of emoji reactions pop up. “Make it go away!”

I practically throw my phone back at Darren, who laughs at me and unlikes the image with a simple tap. “You are too

uptight, boo. That photo is over a year old, and the like is nowhere to be seen. No harm, no foul. See?” he says, showing me my screen. Just as a message alert drops down at the top of my screen.

Ash: Are you Facebook stalking me?

“Oh. Fuck,” I say, wishing the floor would open up and swallow me. “What do I do?”

Darren throws his head back and laughs. “Answer him, of course!”

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*S*ahlia: Would you think less of me if I said yes?

An involuntary smile breaks over my face as her message pops up. It's the first contact I've had with her since I left her in a daze over the weekend. It's something I've been beating myself up about ever since, because I mean, who the fuck does that? She came and I went, and there hasn't been a moment since then when I've looked in a mirror without calling myself a dickhead. I don't know what came over me.

That's a lie.

I know what came over me. *Want. Lust. Need.* The moment the sound of my alarm cut into my consciousness, I knew I had to get out of there or I'd be point-five of a second away from trying to figure out how to stretch her tiny body around me without tearing her in two. No lies this time. I'm fully aware of how conceited talking about my dick like that seems. But as a guy who really does have a huge member, I'm telling you from experience, it's no walk in the park. You hear guys going on and on, boasting about their size. But for those of us who are truly on the big side, bragging about it is the last thing we want to do. Most women think they can take it, but in reality, most of them freak out on sight or they just can't relax enough to make it fit. No matter who I'm with, I have to be careful. I have to be in control. Another big part of why I don't really date.

Big. I laugh to myself. That seems to be the one single word that describes everything about me. And maybe that's

why I'm attracted to somebody so small. Something about opposites and the grass being greener on the other side...

Taking a deep inhale, my eyes read over her words once again, my hand swiping back and forth through my beard as I decide what to send back without overthinking to the point where she doesn't think I'm interested. Because I'm *very* interested.

Me: Never. I'd appreciate your honesty :-)

Tahlia: In that case, yes. Yes, I was FB stalking you. :-P

A burst of amusement leaves my nose as I adjust to cradle the phone in both my hands, rapid typing with my thumbs. I'm sitting at a table on my own in the cafeteria at work, tucked away so no one else thinks to sit with me. It's not that I'm antisocial, it's just that I need a little quiet in my day after making small talk with my lab partner all morning. Professionally, Janeece is an excellent engineer—we're working together on building a prosthetic foot that mimics the user's natural gait and has pressure sensors to help with balance and footing, which is going to be awesome—but she *loves* to talk about her kid. All day. Every day.

Now, I love kids and all—would even love it if I had a couple of my own—but there's only so many times I can hear how little Kramer scored a homerun at little league in vivid detail. So, the way I get my solitude in order to recharge for the remainder of the day is to hideout in the far corner of the cafeteria with my head down, and my eyes glued to my cell, so I'm avoiding all eye contact. Works a treat. And today, I'm secretly grateful to Janeece, because without her ability to talk under water with a mouthful of marbles, I wouldn't have been looking at my phone at the exact moment Tahlia's friend request came through, and I wouldn't have seen the photo like and unlike happen either.

Me: See anything interesting?

Tahlia: Just some old photos...

Me: Decided against liking the one of me and my sister?

Tahlia: You saw that, huh? :facepalm emoji:

Me: Sure did. She's my half-sister. The one I told you about at the wedding.

Tahlia: Oh yeah. I remember. She's beautiful.

Me: I'll let her know you said so.

Tahlia: Lawd! Don't do that! She'll have no idea who I am, and it'll seem creepy.

Me: She knows who you are.

Tahlia: Really?

Me: She's living in New York, so she was put out that I didn't see her while I was there. But when I told her about you, she decided to forgive my faux pas.

Tahlia: What did you tell her? Not everything, I hope :blushing emoji:

Me: I only gave her the PG details. I'd never share anything private. That's not who I am.

Tahlia: I get that sense. Darren says you're one of the good ones.

Me: Is that a 'good' thing? Aren't 'good guys' supposed to be entitled assholes?

Tahlia: Lol. That's only the guys who *say* they're a good guy. If you let people draw that conclusion themselves, it means you're actually a proper good guy.

Me: :thinking emoji: I'm not sure I understand. But I'll take your word for it.

Tahlia: I happen to be an expert on the subject of fake good guys, so I promise you're the real deal.

Me: an expert? Do I need to come up there and beat somebody up?

Tahlia: lol, no. But I like the idea of seeing you. You're still coming for the christening, right?

Me: Wouldn't miss it. Did you win the godmother crown?

Tahlia: Darren did :-(but I'm next in line, I'm sure of it ;-)

Me: Can't keep a good girl down.

Tahlia: never!

Me: I have to get back to work, but it was great connecting again, and I'm looking forward to seeing you soon.

Tahlia: me too. Enjoy the rest of your day.

Me: Thanks. And before I go, I wanted to say sorry for leaving the way I did last weekend. How about I take you to dinner while I'm in town?

Tahlia: nothing to apologize for, but I'd love to have dinner with you.

Me: Great. We'll go out after the christening.

Tahlia: Can't wait :-D

My chest seems to puff to about twice its size as I power down my cell and slide it into my pocket. Tahlia and I have a date. A *real* date. And I'm ridiculously excited. This kind of thing doesn't happen to me that often.

"What's got you grinning like a Cheshire cat?" Janeece asks, catching me as I swipe my ID card to get into the lab.

"Oh, um, just a funny meme," I say, not wanting to share when what's happening between Tahlia and me feels incredibly special and private.

"Memes!" she declares as she walks through the door I'm holding open. "You know, my boy, Kramer, has a wicked sense of humor. Why, he showed me one the other day where an ape was dancing in a paddling pool like that girl in Flashdance. Hilarious, it was. I'll have to show it to you."

"I'd like that," I say, actually meaning it, because nothing in this world can wipe the smile off my face today. I could listen to her talk about her kid for hours and still be happy by the end. So, bring it on. Tell me it all. Because I have a date with the hottest girl I've ever laid eyes on.

ASH

S training on my final push-up, I bring my knees up to my chest then get off the floor, moving into squats like this is somehow going to make me look better before I see Tahlia today. It's a losing battle, I know. No matter what I do or how often, I'm always going to buy my clothes in the big man section, but the rhythmic movement is relaxing me. Something I severely need when I'm a nervous wreck since the christening is in less than two hours.

Similar to the last time, I flew into New York last night after work. The first thing I wanted to do was go straight to Tahlia, but I came to the hotel instead—even though she was willing to wait up for me, gorgeous girl—but I do have the whole weekend in the city before I fly back late Sunday night. It's not a lot of time, but it's something. And it will give Tahlia and I the chance to see if this attraction between us is more than an infatuation created by the romantic veil that descends around weddings. We all know there's something about them compounds our loneliness, so I want to make sure she is one hundred percent into me because I definitely know I'm into her. How could I not be?

Finishing my squats, I let out a heavy sigh, my mind replaying *everything* I really enjoy about Tahlia. Then I head into the shower and beat off twice so I don't embarrass myself the moment I set eyes on her.

After that, my mind is clear and I'm ready to make my best second impression.



“OH, hey there Mr. tall, blond and handsome,” Darren says when I arrive outside the church for Bradley’s christening. There are close to fifty people milling about, so I’m guessing it’s not time to go inside yet. I slide my hands in my pockets and nod in greeting, trying not to make it obvious that I’m scanning the gathering for Tahlia’s red hair.

“Ready to become godparents?” I ask, shifting my gaze to Theo as he pulls uncomfortably at his tie.

“The godparent part is great. But I hate these fucking monkey suits we have to keep wearing to these things. Why can’t we all start christening kids during a backyard barbecue by splashing them in the pool? It’d work the same if the priest was there, right?”

I can’t help but laugh. The man has a point. “If you ask me, that sounds like a hell of a lot more fun,” I say, gesturing to my own movement-limiting suit. I swear if I shake someone’s hand too vigorously, I’ll tear the back out of it.

“Say, Ash. Can’t help but notice you look a little nervous there,” Darren points out, quirking a single brow. “Something we should know?”

“Nope. Nothing to be nervous about,” I say, doing my best impression of a nonchalant person. The tapping of my fingers against my thigh might be giving me away, though.

Theo doesn’t even try to hide his smile. “Tahlia is inside with Ruby.” That just makes my fingers tap faster as I stare longingly at the main entrance. “I guess you two really hit it off at the wedding, huh? I’d apologize for sending her into the wrong room. But I think it probably worked out for you.” He claps me on the arm, and my face goes bright red. I’ve never been the type to discuss bedroom activities outside it.

“Wouldn’t know what you’re talking about,” I say as I rub the back of my neck and wonder when it got so hot.

“So, you’re not here looking for round two?” Darren teases, sharing a look of silent communication with Theo as I shake my head, hoping for a cool breeze to come my way.

“Not at all.” I gulp. “I wouldn’t. I mean, I’m not the kind of guy to be presumptuous. And I live so far away. Tahlia and I are probably friends at most. She’s a sweet—”

“Hey, Tahlia!” Theo says a little too enthusiastically, cutting me off as he looks over my shoulder. I wince and pray real hard for Ant man’s superpower so I can shrink myself down and disappear. But that doesn’t work out, so I turn around and find Tahlia looking gorgeous in a dusty pink dress with her auburn hair hanging loose over her shoulders.

“Hey,” I squeak, gulping because, shit, I think she just heard that. Her eyes are a little wider than I remember and her face is a lot sterner. So yeah, she just heard me call her ‘a friend at most’. Fuck.

“I’m just letting everyone know it’s time to go inside,” she says in a rush.

“OK. Should we—”

“Maybe I’ll see you after.” She gives me a pointed look, and I just nod.

“Sure thing.”

Then she’s gone and I’m turning back to Darren and Theo, who both look like they just witnessed a train wreck and don’t know what to say.

“We...we’re supposed to be having dinner tonight,” I say, trying not to hyperventilate. *Did I just fuck that up?*

“I know,” Darren says, his tone much steadier now. “She was actually really excited about it.”

“She doesn’t look excited now,” Theo points out unhelpfully, and I follow his line of sight to where Tahlia is looking agitated while saying something to Ruby. *I definitely fucked that up.*

“Maybe it’s for the best,” I say, feeling my shoulders droop as all of my hopes and dreams for a girl as beautiful and

magnetic and waaaaay out of my league as Tahlia could ever truly look twice at me.

“Oh, bull crap,” Darren says. “She likes you. You like her, and me and Theo are going to be your fairy godparents and talk you through this, you giant man with a tender heart. Right, baby?” He nudges Theo in the arm. Theo frowns in confusion.

“Wait. What are we doing?”

“We’re going to help our man, Ash, get the girl.”

Theo nods. “Yes, we are. But if you hurt the girl, I’ll hurt you. I don’t care if you’re bigger than me.”

“I don’t want to hurt her,” I say quickly. “I just...I want her. But I seem to be messing that up right now.”

“Well, that’s easy to fix. All you have to do is *talk* to her and reassure her you want more than friendship. She needs to know that she’s the only woman in the world you want to see.”

“That easy, huh?”

“It really is,” Darren says before linking arms with both me and Theo, then marching us toward to the church.

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TAHLIA

“Are you OK?” Ruby asks while I make myself busy arranging food on trays in her kitchen after the church service. There’s catering staff here to do this but I’m kind of avoiding the fact that I’m still reeling a little over hearing Ash say he considers me as a friend *at best*. A *friend*? At *best*? What the fuck? I don’t know about Ash, but I don’t tend to go down on my ‘friends’, rock their world and then ask them on a date the next time we see each other.

“I’m itchy.”

“Itchy?” She steps toward me.

“Because of this lace,” I gripe, pulling at the top of my fancy, overly expensive bra that I really couldn’t afford but splurged on for the occasion because I wanted to see that heat of desperation in Ash’s eyes again. “And I’m pretty sure I got the wrong sized thong. This thing is seriously threatening to cut my hoo-hah in half.” I quickly glance around and adjust myself when I notice the coast is clear.

Ruby chuckles and hands me a glass of wine. “To help numb the pain.”

I take it from her gratefully, holding it to my nose and inhaling the plummy bouquet. Once upon a time, Ruby and I shared our taste in wine with the homeless guy who lived behind the dumpster next to our building—anything under five dollars. Now that she’s married to a millionaire, her taste has vastly improved. Mine is still the same, however, but I’m more aware of how horrible cheap wine tastes than I was before.

“God. I needed that. Thank you,” I say after my first mouthful, abandoning my tiny quiche arranging and leaning against the counter, sipping wine instead.

“You’ll probably need a bunch of it in the near future. It’s the curse of falling for these Wright men. They kind of make you crazy.”

“Am I that obviously pining?”

Ruby holds her thumb and forefinger close together. “A little. Anything I can do to help? Want me to get Tanner or Theo to rough him up?”

“I doubt Theo would dare. Darren seems completely enamored and they’ve become his gay cheerleaders, from what I can see. Did you see them out there? They flank him wherever he goes.”

Ruby’s lips quirk in amusement. “Well, if you’ve already got the Coco seal of approval, then Ash must be even better than I thought. They both gave Tanner a hard time for ages before they came to love him,” she points out, taking a mouthful of wine.

“It’s because they think he has a giant cock,” I state, remembering our conversation at the wedding.

Ruby coughs and almost sprays her wine all over me, thankfully only getting a little on her chin. “Oh my god.” She laughs slightly and wipes at her chin. “Why would they think that? I mean...did they see? Does he?” Her eyes widen. “You saw it, right? How big are we talking?”

“I didn’t see it,” I say in a rush. “I only felt it.”

She leans in. “Well then, how did it *feel*?”

I’m trying to gesture with my hands about the size and girth—something one would *only* ever do with their best friend—when Tanner saunters in, followed by none other than the man with the member I’m miming.

“Ahhh. What are you two doing?” Tanner asks, amusement teasing his lips as he looks between a scarlet-faced

Ruby and me. I drop my hands to my side and try desperately not to make eye contact.

“Eggplants!” Ruby yells.

Tanner’s brow tightens. “Eggplants?”

“Yeah. Tahls was just telling me that one of her co-workers is growing an eggplant on their balcony and they grew huge. Right, Tahlia?”

“Ah, yeah. Huge.” I lift my hands and gesture again, dying a little inside as Tanner looks between us then back to Ash dubiously. Ash looks like he doesn’t know what to think.

“We should try it, honey.”

“You want to grow eggplant?” Tanner asks, disbelief in every pore.

“Sure! Let me show you where.” She hooks her arm in Tanner’s and leads him right out of the kitchen, rambling about all the things they could make with their own vegetable patch.

Her voice drifts away. And that just leaves Ash and me alone.

“She really likes eggplant, huh?” Ash says quietly, his hands in his pockets as he stays a couple of steps back like he’s a little kid in trouble or something.

I smile slightly and press the heels of my hands against the edge of the counter. “Babies change you, I guess,” I say back, my eyes dragging over his body, admiring the fit of his obviously bespoke suit even though he’s lost the jacket and tie from before. But he’s got his sleeves rolled up and a couple of buttons undone, so in my books, he’s looking even better. Something about those strong forearms and big hands...

“I guess so,” he says, taking a trepidatious step forward before he sucks in a breath. “I can’t help but think you’ve been avoiding me ever since the church.”

My heart speeds up at his nearness, along with my breathing. “I don’t know if ‘avoiding’ is really the right word, ‘taking a little alone time’ might be a better fit.”

“Anything I can help you with?” he asks, taking yet another step closer. Now my nether region is tingling. “I’m told I’m a fairly good listener.”

I have to tilt my head back just so I can maintain eye contact as he reaches me and places a hand on the counter next to me, smiling like he’s the sun and I’m the little flower that follows him wherever he moves. “I don’t know if you can help with this problem. Now that I think about it, it will sound silly if I say it out loud.”

“Hmm.” He tilts his head, thinking for a moment. “Then how about I talk for you?”

“You can try.” I look at him through my lashes as a smile takes over my face. This is either going to be touching or a train wreck. And I’m really hoping for the former.

“This is about what you overheard outside the church, right?”

I bounce the shoulder as my gaze drops to my feet. He’s hitting the nail on the head. “Maybe.”

“I’m sorry you heard that. But I need you to know that I’m not the kind of man who talks about the women I’m dating. I’m also not the kind of man who flies into town once a month with the expectation that the gorgeous girl I can’t stop thinking about is going to invite me into her bed. So, if another man questions me about those things, I will downplay it until he stops because as far as I’m concerned, what goes on between you and me is between you and me. Nobody else. Does that clear things up for you?”

“Yes,” I practically whisper as my eyes fly up to his and my knees go a little weak. “I guess that means I should, um, keep the eggplant talk to a minimum then?”

He grins and nods while he searches my eyes. “I’d appreciate that. Especially since you’re the only person I’m interested in showing my...*eggplant* to.” I giggle up at him. He’s so damn sexy when he talks like this. It’s like he knows exactly what he wants, and he’s not willing to bend or sway for anyone in this world. I like how sure he is. But mostly, I

love the way he makes me feel—nervous but wanted. It’s an intoxicating mix.

“I thought maybe I misunderstood what tonight was supposed to be.”

He grins. “What did you think tonight was going to be?”

My cheeks heat as I smile and look away. “Now you have me feeling like I can’t say or I’ll look foolish.”

“You couldn’t look foolish to me if you tried, tiny.” He hooks his finger under my chin and lifts until my eyes meet his again. “I am a forty-two-year-old man who’s gone all sweet over a twenty-five-year-old girl who lives almost a thousand miles away from me. I’m big and I’m nothing special to look at, and you’re tiny and so fucking beautiful it makes my chest hurt when I look at you. On top of that, I have two new friends out there calling themselves my fairy godmothers because they think I’m so hopeless that I can’t figure out how to talk to you on my own. But if I’m honest, I don’t think a lot about talking when I look at you, Tahlia. So, if one of us is foolish here, it’s me from thinking I could actually lay claim to a girl like you.” And that’s the exact moment my panties combust and I melt, my arms flying out to wrap around his neck as I slam my mouth against his, kissing him like a woman possessed.

“How about we finish this... *conversation* back at my place?” I whisper in his ear.

His answering growl is all the confirmation I need.

TAHLIA

“*I* was supposed to take you out to dinner first,” Ash says between kissing me as we barrel through my apartment door. It took us far longer than normal to make it up the ten flights of stairs I have to walk every day since the elevator is *always* out. But the good news is, I live in a shoebox, so within a few steps, we’re already in my bedroom, the back of my shins hitting against the bed.

“We can order takeout,” I gasp, twisting open the buttons of his shirt as my mouth presses hungrily against his skin. “Or better yet. We can feast on each other.”

He lets out a groan then wraps his big hands around my waist, before he lifts me off the floor and my legs go immediately around his waist. I have no intention of letting go.

“You’re wearing too many clothes, Ash,” I whisper, sucking on his bottom lip.

He chuckles. “I could say the same about you, tiny. But I’m not sure you really wanna see what’s under all this.”

“Oh, but I do. I want to feel your skin against mine, Ash. I want to see all of you.”

He looks at me for a long moment before he nods sagely. “OK. If you let go of me for two seconds, I think we can fix the clothing situation for both of us.”

I tighten my hold, squeezing my arms and thighs together. “If I let go, you might run away again.”

“If you don’t let go, I’m gonna pass out from this grip you’ve got around my neck.” He lets out a grunt, making a dramatic show of stumbling and wheezing as he collapses onto the mattress and pretends to pass out with his face buried in my neck.

“Oh no!” I laugh and shove gently on his shoulders. “You can’t pass out. I haven’t had my wicked way with you yet. You have to get up.” I rock beneath him, trying to get him to move, which is when I feel it. “Ohhh, you *are* up.” He groans as I lift my thigh, pressing me against his hard length.

“I’m always up when I think about you,” he murmurs, his lips brushing against my pulse.

“How often do you think about me?” I ask as those lips of his make their way along my jaw, then pause as he lifts himself up and looks down at me.

The soft rumble of his voice leaves his mouth just as his lips press to mine. “All the fucking time.”

I whimper as his tongue touches mine, my whole body coming alive as we move together, kissing and writhing, his strong body dwarfing mine and making me feel so dainty beneath him.

“Can I tell you something?” His hand slides down my side, wrapping around the back of my thigh.

“Anything.”

“I jacked off daily thinking about these thighs wrapped around my head.” He tugs my leg so we’re pressed together a little tighter. I moan.

“I thought about that too,” I gasp, arching back as he pushes my dress from my shoulders, dragging my bra with it so my breasts spring free, his hungry tongue flicking at my nipple as my fingers dive into his hair. “And since we’re being honest, I might’ve been imagining that while I—”

“Rang your own doorbell?”

With a laugh, I nod. “Yes.”

“That’s crazy hot.”

“You’re crazy hot.” I run my hands over his shoulders, down his chest, needing to touch him, needing more of him. When my fingers find the hem of his shirt, he catches my hand, then holds it against the mattress above my head.

“Now *that*, I know is a lie.” His tone belies his words, laughter in it as he takes my nipple in his mouth once more.

“It’s not a lie, Ash. I think you’re incredibly sexy.”

He laughs like he doesn’t believe me, instead focusing on pulling my dress down past my hips, pausing only to unclasp my bra when it gets caught.

“You don’t believe me?” I ask, lifting my hips as he whips the entirety of my clothing off my body, like he a magician tugging on a tablecloth.

“I know what I am, Tahlia. Just like I know you’re absolutely perfect,” he whispers, his voice husky as he leans in and nips my lips.

“Touch me and you’ll find out how hot I think you are,” I murmur, needing this beautiful, world-rocking man to understand how I see him. It saddens me to think he sees himself as anything other than the magnificent man he is.

“You want me to touch you, huh?” He presses his weight onto the bed beside me, his fingers starting at the center of my throat before gliding down, thumbing my nipples, and sending delicious ripples down to my core before he lightly glides a fingertip over my dripping core and groans, finding out just how wet he makes me.

“And I want to touch you too.”

“Think you’re ready for that?” he returns, grinning wickedly before he kisses me again, his tongue diving deep, fucking my mouth the way I want him to take my body. Then he nips at my bottom lip and drags his mouth lower, sweeping tiny circles along my throat until he’s back to sucking my nipple into his hot mouth, teeth grazing, tongue teasing.

“I’m ready. I know you’re worried you’re too big for me. But if my body is made to have a baby, surely it was made for you too.”

He releases my nipple with a pop. “Hmm. You ever had a baby?”

“No.” I giggle as he lifts his head and meets my eyes, giving me a boyish smile. “But I did get myself a rather large... toy to prepare for you.”

He pushes up on his arms rapidly, his face aligning with mine as his eyes light up with curious interest. “Are you serious right now? Because if you’re teasing, I really need you to stop. I’m so fucking hard for you right now, and information like that could very well unman me.”

Pulling at my bottom lip with my teeth, I start to twist his buttons open, revealing the thick, hairy chest underneath. I don’t know what it is about Ash, but everything about him turns me on so much that I’m shuddering in anticipation. “Open my beside drawer and you’ll find out for yourself.”

He sits back on his knees, and I giggle when he opens my drawer and finds a big purple glitter dildo inside. “Is *this* the eggplant you and Ruby were talking about earlier?” he asks, brows raised as he holds it in the air like a sword.

I put my hands over my face as laughter bubbles out of my chest. “You know it wasn’t,” I say from behind my fingers.

I hear the weight of it drop into my drawer as he leans over me again, his voice low and amused. “Naughty girl, tiny.” He grinds his hips against me and I moan, my hands landing against his chest, my fingers curling into his chest hair.

“Please, Ash.” I want him inside me so badly that I wrap my legs around his middle and grind into him.

“Jesus, Tahlia. You have no idea what you’re doing to me.” I shove his shirt off his shoulders and he helps by shucking it to the side, his darkened blue eyes flashing with momentary worry as the thickness around his waist is exposed. “Maybe we should turn out the lights?”

I stop him as he reaches for the lamp, my hand wrapping around his strong forearm. “Don’t you dare. I want to see all of you. Including your eggplant.” I reach my hands down to

his sides and rake my nails over his skin. “Don’t hide from me, Ash.”

He lowers his arm back to the mattress and holds himself over me. “OK,” he whispers, eyes searching mine before he dips his head and kisses me slow and deep, the urgency of all our previous kisses calming as a beautiful intensity takes over.

I place my hand on his shoulder, pushing gently until he rolls onto his back and I’m straddled over him, kissing him all over, showing him some of the attention he showed me.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” he rasps, his fingers sliding into my auburn locks before I shift back on his waist, reaching between us to unbuckle his belt and open his fly.

“Eggplant time,” I tease with a sultry grin as I work his pants down past his hips, holding on and giggling while he kicks them off like he’s a bucking bull. Although my laughter quickly dissipates when I get my first look at the monster cock in his pants. “Holy shit. Your eggplant is way bigger than mine.” I’m actually staring at it. It’s bigger than I expected, long and thick, with big veins running down the sides, his smooth crown glistening with his arousal.

“We don’t have to do this if you’d rather wait,” he says straight away, his hands landing on my thighs and rubbing soothingly. “I don’t want to hurt you in any way.”

There’s so much sincerity in his voice that my heart melts. This can’t be easy for him, naked, so aroused and so close to doing something about it. The respect I have for him triples in that moment, but there’s also no way I’m taking him up on that offer. I’ve been dreaming about this since he went down on me when I stumbled into the wrong hotel room. There’s no way I’m turning back now.

“I don’t want to stop, Ash. I want you,” I murmur, shifting myself so I’m sitting on top of him, his rock-hard shaft pressed against my center as I glide up to his tip, my juices causing him to moan as I coat him then position him at my entrance. “In fact, I’m pretty sure I need you. Right. Here.”

ASH

*H*er heat opens then stretches around me, so tight that my eyes lose focus and I almost crack a tooth gritting my teeth so hard. “You sure you’re OK, tiny?” I ask, my hands gripping her thighs as she pauses halfway on her journey down.

“So. Big.” She gasps. *Fuck.*

My hands shift to her hips, ready to haul her off me. *I knew I was too big for her.*

“Do you need to stop?”

She shakes her head and places her hands on my wrists, trying to stop me from lifting her in the direction that doesn’t involve sliding further down my cock. I’m caught between wanting to protect her and giving her exactly what she wants, so I move my hand between us, my thumb seeking out of her clit and teasing her until her wincing changes to moans and she starts inching her way down again.

“Holy fuck, Ash. This is...it’s...”

“Don’t try to talk, baby. Just focus on relaxing and let me do the rest.”

With a nod, she closes her eyes, her breathing caught between a groan and a cry as she moves up and down, urging her body to open up and take me deeper and deeper. I keep a close watch on her expression, determined to make this good for her, but ready to back out the moment she seems hurt in any way. This big dick of mine is more of a curse than a

blessing, and I have no right even trying to fit it inside a girl as small as Tahlia, but I just can't fucking help myself. There's something about her that has me wanting things I long since gave up on, and one of those is finding someone who can handle all of me.

"Ah!" Tahlia winces, and I wrap my hand around my base, blocking her from getting any further.

"Enough," I say, flipping her on her back so I'm the one in control. Her eyes fly open, and I hold myself over the top of her, gazing down. "This is all you're getting today." Keeping my hand in the way to act as a guide so I don't lose control and give her too much, I move in and out of her, loving the slick coating of her juices running down and lubricating my palm. "Fuck you feel good."

"Ash. I'm gonna... I need it all. Please. I'm gonna..." Her fingers press into my shoulders, nails biting into my skin.

"Hold on. Just one more minute, baby. I'm almost there with you," I gasp, jacking off and fucking her at the same time. The movement is a little frantic, and I can feel her wet heat sucking me in, a little deeper, a little deeper.

"More, Ash. More. Please. I can take it."

"Are you sure, baby?"

"Positive. Please!"

"Fuck. OK." I give her what she wants, moving my hand out of the way while an overwhelming surge of ecstasy rippling beneath my skin as I release my cock and plant my hands on either side of her.

"Please, Ash. Please," she moans, her feet digging into my ass cheeks and urging me the rest of the way.

The moment her lips kiss my base, all bets are off and I let go, a couple more pumps and I'm grunting and groaning, spilling my release inside of her while she howls and scratches at me, coming so hard that I think my dick might be bruised tomorrow morning—not that I care. Being inside her, buried as far as I can go, is totally worth it.

“Tahlia. Fuck,” I mutter, slowing my strokes as we both come down and then still, wrapped around each other and connected as intimately as two people can be.

“Fuck is an understatement,” she gasps, laughing as she pushes her hair back from her face. “I’ve never... Wow.”

“And you’re not hurt?” I ask, glancing down between us and feeling turned on all over again at the sight of myself buried in her body.

“No, Ash.” She chuckles and my dick jumps from the sensation. She moans and licks her lips. “Stop worrying about me. This feels *so* good. I’ve never been so full. Even my eggplant doesn’t stand up.” Now it’s my time to chuckle, which just means we’re both moaning again.

“Holy shit, tiny. How is this happening?”

“I don’t know. But do you think you could move some more? I want to keep feeling this.”

“OK,” I say, leaning down and brushing my lips against hers. “You know, I might have to cancel my flight tomorrow. I don’t think I’m pulling out of you anytime soon.”

“Good,” she whispers, her fingers moving to entwine with the base of my hair. “Because I’d really like you to stay till the end this time. No more running out the door as soon as your alarm goes off.”

“No more running away, tiny. I promise.” Moving my hips slow and languid, I smile against her mouth and kiss her much in the same way, enjoying her body while realizing that I’m in big trouble here. Tahlia and I started out of a flirtation that’s turned into something so much more very quickly, and while I can cancel my flight and book another one, eventually, I have to go back to Atlanta, and she’ll still be right here. They say long distance never works, but maybe, just maybe we can be the exception.

TAHLIA

“Oh my god,” I moan, the ache between my legs almost like someone hit me with a sledgehammer in my sleep. Sex with Ash was *outstanding*, but it’s definitely going to take a little getting used to, because the morning after feels swollen. I have a feeling that if I held a mirror between my legs, my lady parts would look like the after photo for botched lip filler. Totally worth it though. I have never felt so incredibly full, and I’ve never come so hard. It was the strange and perfect ache that made me feel more animal than human. I never want to go back to riding regular- sized cock again. Ash is all there is for me now.

But since Ash doesn’t live in the same city as me, regular trysts will be nigh on impossible. If I don’t want my little hoohah to tighten up again, I’ll have to get myself a bigger toy ‘eggplant’. Or better yet, I could get one of those cloning kits so Ash can give me my own version of the real thing. I could do one for him too, and we could do dirty things on FaceTime together while he’s not here, and then... *Wait*.

I force myself to stand on shaky legs so I can go to the bathroom.

Calm down, Tahls.

The multiple orgasms seem to have gone to my head, and I’m getting ahead of myself here. For all I know, Ash could consider last night a one and done situation. There aren’t any more Wright family gatherings scheduled for the foreseeable future that I know of. So maybe I am nothing more to him than a distraction while he’s here. It wouldn’t be the first time I

swooned at the feet of a ladies' man, only to realize I was just a good time. Sure, Ash's personality doesn't mesh with the kinds of guys I usually go for, but some men just ooze virility and women catch onto that. I'm worried that maybe I've just fallen headfirst into one of my old, frustrating patterns, where I give myself over to the fairytale before learning what a guy's true intentions are. And I've had enough of that life. I'm trying to grow here!

"Whoa, whoa! Sit down," Ash says, suddenly appearing in my bedroom doorway with a tray laden with sweet-smelling breakfast food—waffles and strawberries if my nose doesn't deceive me. "I can't imagine moving around is easy for you today." He rushes over and places the tray on the end of the bed, taking me by the elbow like I've just undergone surgery or something.

"Wait. I need the bathroom," I say, leaning into him and feeling my overactive imagination calm down a little—a ladies' man would *never* bring me breakfast in bed.

"OK," he says, scooping me in his arms and carrying me there. "Give me a yell when you're done, and I'll carry you back." He flashes me one of his gorgeous smiles and leaves me to my business, and true to his word, the moment I call out, he carries me back to bed.

"I don't think I've ever been carried to and from the bathroom before," I say as he sets me back down. "And breakfast in bed on top. Careful, I'll develop expectations."

Ash laughs a little then reaches over to the tray, lifting a bag of frozen peas off it. "I'm happy to wait on you while I'm here. I'm well aware that what we did last night won't be easy on you today. So..." He holds the bag of peas out to me.

"What's this for?" I ask, taking it and frowning.

"For your..." He frowns then clears his throat, gesturing to my general pelvic area.

"Oh! My hoohah." He smirks and shifts back, making me giggle. After everything we did last night, and the amount of time he's spent with this face shoved against it, it's kind of

adorable that he'd be even a little awkward discussing my private parts.

"You didn't have an ice pack. Figured this is the next best thing."

"To be honest with you. Those peas *are* my ice pack. Never did enjoy eating them. But they should help make we walk a little less cowgirl before long." Lifting the blankets, I position the peas between my thighs then sigh in relief as the cool eases the swelling slightly. "Oh yeah, that feels good."

"I'm sorry. I hate that it hurt you." With my 'icepack' in place, he picks up the breakfast tray and sets it over me so I can eat. There's waffles, strawberries, syrup and freshly brewed coffee. Plus, a glass of water and a bottle of Tylenol—for the pain, I assume. He's truly thought of everything.

"It was worth it, Ash," I say, placing my hand on his arm. "I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

"A heartbeat?" he quirks his brow like he doesn't believe me and I laugh.

"Well, maybe once the peas and the Tylenol have done their job," I say, giggling as I down the medicine and pick up a strawberry to chase it. "I'm gonna need some more preparation before you're back in town." Testing the waters, I watch him curiously while slicing off the corner of a waffle with a fork and taking a bite." He frowns. *Not a good sign.*

"About that..." He worries his lips together as he pours the coffee, waiting on me like he's my servant or something. It was swoony gorgeous a moment ago, but now I'm quickly flipping back to feeling wary. *Is he just trying to let me down gently?*

"Oh, my god. You're dumping me, aren't you? God. I'm so stupid when it comes to men! I just—"

"What? No!" Ash sits on the side of the bed, his pink tongue sneaking out to wet his lips as he adds cream and sugar to my coffee like he needs to be busy or he won't get through whatever it is he's about to say. "I'd never..."

“OK. If this isn’t all to say thanks before you walk out of my life, then what?”

His eyes lift to mine, and I hold my breath. I’m not sure who’s more nervous here, but I do know that I’ve become incredibly attached to Ash in a very short time. There’s something about just being near him that feels right to me. And I don’t want that to end.

“Tahlia, I don’t want to be the guy who flies into town for my cousin’s functions occasionally and fucks you when I’m here,” he starts, making my chest get even tighter. “I want more than that. I want *us* to be something more. What I’m trying to say is that I want to date you *properly*.”

Full of relief, I let go of my held breath, but it makes a sound akin to a goose being stepped on, and it’s not pretty. “Haaaaaaaeee.”

“Shit. Are you OK?” He quickly moves the tray to the side and reaches for me, but I shake my head while trying to breathe and hold him back because I *need* him to keep going.

“I’m fine. I’m fine,” I manage. “It’s just... You want to *date me*? As in, I’ll be your girlfriend?”

He pauses and his mouth quirks into a half-smile. “Yes. If that’s what you want too.”

“Want? Oh my god, Ash. Yes, I want to be your girlfriend! I have no idea how that’s going to work with you in Atlanta and me in New York, but I want nothing more.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Throwing caution to the wind, I shove the frozen peas to the side and kneel on the bed in front of him, taking his face in my hands as I gaze deep into his gorgeous blue eyes. “We like each other enough to make this work long distance, right?” I slide myself onto his lap and his big hands come up to my waist and wrap around me.

“It won’t be easy. But until we work out a better solution, yeah, I think we can,” he says, smiling up at me before his hand curls around the back of my head and he brings his mouth to mine, kissing me in a way that lets me know that

everything is going to be just fine. Ash wants me. I want Ash.
And somehow, he just became the first guy to ever ask me to
go steady.

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TAHLIA

“So, what color does Coco want to wear this week?” I ask, as Darren and I trawl through racks of dresses, looking for the perfect find. Drag queen clothes are over the top and dramatic. So when I find a purple ballgown, it feels like I’ve struck gold. “Please tell me it’s purple.” I suck in an excited gasp as I pull the dress from the rack and hold it up. Darren’s jaw hits the concrete floor when he clocks it, then he comes rushing at me making grabby hands.

“Oh my. You, my good friend, have now ben upgraded to fairy godmother status. This is going to be *perfect*.” He takes the dress from my hands and holds it against his body, sweeping across the store until he’s in front of the mirror, sucking in his cheeks and turning side to side as he poses. “A little snip, a little tuck, some bedazzling and ... yes. This is the one.” He turns to me with a brilliant smile, and I can’t help but smile right back. There’s nothing but like seeing a queen find the right dress. “I love it, fairy godmother. I shall wear it to the ball and dazzle my prince.”

“Fairy godmother, huh? Isn’t that what you said you’d be to Ash the last time you saw him?”

“Probably,” he says as he drapes the dress over his form and turns back to the racks. “He was mooning over you so hard, and I do enjoy fairy tale euphemism. How is the giant of a man, anyway? It’s been, what—a couple of months since he was here last?”

“Six weeks and four days,” I say, pressing my lips together as I play with the loose sequin on a gawdy looking 80s dress.

“Plus seven hours, forty-eight minutes, and twenty-two seconds,” Darren says with a smirk. I roll my eyes at him and he chuckles.

“I’m not that bad.” I pull a red boa from the rack and wrap it around my shoulders, posing and pouting when Darren pulls out his phone and snaps a couple of pictures.

“But you’ve got *it* bad,” he says, turning his phone around so I can see the shots before he sends them off to his Instagram story. Every moment is a snappable hustle when you’re Coco Monroe.

“I do.” I sigh. “And I miss him too. We talk to each other all the time, but...”

“I’ll bet it’s just talking,” Darren says with a chuckle. I tap him on the arm playfully.

“Get your mind out of the gutter, Miss Coco. We do have a modicum of control. We talk just as much as we do... *other things*, I’ll have you know. But I just really want to see him in person. You know, reach out and touch warm skin instead of a computer screen. When he spent the entire weekend at my place after Bradley’s christening, we did a lot of talking and cuddling up on the couch and just being together. I felt so connected to him, and with him so far away.” I press my lips together and shrug. “It’s just hard.”

As much as I love every moment I get to spend with Ash online, seeing him through my phone or laptop leaves me wanting. We entered into this relationship knowing it was going to be difficult due to the distance involved, but I kind of thought we’d see each other every couple of weeks, or even once a month. But with six weeks passing and no physical contact, I’m starting to have real feelings for my full-body pillow since I’m falling asleep with that every night instead of Ash.

I know none of this is his fault, and I don’t hold any sort of grudge or disappointment toward him. I just wish things were a little easier is all. I’ve never felt so connected to another human being, and it’s just my luck that the man I fall for is a man I can barely have.

“Can’t *you* just go and see *him*?” Darren asks, pulling the boa from my neck and putting it back on the rack.

“Well, he’s working all weekend, and on top of that, money is an obstacle,” I pout, following him to the register. “I’ve actually been thinking about getting a second job just for the sake of buying plane tickets, but besides journalism, I don’t have any other skills, and there are only so many hours in a day. You know, I asked Andy if his Starbucks was hiring, but they don’t have any positions right now, and if they did, he’d want me for weekends. And since that’s when I want to be seeing Ash, that just leaves me right where I am now. Broke and lonely, saving pennies in the hopes I’ll get down there soon.”

“There are more jobs that can be done after hours, you know,” Darren says, handing over the cash and thanking the cashier before we head out into the street.

“For the last time, I’m not being a stripper,” I say, shaking my head and laughing. Stripping seems to be Darren’s answer to *everything*. Which is understandable since before he became a drag queen, he was an exotic dancer.

“Shame. You’d be able to hire a private plane on the kind of money a natural redhead could make giving private showings.”

“And considering I’d be making this money to go and visit my *boyfriend*, I can’t imagine he’d be particularly on board with that method of fundraising.”

“Possessive, huh?”

I glance at him and smile. “Mildly.”

“Hot.” Darren laughs, then slips his arm in mine, directing me to the nearest coffee shop.

“Tell you what,” he says as we get inside and join the line. “How about I give you an early birthday present? I’ll buy you a ticket to Atlanta so you can get your freak on in person with big boy Ash next weekend, and in the meantime, I’ll also put out some feelers for night shift work that doesn’t involve getting naked. I have a cousin who runs a bar in the financial

district. He gets the Wall Street crowd in there buying overpriced cocktails and craft beer. So if he has any available work, I can ask him to give you a chance. The pay is shit but the tips are decent, so maybe you'll have enough for a ticket a month on top of your normal wage."

"Really?" I gasp, turning to him with a massive grin on my face. "You are my savior! That would be amazing, Darren. Thank you." I move to hug him, but he holds his hand up. Not one for overly big displays of affection.

"It's no trouble. Besides, Banks is always saying good help is hard to come by, so if I vouch for you, you'll be helping him out. And I suppose it makes me feel better to know you'll be working somewhere that *I know* is going to take care of you—which is another reason stripping is a great opportunity. The decent places walk you out and make sure you get into a cab safely."

"Darren," I say, pressing my lips together.

He holds up his bejeweled hands. "I know, I know—no stripping. But I would like it if people would see it more for the opportunity it is over putting shame on those who are bold enough to dare. Coco wouldn't have got off the ground if it wasn't for the strip clubs funding her. They serve a purpose."

Reaching out, I place a hand on his chest and give him an understanding smile. "I agree with you, Darren. I really do. It's just not something that I personally feel comfortable with. Not to mention I would probably murder myself walking around in those spiked heels they wear. I couldn't even wear your shoes without falling over and breaking something. So I think bar work is probably my safest bet." I lift up on my toes and press a fast kiss on his cheek before he can deflect me. "I love that you care about me so much though."

He purses his lips and rolls his eyes slightly. "If you tell anyone, I'll deny it all."

I smile. "I will never tell a soul. Your soft squishy heart secret is safe with me."

ASH

“*H*ey tiny,” I say, touching my fingertip to the computer screen as her smiling face appears.

“Hi big guy,” she says, the picture losing focus as she adjusts and lies on the bed, the muffled sound of sheets filling the mic before the focus is back and she’s lying on her pillow, her auburn waves draped over her shoulder. “Tell me about your day. Looks like you’re still at work.”

I look over my shoulder at the lab like it’s news to me, then offer her a half-smile. “Ever since they moved the deadline up, it seems like I live here.” We’ve been working on fine tuning the calibration technique for our prosthetic foot, and it’s meant analyzing reams of data and writing up findings. And so my lab partner can still spend time with her kid most nights, I’m putting in the extra overtime so we make the deadline. Normally, I’m happy to do it. But now that I have Tahlia, it’s really getting in the way. I just want to hold her in my arms, touch her, and taste her. By the time I see her again, it’ll be over two months since the last time, and that just feels too long. I want to see her yesterday.

“I wish I was there to rub your shoulders for you and make it all better. Maybe bring a picnic dinner and you could have your dessert on that workbench right there.” She looks over my shoulder as her mouth curves into a sultry grin. I groan.

“God, you have no idea how much I want that right now. But even if you were here, I’d be lucky to see you more than five minutes a day. This deadline is brutal.”

“I could handle five minutes if it meant I got to see you in person.”

I lean forward and run my hand back and forth through my hair, releasing a frustrated sigh. “The moment I can get away, I’m jumping on a plane straight to you. I promise.”

“OK. That sounds perfect,” she says. “I miss having you in my bed.”

“I miss being there.”

She bites her lip. “Is anyone around?”

“No. The place is empty.”

“Good. Because I want to show you what I’d like to do to you...”



WITH A FURIOUS COLLEAGUE lamenting the fact she’s missing Sunday breakfast while she fills in for me back at the lab, I step out of the cab and make my way to the airport check in with a ticket to New York on my cell. Janeece may be cursing my name right now, but since I’ve spent years building up my karma points where she and time with her kid is concerned, I don’t feel terribly guilty. She went to his little league game yesterday while I was crunching numbers and making program alterations. So as far as I’m concerned, missing breakfast is a small sacrifice to thank me for all the extra hours I’ve pulled so she *could* be a present parent *and* not lose her job for failing to complete a project on time. Hell, I’m practically a saint here. And I don’t think a single day off is too much to ask.

However, since I only have a single day, it means I have exactly twenty-four hours to commute between Atlanta and New York, get my fill of Tahlia and maybe eat something and sleep a little before I need to rush back and show up for work on Monday so we can finally put this project to bed in the coming weeks. This has been a solid year in development, but now that we’re in the final phases of testing, we’re finding there’s a massive issue with the arch flexing system calibrating

with the toes on uneven surfaces. The whole point of this prosthetic is to simulate natural movement so wearers have less of the joint and mobility problems traditional prosthetics can cause long term. So, if we can't figure that out, this entire project will be a bust. And one of my most hated things to do is hand in a failed project. Not only does it affect future project allocations, it also affects my performance and pay scale review. And while I may not have wanted to throw my brains and ambition into the family company working for Wright Media, I do still have an intense desire to succeed. Probably the one thing my father gave me that's been useful to me.

When I move through the line and get my boarding pass, I head over to the security checkpoint and line up there, checking my watch regularly as we slowly meander through screening. The moment I'm on the other side, I pull out my cell to text Tahlia. After talking to—and *watching*—her on Friday night, I knew I had to make a trip to New York, and fast. There's only so much time you can let lapse between asking a girl to be your girlfriend and seeing her again, and it was getting clear from the desperate need that seemed to coat our every conversation that I'd already far exceeded that time. So I made a snap decision to book a flight, insisted Janeece take the Sunday at the lab then set out to surprise my girl with exactly what she's been missing. Me in her bed.

Me: Morning precious, I've got a morning full of closed-door testing. I'll call you as soon as I'm free. Enjoy your Sunday and take photos if you find yourself thinking of me. :inserts devil emoji:

I smile to myself as I hit 'send' then wait for it to say 'delivered' before I pocket my phone and head toward my gate. If all goes well, I should be knocking on her door in a few hours with croissants and coffee in hand. I'm getting hard just thinking about that tiny little body of hers wrapping around mine again. I can't fucking wait.

TAHLIA

The devil emoji makes me smile, and if I wasn't in public, I'd send him a sexy photo to use as 'inspiration' when the time is right. But he'll just have to wait to see the real thing in person since I'm on my way to see him right now.

This closed-door testing is actually pretty perfect. It means I don't have to make up an excuse as to why *I'll* be out of contact for the next three hours or more. And then when he's finished work and weary after another long day, he'll have me there to perk him up again. It's going to be brilliant, and I can't wait to see the expression on his face when I surprise him.

"Boarding pass, please." The flight attendant smiles and holds out his hand when I've reached the top of the stairs and step inside the plane. I hand the ticket over and he directs me to my seat. "Have a nice flight."

"I'm going to Atlanta to surprise my boyfriend," I say, unable to keep my excitement inside me anymore. It's been almost impossible for me not to blurt it ever since Darren bought me this ticket as my early birthday present. I think I spent two hours talking nonstop about it with Ruby yesterday, and when I was talking to Ash last night, I almost let it slip. But thankfully some alarm on the equipment in his lab went off and cut our conversation short. Any other time I would have been very put out by the interruption, but for once it was welcome. My surprise visit was kept secret and I'm practically bouncing on my toes with excitement to see him.

“Lucky boyfriend,” the attendant says with an even bigger smile as he hands me back my ticket.

“I’m nervous,” I say, noting the disgruntled sigh of the passenger behind me.

The attendant purses his lips. “I’ll bet you are.”

“Not because I don’t think he’ll be happy to see me. Just because I’ve never been to his place before.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” the person behind me mutters, and I glance back and frown.

The flight attendant pats my hand. “Don’t worry, girlfriend. I’ll bring you something to calm those nerves when we serve refreshments after takeoff. You just find your seat and I’ll take care of everything else. Promise.”

His words help to settle me immediately. “Thank you,” I say, glancing at my boarding pass again and finding my way to my seat. Happy in the knowledge that soon, I’ll be right where I want to be—in Ash’s arms and hopefully his bed.



WITH MY CARRY-ON luggage trailing behind me, I pull out my cell and power it up grinning when it lights up with a call the moment I do. Ash’s sexy face fills my screen and I swipe my finger across it so his deep, rumbly voice fills my ear. I’m already majorly turned on, and I’m not even at his place yet.

“I was just thinking about you,” I say with a smile.

“Good things, I hope,” he says, amusement in his voice.

“Always good things,” I say, going outside to join the queue so I can get a cab. “But you’ll never guess where I am.”

“Ah, this is strange. Because I was about to say the same thing to you. Are we reading each other’s minds here?”

“Maybe,” I say with a giggle. “Why? Where are you?” I stop walking and just listen. “It’s really loud where you are.”

“That’s because I’m walking out of Newark airport ready to get in a cab so I can come and see you.”

I almost drop my phone. “No.”

“Erm... not the reception I was expecting, tiny. I kinda thought you’d be excited. Did I do something wrong here? Have I misinterpreted what being in a relationship means?”

“No,” I say again, shaking my head as the realization of what we’ve done hits me.

“You keep saying that but I’m not really sure what’s wrong here.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “You’re in the wrong city.”

“What?” There’s a pause. “You’re not in New York?”

“No. I’m in Atlanta.”

“What?”

“I’m in Atlanta,” I repeat, laughter bubbling out of me as the absurdity of what we’ve done tips the scale from crying to laughter. What are the odds of both of us deciding to surprise each other with exactly the same thing at exactly the same time?

“You’re in Atlanta?”

“Yes,” I gasp, nodding, laughing, and crying as all the energy that was swirling beneath my skin evaporates and makes my bones heavy. “I wanted to surprise you.”

“Fuck. I wanted to surprise you too.”

“Surprise!” I say, sniffing a little as I place my hand on my face.

“Oh, fuck.”

“I know. What a mess.”

“Shit. OK. You stay there, I’m coming to you,” he says, and then I hear him saying excuse me about a hundred times as he goes against the flow of people. He gets more than his fair share of ‘watch it, buddy.’

“Right here? You want me to wait at the airport?”

“No. Not the airport. Go to my place. I’ll tell the concierge to expect you and he’ll let you into my apartment. Wait there, OK? I’ll be back as soon as I can. I’m heading to the main desk to get on the next available flight right now. Just...don’t leave before I get there, OK? I want to see you.”

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ASH

When I was a kid, my mother bought me a goldfish from the pet store. We set it up in its tank with colorful rocks and one of those ornaments of a frog sitting on a log and a sign that says gone fishing sitting in the middle. All I wanted to do was watch that fish swim around its new home. But I had to wait a solid hour while the bag just floated on top of the water, equalizing the temperature so the goldfish wouldn't experience any shock when we transferred it from one environment to another. At the time, it felt like an hour lasted a year and to this day, time has never moved that slowly again. Until I was sitting and waiting for a plane to take me back to Atlanta.

Every single second felt like an hour.

A minute felt like a day.

And by the time I finally touched down in my home city, it felt like a decade had passed, and I still hadn't seen the little redhead that occupies my mind twenty-four/seven.

Pushing the door open to my apartment, I throw my keys on the entry table and dump my bag by the door. "Tahlia?"

Silence. The apartment is dimly lit by city lights through darkened windows, but I can't even hear the faint sounds of a TV from the living room. Tahlia has either gone to bed or she's left. *Please still be here.*

Because I was on standby, I got added to and bumped from flights before finally getting a seat, squashed between a woman eating an entire roast chicken with her fingers and a

man who slept the entire way with his mouth open and his head on my shoulder. Now, it's after ten at night. I'm hungry. I'm exhausted and I'm pissed. I pulled so many strings to make this day happen in the middle of a deadline and while I love that my girl was coming to surprise me, I hate that this day didn't work out the way either of us planned. We should have been together. Except we've been even more apart than we normally would be. Something has to change here, or we'll be over before we've even begun.

Checking each room as I walk through my apartment, I pause in the doorway of my bedroom, my frustration and anger evaporating away the moment I see her figure in my bed, curled up on her side and hugging my pillow against her chest. I melt. I'm a puddle of goo on the floor, because the sight of this woman in my bed has me thinking all kinds of things. Most of them get my dick standing at attention, but the rest causes my heart to swell. I knew it before, and I know it even more now—I need this woman in my life. And as I kick off my shoes and socks, pull my shirt over my head and climb into bed beside her, I decide to move mountains to make that happen. The moment this project is over, I'm going to put in for a transfer to New York. Failing that, I'll find a job there. Because if there's one thing I'm absolutely certain of, it's that coming home to this beautiful woman waiting in my bed makes a shitty day feel like a perfect one. I don't want to spend any more time without her.

“You're here,” she whispers sleepily, fitting into the curve of my body as my arm slides around her waist and I draw her in close.

“Hey, tiny. I'm sorry you had to wait alone all day.”

“You were worth it. I just—” She murmurs something indecipherable, and I smile and hold her a little tighter, pressing a soft kiss to her bare shoulder.

“Sleep. As long as I get to hold you until morning, I'll be a happy man,” I whisper, realizing happily that Camille's wedding magic worked—I've found the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with, and I'm going to move heaven and earth to make sure I can keep her.

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TAHLIA

*M*y eyes pop open just as the morning light peeks through the cracks in Ash's bedroom curtains. I have a brief moment of feeling bereft, because my last memory was getting into bed alone, and now I'm waking up again. But then I feel his fingers flex against my stomach, his mouth against my skin, and his morning wood against my ass. *Good morning to me.*

"Good morning," I whisper, reaching behind me and sliding my hands into his thick hair, moaning softly as his kisses move from my shoulder to the curve of my neck, and when I turn toward him, my mouth.

I reposition myself on the bed, opening my legs beneath him as his tongue enters my mouth and we kiss each other deep and desperate, his tongue moving with mine as the world seems to fall away around us, leaving us inside our own perfect bubble of togetherness. *I wish it could always be like this.*

"Morning, tiny," he rasps, brushing his nose alongside mine before he's kissing me again, rolling so I'm draped over him, his thick manhood pressing right against my core. I roll my hips and groan. "How long do I have you for?"

I press my lips together and place my hand against his chest. "My flight is in a few hours."

"Fuck," he groans, pulling me flush against him and burying his face in my neck. "I have to be back at the lab in two."

“Then we need to make the most of the few moments we have,” I say, pulling back and pressing my lips to his.

“There’s never enough time, tiny. I’m so not happy about this.”

“Look on the bright side, we still get right now. Plus, it feels like *someone* is happy to see me.” I gasp and rock my hips over him, loving the manly grunts that leave his chest while I work myself into a soaking mess along his hard shaft.

“More than happy,” he says, lifting his hips to grind against mine. “Rock-hard ecstatic.”

“I can feel that,” I whisper, dragging my teeth over his bottom lip. “But I think I might need to *see* how happy you are.”

“Is that right?” He grins as I sit back and rake my fingers through the hair on his solid chest.

“Definitely. I think it’s only fair that I do a more thorough inspection of the merchandise since it’s been a while and I need to refresh my memory,” I say playfully, turning so my back is facing him while I flick the blankets aside and shove his pants down his legs.

He groans and settles his hands on my hips. “Inspect away.”

“Oh yes,” I say, his proud cock bouncing free and standing up as if saluting me. “That’s a glorious piece you’ve got there.” It takes both hands to fully encircle it as I stroke it, testing the weight of it.

“Thank you. I grew it myself.”

I giggle over my shoulder, loving the mixture of arousal and amusement on his face. “And what a fine job you did.” Turning back to my inspection, I lean in close, using a finger to trace over his veins lightly, delighting in the way his dick bounces in my hands when I apply any pressure. “How do you not pass out from a lack of blood flow when this monster is erect?”

“Monster? I’m not sure he likes being called a monster, tiny.”

“Hmm, then what would he like to be called?” I glance back then continue gliding my hands up and down his length as I think out loud. “Tiny II would be insulting.”

“He’s yours, but he ain’t little.”

“Precisely. It’s so big that you could use it to conquer the Amazons. They’d see it and completely rethink their stance on letting men into their tribes. They’d likely build fuckable statues of you to have in every house so no woman would go unsatisfied.”

He chuckles. “I’m only interested in satisfying *one* woman, tiny.”

“Then maybe we should just call it ‘mine’?” I tease, gripping a little tighter and sliding my hands up and down his shaft.

“Perfect.” His big hand lands on the center of my back, pushing my negligee up so he’s touching me skin to skin.

“And since it’s mine, I should be able to do what I want with it, right?” Pressing the sweet spot on his shaft, I rub up and down, leaning forward and taking the tip into my mouth. He moans as I use my tongue to tease the rim. His hips rolling and his breath hissing the more I suck and rub and massage.

“Fuck, yes, tiny,” he rasps, and I pump a little faster, suck a little harder. Then I reach between his thighs and massage his balls with a light touch. One squeeze is all it takes. “Holy fuck!” He stiffens like a board, his toes curling as hot come erupts from his tip and hits the back of my throat. “Tahlia. My god!” I swallow it down while I slow my movements to keep him riding that glorious high, loving the way he’s coming undone by my hand.

His fingers tighten around my waist and the hand he had on my back slides higher, his fingers wrapping around my long hair before he yanks me back and I fall on the bed beside him with a bounce. “Just so we’re clear, no showing what’s

mine to any of those Amazon women, OK? I'm too tiny to fight them *all* off, but I'll scratch and hiss or go down trying."

With a chuckle, he rolls on the bed and holds himself over me, his eyes dancing with laughter. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"The Amazons and the statues they'll, ahem, *erect* in honor of your monster cock."

"Oh yes. Now I remember," he murmurs, brushing his lips against mine as he kisses me lightly. "As far as I'm concerned, tiny"—he hooks his fingers in the sides of my panties and drags them down my legs—"the only part of that conversation that matters is the part where we decided my cock was yours." He holds himself over me and presses his tip against my seam. "Something I'll gladly give you over and over and over again."

"Yes," I whisper, opening my legs wide for him as he dips his head and moves down my neck, kissing and licking as he reaches down and grips his cock, rubbing it back and forth against my sex, silky soft as it teases my clit and opening. "I want you inside me, Ash."

The moment the words leave my lips, he closes his eyes and pushes inside, his features softening in relief as my body welcomes him, stretching around him until my mind goes numb and all that there is is him and me and this feeling of completion that only he brings me.

I don't know what it is, but there's something about Ash that calls to me like a siren in the sea. Ever since that first night when I went into the wrong room, I've felt empty inside without him. And that's not just because of his dick. It's about the way he makes me feel, like being with him completes me.

"Fuck, Tahlia. You own me," he rasps as he moves inside me. "You know that, don't you?"

I look up into his eyes, seeing nothing but vulnerable honesty within their depths, and I nod. Because without him even speaking those words, somehow I do understand that. Maybe because he owns me too. We belong to each other. That

part about our relationship is the clear and easy part. But the rest? Well, that was a huge fucking mess. But we'd work it out. Somehow...

"You own me too, Ash," I whisper, gasping when he entwines his fingers with mine then holds my hands above my head, driving into me over and over again with his gaze locked on mine, like we're waiting for that moment when we'll both find our release and fall just a little further into the abyss of our emotions, never to return.

"You feel so fucking amazing, tiny. Never want to stop."

"Then don't. Don't stop. Don't stop," I cry, my release coming hard and fast, impossible to resist with each deep kiss of my womb.

"Tahlia," he grunts, just as I throw my head back and wail.

"Assssshhhh!"

Our bodies shudder and he comes inside me, his mouth meeting mine and kissing me with passion and sincerity. I feel closer to him than I've ever been to anyone in my life. But at the same time, my mind reels with a thousand different concerns over how we're supposed to work as a couple once I get back on the plane tomorrow morning and fly back to New York. When we're together, everything feels perfect. But with our lives and our careers in different cities, when we're apart, it feels like too much space too much time. If the last six weeks taught me anything, it's that.

Six weeks ago, we thought we could make long distance work. But six weeks and only one moment together isn't enough. Something has to give. And I think it needs to be me. When I get back to the office on Monday morning, I'm going to enquire about a transfer to Atlanta. Being in the same city is the only way we're going to make this work. And while many may think the idea crazy and too soon, I think that this thing between Ash and me is worth it. I'd rather fuck things up by trying than let them fall apart by not trying at all. My mind is made up. I have to try.

TAHLIA

“Tell me everything,” Ruby says as we stroll through the park, pushing Bradley in his buggy the afternoon I get back to New York. I’m exhausted, but when your best friend has some available time and you need to decompress, a walk in the park with the baby is the perfect way to do that. “How surprised was he? Did you even get out of bed? Was it, like, a fairy tale weekend?”

“I wish,” I say, lifting my takeaway coffee to my lips and taking a lifesaving gulp. Caffeine is quite literally the only thing that’s keeping me going right now.

“What do you mean?” She looks at me with concern, knitting her brows.

“Well,” I start, moving over to a free bench that Ruby gestures to. She hands Bradley a rice rusk so she can give me her full attention. “He wasn’t even there for most of it. We got maybe an hour together before I had to leave to make my flight.”

“Oh no. Was it because he was stuck at work?”

I shake my head. “The complete opposite, in fact. It’s actually really funny when I think about it now. And I’m sure it’ll be hilarious a few months down the track, but right now it’s a little disappointing.”

She places her hand on my thigh and squeezes. “Oh my god, Tahlia. The suspense is killing me here. What *happened?*”

The corner of my mouth twitches up as I turn to her and meet her eyes. “He came to New York to surprise me.”

“No!” She extends the syllable out as her eyes go wide and her mouth makes an O shape. “You were in opposite cities!”

I nod as I slump back against the seat. “And then it took so long for him to get a seat on a flight back that the entire day was done by the time he got to his apartment. I’d already fallen asleep, so I guess he got into bed with me. And it was really nice when we woke up together, but oh man, I wish we could get a little more than a handful of stolen moments, you know? I really, really like him.”

“I can tell,” Ruby says. “I’ve never seen you this twisted up about a guy before, and you were completely enamored with that Terrence asshole who dumped you right before your birthday. I’ll never forget that guy, and if I ever find him, I’ll be sure to leave a message on *his* car this time.”

“Oh, I don’t want you to do that anymore,” I say with a smile. “It led to you meeting Tanner, which has led to me meeting Ash. So really, Terrance did us a favor. We should probably send him a thank-you card. Or, at least I will when I manage to spend more than a few hours with Ash to find out exactly what we are to each other. I feel like we could be something really big. But without that time, that closeness, I feel like we’re going to be perpetually stuck as each other’s interstate booty call. And I don’t want that with him. I want something more.” When I lift my chin and meet her eyes, there’s a stark realization in hers.

“You want to move there, don’t you?”

Wincing a little, I nod. “Is that crazy?”

“Crazy?” She tilts her head slightly to the side. “You’re talking to the girl who drew a giant dick on her boss’s car then proceeded to taunt him mercilessly until he married me.” She chuckles at the memory, which makes me smile. “I don’t think anything can be counted crazy if it’s in the name of love.”

“Love,” I say the word out loud so I can feel the weight of it on my tongue. “I guess that’s exactly what I’m trying to find

out.”

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“So, let me get this straight—you and this new girl you’re seeing long distance are a hot mess of awkwardness everywhere *except* online, and you feel that the solution to that hot mess is to completely relocate yourself so you can be close to her... the hot mess?” my sister, Isla, surmises during our late lunch/almost dinner a few weeks later. My project has finally finished to completion and been submitted for peer review, so I’ve taken two weeks of my vacation time to come to New York to try my hand at surprising Tahlia again. However, first on the agenda was interviewing for a position at a biomedical research lab, after which, I’ve met up with my sister to ask for her help apartment hunting if I happen to get the job. The New York real estate market is cutthroat, and I know she’ll be more than happy to assist me since she’s been wanting me to come back to New York for a long time. The reason I want to come back seems to be sticking with her, though.

“You keep saying ‘hot mess’ like it’s a bad thing. I like being a hot mess myself, and I happen to really like this girl—messiness and all—and I want to make a real go of it. Not sure if you’ve noticed, but I’m kind of getting on in years, Isla. I’m not young like you are.” She smirks. “And I’d really like to settle down, have someone to come home to each day, maybe raise a couple of kids...” I sit back and release a sigh. “I don’t know. But I think if that’s ever going to happen for me, then Tahlia could be that girl. And the only way I’m going to find that out is if I spend more time with her. So I need your help. I can sort out the job situation remotely, fly in and out for

interviews and whatnot, but finding a decent apartment will take someone on the ground. I really need you to take point on that.”

“OK. And I’m happy to help. I mean, I’m beyond ecstatic that you want to come and live here again because you know I miss your face. But don’t you think your girl should be helping with this? I mean, if she’s who you say she is, then she’ll be spending a lot of time there, don’t you think she should get a say? Oh, I know! Why don’t you introduce me to her while you’re in town, and when it’s time, she and I can go apartment hunting together?” Her eyes go wide, and she claps her hands together. “I *really* want to meet this magical girl who’s managed to turn my brother’s head long enough to get him thinking kids.”

“You can meet her. But you can’t tell her anything about the job or the apartment. I don’t want to get her hopes up until I know it’s a done deal.”

“OK. That’s fair, I suppose.” She sits back and pouts slightly as the waiter brings over our meals, placing a chicken salad in front of her and a steak and potatoes in front of me. “When do you think you’ll tell her?”

I sit back and press my finger against the handle of my fork before I lift my eyes to hers with a smirk. “I was thinking I’d take her out to dinner, but it’ll be eating in at the new place.”

Isla’s mouth drops open, her fork piled with salad not quite making it to its destination. “You can’t surprise her with *this*, Ash. This is a huge life decision. You could freak her out.”

“And if I tell her and it doesn’t work out, it’ll only make it harder. You know how much drama I have getting jobs. They all think I’m lying about my experience because I look like a dumb kid.” I gesture to my face and she grimaces.

“I still hate you for your complexion. Do you know how much it costs me to look this good? A mint. And I still look older than you when you’re almost fifteen years older than me.”

“It’s not a blessing when you’re a guy, Isla. But if we can get back to the matter at hand, can you help me find an apartment or not?”

“I will. But I think you should tell your girlfriend first.”

“I will when I’m ready.”

“You are stubborn and pigheaded. You know that, don’t you?”

I chuckle. “I like surprising people with things I know they’ll love. And I *know* Tahlia will love having me in New York, but dangling it in front of her and not delivering will be torture. But if you want to meet her, then by the time we finish up here, she should be at this bar she’s started working a second job at. You can come with me to surprise her there.”

Now her fork clatters to the plate in front of her. “She doesn’t know you’re here this time either?” she practically shrieks. “Did you learn nothing from the last time?”

“I did.” I chuckle, picking up my knife and fork before cutting a slice off my steak. “And I contacted our mutual friend, Darren, and he told me what her movements would be tonight. She’s doing a shift at a bar downtown, then they’re all meeting up at Darren’s drag queen show. He’s the MC at some place in midtown east. He sent me the address, but Tahlia knows where. You should come there too.”

“You’re friends with a drag queen?” Her eyes somehow get bigger and more excited. “My god, big brother, you have this whole life I know nothing about. Yes! Count me in. I want to meet the girl, the drag queen and anyone else you’ve been hiding from me.”

“Great. But just so you know, Tanner will be there too.”

“What?”

“Tanner, our cousin.”

“I know who he is, Ash. Why is he going to a drag show with you? Do you know how much shit his stunt with Wright Media caused? I’ve been up to my eyeballs in public relations

bullshit ever since he walked out.” Isla heads up Wright Media’s PR team.

“I know you have, and I’m sorry for that. But Tanner is one of the few family members besides you and my mother, who stayed in contact with me when I left. Plus, his wife is Tahlia’s best friend. I actually met her at their wedding. And Tanner isn’t nearly as big an asshole as you all think he is. He just hated working at Wright Media so much it colored his behavior. He’s a different man away from it.”

“We all hate working there, Ash. But OK. If you say Tanner is cool then I’ll come and keep an open mind.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Well, seeing my big brother happy means a lot to me. I don’t want to do anything to make your life harder,” she says, lifting her glass of wine with a smile. “So we should toast: to your future happiness. My all of your surprises be well received.”

I grin as I tap my glass to hers. “They will. It’s one thing I’m certain of.”



A HIGH-PITCHED SQUEAL cuts through the din when we walk into *Banked Up*, the bar Darren’s cousin, Banks, owns in the city’s financial district. He’s got the perfect name for it himself, and I like the play on words he’s gone with for the bar’s name too. Then I like how he’s gone one step further and decked the place out so it looks like a nightclub and a Bank got married and their offspring was this bar. There’s an open vault door showcasing the liquor, and the bar itself is a row of tellers that call you up one at a time. It’s there, handing out paper tickets, that we find Tahlia doing her impression of an excited siren.

The moment she sees me, she abandons her post and makes her way through the crowd at top speed, running and leaping into my arms and peppering my face with kisses. “I

can't believe it's you. You're here. I missed you," she says in between lip smacks.

I laugh and hold her tight, kissing her right back as I do a slow spin, just relishing in this awesome moment. Being with her feels like coming home. "Hey, tiny," I say, slowly lowering her to her feet. "You are just a sight for sore eyes."

She runs her hand over my chest, her fingers tucking beneath my suit jacket before they move to my tie. "What did you do? Come straight here from work?"

"Pretty much," I say with a laugh. "Although I did make a stop first." I turn to my sister and gesture for her to come forward. "Tahlia, I'd like you to meet my little sister, Isla."

"Oh! You're the one from the Facebook photo," Tahlia says. "Wow. You're even prettier in real life than you are in pictures. It's so lovely to meet you. And you're so tall!" Tahlia's arms go wide as her eyes travel up to my sister's face.

"It's nice to meet you too, Tahlia." Isla leans forward and embraces her. "Ash has told me so much about you, and I just had to meet you for myself."

"Oh, gosh. And here I am making a hyperactive first impression. I'm so sorry. It's just that I haven't seen Ash in weeks and the last time we tried meeting the same city it didn't go so well."

Isla laughs and shakes her head. "It's perfectly fine. I get it. And honestly, any woman who can make my brother fly out to New York on the regular is fine by me. Be as hyperactive as you like."

"And who's this, then?" a man who I'm guessing is Banks, asks as he approaches us. It's obvious just by his smile that he and Darren are related, but where Darren is fine-boned and rather lithe with his movements, Banks is tall, broad and has a masculine elegance that only someone who knows his worth can exude.

"This," Tahlia starts, placing her hand on the center of my belly. "Is my man, Ash. Ash, this is Banks. He's Darren's cousin, and he owns this place, so that also makes him my

boss.” Banks and I exchange pleasantries and shake hands cordially before Tahlia moves onto introducing Isla. “And this is Ash’s sister, Isla. We just met. But if Ash is anything to go by, she should be a sweetheart.”

Isla giggles at Tahlia’s summation, then flicks her long dark hair over her shoulder, holding her hand out to shake Banks’s. “Sweetheart is not a term used to describe me often,” she says with a slight flutter of her lashes that both Tahlia and I clock since we exchange a knowing glance.

Banks’s brows lift as he tilts his head in interest. “What word would you use to describe yourself instead?”

“Oh, that’s something you’ll have to learn for yourself, Mr. Banks,” she says.

“No Mister,” he says. “Just Banks.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Banks. Your bar is... spectacular.” She flutters her lashes again then looks around, nodding her approval.

“Why, thank you. Maybe you could come by one afternoon before we open and I can show you around when the bar isn’t as busy?”

“I’d love that. Are you coming with us to see the drag show tonight? Ash mentioned Darren is your cousin.”

“He is. And since I haven’t been to one of his Coco shows for some time, I think I’d really enjoy that.”

While they’re busy making eyes at each other, Tahlia bounces on her toes and looks up at me. “We’re going to see a Coco show tonight? I haven’t been to one since before the wedding.”

“I hope you don’t mind that I made plans for us. Well, technically, it was Darren who did the planning. He played eyes on the ground for me to make sure we didn’t repeat the mistakes of our last trip to see each other.”

“Well, that explains why he’s been so cagey lately. I thought he was mad with me about something, but he was probably just afraid he’d slip up and ruin the surprise.”

“Seems he did well based on your reaction when I walked in.” She hugs her arms around my middle.

“He did amazing.”

“He’s also organized for the whole gang to get together tonight, so I hope you’re up for that.”

“Absolutely. How long do I have you for, though? We may have to slip away early.”

“I’m in town for two weeks. So be prepared to get sick and tired of me.”

“Two weeks! Never.” Her arms tighten around my waist, and she looks up at me adoringly. I just love it, and I think I love her. “I’m going to struggle with letting you go.”

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ASH

Standing outside *Queen's Delight*, I'm congratulating Darren on an amazing performance while Ruby, Tanner and Theo belt out an off-key rendition of Christina Aguilera's, *Candyman* from Coco Monroe's final performance. Had I not known Darren was the queen behind the wig, I never would have recognized Coco as him. The makeup job was transformative, and his performance was thoroughly entertaining. It's just a shame both my sister and Banks missed it. Banks had to stay back at the bar to organize a few things but said he's meet us here, and Isla said she was going home to change and would do the same. But neither made it. Isla messaged that something came up, but still, I hope everything is OK.

"You look after our girl while you're in town, all right?" Darren says, waggling a red stiletto tipped nail my way. "And I expect to see both of you at least once. Consider it coming to mama's house for Sunday dinner, except we'll all be there and it'll be takeout since I can't cook."

"I'll cook," Theo says, sliding in and shaking my hand. "It's good to see you, bro. Too long between trips."

"You're telling me," I say, glancing over at the smiling Tahlia who's saying her goodbyes to Ruby and Tanner. "Atlanta is just too far away."

"Well, maybe you should make your visit a little more permanent," Darren suggests, waggling his brows. I chuckle—if only he knew.

“In time,” I say, just as Theo elbows him.

“You can’t go putting pressure on like that. You’ll freak the guy out.”

“It’s fine,” I say with a laugh. “No freaking out here.”

“Who’s freaking out?” Tanner says, clapping me on the back before he holds his hand out for me to shake.

“Not me,” I say, giving him a brotherly hug instead. “How’s married life treating you?”

“As great as engaged life did. Ruby is my person, so I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

Nodding slowly, I smile over at my girl—my person—and hold out my hand. She comes over quickly, and with my arm around her shoulders, I thank everyone for a great night and turn around to hail a cab.

“I just realized that you don’t have any luggage with you,” Tahlia says when one stops and I open the door for her.

“It’s at the hotel.”

Her face falls. “You’re not staying with me?”

“No, tiny. You’re staying with *me*. We’re gonna spend all weekend in bed getting room service.”

A slow grin curves her mouth as she climbs into the cab. “And what about the rest of the two weeks?”

I slide in beside her and brush the back of my hand against her cheek, touching my lips to hers. “Anything you want, tiny, that’s what we’ll do.”

“I just want to do you,” she whispers against my mouth before I close my lips over hers and kiss her long and deep, before giving the cabbie instructions to the hotel.

“You’ve got me.”

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TAHLIA

“*I* don’t want you to go,” I say, sitting up in bed as I watch Ash move around my tiny bedroom like he’s Alice in the scene where she grows too big for the Rabbit’s house. He’s making sure he’s packed everything because our two weeks are up and he’s going back to Atlanta. *Boooo. Hisssss!*

After our luxurious weekend in the hotel, he came back to my place to stay since I couldn’t get time off work and I needed clothes for that—insert more booing and hissing here. And as much as I pouted about that at the time, I have to say that waking up next to Ash and falling asleep beside him after making love every night has been pure bliss. He *cooks*. Every night when I walked in the door, there was some great smell greeting me while a sexy giant moved about my poorly decked out kitchen. Then we ate together, we talked about our lives and really got to know each other on a deeper level, we cuddled, we kissed, we touched each other *everywhere* and now that it’s over, my heart can’t take being separated from him. This long-distance thing is hard. I need to bite the bullet and start looking for work in Atlanta.

Easier said than done when my manager has made it clear that I can’t get a transfer and I’m stuck under contract for at least another two months. So that means two months before I can even contemplate making the move. And two months of saving every spare penny I have to make sure I can afford to move. I’m gonna need some extra bar shifts too.

“I’m not too keen on going either, tiny,” Ash says as he zips up his duffel. “I’d much rather stay right where I am with you. But this whole being grown-up with responsibilities thing kinda sucks, huh?” He gives me a half-smile before he moves to sit on the bed next to me. “But I have loved every single second I’ve been with you these past couple of weeks. And I promise I’ll get out here again as soon as possible. Or I can fly you to me... Either way, we won’t leave it so long this time.” He leans in and kisses me, and I get such a surge of emotion that I slide my arms around his neck and hold on as tight as I can.

“*Icunbref*,” is the only decipherable sound that comes out of Ash’s mouth.

“What was that?” I pull back and meet his eyes in question, the resulting gasp of breath from him letting me know I was choking him. *Whoops*.

“I said I can’t breathe,” he gasps, rubbing at his throat.

Tears immediately spring to my eyes. “Gosh, I’m so sorry. I’m acting crazy and I’m ruining the last moment we’re gonna get.”

He places his hand on my cheek and brushes away a tear I didn’t even realize fell. “You haven’t ruined a single thing. We’ve had an amazing two weeks, and we are going to have a hell of a lot more amazing weeks together. We’ll work this out, yeah?”

I nod and snuffle at the same time. “Yeah. And until then, there’s FaceTime, right?”

“You’re sexy as fuck on FaceTime,” he says, pressing a light kiss to the tip of my nose.

My eyes pop open wider, and I’m quick to jump out of bed. “Oh, my god! I almost forgot.”

“Forgot what?”

I throw open the doors to my cupboard and rummage through, coming out with two boxes and handing one to him. “A clone-a-privates kit. One for me and one for you. It’s so we

can make a cloned copy of ourselves so when we are messing around online, it's as close to the real thing as we can get.”

“Wow.” Ash stares at the boxes without expression, and for a second I'm nervous and feeling foolish. But then I see the tenting in his pants that tells me he's actually turned on by the idea.

“What do you think?”

“I definitely want a version of your pussy to take home with me.” He takes the box from my hand and looks at his watch. “How long do these things take to make?”

“The molds? We can probably do them before you leave. Then you can make the actual product once you're back in your apartment. And I expect you to call me before you try it. I want to see you fucking me.”

He lets out a growl, then his hand wraps around the back of my head, tugging my hair before he brings his mouth to mine. “And I expect the same from you. Do not use my eggplant without me.”

I giggle as he lowers me back onto the bed. “Deal.”



AFTER REALIZING I'd need more silicone than the kit provided to make an 'eggplant' the size of Ash's, I made a quick trip to my local sex store and bought a second kit, along with a cheap bottle of wine to make the whole process feel a little less confronting.

It's not that I don't want a dildo that's the exact shape and size of Ash, it's just that I want Ash too. And I kind of feel that having this might just make me miss him more. Which will then make me feel foolish because I knew what I was getting into when I started dating him. But still, absence might make the heart grow fonder and all, but it also gives you a big ole pain of longing in the guts. I don't know how much longer I can go on like this.

As I mix up the solution in a bucket, I smile to myself as I think back to the fun we had getting the molds ready before Ash had to leave for the airport. He almost didn't make his flight because keeping himself erect long enough for the quick-set mixture to dry around him meant I had to put on a little performance that, of course, ended with him finishing what I started. Then we had the same conclusion when creating my mold. He cut it so fine that it was almost an exact replay of our very first time together when he did the come and run. But this time, there wasn't any anxiety involved. This time, I knew it wasn't me that drove him away; it was me making him want to stay. And gosh, I want him to stay more often. Actually, having him near is something I need.

Letting out a sigh, I take a long drink of wine and then lift the bucket of mixed solution and start pouring it into the mold, watching the dick-shaped cavity slowly fill. I release a giggle at the absurdity of what I'm doing, then I flinch when I hear, "Knock, knock!" coming from my *now open* front door.

"Shit!" I hiss, putting the bucket down and scrambling for something to cover the mold while also hiding the box and trying to act normal because my apartment isn't very big and Ruby can see me as soon as she steps in. "Hey, Ruby. Just give me a minute."

"Thought I'd come over with wine so we can order and pizza and watch cheesy movies so you aren't missing Ash so much," she says, her voice getting closer while I scramble faster. This isn't an unusual situation. Ruby and I have been friends for so long that we used to live directly across from each other. And we've always had keys to each other's places, and always freely entered whenever we knew the other person was alone. It's a system that's worked great for us over the years, but right now, I kinda wish I'd asked for that key back because I'm holding a half-filled dildo mold and I don't quite know where to put it.

"Uh-huh. Great," I say, opening the cupboard under the sink and shoving it in there and slamming the door before I turn to face her.

“Is everything OK, Tahls?” She rounds the counter and surveys the situation. I have a dishtowel covering the bucket of silicone, the packaging shoved inside a grocery bag, and the mold hidden away. I’ve got this.

“Perfect. I was just...cleaning,” I explain quickly, stepping away from the sink. “And you have wine. Brilliant.” I reach for the bottle in her hand, and the moment I wrap my hand around the neck, the cupboard under the sink flies open and mold tumbles out, bouncing on the tiles once before cracking in two and oozing purple silicone all over the floor while I watch on in horror. “Oh god. Look away!”

Ruby isn’t looking away. Instead, she’s staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed as two perfect indentations of a giant penis rock from side to side on the floor. “Is that...a dick?” she asks, to which I nod and twist the top off the bottle of wine in my hands, lifting it and drinking it directly from the bottle.

“That’s a dick, all right.”

“Holy fucking hell.” Ruby moves closer to it and crouches down to inspect it closely. “That’s the biggest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Gulp. Glug. Gulp. “Ash is a big man.”

“I can see that. Is this one of those cloning kits?” I nod. “And you broke it trying to hide it from me.” I nod again. “I’m so sorry. I should have knocked before I came in to be safe.”

“It’s OK. How were you supposed to know I was in here cloning a dick?”

She releases a chuckle as she tilts her head from side to side as she inspects the pieces, then worries her lips. “Maybe we can fix it? No. that won’t work, it’ll have a seam and slice you on the hoohah. You’ll have to get him to make it again and send it you.”

“Oh god. This is so dumb. What am I even doing here?” I sniff, lifting the bottle and drinking a little more.

“Oh, honey. This really sucks. I’m so sorry I made you wreck your stand-in boyfriend.”

Tears jump into my eyes as I release a self-deprecating laugh. “I don’t even really want a stand-in,” I squeak. “I miss him so much already and I think...I don’t think I’m cut out for this long-distance thing. It’s *awful*, Ruby. I mean, it’s amazing when we’re together, but as soon as we’re apart I feel so lonely. And the longer it goes on, the lonelier I get, and the kicker is that we’re apart for most of the time.”

Ruby jumps to her feet and immediately wraps me in her arms. “I know, honey. I know. And I’m so sorry you’re feeling this way. Is there anything I can do for you? Just name it and I’ll make it happen.”

“Pizza. I just need pizza and my best friend.” I sniff as she places her hands on either side of my face and gives me an understanding smile.

“Pizza it is,” she says before releasing me and pulling out her cell, leaving me with the wine and a confused heart. Job or no job, I really need to talk to Ash about the future of our relationship. That much is clear to me now.

ASH

“—*T*hen Ruby turned up, and it broke and now I don’t have it and everything is ruined and I’m so sorry. *Imissyousomuch.*” Tahlia’s face is just a little too close to the camera for me to make out her features properly, but I can make out her words and the fact that she’s very, *very* drunk.

“I miss you too, sweet girl,” I say, smiling slightly as my insides tug uncomfortably, knowing that having two weeks then parting ways again has pushed her a little too far out of her comfort zone. And the really shitty part is that my plans to move to New York have now been waylaid because I didn’t get that job. They gave it to someone with more *experience* which is bullshit, because at my age, I have about all the experience in my field as there is. So that means my stupid baby face strikes again, and they didn’t take me seriously. Story of my fucking life.

“It’s OK. I think the real fun in those things was making the molds anyway, and since we got to do that together, I’d like to call the experiment a success.”

“Did yours work?” she asks, leaning into the screen like maybe she could see around me if she tried.

“Not really. I think I got the mix wrong, or I didn’t tap the mold enough to get the air bubbles out. Because it came out very textured, but not in a good way.”

“Ohhhh I’m soooooorryyyy!” she wails. “You got a queef-light instead of a flashlight. This is the *worst.*”

I chuckle even though she's sitting there crying and feeling sorry for herself. Even mid-tantrum, I find Tahlia beautiful. "What's a little vaginal flatulence between friends?" For some reason, that makes her cry even harder. *Whoops*. "What did I say, tiny? I'm not trying to upset you, sweet girl. All of this is OK. You and me, we're OK."

"You called us 'friends'."

"You know I want us to be so much more than friends, Tahlia. Every time I'm with you, I just want it to be forever."

"That's how I feel too. But how are we supposed to be something more when we're so far away from each other? This is getting harder and harder the longer it goes on, Ash."

"I know. It's hard for me too."

"I think...I think one of us has to move."

"I agree. In fact, I interviewed for a job while I was in New York. I even asked Isla to keep an eye out for an apartment for me."

Her tears stop and she sniffs. "You did? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted it to be a surprise and because I didn't want to get your hopes up unless it was really happening. I'm not a millionaire like the rest of my family, Tahlia. So I can't just pack up and come to New York to be with you unless I have a job to go to."

"I understand that. I really do. I'm not trying to make this harder than it has to be. I'm just...I'm lonely without you. But if you get this job, then we won't have to deal—"

"I didn't," I state quickly before she becomes too hopeful. "They didn't hire me. But I'll keep looking."

"What if...what if I look when my contract is up? I'm stuck for a couple of months, but I could come to you."

"We'll discuss that as an option when you're sober and the time is right. But just know that I won't stop searching. It's just going to take some more time. Can you give that to me? I

don't want a drunken conversation about a broken dildo mold to be the end of us.”

A laugh bursts out of her chest as she brings her hands to her face and sighs. “God, you must think I'm a crazy person right now.”

“I don't,” I assure her. “I just think it's really hard to miss someone you care about.”

She meets my eyes and nods. “I think I'm in love with you, Ash.”

I suck in my breath as her words hit me right in the chest. “I'm pretty damn sure I'm in love with you too, tiny. And we're gonna make this happen, OK? One way or another, we're going to be together.”

“OK,” she whispers. “I can wait.”

“Me too. Because you're worth it. We're worth it.”

She nods and then rests her head on the back of her palm, and before I know it, she's snoring away on screen.

With a smile and a heart full of hope, I press a kiss to the tip of my finger and touch the screen. “Good night, tiny.”

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TAHLIA

A few months later and we're no closer to moving Ash to New York than we were previously. Needless to say, it's putting a strain on things. Don't get me wrong, I still think he's the most wonderful guy in all the land, but each time we see each other, whether it's for a quick weekend in person, or during a video call online, saying goodbye gets a little harder until I'm missing him even when we're in the same room. I'm not sure I can keep hurting like this.

Which is why I'm heading to Atlanta to see if I can get a job there instead of putting all the pressure on Ash to relocate. He's been insistent that I stay and he comes to me because he didn't want to take me away from my support system. But why is it OK for him to leave his? So I've made the executive decision that if we can't bring Ash to the big apple, we'll take the big apple—or the tiny woman *from* the big apple—to him. And after a few rather tense interactions between us of late, I'm excited to surprise him with a couple of days together and some naughty sex.

After giving the concierge a tip from the 'silly money to surprise Ash' fund I've been collecting from my tips at the bar, I pull the sash on my trench coat tight and step onto the elevator. I feel like a vixen in my thigh-high stockings, and a fancy set of peep show lingerie that has everything there except for the bra cups and the panty lace. So I'm practically naked, and from thinking about the look on Ash's face when he opens the door to me, I'm also incredibly turned on.

With my shoulders pulled back and my head held high, I walk down the hall with my carryon luggage wheeling behind me before I come to his front door and take a deep, fortifying breath. “Here goes nothing,” I say to myself, heart thundering in my ears as I set my luggage to the side then raise my hand to knock, my fingers moving to the sash and loosening it so I can pull my trench coat open the moment Ash opens the door.

Talk about a great icebreaker! The moment Ash gets an eyeful, he’ll drag me to his bed and he’ll never let me go—mission accomplished.

Nervousness buzzes under my skin as footfalls approach from the other side, and when the handle turns, I take a deep breath and close my eyes. “Surprise!” I sing, opening my trench coat to reveal my nakedness as the door pulls open. I feel so feminine and empowered that it takes me a moment before I realize the reaction isn’t happening as fast as I expected it to.

“Ah...Ash?” A voice that isn’t his makes my heart stop beating as I pop open one eye. “I think this might be for you.”

With a gasp, I close my trench coat and lock eyes with the woman in front of me, my cheeks flaming as I come face to face with Ash’s *mother*. And what’s worse, is this is her first impression of me! I know her only from the photos I’ve seen of her in Ash’s apartment. *Dear Lord, kill me now.*

“I should go,” I squeak, gripping my coat closed with one hand as I grab my suitcase with the other and slink back to the elevator as fast as I can, slowly dying inside because *I just flashed my boyfriend’s mother!* Oh god, oh god, oh god! I’m dying and I can’t breathe and this stupid elevator isn’t getting here fast enough!

With deep, ragged inhales, I jab at the call button, desperately needing to hide or run or jump out a window if all else fails. *Ash’s mom saw me naked! Arghhhhhh!*

“Tahlia?” Ash’s voice fills my ears just as the elevator doors open, and instead of turning to speak to him, I step inside. There’s no coming back from this. “Tahlia.”

Since luck is *not* on my side today, his big hand wraps around the closing doors and they open again, staying that way as he obstructs them with his oversized frame. “Your mom just saw my tits,” I blurt, an edge of hysterics in my voice as I throw my arms in the air. “She also saw my landing strip. I don’t really have much on under here.” I gesture to the coat and shake my head as I look away.

Ash grins. “Really? Can I see?”

“No! This isn’t funny. This is humiliating and now I’ve ruined my relationship with your mother, which means I’ve ruined any future we could have because she probably thinks I’m a whore. How am I supposed to have Sunday dinner across from her when we have kids if she thinks I’m a whore?” I demand.

Ash’s grin only gets wider. “You want kids?”

“What?”

“Kids,” he says. “You just said you want kids. You also mentioned Sunday dinner with my mom, but even I don’t do that, so...”

“Yes,” I admit. “I want kids with you. Lord knows how I’ll get your giant babies out of my body, but yes, I want to have your babies. I want everything with you, Ash.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” My embarrassment slowly calms as I step a little closer to him and bite my lip. “It’s why I’m here. I have a job interview for a magazine. I thought that since we’re not having much luck moving you to New York that maybe I should be the one to move here...”

“You want to give up the city, your life, your friends and move to Atlanta for me?”

Pressing my lips together, I nod. “As long as that’s OK, of course.”

“OK? Tiny...” He reaches out to me with a sexy smirk on his face. “Why don’t you get your ass over here so I can show you just how OK that is?”

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“*M*aybe you can meet her properly later,” I say as I walk my mom to the elevators while Tahlia gets changed in my room. “How’s Sunday dinner sound?”

“That depends. Will she be wearing clothes?” Mom’s brows lift to her hairline. But I can tell she’s only joking. I can also tell she’s dying to tell her bridge pals all about this the moment she gets outside.

“Of course she will. Me, on the other hand...”

“Oh, you,” she admonishes with a chuckle as she slaps me against the chest. “Too cheeky for your own good. In fact, I’m surprised you found such a lovely girl to put up with you.”

“You think she’s lovely?” I rub a hand over my beard as I laugh. “That’s high praise for seeing so little.”

“Oh, I saw *plenty*,” she says as the elevator arrives on our floor. “But once the coat closed, there was an adorable, nervous girl who obviously cares about my son enough to come back and speak to me face to face. I’ve got a lot of respect for that. You, on the other hand, should probably start thinking about making an honest woman out of that girl. You’ll stop getting surprise visits all together if you don’t get a ring on that finger soon.”

“I promise you, mom, it’s at the top of my list of things to do. I was just trying to get our living situation sorted out first.”

“Still going to New York?”

“You know, I think that maybe we’re both going to stay here.”

Her eyes light up. “Well, I can’t say I’m disappointed about that, because I’m not.”

“I didn’t think you would be. But I’ll talk more to you later. Right now, I have an embarrassed girlfriend to console.”

“Console,” Mom repeats with a cackle as she steps onto the elevator. “Is that what they’re calling it these days?”

“Goodbye, mother.”

She laughs as the doors slide shut and she’s out of sight, meaning I’m quickly turning back to my apartment to go and try to talk Tahlia down from the height of her embarrassment. I’d offer to flash her parents if it’d help, but something tells me that wouldn’t solve anything.

“Is she gone?” Tahlia asks from inside the bathtub where I find her. She’s up to her neck in bubbles and looks like a big foam ball. “Does she hate me?”

I lean against the door frame. “Yes, she’s gone. But no, she doesn’t hate you. In fact, she’s agreed to have Sunday dinner with us in order to meet you properly—well, fully clothed, at least.”

“That’s not funny,” she pouts, sinking further into the bath water.

“Too soon?” I ask, grinning as I approach the bath and kneel beside it.

“Of course it’s too soon!” she wails, sinking below the surface with a glut, glut, glut of bubbles in her wake.

I push my sleeves up and reach in, pulling my tiny love into my arms and smoothing her hair away from her face as she gasps and moans. “My life is over!” She cries on her first breath.

“That’s a little dramatic, don’t you think?”

“No.” She pouts, and I can’t help but laugh.

“I’m sorry you’re embarrassed. But I assure you, it hasn’t affected how my mother thinks of you. She’s not like the rest of the Wright family—primarily because she married into it instead of being born to it—and she doesn’t judge people based on moments. She judges them on deeds, and since she already knows that you sacrificed your career to help Camille, she already thinks you’re amazing. And once she gets to know you for you, she’ll *know* you’re amazing. Especially since you’re going to be the mother of her grandchildren.”

“Well, there’s something missing right here for that to happen,” she says, lifting her left hand and wagging her ring finger at me.

“Is that so?”

She nods. “Call me old-fashioned, but I don’t think we should even think about having babies if they’ll be born out of wedlock.”

“She doesn’t want much, huh?” I laugh as I lift her out of the tub and wrap a towel around her naked body.

“Not much,” she says with a smile. “Just everything. With you, of course. I want to live with you, love you, and make a family with you. Is that too much?”

“No.” Sweeping her back into my arms, I carry her into my bedroom and lie her on the bed, climbing over her and kissing her gently. “I think it might be just enough.”

“I love you, Ash,” she whispers, wrapping her arms around my neck as kiss her deeply, our hands working together to get rid of my clothes so I’m just as naked as she is, my dick at her entrance, gliding back and forth through her juices, teasing her clit with my tip until she’s throwing her head back and screaming my name.

“Tahlia?” I rasp, my dick throbbing with need as I notch it inside her entrance.

“Yes?”

“I love you too,” I say, pushing myself inside her before I lift her in my arms and move with her, seated and holding each other as ecstasy overwhelms us both. She pushes through her

thighs, riding me and taking me deep as she whimpers against my mouth while I explore her mouth with my tongue, her skin with my hands, and her soul with my heart. Each and every time I've been with this woman, I've known we were built to fit each other. And each and every moment I've spent with her has shown me not only to we fit together, but we work together and complement each other as well. I wanted to be the man she needed, to go to New York and provide her with a life that meant she never had to leave her comfort zone or her friends. But I'm not so bullheaded that I'd refuse the opposing solution to that. Having Tahlia come to Atlanta means we get to be together, and after experiencing months of being forced to love her from afar, I'd give my right arm to never have to say goodbye to her again.

"Oh, Ash," she moans, her body tightening as she draws closer to climax, squeezing me and tipping me over the edge so I'm coming right along with her, a grunt in her neck and my teeth pressing against her shoulder.

"Fuck. I'll never get tired of that. When can you move in?"

She throws back her head and laughs. "As soon as I get a job."

"No. Fuck that. Fuck getting a job. If you're gonna move to Atlanta and have my babies, then I want to be the guy who takes care of you."

"You want to take care of me?"

"Of course."

"But what if I want to work?"

"Then work. But don't make it a prerequisite of us being together. Atlanta isn't like New York. My salary can keep us both here. Hell, we can get ourselves a place with a yard and live the suburban dream if that's what you want. Kids, a picket fence—"

"A mommy blog." Her eyes go wide and she smiles, seeming quite excited by the idea.

"Yeah. A mommy blog. You can finally write whatever you want without having to worry about Wright Media

holding you back or blocking you from being the journalist you want to be. I want you to be happy, tiny. And I want to be the guy who goes out of his way to make that happen.”

Her eyes shine brightly as she looks into mine and bites her lip. “I want that too.”

“Then marry me,” I say, lying her back on the bed as I press a kiss to her lips, then reach over to my bedside drawer. “Marry me and make me the happiest man on the planet.”

“Oh, my god.” Tahlia’s eyes go wide as I produce a dark velvet box and lift the lid, showing her a diamond ring I’d purchased the moment I decided to move my life for her. “What on earth? You already had a ring?”

“I’ve been thinking about asking you to marry me from the moment I saw you, Tahlia,” I say, sliding off the bed and dropping to one knee on the floor beside it. “I knew as soon as I saw you that you were the one for me. And the fact you’ve endured the up and downs of being in a long-distance relationship with me has just solidified it. I want you to be mine. From now until forever, so please say yes. Will you marry me, Tahlia?”

“Yes!” she cries, launching herself at me so that I almost fall back but catch us both before I lie back on the carpet, her sitting on top of me as I hold up the ring and slide it onto her finger.

“My future Mrs. Wright.”

“And my Mr. Wright.” She holds her hand up and admires the glinting stone. “I love it. And I love you.” She leans down and presses her mouth to mine.

“I love you too, tiny,” I whisper, rolling us over before deepening the kiss and reuniting our bodies with a slow, deep movement that has both of us coming again and solidifying our engagement with the union of our bodies. Then we do it again and again and again, because I’m never letting her go. I waited for her for forty-two years, and then I waited almost a full year more, but now, the waiting is over. She walked into the wrong room for a reason, because she is mine and I am

hers. She's the right girl for me, and nothing—not distance or time or work—can change that again. We chose each other, and that's all that matters.

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EPILOGUE

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TAHLIA

Twelve months later...

Sometimes, it only takes a moment to fall in love with someone. In my case, it was during Ruby and Tanner's wedding reception when Ash looked at me and said, 'I've got you'. Because from that moment on he did have me. I was his body, mind and soul. The struggle was just in figuring out how to make that happen.

Despite the struggles a long-distance relationship came with, there was never a moment when I felt that Ash wasn't willing to move heaven and earth to keep me. No matter how many obstacles were between us, he always made me feel like I was his number one priority. So, the least I could do for a man willing to upend his life and career for me was to upend *my life* for him. And I don't have a single regret.

While New York was where I'd spent most of my life, it's in Atlanta that I found my home. Sure, I miss my friends and the ability to share coffee or a bottle of wine with them at a moment's notice, but we still manage to catch up online and fly to see each other in person whenever we can. If I could maintain a romantic relationship long distance for almost a year, maintaining lifelong friendships long distance is a breeze. Besides, all of our lives are changing from what they were a couple of years ago, and the city nightlife isn't a priority for us anymore. We all care more about quiet nights in with our significant others, and when we *are* all together, there's a big focus on kids. That's right...kids. We have Ruby and Tanner married with their kid. Darren and Theo are now

married—they did it on stage at one of Coco’s drag shows—and now they’re awaiting approval to adopt their own kid. And even Andy and Karen have been talking kids lately—although Karen is still firmly against marriage, but each to their own, right? And let’s not forget Ash and me. After a year of living together as an engaged couple, we’ve finally taken a trip down the aisle ourselves.

Today, we invited everyone we love and care about to our new home, complete with a yard and picket fence, just outside Atlanta. They witnessed our nuptials in a comfortable backyard wedding—dress code, smart casual since Ash hates suits and I hate uncomfortable dresses—and to feast on a catered barbecue while drinking and having a wonderful time playing on the great big jumping castle we’ve put in the back corner. It was a highly unconventional idea that I almost nixed. But seeing my new husband jumping on it gleefully had me feeling all kinds of happy. Ash is a man when he needs to be, and a big ole teddy bear the rest of the time. And best of all, he’s mine. This big, funny, happy, galoof of a man is all mine. And I couldn’t be more in love.

“How you feeling Mrs. Wright?” Ash asks, reaching for my hand as we lie next to each other on the still-inflated jumping castle looking up at the stars that are brighter than any I’ve seen before.

“Like I just got my fairy tale ending,” I say, turning to face him with a massive smile on my face.

“I got my fairy tale the moment you chose me, tiny. You have no idea how lucky you make me feel.”

“Oh, I have an idea. Because I’m lucky too. You’re a catch, Ash Wright. And you’re mine, all mine.”

“Forever and ever,” he says, bringing his mouth to mine and kissing me softly.

“And ever and ever.”

“Hmm. Now that I’ve made an honest woman of you, does it mean I get to start filling you with my babies?”

I giggle as I pull back from him slightly and look deep into his bright blue eyes. “About that,” I say, loving the curiosity that turns into realization and then excitement.

“No way!”

“Yes way. I took a test this morning and you’re gonna be a daddy Ash Wright.”

“Holy shit!” he yells, grabbing me by the hands and getting us both to our feet, jumping up and down as he yells to the entire neighborhood that he’s going to be a dad.

I laugh and jump and fall a little deeper in love with him with each jump. Then suddenly he catches me about the waist and we’re not jumping anymore. “I love you so much, Tahlia,” he whispers against my mouth.

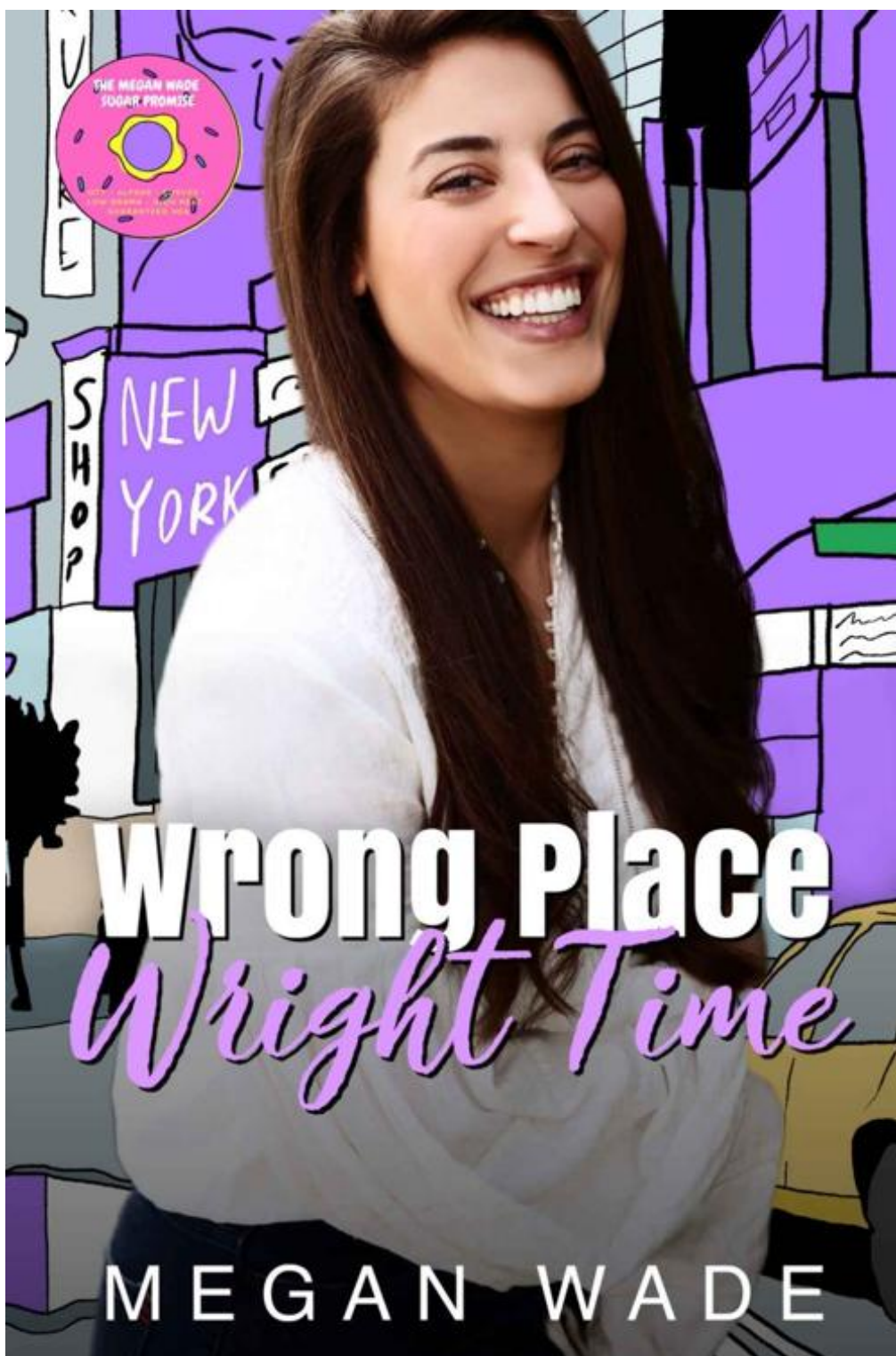
“And I love you too. I’m so happy, Ash,” I say, leaning in for a kiss before his phone goes off and interrupts us. Ash groans then pulls it from his pocket and frowns at the screen. “Who is it?”

“Isla. Says she went to the wrong place and feels awful that she missed the wedding. But she’ll make it up to us and hopes we had a happy wedding day.” Ash’s sister not making it was definitely a disappointment, but thankfully, it didn’t spoil the day. We both know there’s no way she’d miss out unless it couldn’t be helped.

“Tell her no hard feelings,” I say as he types back then slides his cell in his pocket.

“Now, where were we?” he says, sliding his arms around my waist.

“I think we were about to make love on a jumping castle,” I whisper, causing him to chuckle, and for both of us to lower to our knees, shucking our clothes as we go...



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ISLA

S wiping a layer of plum-colored lipstick over my mouth, I take a moment to assess my appearance in the bathroom mirror, wondering if my outfit is too plain or demure for where I'm going, which is a drag show in Midtown East. I've never been to one before, but I imagine wearing a pencil skirt and a cap sleeve blouse is a little too... board meeting for something that sounds so colorful and exciting.

With a side-to-side turn, I run my hand along the hem of the lilac silk on my blouse while I contemplate whether I want to tuck it into my skirt. There's a drag queen in Australia who goes by the moniker, *Karen from Finance*. She's hilarious and fun, and her entire demeanor seems to light up a room despite the corporate theme of her character. If I were a drag queen, my name would be *Isla from PR*, and I'd be decidedly unfun since all I ever do in life is work, work, work then moan about needing to work so I can avoid going out to have fun.

I think my social skills are broken.

And it's no wonder. It's been so long since I've been on a date or done anything for the sake of enjoyment that I think I've forgotten how.

As one of the handful of children set to inherit the *Write Media Corporation* when our parents retire, I'm expected to pull long hours at work learning every facet of running a company with interests the size of ours. My father and two uncles currently sit at the helm, and together they control the vast majority of information that the American people get fed each morning. We don't own all media, of course, there are

plenty of alternative sources out there and other media groups who hold the rights to different channels, but we have enough of a monopoly that our reach is far and extensive.

That monopoly also means that the interests of many are governed by a bunch of old men who are so far out of touch with the current climate, that the only girl child in the family who works for the company can't stand to work even remotely close to them. I tried when I first finished college, but after months of sitting around the boardroom table being talked over and asked to top up coffees was enough for me.

So to save my sanity while also keeping my paycheck, I've sequestered myself a few floors down in the Public Relations department, because at least then I'm seen to be taking on an active role instead of just sitting in a massive corner office using my surname like a powerful sword to get my way.

You know, it's amazing what a well-timed, insinuating article can do to not only influence the public, but politicians too. It all feels a little bit dirty to me most days. But I do enjoy the money that comes with my station. I'm not going to lie about that. And when I finally get the chance to take over when my father retires, I get my chance to make some up-to-date changes to the way we do things. But until then, I keep my head down and my mouth shut. Especially since my big brother, Ash, was completely cut off for not falling in line—he chose to be an engineer instead of a junior VP.

Both Ash and our cousin, Tanner, turned their backs on Wright Media and were cut off from funds and cut out of wills because of it—not that it affected Tanner much because he has his own money after working for Wright Media for most of his career and making a name for himself in radio before he exited the company a few months ago, leaving a shit storm in his wake—and I don't want that for myself. Call me a sellout, or even call me complicit. But I'm not giving up my ability to make a difference when I get to be in charge. Not when I've already waited this long and sacrificed two marriages along the way.

P.S. I'm only twenty-nine.

“Hmmm. Surely, I have something...flirtier to wear,” I say to my reflection as I let out a sigh, knowing that isn’t true because my wardrobe consists of workwear, sweats and pajamas. I’m almost thirty years old and it seems I’ve already given up on life after two failed attempts at marriage in my early twenties. The first one was a reckless mistake, but the second time, I thought I was signing up for the fairytale. What I got was a Stephen King novel instead. I swore I’d never go back there. Walking down that aisle a second time was singularly the worst choice I’ve ever made in my life. And after an even nastier divorce, I’d rather be perpetually single than risk that nightmare again. I’ve spent the last few years avoiding men and relationships like the plague. But then, my brother introduced me to a man named Banks and suddenly it feels like my resolve is slipping.

Maybe I could dip my toe in the water for a moment, maybe even take a short swim and still manage to come out unscathed?

The drag queen we’re going to see, Coco Monroe, is Banks’s cousin, and thanks to a connection the sweet girl my brother is dating has with this drag queen, I found myself invited along on a group outing. I don’t get to see my brother a lot, so I jumped at the chance to spend some time with him and get to know this girl, Tahlia, he’s so keen on. But when Banks expressed an interest in going too, well, I more than jumped, I practically did a backflip, some star jumps and a belly flop. The man is... *stunning*.

I don’t think I’ve ever experienced a full-body reaction the first time I’ve met a man before. But when Banks turned that broad, confident smile and those warm, dark eyes my way, the only thing I could do was *giggle*. Oh, and flirt—something I haven’t done in *so* long. It’s like we had a moment just between us where all the noise in the room disappeared and we were the only ones there. I came away from it feeling all warm and trying not to smile too much, but I’m so eager to see him again. Even if it’s just to see if I react to the bar owner the same way again.

Besides the fact that he's tall, dark skinned and deliciously handsome, I also love the fact that he's his own man. He owns a bar in the financial district called *Banked Up*. It's where all the wealthy Wall St brokers burn off some steam after a long day of trading other peoples' money. Very up-market. Constantly busy. And the kind of place that takes more smarts than luck to make successful. Needless to say, I'm impressed from the get go. And what I liked even more was that if he knew who my family is, he gave no indication. So, for once in my life, I'm going into an evening with a man without trepidation, because while money makes men attractive, for a woman, it's...different. In my experience, it made me a bit of a target. And I really, really, *really* don't want to feel like that again.

My phone buzzes on the vanity, snapping me out of my tumultuous trip down memory lane and up river into Hopesville. I look to see a message from Ash light up the screen—**Heading to the bar now.**

Deciding I don't have time to second guess my outfit anymore, I tap out a quick, **leaving soon**, response and cap my lipstick, dropping it in my clutch. Then I spray a little perfume in the air and walk through it on my way to put on my heels and head out, taking the elevator to the lobby of my building.

“Ms. Wright,” the elderly concierge says, trying to keep his voice even. But there's no hiding the surprise in his tone.

I smile. “Unusual to see me out after dark, huh, Carl?” I say as I move toward him.

“It's wonderful to see you out after dark, Ms. Wright. Someone so young shouldn't spend all her time alone.”

I laugh. “You sound like my mother. Are there any cars about?”

“I'll call one around for you.” He touches the side of his earpiece and relays the message. “Enjoy your night.”

“Thank you, Carl.” With my heels clacking against the marbled lobby, I make my way to the revolving doors where the doorman greets me by name and gestures to the already

waiting town car. Carl is excellent at his job and seems capable of producing anything you need out of thin air. This is why the man has a beautiful Rolex on his wrist. People will tip a man well for consistently coming through for them.

“Where to, miss?” the driver asks as I slide in.

“Banked Up,” I instruct, sitting back against the gray leather seat with a happy sigh.

“Right away. Will you need a return car, miss?”

A soft smile tugs at the corners of my lips as the image of Banks smiling at me fills my mind and that little ball of maybe gets bigger. “I’m not sure,” I say, looking out the window. “I think I might just see where tonight takes me.”

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BANKS

“*I*’ll likely be gone a few hours,” I say, checking my watch. “So, I might not get a chance to return before we close.”

The bar manager nods. “Not a problem. I can handle anything that comes up. I think it’s good that you’re getting out yourself for a change,” he says as he lifts a tray of glasses and adds it to the cooling system embedded in the bar. Everything tastes better in an ice-cold glass. “Now, quit hovering and go already. I’m sure your friends are waiting.”

“I get it. I’m a workaholic. But I’m going now. Call me if you need anything.”

“I won’t,” he calls out as I move out from behind the bar and make my way to the front of *Banked Up*, the upscale bar I’ve put my blood, sweat and tears into. Years ago, when I bought this place, the guys I worked with on Wall Street thought I was absolutely insane. But I’d had enough of the cutthroat trading game by the time I was thirty and was more than ready to get out of it. I sunk everything I had into setting up and launching this bar, and while it was a gamble, I’m glad I took that risk. Almost a decade later, *Banked Up* is still the place to be for young professionals. And I couldn’t be happier.

Taking a moment to greet a few regulars on my way out the door, I can’t wipe the smile off my face because even though I love my work and rarely take time away, I’m looking forward to going somewhere different tonight. It’s been a solid year since I’ve had the chance to go and see one of my cousin, Darren’s, drag shows. From what I hear, he’s been going from

strength to strength and has landed himself a steady emceeing gig at *Queen's Delight* in Midtown East. I'm keen to see how much his character, Coco Monroe, and her show has grown. But despite my familial reasons for going out tonight there's also a personal reason. And her name is Isla.

Tall, beautiful, curvy, *busty* Isla.

I wanted her the moment I saw her. And I'm not the kind of man who refrains from going after what he wants. It's how I have always lived my life and it's what made me the man I am today. I'm not about to stop being me just because the woman I want is one of Wright Media's protégées with the power to tear down everything I hold dear with one well-targeted smear campaign. To me, the risk might be there should things go awry, but the reward in bedding such a powerful woman and seeing her vulnerable side is far greater in my opinion, and it makes me only want her more.

Not that who she is matters since the first thing I noticed was how my body reacted to her. And then I noticed the way she flirted with me. There was something familiar about that long dark hair and bright smile, but it wasn't until I was properly introduced that I realized she was Isla *Wright*, the youngest daughter of Paul Wright. Paul is one of three siblings who are well past their prime and sit at the helm of *Wright Media Corporation* with their children working one level down with a view to take over when the ancient ones—the term I like to use for old men who don't know when to retire—either die at their desk or step down over some scandal. Although, so far, the older Wright generation seem bulletproof. Even a public court battle between the oldest son and father didn't seem to rattle any cages. The Wrights are unstoppable. And I think the older generation will be running things for a long while yet.

Why do I know all these things as a bar owner, you ask? Well, my cousin's fiancé is Tanner Wright's brother-in-law—the son who forced his father to admit his wrongdoing and fully pay for his disabled sister's care—so, I have a smaller degree of separation to this powerful family than most, meaning I've googled them, fallen down a rabbit hole learning

how insidious their media monopoly really is, and continued watching for any further rebellions from the next generation of Wrights as it becomes clearer and clearer that they may never get the chance to take over. It also means that not only do I find Isla Wright beautiful, I also find her intriguing since she's the only female in the generation to come. *What will her role be when the old men leave? Does she think they ever will? Are they considering a hostile takeover?*

"Banks! Come and have a drink with us," my buddy, Ronan—a venture capitalist—calls out as I pass, indicating that he's surrounded by a bunch of Wall St guys. Some of them I know from my time there.

"I'm just on my way out. But I'll catch up next time, OK?" I say over my shoulder as I make a break for the door and breathe a sigh of relief. Ronan has been my closest friend since middle school, and I have all the time in the world for him. But the Wall St guys? Them, I can pass on. There's a certain kind of arrogance to men who have more money than they'll ever know what to do with, and you can only handle them in small doses—I should know since I used to be one of them.

The moment I step onto the sidewalk to find freedom, a town car pulls up in front of me and none other than Isla Wright steps out from the back seat. I pause and smile, sliding my hands into my pockets as I watch the driver help her to her feet then drive away after she hands him a tip. I'm not sure she's even seen me yet, because she looks up at the neon sign for *Banked Up*, smiles to herself then takes a deep breath and starts to walk in. I grin at the sight. *Yeah, I'm looking forward to seeing you again too.*

"Isla," I say before she gets to the door, startling her. Her hand flies to her chest as her chocolate-brown eyes find mine.

"Banks! I didn't see you there. Hi." Her heels click on the pavement as she moves toward me, her skirt hugging her shapely thighs. "Are we meeting the others out here?"

I frown. "We're meant to be meeting them at *Queens Delight*."

“Oh god. I was so sure we said here. Lucky I ran into you then. It would have been embarrassing sitting inside alone all night waiting.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t have been alone for long,” I say, leaning in slightly. “A beautiful woman like you must be beating them off with a stick.” She releases a hollow laugh and steps back.

“I can assure you that I haven’t beaten *anybody* off for a long time,” she says, sending my brows sky high before her eyes go wide, and her hand goes to her plum-colored mouth. “Oh my god. Please don’t read into that. I just meant that I don’t really date.” That makes two of us. The older I get, it seems the less I have patience for anything lacking in substance. But from everything I know about Isla Wright so far, substance seems to be her defining quality. I must know her.

“Tell you what. I promise not to hold it against you, if you promise to come and have a drink with me before we go.”

“I think I can handle a promise like that,” she says. “But do we have the time? I don’t want to be rude and walk in halfway through the show.”

Glancing at my watch, I shake my head. “We won’t be late. We’ve got a good hour before the show starts. So, I think that gives us plenty of time for a pre-game drink.” I look into her eyes as she bites the inside of her lip in consideration. “Plus, it’ll give us some time to get to know each other since we’re the only two in the group who don’t have a pre-existing friendship.”

“Are you trying to be my friend, Banks?” she says with a teasing smile. My dick goes hard.

“Highly probable. Either that, or I’m just trying to talk you into my bed.”

She laughs. “You’re honest.”

“It’s the only way to be. So, about that drink.”

Tucking her clutch purse under her arm, she moves toward me. “OK. Let’s do it.”

I gesture to a small door beside the bar. “Then let me take you somewhere quiet. I think tonight is about to get very noisy.”

She follows me without pause. “Lead the way.”

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ISLA

“*Y*ou know, I always had this pre-conceived notion that apartments above bars would be noisy and dingy. But this...” I stop moving, not even trying to conceal my obvious gawking as I absorb the bright and airy space. “This is stunning.”

His furnishings are simple and sleek—black leather couch in the living area with rustic wooden furnishings that are a shade or two darker than the wood-paneled floor; marble countertops in the kitchen with stainless steel appliances and LED lighting creating an ambient glow around the base of his cupboards, along with great big floor to ceiling windows that highlight the hustle and bustle of the city down below. But most of all, the thing I notice most about this space is the quiet. I can’t even feel the vibration of the music in the bar coming up through the floor. It’s like we’re in another world.

“Some say I have a well-trained eye,” Banks says as he hands me a crystal glass with clear liquid and a lime wedge inside. “Vodka and tonic.” His fingers remain wrapped around the tumbler for a moment longer than they should, ensuring lasting contact between our fingers as I take it from him. I suck in and hold my breath. Something about this man crowding my space and making his intentions abundantly clear sets off every nerve ending in my body. Which in itself is an odd feeling. I’m surrounded by bossy, overbearing men in almost every other aspect of my life. Being a Wright means that every action or decision I make runs through the echelons of our patriarchal family. And if the old men at the top don’t like it, they wield whatever power they have over you to pull

you back into line. So, naturally, I'm opposed to any sort of controlling or bossy behavior. But then, Banks isn't being bossy or controlling, he's being *assertive* and perhaps preemptive of my needs. And *that*, ladies and gentlemen, is the difference between an alpha, and an asshole who *thinks* he's an alpha.

"Thank you," I murmur, lifting the glass to my lips as I smile, both at the innuendo in his initial comment and my thoughts following. For the first time in a very long time, I can actually see myself getting naked with something other than my battery operated stand-ins. Banks is intoxicating, which means I need to be careful here too. Smart women should *never* trust an intoxicating man with her heart. She's likely to get squashed and feel stupid when she's left alone and heartbroken in the morning. I put my mental guards up.

"A seat?" With his eyes on my lips and throat as he watches me swallow, he inclines his head toward the big leather couch that sits across from a flickering fire that seems to be there more for the ambience than the warmth.

I walk ahead and position myself in the far corner, crossing my legs and balancing my glass on my knee. He sits not far from me, mirroring my position in a way that makes my grin even bigger. *This guy is good.* I feel like I'm the center of his world right now and can't help but wonder how many women he's done exactly this with previous to me.

"Tell me about the bar," I start, lifting my glass and sipping while maintaining eye contact—I can play games too.

"What do you want to know?"

"How did it come about? It's obviously a play on your name, but how did you know it'd become as popular as it is?"

He chuckles as he lifts his drink to his mouth. "I didn't." Taking a small sip, he hisses slightly as he swallows and sets the glass back on his crossed knee, same as me.

"Are you telling me you set that place up without any sort of market research behind your decisions, and it just...worked out for you?"

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you. I used to be a venture capitalist, so I know what works and what doesn’t. And I was great at that, but...” He blows out a breath as he shakes his head slightly. “There was just something kind of hollow about making money for the sake of making money off the ideas of someone else. And I’d had this idea for a bank-themed cocktail bar in the financial district for years, so I did what I do best, and I took a gamble.”

“And didn’t look back?” I finish for him, and he nods.

“Not for a second. I mean, there were a few moments in the beginning where I wondered if I was stone-cold crazy sinking everything I had into a bar when I didn’t have any experience owning one. But I figured, I’ve been poor before, so if I fell on my face, I already knew how to survive. I knew how to build myself up from nothing, so the risk wasn’t really that high. The gain, however”—he looks around his apartment and a half-smile curves his mouth, giving me a glimpse of the proud man he’s become—“was worth it.”

“I think you’d get along well with my cousin, Tanner,” I say with a sigh. “He’s the big risk taker in the Wright family.”

“What about your brother? Ash, right? I don’t see his name anywhere on the company register.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Been doing some investigating?”

“Family is very important to me, Isla, and since my cousin is closely involved with multiple members of the Wright family, I make it my business to know who all the stakeholders are.”

“That’s fair. Although now I’m feeling a little underprepared because I didn’t study up on you. But then, I did step out in public with you for five minutes, so I’m sure my father’s spies already have an entire dossier written up about you, weighing up the pros and cons of any sort of affiliation with each other.”

“Sounds like...freedom,” Banks says with a laugh.

“Oh, it’s not that bad. I’m exaggerating, of course. They only create dossiers if something like marriage is on the table.

Then they'll talk to us about that person's *potential*." He smirks at that. "For the most part, it's a pretty cushy existence. I show up to work, I jump through the hoops and the rest of the time, I'm left pretty much alone."

"As long as you don't do anything to piss off the patriarchy?" I laugh in response as he drains his glass then nods his head toward mine. "Another?"

I tilt my glass to the side, noting there's nothing but a little ice and the lime wedge left inside it. "I shouldn't. We should probably just go. Everyone will be waiting on us."

I stand and Banks stands with me, taking the glass from between my fingers. "Or," he starts, his rich brown eyes drinking in every inch of my face as he towers over me. "We could stay. Just a little longer."

And as his eyes lock with mine, they hold so much promise that I find myself nodding along. "I guess one more drink can't hurt."

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ISLA

*A*lcohol and regret are common bedfellows indeed, and it's the former that leads one to the latter. My inevitable tumble into Banks Johnson's bed is no exception to this rule.

It starts with tension—all great hookups do—then it's followed by wonderful conversation that makes me feel heard and understood in a way I rarely am. Conversation so good that I keep accepting those offered drinks, completely forgetting the time until that tension is all there is and suddenly, it's imperative we both act.

I don't even know who leans in first. But what I am certain of is that the moment our lips touch, everything else just falls away and all there is left in this world is the sensation of his mouth and tongue moving against mine while our bodies collide, pulling each other closer and closer until I'm lifted off the couch and carried into what I'm guessing is a bedroom as lush as the rest of his apartment. But it's not the furnishings I'm looking at. No. It's the man holding himself above me, pulling his shirt over his head and revealing a rippling chest that makes my mouth water and my insides clench.

The only thought in my head is *want*, and the only feeling I experience is *need*, and as he pushes my skirt up around my hips and pulls my panties down my legs, the only word I can say is, “*Yes.*” Because right now—as Banks's mouth connects with my apex—I don't have a solitary regret.

“Fuck me, you taste good,” he moans, his tongue gliding through my seam before he centers his focus on my clit, licking and sucking and teasing my already intoxicated mind

to such heights I might not be able to remember my name if asked.

His fingertips circle my entrance as his hot breath washes over my inner thigh. “You smell amazing too,” he rasps, dragging his teeth against my tender skin before he inserts his fingers and covers my clit with his mouth yet again.

“Keep going.”

“I have no intention of stopping,” he whispers, nipping lightly at my inner thigh before diving back in, sliding two long, thick fingers inside me as he sucks and swirls, working me into a frenzy.

My hands clench against the bedsheets, my back arching high as I moan and shudder, spiraling toward my imminent climax. “Oh god. Yes! Yes, Banks! Yes! *Banks!*” As my orgasm rips through me, my hips lift off the bed, my thighs closing around Banks’s face as I ride out the wave, fucking his face and fingers like it might be the last sexual experience I ever have. It’s too good and too much all at once, and when my body feels like it might burst into flames, I place my hand against his forehead and gasp, “Enough. Enough.”

“Mmm,” he moans, curling his arms around my thighs as his tongue rapidly flicks my bundle of nerves, sending me over the edge when I honestly thought I couldn’t take anymore.

I howl up at the ceiling like a wolf calling to its pack, and if it ends up that a bunch of wolves take to the streets of New York, then we’ll all know who’s to blame. Not that I could give a damn even if I wanted to. My brain is total mush and my body is nothing more than humming pleasure impulses as Banks does things to my body no one—not even myself—has done to me before. The man has a magic mouth and artist’s fingers, and if he turned around and told me I had to pay him after this, I’d probably just hand him my keycard and tell him he’s welcome to whatever he wants. Pleasure like this is absolutely priceless.

“On your knees.” Banks’s deep voice rumbles out a command that my liquified brain has no choice but to obey. He could tell me to do a handstand against the wall so he could

fuck me upside down and I'd oblige. There's literally nothing I wouldn't do in this moment if it means feeling this good for as long as possible.

"Fuck me. Fuck me," I beg, keening noises coming out of me as I sway on my knees, urging my hips back toward him. "Please. I want you inside me."

"And you'll get it," he rasps, placing his big hand in the center of my back before he drags his fingers down my spine until he's cupping my ass and humming as if that smooth pale skin is all he ever wanted. "I'm just trying to decide whether I'm going to survive this."

"I'll resuscitate you, if need be," I say over my shoulder, flashing him a smile as he takes his cock in hand then circles it around my entrance.

"You might need to," he hisses, pushing a little inside and stretching me around his girth.

I gasp out a moan, my entire body singing with the sweet torture of opening up for him. He's bigger than I anticipated, but holy hell, it feels good.

"So. Tight." Banks's words sound like they're being forced through gritted teeth. "So. Good."

"Yes. Oh yes! Give it to me, *please*."

Banks pulls his hips back and drives into me harder in response, his hand sliding up my back and grabbing the now messed-up curls as a way to lever himself in as deep as possible. I cry out as my head reefs back. Not from pain, but from absolute pleasure. With each measured thrust, I'm filled to depths I couldn't have possibly fathomed before. Every nerve is alive, and even my nipples are tingling like they have an orgasm of their own to give up too. I've never been so... *aroused* and turned on before.

"Fuck me," Banks growls, his thrusts getting faster and more erratic. "I can't. I can't...hold. *Fuuuuck!*"

With a final pivot, he buries himself all the way and pulses deep inside me, triggering my reciprocal release and a deep, long moan.

“Whoa,” I gasp as we both collapse onto our backs and stare up at the ceiling. “That was...” I can’t find the words.

“I know.” Banks swipes a hand down his face as his chest heaves for breath. “That was definitely whoa.”

“Something tells me we missed Darren’s show,” I say, catching sight of the neon red numbers on Banks’s bedside clock.

“I’ll make it up to him.” Banks turns to me and smiles. “And to you, well, it looks like we have a bit more time together.”

Sitting up, I slide my legs off the bed and take a deep inhale, swallowing past the dryness in my throat as I shake my head and try to find my panties on the floor. “I don’t think that’s such a great idea,” I say as I catch them up in my fingers and slide them past my feet.

“You’re leaving me?” He rolls to his side and lifts his brow like he can’t believe this is actually happening.

“Regrettably, yes,” I say, standing as I shimmy into my panties and pull my skirt back down. “As much fun as ‘getting to know you’ was, Mr. Banks. I kind of think it’d be in both of our best interests to end it right here.”

“*Both* of our interests?” he repeats with a laugh. “And it’s just Banks. After I plowed you into my mattress only seconds ago, I think we’re way past formalities.”

“You have a bit of a dirty mouth, don’t you?” I say, grinning as I tuck my blouse in straight and run my fingers through my messy hair.

“Get back into bed and I’ll show you just how dirty I can be.” His grin is so inviting as he taps the mattress that I almost give in. *Almost*. But I’ve danced this dance enough times to know when a man is no good for me, and as it turns out, the greater the chemistry in the beginning, the bigger the crash in the end. I don’t know about the rest of the population, but for me, I’m just not willing to put my heart on the line again. I’d rather have my fun and walk away with my dignity still intact.

“As tempting as that offer is,” I say, sliding my feet back into my heels, “I’m standing by my initial decision.” I straighten up and place my hands on my hips as I let my gaze run over his long, toned body one last time. My insides clench and beg me to reconsider, but my brain and my heart know better. I hold out my hand. “Thank you for the drinks—plural. And for the good time, Banks. It was...memorable.”

He rakes his top teeth over his bottom lip, smiling like he can’t believe I’m actually walking away from a specimen as fine as him—and honestly, I’m struggling with the decision too. But I know what’s best for me, and that’s definitely not him. The very fact I fell into bed with him instead of meeting an obligation I had to show up to an outing with my brother and his new girlfriend means he’s got trouble written all over him. I could completely ruin myself over a man like Banks Johnson. So, the best thing for me to do is to get far, far away from here with one great memory to keep me company.

“What if I just buy you dinner?” he says instead of taking my outstretched hand. “Feeding you before you leave is the least I can do.”

“You don’t owe me anything. I can feed myself.”

He sucks air in through his teeth as he chuckles and reaches out to shake my hand finally. “In that case, *Ms. Wright*. I’ll bid you adieu.” Sighing with a smile of relief, I go to remove my hand but his grip only tightens. “But one of these days, Isla, you’re gonna have to let someone into that self-sufficient heart of yours. Maybe it’s not me, and maybe it’s not today, or even tomorrow. But eventually, you’ll have to let those walls of yours down.”

“Maybe I just like being on my own,” I reply, practically whispering as he releases my hand and I pull it back, my skin still tingling.

He rolls onto his back and chuckles, giving me a beautiful view of his half-erect manhood as the city lights push in through the windows and highlight his skin. “No one likes being alone, Isla,” he says, his eyes locking with mine as I take a deep breath and nod instead of providing an answer.

“Thanks again, Banks,” I say, backing out the door as I push his insights down as deep as they can go. Seems Banks just did a lot more than just fuck me better than I’ve ever been fucked before. Somehow, he saw right through me too. And I’ve never felt more naked.

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BANKS

“*H*ey, man,” Ronan says, when I venture down to the bar about thirty minutes later, needing to get out of my far-too-quiet apartment after my night ended sooner than expected. “Manager said you’d be out for the night. Hot date gone bad?” He smiles jovially and claps me on the back. But I don’t really feel like laughing. He kind of hit the nail on the head.

“Not bad. Just... over before I wanted it to end. Which is weird. That doesn’t normally happen to me.”

He furrows his brow slightly as he nods. “Well, if it becomes a problem, you know a doctor can help you with that, right?”

It takes me a minute to realize what the hell he’s going on about before I roll my eyes and scoff. “Not *that* kind of problem. Fuck, Ronan. I’m thirty-eight, not seventy-fucking-eight.”

Ronan chuckles as he lifts his glass of Grey Goose on the rocks and drinks. “Hey, I’ve heard of that shit happening to guys as young as *twenty*-eight. Stress of the job.” He bounces a shoulder. “It’s not for everyone.”

“Yeah. Well, when you’re working on Wall St. I can understand it.” I lift my eyes to meet his mossy-green gaze and shrug. “But away from that life, I’m pretty fucking stress free.”

He releases a slow breath and shakes his blond head slowly, looking at me in bewilderment. “I just don’t

understand how you did it.”

A server brings me over a vodka tonic, and I thank her. “Did what?”

“Walk away from it all. The adrenaline rush. The feeling of power when you make the call of the century. I don’t think I could give that up for anyone or anything. I thrive under pressure.”

“And yet, you’re the guy with the knowledge about limp dick doctors,” I retort, eyebrows raised.

He rolls his eyes and laughs. “You’re a real asshole, you know? Anyone ever told you that before?”

“A handful of times,” I say with a chuckle. “So, besides your broken dick, how’s everything going.”

“For the record, my dick is perfectly fine. Work is too. I’m actually up for promotion. If all goes well this month, I’ll be heading up my own division. And you know what that means?”

“A fuck ton of stress and giant bonuses if your team delivers.”

“Fuckin’ A. It’s everything I’ve been working toward. Not a single person from the old neighborhood will ever be able call me a loser wannabe again.”

I look at him for a long moment, remembering the skinny little kid who struggled harder than any other kid in the neighborhood. We became friends in middle school when I started splitting my lunch with him before my mom realized and started packing enough for two. Ronan Kennedy might have an important family’s surname, but he certainly didn’t get a lot of the privilege that should come with it. Anything he has, he fought hard for. The kid with little to no food in his belly creates an adult who’s perpetually hungry for more, more and more. And I often wonder at what point it will be enough. What will he end up sacrificing before he’s sated?

“What neighborhood?” I say, placing my hand on his right shoulder. “I don’t think there’s a single person still living there who should matter to either one of us anymore. All the

important people are out. So anything we do now, it's for us. We ain't got nothing to prove, man. We both made it the day we got accepted into college."

"I know you're right. But I just...I don't think I'm finished yet. Like, I haven't climbed to the top of my mountain."

"OK." I raise my glass. "Then here's to finding what's at the top of that mountain."

He taps his glass to mine. "Hopefully it's a big pot of gold," he jokes, taking a drink.

"And then what?" I say suddenly, causing him to freeze and frown like he doesn't understand the question.

"What do you mean?"

"What happens when you're at the top of the mountain with your pot of gold? Is that just...it?"

"Nah, man. That's when I get to do whatever I want. Everyone knows the best part about climbing a hill is sledding back down. So imagine how much fun it'll be sitting on that pot of gold then sliding back down that mountain."

Pausing for a moment, I ponder his words as my mind wanders along the journey of my life until now. I've worked my way from nothing up to something, and then I turned that something into an icon with this bar. But now what? Now that I've made a success of everything I've put my mind to, where do I go now?

The answer comes in flashes, memories of smiles and gasps as I remember everything about my evening with Isla. And that's when it hits me.

"I think I want to get married and have kids," I state, causing Ronan to choke on his drink.

"You *what*?"

"Yeah," I say, nodding to myself as my mind takes hold of the idea with both hands. "I think this place is the peak of my mountain. It's time for me to head back down the other side. I want to take a step back and start a family."

“With who?”

“That part’s to be decided, my friend. But I have a pretty solid idea.”

“The date who left early tonight?”

I nod. “I’ve just gotta get her to lower her walls enough to let me in. Prove to her I’m the man she needs.”

“Because that’s the *easy* part,” he says with a sarcastic laugh.

“Well, I haven’t met an obstacle I couldn’t overcome. So whatever is in Isla Wright’s past that made her think we were a bad idea, I intend to find out.”

“Wait. The girl you want to settle down with is Isla *Wright*? As in Wright Media?” I nod. “Fuck, man,” he says, waving to the waitress to bring over another round. “You’re either insane, or you’ve got the biggest balls out of anyone I know. That family is old money. They could eat you alive.”

“Lucky I’m only interested in the daughter,” I say, downing the last of my drink as my resolution sets in.

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“*T*here are flowers on your desk,” Karen, my assistant and favorite all-round person, says when I get into the office Monday morning. “I’m guessing you had an interesting weekend.”

“Never as interesting as yours, I’m sure,” I say, entering my office and immediately spotting the arrangement of flowers in a variety of purple and pink shades that sits in a beautiful vase at the corner of my desk. They smell amazing.

“Read the card! There’s a card,” Karen says, bouncing on her toes as she clasps her iPad to her chest and waits for me to round my desk.

“It’s probably just from a client whose ass I saved with a well-timed article and a positive spin glossing over their bad behavior,” I say, plucking the card from the stand.

Karen smiles knowingly. “I don’t think so.”

I flick open the card and my heart hammers out a cheek-heating rhythm as flashes of memory—tongues on skin, fingers in hair and *thrust, thrust, thrust*—take over my mind. I have to close my eyes and place a steadying hand on my desk before I can even pretend I didn’t just experience a bunch of after tremors from the best sex I’ve ever had.

“What does it say?” Karen asks, her pointer finger pushing her glasses up her nose as her brown eyes go wide with eagerness.

“Ah.” I clear my throat. “Just a thank you card...uh...from a client. As expected.” I slide the card back inside the tiny envelope and tuck it under the base of the vase.

“I think they’re from a suitor,” Karen says. “But if you don’t want to share whatever made you blush like you’ve been sitting in the sun too long with your very best friend in the world, then I’m not going to force you. I can respect your privacy.”

“Thank you,” I say, breathing a sigh of relief as I sit in my chair. “It really is no big deal.”

“Obviously,” she says, moving a little closer as her grip tightens on the iPad. “I guess it’s just been so long since you’ve been on a date that you’re out of practice. So of *course* you’re going to blush when a man thanks you for a nice evening. I mean, it’s not like he thinks the plum-colored orchids remind him of your lips, right?”

I gasp and sit ramrod straight. “You *read* it!”

“Me? Never.” She places a delicate hand on her chest and feigns innocence. “Why, it’s just a guess that the purple are for your mouth and the pink are for...well, parts he probably shouldn’t name.”

My mouth and eyes both widen as I suck in a breath and try to decide whether I want to dissolve into a puddle of nothingness or pitch a fit and fire her on the spot. Although, we both know I’d never, ever fire her. Not only is she my bestie, but she’s also the best damn PA I’ve ever had. The woman is invaluable and puts up with all of the Wright family political drama like a champ.

“So...who’s the lucky guy?” she asks, waggling her eyebrows as I look at her through parted fingers.

“No one,” I moan.

“Well, ‘no one’ has a bit of a mouth on him.” She picks up the card and reads over Banks’s words again, sighing like she’s in the middle of a swoony romance novel. “Kind of reminds me of Andy in the beginning of our relationship. He used to leave me notes like this. He works at Starbucks, so he’d write

them on the side of my coffee cup.” She places the card back on my desk and smiles. “Those were the days.”

“Wh-what did he write?” I ask, knowing I’m likely to regret my words the moment they fall from my mouth. Karen and her live-in boyfriend, Andy, have a peculiar relationship. When you first see them together, it kind of seems like they hate each other. But then you realize that they both get off on their weird dynamic, and then you just realize they’re super freaky.

“Well there were a *lot* but my favorite was when he wrote, ‘Tonight’s safe word is bananas’ because when I went to his place that night, he had a *huge* banana that he used to fu—”

“La-la-la!” I stick my fingers in my ears. “I’m sorry I asked! I knew it was a bad idea, but...”

Karen laughs and pushes off the side of my desk. “I’m just happy you got laid well enough that you’re still flushed thinking about it,” she says. “It’s been far too long in between men.”

“It was nice and all. But it was just a one-time thing,” I say, taking the card and putting it in my top drawer.

“If you say so,” she says, looking like she doesn’t believe a word I’m spouting as she heads for the door. “And by the way, you’ve got about thirty minutes before you’re expected to meet with your father and uncles.”

I groan. “Did the invite say what it was about?”

“Nope. And you’re the only one invited, so I’m guessing they already know about your new man.”

“No. They can’t know about him. They’ll want to know why I went to lunch with Ash.” I sit back in my chair and groan. *God I hate my family.*

“I’ll have a stiff drink waiting for when you return.” She widens her eyes dramatically as she slips out of my office and closes the door, leaving me alone with the fragrant bouquet of flowers and the well-worded card sent by Banks Johnson himself.

With an unsteady breath, I pull the card out of my desk again, scanning over the neat handwriting and the phone number at the bottom. I get stuck on that number. My thumbnail between my teeth as I contemplate tapping it into the keypad and hearing the silky voice that's filled my dreams for the last couple of nights. *Maybe it wouldn't be as bad this time?*

The moment the thought enters my mind, I shove the card back in my drawer and close my eyes, shaking away the urge for more as quickly as it starts. While one night with Banks Johnson promises another will be just as good, I know myself well enough to hit the brakes before we're moving so fast we end up crashing into a wall—or worse, married. And since I've made that mistake twice already, the lesson I've learned is that Isla Wright and relationships don't mix. Like my father and his half dozen failed marriages, I'm better off alone.

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BANKS

“So...what happened to you on Friday night?” Tahlia asks at the start of her Thursday shift, the little redhead’s voice dripping with hopeful curiosity.

“Nothing,” I say from behind the bar. It’s about thirty minutes before the doors open, and I’m just doing my usual, checking everything is stocked and ready to go. Sure, I have employees for all of this, but I’m a hands-on guy, and I find that participating in set up and close shows my workers that I’m willing to do the things I ask them to do. It sets us up for a better working relationship.

“Nothing?” She leans on the bar and smiles up at me. “You missed your cousin’s show for *nothing*?”

Pausing what I’m doing, I meet Tahlia’s blue eyes and maintain a stony expression. We may be friendly with each other—she’s very close with my cousin, Darren, who is the reason I hired her in the first place—but it doesn’t mean that I owe her any explanations for how I choose to spend my time. Hell, I don’t explain myself to *anyone*. So, despite the fact that she’s friends with a family member while also dating the brother of the woman I’m interested in, she doesn’t get any details. Those kinds of things are private, and whatever goes on between Isla and me from this point on, stays between us. Especially since I’ve sent her two lots of flowers and an invitation to dinner in the last week, and I’ve received nothing in return.

“I’ll make things right with Darren. I simply got caught up.” *In your boyfriend’s sister...* I feel my dick twitch as a

sliver of a memory hits my consciousness. Then I squash it back down as fast as I can so I don't end up with a full-blown hard on in front of my staff.

Tahlia keeps pace beside me when I make a break for the storeroom. "Interesting that Isla was missing on Friday, too."

"Why would that be interesting?" I ask, grabbing a box of cocktail napkins and attempting to return to the bar, only to be blocked by the tiny cocktail waitress.

"I don't know. I guess after witnessing the air-gasm you two had just looking at each other last Friday when you met, I kind of thought the fact neither of you showed might mean something."

"Air-gasm?" I scoff, pushing past her with an excuse me. Of course she follows.

"Yeah. The charge in the air when you locked eyes, and if that wasn't enough for Ash and me to pick up on, you let a couple of sexually charged innuendos fly too. It was pretty obvious the only reason you two agreed to come out was because you wanted to see each other again."

I grunt a response as I put the napkins in the holders behind the bar.

"So, what happened? Did you both arrive at the same time then decide to go make your own fun? Or did you arrange to meet up secretly without us?" She grins as she follows me along on the opposite side of the bar. "Come on, Banks. You can tell me. I won't tell anyone else."

I let out a laugh at that one. "Except maybe Darren, who'll tell Theo, who'll tell Ruby, who'll tell Tanner, who'll mention it to Isla. *Or*, you'll say something to Ash who will go directly to Isla and ask her what's going on." I shake my head as I finish with the napkins and start breaking down the empty box. "No thank you. I'll keep my personal life personal thanks."

"No problem," Tahlia says as she steps away and giggles. "You just told me everything I wanted to know anyway."

"What?" I gape, quickly running over what I said and realizing that by trying to say nothing, I actually admitted I

was with Isla inadvertently. “Shit.”

“It’s OK,” she says, reaching across the bar and patting my hand. “I give you my word that no one—not even Ash or Darren—will hear anything from me.”

“I appreciate your confidentiality. Especially since nothing is actually going on between us.”

Her brows go up. “Got it out of your system already then, huh? I really thought there’d be something more to it than one night.”

Pressing my lips together, I inhale a deep breath. “Me too, Tahlia,” I say, before I rap my knuckles against the bar then excuse myself to head toward the office where I can be done with this conversation and have a moment of quiet before service starts. I need to regroup. Wooing Isla via traditional means doesn’t seem to be working. So if I want anything more than just one night with her, I’m going to have to get creative. But what does a man offer when a woman has the means to give herself everything a person in this world could ask for?

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ISLA

“No flowers today, huh?” Karen says in my doorway as we finish up work. After receiving two bunches of flowers within days of each other, I do have to agree that it felt like it was becoming a habit. But since Wednesday’s bunch was accompanied by a note inviting me to dinner on Friday night—to which I declined—it does seem that Banks has realized he’s barking up the wrong tree. I’m not sure if I’m elated or disappointed. Because I wanted this, right? I wanted to have my night and walk away with no regrets.

So what’s that weird feeling in the pit of my stomach then?

“Can’t blame the guy for quitting his pursuit. It’s kind of a relief, really,” I say, standing up and putting on my coat while my computer shuts down at the end of a long Monday.

“Pity,” she says, looking at her nails. “I was kinda hoping this guy would work a little harder and chip away at the grumpy ‘I’m better off on my own’ façade you’ve got going on.” She deepens her voice at one point, making it out like I’m some kind of craggy bear.

“I don’t think I sound like that.” I laugh.

“Close enough. All that wound licking has deepened your voice.”

“You’re so hilarious,” I say, picking up my bag and heading for the door. She steps out of the way.

“It’s a gift. Maybe I could convince Coco Monroe to give me a go on stage. I think I’d make a stunning drag queen.”

“Aren’t drag queens all men?”

“Oh no, a woman can dress in drag. It’s a style—a character—and I happen to think I’d be amazing.”

“OK. So what would your drag name be?”

She thinks on that for a moment as we leave my office and pause by her desk while she grabs her things. “That’s a tough one. It’d have to be something that reflects my inner self. Oh! I’ve got it,” she says, finger in the air like an exclamation point. “Donna Matrix. I’d wear skintight leather, spike-heeled boots, shiny red lipstick with heavily winged eye makeup and a long, red ponytail that I can whip around like a cat of nine tails.”

“That sounds horrifying,” I say, chuckling over the image she just conjured in my head as we step onto the elevator.

“It sounds exciting,” she points out. “And when I get home, I’m going to tell Andy my idea. I’ll bet he’ll want to act that out as soon as possible. Why, just the other day, I had to take his ball gag out because he had—”

“No, no, no!” I wave my hands in the air, thankful she and I are the only ones left working at this hour, so the elevator cab is empty save for us two. “The moment the words ball and gag are linked together, I can’t listen anymore.”

“You are so unfun.” She pouts, although I know she’s not really upset with me. Slipping in dirty Andy anecdotes and watching me react is probably her favorite sport.

“Just call me nana and leave me to my puzzles,” I say as we hit the ground floor and step out into the lobby. “I honestly prefer solitude, Netflix and a thousand tiny pieces of cardboard to keep my company.”

“So, hot bar owners wearing tailored pants and a gorgeous fucking vest don’t even register on your radar?” she says, making me frown since that was an oddly descriptive comment.

“Well, no. I mean, sure, we had a great night, but I’m allowed to have it just be that. I’m allowed to choose singledom.”

“Sure, sure,” she says, nodding as we move past security and say goodnight. “You should probably make a beeline to your car in that case. Because I think you’ve already registered on *his* radar.”

“What?” I ask, glancing at Karen who points over my shoulder as we step onto the sidewalk. And right into Banks. “Holy fucking hell! Where did you come from?”

“I tried to warn you,” Karen says, reaching around me with her hands out. “Nice to meet you, sir. You are stunning, by the way.”

Banks smiles and my entire reproductive system takes notice. “Thank you, ma’am. The name’s Banks. You are?” He shakes her hand and Karen’s grin is so huge, I know she’s never going to rest until Banks gets one of those chances she thinks I should be giving him.

“Karen. I’m Isla’s bestie. We work together too. I’m her PA.”

“Ah, the woman who controls the schedule. Perhaps it’s you I should be asking to slot me in for a date.” He leans in and gives Karen a conspiratorial wink, making Karen giggle.

“Oh, I can get you an audience with the boss anytime you want,” she says. “You just give me a call, and I’ll make it happen.”

“I’ll do that,” he says, tapping the side of his nose.

“Are you two for real?” I say, looking between the two of them. “Number one, I’m right here. And number two, I can make my own dinner plans.”

“She really can’t,” Karen puts in. “She eats take out probably six days out of the week.”

“Because I don’t like to cook. What’s the harm in that?” I ask, arms out to the side.

“I can cook,” Banks says, turning his attention to me. “And I’ve got a fully stocked kitchen. Any night of the week, I’ll step away from the club and cook you a meal that’ll make you wonder how you ever got by without me.” *I’ve been*

wondering that since you made me come three times in a row last week.

My breath thickens and I have to shake the lusty haze from my thoughts. This isn't happening.

"I'm fine eating chow mien noodles and satay as my main sustenance. Now, if you'll excuse me, my car is here."

I step to the side and head for the car only a few feet away with my driver waiting beside it. "It was lovely to run into you, Banks. *Good night, Karen.*"

Karen giggles and gives me a finger wave as she steps away, miming to Banks that he should call her and she'll write him in the diary. I slap a hand over my face. *She's incorrigible!*

Banks chuckles and moves to open my door for me, nodding politely at the driver who steps out of the way. "She's a hoot."

"She thinks she's hilarious," I say, dropping my purse into the backseat before I turn back to Banks who still has that gorgeous, ovary-stimulating smile on his handsome face. "What are you doing here, Banks?"

He bounces a shoulder. "I was walking by."

"At the exact moment I decided to call it a night?" I glance at my watch and it's close to seven-twenty. Not a normal clock-off time.

"What can I say? I'm a lucky guy."

"*Or, you're taking up stalking as a hobby.*"

"Oh, I'm sure no man could get close to you if you weren't willing to let him in, Isla Wright."

Something about the way he leans in and his voice lowers to an intimate level sends delighted chills all over my body. I lower my eyes before I look back up at him. "That's because I prefer solitude, Mr. Banks," I say as I slide into the car, tucking my legs inside and smiling back at him. "Have a nice evening."

“You too, Ms. Wright.” He grins and places his hand on the top of the car door. “You know, I’m not going away.”

“That’s your choice, I suppose,” I say, trying to quiet the thundering of my heart.

“I’m also going to wear you down. One day, I’ll be sitting in that car right beside you.”

“You seem very sure of yourself, Mr. Banks.”

“Just Banks. But you already know that,” he says, giving me a wink before he steps away and closes me in.

“Everything OK, ma’am?” the driver asks before we set off.

“Yeah,” I say, realizing I’m slightly out of breath. “Everything’s just fine.”

And as we pull away from the curb, I find myself unable to take my eyes off the waiting Banks, standing on the curve with his hands in his pockets until we just can’t see each other anymore. I don’t fail to notice the way my heart responds. It’s like I miss him even though he isn’t mine to begin with.

BANKS

“Oh, now he turns up,” Darren says when I arrive at his apartment at eleven the next day. He knew I was coming. We’d organized this brunch a week ago when I called to apologize for not going to his show. But, in a true Darren style, he needs to give me shit for it. “Only about 250 hours too late, but hey, you made it. Well done, cousin.” He pats me on the back as I walk through the door.

“Don’t listen to the drama queen,” Theo, Darren’s fiancé says as I shrug off my coat. “He didn’t even notice you weren’t at the show because he was too busy lapping up all the attention from his audience. I honestly think you could have not apologized and he wouldn’t have even thought about it.”

“Take that back, you cheeky man who’s giving away all of my secrets,” Darren teases, feigning an indignant gasp while he leads me to the little table in their kitchen. It’s one of those old farmhouse ones with the weathered wood and faded paint. They also have mismatched chairs that add to the aesthetic. It’s topped off with a lace table runner and a galvanized watering can with a bunch of flowers stuck into it. The only thing separating this from a suburban housewife’s kitchen is the nipple tassel that’s dangling off the watering can’s spout.

“I speak truth,” Theo says with a shrug from where he’s standing, stirring something at the stove. “I don’t know any other way to be.”

“And it’s one of the things I love about you,” Darren says with a smile as they exchange an intimate glance before Theo turns my way.

“How’s the bar?” he asks, glancing up from his stirring. “You want coffee?”

“Yes to coffee,” I say. “And the bar is great. Kind of runs itself these days.”

“Uh oh,” Darren starts, carrying a tray with a French press and ceramic mugs to the table. “That sounds like a man looking for something.”

“I’m fine,” I say, sitting where he gestures. “I guess I’m just a little restless.”

“Are you thinking of moving on? Finding a new challenge?” Darren asks as he presses down the plunger then starts pouring delicious smelling coffee into the three mugs.

I shake my head. “I don’t want to move on. I love the bar. It’s seriously my pride and joy, and I can’t imagine not being the person who runs it. But, you know...” With the bounce of my shoulder, I add some cream to the mug Darren pushes my way then stir in half a spoonful of sugar.

“No, actually,” Darren says. “We don’t know. So you’ll have to enlighten us.” He waggles his drawn- on eyebrows above his coffee cup as he takes a swig.

I sigh. “I want to settle down and have a family,” I admit, expecting Darren’s eyes to bug out but instead noting a quiet understanding inside them.

He sets his coffee on the table and nods slowly. “That’s understandable,” he says.

I rub a hand over my face and shake my head, looking out the window as I try to find understanding myself. I’ve always been happy with my life, happy in my own company. I enjoy that feeling of freedom where I didn’t have to answer to anyone or take anyone else’s feelings into consideration whenever I made a decision. But now, it’s like all I can do is think, ‘How would Isla react to this?’ ‘What would she like to do today?’ ‘How is she feeling?’ ‘What is she doing?’ ‘What can I do to make her life better?’ ‘Does she have a favorite color?’ and ‘If I paint my walls that favorite color would she

be more likely to stay?’ The internal monologue seems endless and focused on only one thing. Making Isla mine.

“I’m glad *you* understand it,” I say, half muttering against my hand.

“What’s not to understand? We’re all getting on in life—some more than others,” he says, his eyes moving over me to point out that there’s a five year difference in our age. I’m the one at the higher end at thirty-eight. “And it’s natural to trade career goals for life goals. We all want someone to spend our nights with, to grow old with, to have children and grandchildren with.”

“I don’t even know if she wants children,” I blurt, going stock-still when I register what I just said.

“*She?*” Darren gawks. “You’re *dating?* Who, pray tell, is *she?*”

“Might as well give up the information now,” Theo says as he brings over three plates of eggs benedict on toasted bagels with a spinach and rocket salad on the side. “Darren is nothing if not relentless when it comes to gleaning information. He’ll cyberstalk you if that’s what it takes. So put the poor guy out of his misery. Actually, put *me* out of any future misery, because you know he drags me along during all his hijinks.”

“You love my hijinks,” Darren says as he taps Theo against the chest.

“It’s true,” he says with a nod. “I’ll do anything as long as he’s smiling.”

“And that’s what I want,” I say, thanking Theo for the food. “I want someone to smile with and to spend quality time with. What’s the point of all this success if I don’t have anyone to share it with?”

“I agree, I agree,” Darren says. “But you still haven’t said who this woman is. I’m waiting here with Facebook on my screen ready to stalk away.” He turns his cell to me so I can see he’s serious.

“Isla Wright,” I say, biting the bullet and just laying it all out there. In my life, Darren has been the closest non-

immediate family I've had considering we were both sent to live with our gran when our respective parents decided we needed 'straightening out'. My straightening was based on the trouble I was getting in once I got to high school, and Darren's was the fact he kept getting caught raiding his mother's shoes and makeup. One of these things was not like the other, and one of those things could not, and should never have even *tried* to be changed. But my cousin is powerful and persistent, and no amount of coercion was ever going to keep him from being his divine self. Me, on the other hand, definitely needed our grandmother's strict guidance. It's how I got my scholarship and changed my life for good.

"*You're interested in Isla Wright?*" Darren balks, his eyes going straight to Theo's.

"As in Ash's sister and Tanner's cousin?" Theo adds.

"That's the one," I say, noticing the way Theo takes a breath and sits back against his chair.

"How many of these people are there?" he asks, and Darren nods along.

"Right? And how is it they're managing to hook up with every single person we know?"

"I think that's a bit of an exaggeration," I say, chuckling as I take a mouthful of food. But I understand what he means. Supposedly there's six degrees of separation between almost everyone on the planet. But with Darren and the Wright family it probably feels like there's no separation at all.

"How did you even meet her?" Darren asks.

"She came into the bar with Ash when he was in town seeing Tahlia."

"I see. So she's the reason you didn't make it to my show?"

"Yeah," I say as I finish chewing. "I was with her."

"And now he's pussy whipped," Theo points out, to which Darren laughs.

“I’m so glad I never touch those things. They sound so dangerous.”

“Right?” Theo agrees. “One good fuck and you’re sucked right in.”

“It’s not like that,” I say, finding their summation amusing. “It’s her. There’s something about her that’s...different to everyone else. I crave her, but I have no idea how to win her.”

“Uh oh,” Darren says for the second time this visit. “That’s not a problem you’ve encountered before.

“I’m aware. Which is what’s got me so off balance. It’s normally not this hard to get a date with someone.”

“Well, you got *one*,” Theo points out. “How did that come about?”

“It just happened.” I shrug. “She came to the bar, thinking we were meeting there before the show, so we had a drink, got talking and then...”

“One thing led to another and now you’re her snatch-slave for all eternity,” Darren teases, making me almost choke on the mouthful of coffee I just took.

“This isn’t helping, guys. I’m actually at a loss of what to do here. I mean, normally when I like a woman, I can shower her with attention—flowers, dinner, gifts—and it’s cruisey. But with Isla...the woman’s a Wright. That family has more money than God. So what can I, a wealthy bar owner, give her that she can’t already give herself?”

“Dick, for one thing,” Darren says as a matter of fact.

“I’m trying to be serious here, cousin.”

“So was I,” Darren says, somewhat indignant. Which is when the stoic Theo tilts his head to the side and shrugs.

“What about loyalty?” he starts. “I’ll bet that’s something she doesn’t have a lot of in her life.”

“Yesssss,” Darren says as if it’s almost a hiss. “That’s precisely what all of them are lacking. That family is full of nothing but snakes. It’s why Tanner and Ash bailed on their

inheritance and made lives of their own. So if Isla is still caught up in the Wright Media machine, loyalty will literally be the one thing she's never had."

Sipping on my coffee, I give their insight a good amount of thought before I respond. "So, what you're saying is that I just have to be there for her? I have to keep showing up, and never giving up and eventually she'll see I'm the real deal."

Theo and Darren exchange a look before they turn back to me and nod. "As long as she's as interested in you as you are in her, it'll be the one thing that can prove to her you're not just another guy trying to raise his status in life by dating her."

"I'd never do that," I say, finding the idea of making something off someone else's back distasteful.

"We know that," Theo says. "But we're not the ones you've gotta convince."

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ISLA

The sun bathes my face in its warmth the moment I step out of my apartment building. And for a moment, I wish I owned a dog so I could take it to Central Park and toss a ball with it for hours, just forgetting the weight of the world and reveling in the simplicity of each other's company for a bit. But that notion quickly dissipates when my phone chimes with about half a dozen reminders about meetings and report deadlines that demand my attention instead.

"Ugh," I grunt, shoving my cell back into my coat pocket as I make my way to the waiting car.

"How about we walk instead?" the smooth voice that enjoys filling my dreams says to my left, causing me to whip around and almost collide with the man. Luckily, Banks is more aware of his surroundings than I am and quickly pulls his arms aside, thereby saving the two takeaway coffees he's holding along with my cream peacoat.

"Good lord. Announce yourself to a girl next time?"

He grins. I melt. "Next time?"

"No. Not next time like I want you to keep showing up unexpected," I blabber, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks as my tongue feels too thick in my mouth. "But next time, as in the next time you start talking to a woman when she doesn't know you're there. It's a PSA from all women to you."

He's still grinning.

I'm still melting.

"I see. But that doesn't answer my question."

"You had a question?" I ask, my eyes fluttering as I try to adjust to his presence. I'm finding it harder and harder to do the thinking and paying attention thing whenever Banks enters my realm of existence.

"I asked if you'd like to walk with me to work this morning."

"Oh. Um. Wouldn't it take a good hour to walk to your work? I really don't have time for that."

Banks chuckles and shakes his head. "I live above the bar if you'll recall. I have no reason to be on the Upper East Side this early in the morning other than to walk to *your* work with *you*. I guesstimate that'll be about fifteen minutes if we hustle, twenty or more if we take our time."

"You're likely to make me late, Mr. Banks."

"Ah, but I bought you this amazing cappuccino and the pleasure of my conversational skills to make it worth your while."

Pressing my lips together I look from Banks to the car, knowing which of the two is the smart choice, and which one is purely self-indulgent, if not a bit misleading.

I suck in a breath. "I really don't want to accept and give you the wrong idea here," I say finally. As attracted to him as I am, and as much as I'm flattered that he sees fit to continue pursuing me, I can't in good conscience lead him on.

"I assure you, Isla, I am under no illusions here. You have made your position clear. You're not interested in a relationship. But I like you, and I'm fairly certain you like me. So at the very least, I figure we can manage friendship. Especially since your brother is dating my cousin's best friend and we're likely to run into each other in the future."

"Friends, you say?" I scrutinize him with a narrowed eye.

He grins and holds cappuccino out to me. "Friends who enjoy a good coffee and walks to work on sunny days."

“OK,” I say, wrapping my hand around the warm cardboard cup. “We can be friends.”

“OK,” he repeats, looking over my shoulder and saluting my driver with an, “I’ve got it from here, champ.”

I chuckle at this man’s eagerness to spend time with me, baffled even why a stunning entrepreneur with the world at his fingertips would bother himself with a woman from old money, old technology, and even older ideologies that most of the world couldn’t even fathom being part of. Generationally, my cousins and I all hate the patriarchy that is Wright Media. But with Tanner and Ash out of the company, it’s my two remaining cousins and I who are set to step up when our three fathers retire. Maybe then things can change. Maybe then, Wright Media can use its power for good instead of the attainment of more wealth and the willful enablement of ignorance.

But maybe that’s a pipe dream.

“You seem very deep in thought,” Banks says as we finish crossing the street and head toward East 79th Street. We’ve been making small talk about how business has been at his bar, along with how heavy my workload has been lately with a few tidbits about my family and his thrown in to round it out. He and his cousin, Darren, seem quite close.

“I was just thinking that it’s been so long since I’ve walked to work. I’m so used to walking out of the door and getting straight into a waiting car that I fear I’ve grown spoiled.”

“Heels hurting you already?” he asks, nodding toward my red-bottomed shoes.

“No.” I laugh. “I was probably born able to walk in these without effort—something about breeding, my mother would have said—so it’s definitely not the heels. It’s more that I forget how close I live to everything. I really should do this more often.”

“Deal,” Banks says immediately.

“Deal?”

“Yeah. If the sun is shining. I’ll be right out your door waiting to walk with you to work. It’ll be our thing.”

My heart stutters with longing and wanting, along with a warning. *Don’t fall for beautiful men and promises, Isla.*

“Whether it becomes ‘our thing’ or not is something only time can tell,” I say, stopping outside the entry to my building. “But I will say thank you for the coffee and the company this morning. It was definitely a nice change.”

“My pleasure, Isla,” he says with a nod and a smile, before he steps back and walks off the other way without so much as turning back.

Ugh. Why do I miss him already?

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ISLA

A month later and Banks is true to his word. He keeps showing up with a coffee in hand and a smile on his face every morning when the sun shines, and sometimes even when it's not. It's getting to the point where I feel sad when I wake up to gloomy skies, which kind of sucks for me, because lying in bed and watching the rain streaking down my window used to be one of my favorite things to do. Now, it seems my favorite thing is walking to work with Banks.

“OK, so I think we've covered all the typical getting to know you conversations,” Banks says as we take a slight detour since the morning air is particularly balmy today and I don't quite feel like fronting up to work just yet. “I've learned that you're close with your brother, but not with any of your other family members. That your best friend is also your personal assistant. That you prefer a night in over a night out. And that your favorite food is Chinese takeout.” In turn, I've learned that he was raised by his grandmother, along with his cousin, throughout his teen years, after having been branded a troublemaker by his immediate family who didn't feel they could keep him on the straight and narrow anymore. His grandmother was a harsh woman, but her strict rules meant he was unable to fall into the kind of friendships that would lead him astray. He focused on his schoolwork, got himself a scholarship and then went to work on Wall St with his best friend, Ronan. While successful in his profession, he wasn't content, so he cashed out and decided to put all of his savings into setting up the bar. It was a huge gamble for him, but it

paid off and he's been riding that high ever since. Oh, and his favorite food is Italian.

"Correct," I say. "Although you'll never catch me saying no to a nice apricot danish with just the right amount of custard and almond flakes on it."

"That's very specific," he says as he drops his empty coffee cup in the trash. "You see somewhere selling them?"

"Sure do. That little place over there. Handcraft. I like to stop for breakfast here when I'm avoiding going into the office."

"You do that a lot?" We continue talking as we cross the road and head for the busy café.

"Not really. Just when I've been working a lot of late nights and I just really want the chance to spend some time outside the same four walls. I didn't inherit my father's workaholic tendencies."

"You don't talk about him much."

"That's because there isn't much to say. He wanted his legacy to be his son's, and Ash didn't want that, so it fell to me. And try as I might, I don't think I could ever measure up."

"Is that something he said to you?"

We step inside and join the line. "Not in so many words. But it doesn't take a genius to work out when your voice isn't worth much. It's why I'm in the PR department instead of wheeling and dealing with my cousins, father and uncles upstairs. As a member of the board, I have to sign off on a lot of things, but I'm never included in the decision-making process."

"That seems a little unfair. Why do you continue working there if they treat you that way?"

I shrug. "Because it's what I know. Because I get paid way more than my job is worth. Because it's expected..."

"You know, I didn't grow up with a lot of expectation," he says, stepping forward as we get closer to the front of the line. "Keeping out of trouble was probably the biggest hope my

mother had for me. So the pressure I put on myself to achieve was all my own. So, as my next getting to know you question, what would you have studied if you were to choose your path?”

We stop when we get to the front of the line and Banks orders two apricot danishes. But I tap my card before he can, insisting I pay. Then we leave the café with danishes in hands, smiles on our faces and a question still unanswered.

“Art,” I say just before I bite into the sweet flaky pastry.

Banks looks at me in surprise. “Art?”

“Yeah. I have a real thing for giant puzzles that depict beautiful paintings. I’d love to be an artist and create something to put on them. But it doesn’t even have to be art on puzzles. It could be art on the cover of notebooks, gift cards... even placemats. The possibilities are endless. And I think it would just be a really nice existence, you know? Sitting in a room with dappled sunlight coming in through the curtain, surrounded by paints and canvases. I could be happy like that.” I take a massive bite of my danish and savor the sweetness along with the cozy feeling my words just gave me.

I’m so caught up in my own fantasy that I don’t realize Banks still hasn’t said anything. But when I look at him to make sure he didn’t keel over from being bored to death, I find him looking right back at me with a bemused smile. “Then why don’t you do that?”

I almost choke on a pastry flake. “Quit my job and become an artist?” I shake my head. “That isn’t...No. I can’t. Especially not when I know that if I just hang in there a little longer, I’ll be in the driver’s seat of my career again. Dad is turning eighty soon, and his brothers—my uncles—are talking more and more about finally handing the company over to the next generation of Wrights. If I walk away now, I miss out on being the first woman with a controlling interest in Wright Media. I want to be part of the change instead of just blindly allowing the old ways to continue because I couldn’t hack it anymore.”

Banks stops walking in the middle of the busy sidewalk and catches me by the arm so I stop alongside him. Then he just places his hands on either side of my face and leans in to kiss me. I'm caught between surprise and acceptance as the sweet honey and butteriness of the danishes we just ate fill my senses completely as his tongue meets mine and moves in a soft caress. I can't help but let him completely take over as the world falls away around us. The hustle and bustle of the city disappears along with the jostling of pedestrians who are forced to walk around us, and all there is is us. His mouth on mine. His tongue gliding next to mine. His scent. His heat. *How have I managed to make it an entire month without falling into him again?*

"That wasn't very friendly," I whisper, almost completely out of breath as we pull apart and the city bursts back into my periphery again.

Banks smiles. "It wasn't meant to be."

I suck in a sharp intake of breath, knocked off balance as he slides one hand down to mine and entwines our fingers, starting to walk again like stopping me and kissing me during a conversation is commonplace for us.

"Wh-why did you do that?" I ask, stupidly just walking along holding hands with him.

"Because you have more substance than any woman I've ever known before and am likely to know going forward. I also did it because I don't just want to be your friend anymore." We stop in front of my building and he releases my hand, again turning to face me. "Have dinner with me."

I press my lips together and look up into his dark and inviting eyes. During these morning walks, I've come to really enjoy his company. But compared to the passion of that first night we spent together, this is all very benign. I like benign. Banks strikes me as a man who enjoys a little pizzazz. Most men in suit vests and tailored shirts do. "I'm not an exciting person, Banks. I don't club. I don't even travel much. I'm just...I'm me."

"You seem plenty exciting to me."

“No. I’m serious here. When I said I like puzzles, I genuinely meant that that’s like, one of my favorite things to do.”

“OK,” he says, completely nonplussed. “Then let’s do a puzzle together. I’ll bring the Chinese takeout.”

Pulling my lips between my teeth, I try to swallow down the nervous feeling in my belly and force back the walls of protection in my mind that are acting like a little angel sitting on my shoulder reminding me of all the ways I’ve been hurt by charming men before.

“I don’t know,” I say, a memory of puzzle pieces flying across the room and hitting the wall surfacing despite my warring to hold it back.

“Then how about I promise not to kiss you even once? Unless of course you ask me to.”

A smile pulls at my lips and I roll my eyes slightly, loving the smooth calm that emanates out of his voice. “I guess I can handle that.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“OK. Then it’ll be a dinner between friends. And to sweeten the deal, I’ll also bring something I enjoy that most people I know find hideously boring.”

“It’s a deal,” I say, grinning wide now as I hold my hand out to shake his, instead, having him take my hand and lift it to his lips, pressing a kiss against my upturned knuckles.

“It’s a *date*,” he drawls, releasing my still-warm hand, tingling from his lips and his touch. *Lawd my nipples are hard right now too!*

Thank god for padded bras.

“I thought you stipulated no kissing.”

A grin lifts one side of his mouth. “That was during our date. I never once said I wouldn’t randomly kiss you while we walk.”

Laughing, I shake my head in amusement as he steps back then wishes me a good day like he does every morning, leaving me feeling that against my better judgement, I'm still falling for him.

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BANKS

When Friday arrives, I spend it keeping myself busy so I don't sit around watching the clock tick all day long. I throw myself into paperwork and preparations for the bar since I won't be there. And by the time I've run out of things to do—I even applied leather conditioner to my couch—I decide it's time to go and annoy my cousin. He has an innate ability to make time fly, and I really need that right now.

“Banksy, Banksy, Banksy,” Darren says, stepping out the glittery door that marks the entry of the drag club he emcees and performs at, Queen's Delight.

“Darren, Darren, Darren,” I reply, falling into step beside him as he waves his long red manicured fingers, indicating I need to follow him. “We going somewhere?”

“I need thread. My dress for tonight has a tear in it and I need the right color or it will be too obvious. So, off to the haberdashery store we go.”

“OK. I'm up for an adventure.”

Darren laughs. “There is no adventure here, sir. Just dire need. A queen must always look her best.”

I nod down toward his feet as they clip clop against the sidewalk. “Those spiked-heel boots definitely accomplish that mission statement.”

He manages a little skip of sorts as he lifts one foot to admire himself. “Yes, well, you kind of have to live what you

sell.”

“True words.”

“So, my incredibly handsome, disappointedly straight cousin, what brings you my way on this fine afternoon?”

“I can’t spend time with my favorite relative without having an ulterior motive?”

Darren stops walking and pushes his way inside a tiny hole in the wall store, practically overflowing with rolls of fabric. I have to turn sideways to make it past the aisle as I follow Darren to the wall displaying every possible color of thread you can imagine.

“You don’t really need an ulterior motive,” he says as he picks up two different shades of red and compares them to a tiny bit of thread he pulls from his pocket. “But this is certainly unusual. Is something going on?” He lifts his gaze from what he is doing and meets mine. “How’s your pursuit of the unattainable woman going?”

“Well, I took yours and Theo’s advice to be the guy she needs.”

“A loyal one,” Darren puts in as he returns one of the spools of red thread then gestures for me to turn so we can fight our way to the checkout counter.

“Not that I could be anything but. I’m not the kind of guy to tell you one thing then turn around and do another.”

“And that’s something I’ve always liked about you.” He hands the cotton to the cashier then reaches in his pocket, freezing suddenly. “Dang. I forgot my wallet.”

“I’ve got it,” I say, pulling mine out and handing over the cash. He thanks me then we push back out onto the street, heading back toward the club. “So, I’ve been meeting her each morning and walking her to work.”

“Romantic,” he says, giving me an impressed nod.

“I figured it shows her that my interest isn’t fleeting, nor is it dependent upon sex. And I’d hope she knows I’m not interested in her money.”

“I think it’s obvious you have your own. She could google you and find your net worth anyway.”

“Do people actually do that?”

“They sure do.”

“That feels a little dirty.”

Darren shrugs. “Welcome to the human race.”

I chuckle slightly, knowing he’s right, but also knowing that the majority of people in this world are good at heart. I have fallen down many times in my life, and more often than not, someone who didn’t need to helped me along the way.

“OK. So tell me how loyally bringing her coffee every morning and walking her to work is going for you?” he asks, getting us back on track.

“We have a date tonight,” I say, nervousness blooming in my guts the moment I say it out loud.

Darren turns to me and smiles. “Ah-ha! Now I know why you’re here. You want more dating advice. Theo and I are starting to call ourselves the fairy-gay-mothers since every straight person connected to us seems to think we have the magic answer to all things relationships and commitment.”

“Don’t you though?” I say with a smile, nudging him with my elbow as we arrive out the front of the Queen’s Delight.

Darren laughs and places his hand on the silver door handle. “Seems that way. So, what’s your question?”

“I honestly don’t have one. I was coming to you to help fill my day if I’m honest. I’ve kind of done everything on my to-do list and I found myself at a loss until it’s time to get ready and go.”

“You’re nervous.” Darren reaches out and brushes a speck of dust off the front of my shirt. “Well, if it’s any consolation, I don’t think you have anything to be nervous about. You, sir, are a catch. Just ask any of the girls on the other side of this door. They would date you in a heartbeat. Every time they see me with you, they curse the gay gods for not making you one of us.”

“All that does is tell me that I’m attractive to gay men,” I say as I slide my hands into my pockets. “Wrong demographic.”

“Oh no, we are the right demographic. We have better taste than all y’all put together. It’s why you keep making us your best friends.”

“Duly noted.”

“Anyway, what is this date you’re taking her on? Tell me how you’re going to romance her.”

“Dinner at her place.”

“She’s cooking for you?” His brow lifts like he thinks this night shows lots of promise.

“She doesn’t like to cook.”

“Oh. So you’re cooking for her?”

“Not exactly. I’m bringing takeout.”

“OK. So this is a Netflix and chill situation?”

“It’s a Chinese and puzzle situation.”

“Is that slang for some weird sex thing I don’t know about?”

“No,” I say with a laugh. “It’s exactly what it is. I’m bringing the takeout and we’re going to eat it while we do a puzzle.”

“Oh god.” Darren’s manicured hand lands on his chest, his face horrified. “Next you’ll be telling me you’ve taken up knitting together.”

“Well…” I start, just as Darren holds his hand up and turns his head to the side dramatically.

“Please don’t. I couldn’t take the boredom.”

“I kind of think that’s the point,” I say, causing Darren to lower his hand and look back at me.

“What do you mean?”

“I think she wants me to want to stay through the boredom. I think it’s the only way I’m going to earn her trust.”

“Well, the woman has had not one, but *two* messy divorces. Her family tried to keep it out of the press as much as possible, but some of their rivals made her out to be a diva no man could handle.”

“Yeah. I saw the articles. But after meeting her, I know that can’t be further from the truth.”

“The media rarely tells us the reality of a story. What is it Denzel said? That these days, it’s not about truth or being right, it’s about being first. It’s about being entertaining and sensational for the sake of ratings and readership. And people like Isla, and Tanner and even Ash, end up getting caught in the crossfires of something that started even before they were born.”

“I asked her why she keeps working there. You know, since everything we learn about Wright Media seems like it’s run by the scum of the earth. And she said it’s because she’ll be the first woman with controlling power when her father steps down. She wants to stick it out and be part of the change.”

“Oh, bless her. Does she realize those old men are going to sit on those thrones of theirs until they’ve turned to dust? And even then, I have a feeling they’ll have holograms set up to keep up the illusion of never-ending power.”

I chuckle a little at that visual. “It wouldn’t surprise me. But no, I don’t think she’s realized that. She’s just hanging on in there with her other two cousins, waiting for their chance to make things better.”

“Well, I admire her tenacity. Just like I’m sure she’ll come to admire yours.”

I grin and check my watch, smiling when I see that if I head back home now, I’ll have just enough time to shower, pick up the food and head over to the Upper East Side. Mission complete.

“You want to come in and say hi to the girls, or you on your way now?” Darren asks as he pushes the door open and a Tina Turner classic floats out and mixes with the sounds of the street.

“No, ma’am. I’ve got me a date to get ready for.”

“Well, good luck. And don’t do anything I wouldn’t do—which really isn’t much, so you pretty much have carte blanche on everything.” He gives me a wink and I laugh.

“Thanks for the talk. Good luck with your show tonight too.”

“Oh, cousin. I don’t need luck. This place, it’s where I was born to be. It’s the only place on this planet I get to be me. Unapologetically.”

When we part ways, I walk away ruminating over his final words, wondering if that’s what I’ve found in Isla as well—a place to be unapologetically me. She may be thinking her favorite thing to do is mind numbingly boring to most, but she hasn’t gotten a load of what I enjoy doing to entertain myself. It’s not something I’ve shared with a single other person on this earth, and I have a feeling it’ll either be the thing that brings us closer together, or the thing that’ll make her realize I’m not the kind of man she thinks I am at all...

ISLA

“*L*et him up.” My heart jumps into my throat as I give the word to the concierge, Carl, to allow Banks to come up to my apartment. A hand floats up to check my hair before it smooths down my clothes and my gaze falls to my socked feet, suddenly wondering if my choice to go with my normal puzzle and takeout attire was a good choice. After all, this is *technically* a date. An oversized sweater and thick woolen socks might be seen as total disinterest.

Wait. Do I want him to think I'm interested in him?

I turn and look into the entryway's mirror, taking in the messy bun, my gold-framed glasses—I normally wear contacts during the day but prefer my glasses at home—and the cream sweater that covers my body to the center of my thick yoga-pant-wearing thighs and cable knitted cream socks. If I was still in my early twenties, I could be considered adorable. But now that I'm pushing thirty, I'm starting to think I look like I've given up on life. Something I definitely haven't done.

Given up on love? Now, that's a completely different question and something I can unequivocally say yes to. But then a man like Banks comes along, rocks your world, buys you coffee then kisses you in the street, and suddenly you start wondering about all kinds of possibilities. So to answer my original question...yes, I do want Banks to think I'm interested in him. Question is, will he still be interested in me after spending an evening one step away from being bingo night at an aged care center?

Knock, knock, knock.

My breath catches in my throat as I turn away from the mirror and approach the front door, going a little too fast and sliding into solid wood with a thud when my socks fail to provide the friction I need on the slate flooring. *Oof*.

“Everything OK in there?” Banks’s voice says from the other side.

“Ah. Yeah. Door’s just a little stuck.” I make a show of wrenching the door open. Then I’m just dumbstruck. Because Banks in a tailored pants and vest is stunning enough, but Banks in a pair of jeans, a T-shirt and bomber jacket *holding* a bag of Chinese food is what dreams are made of. “Ahhhhh.”

Banks grins—like *that* could possibly help this situation. “Can I come in?”

“Oh. Uh. Yeah. Sure.” I shake off the hungry, lusty images flashing through my mind as I step back, gesturing for him to come on in. “Wine?”

“Sure.”

He follows me into the kitchen, lit by just the overhead light from the range hood as I pull two glasses out of my dark wooden cabinets and take a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc out of the fridge.

“Wanna grab a couple of plates from in here,” I say, tapping the cupboard they’re in with my foot. “The puzzle is this way.”

Banks grins again, his eyes shining like everything about this evening is thoroughly entertaining for him. Then he gets the plates and follows me into the main living area.

“I normally just sit on the floor—the rug is really thick. But we can use the couch if you like. Pull the coffee table nice and close.”

“The floor is fine,” Banks says, taking a pack off his back I didn’t notice at first and setting it on the floor to the side of the couch.

“Is that your contribution to the evening?” I ask, suddenly really wanting to know what’s in his bag.

“It is. But I think that maybe we should do the puzzle first. My hobby isn’t for everyone.”

“Now I’m really intrigued.”

“As you should be.” He waggles his brows up and down then gets to work pulling boxes of delicious-smelling food out of a paper bag. “But that big reveal will have to wait until after we’ve eaten, *and* until after we’ve puzzled ourselves out.”

“You think a puzzle lover can be ‘puzzled out?’” I ask, taking the brand new thousand-piece box from beneath the coffee table and setting it on top.

“Not on a tiny thing like that,” he says with a grin, his eyes falling to the box in my hands.

“I didn’t want to overwhelm you on your first time,” I say, batting my lashes and realizing that I’m flirting with him. Over puzzles. *Maybe this guy could be something more than a friend?*

“Don’t go easy on me,” he murmurs, the intimacy in his voice causing my insides to liquefy. “I can take it.”

“OK. But remember you asked for it.”

“With you, I’ll always be asking for it.”

With my cheeks heating, I slide the box back in place before pulling out a three-thousand piece one instead. “This is not only bigger, but it’s also made of entirely black and white striped pieces. So it’s almost impossible to guess where each piece goes.”

I set it on top of the coffee table and Banks leans forward, nodding slowly as he peruses the box. “OK. Now, *this* is a challenge.”

“Then we better get started.” Picking up a set of wooded chopsticks, I separate them with a snap and smile. I may have wanted this as a way to show Banks how unexciting my life really is, but now that he’s here and so willing, I think this night may prove to be the best date I’ve ever been on.

BANKS

“*W*hat are your feelings toward ice cream?” I ask, standing up from my position on the floor and stretching out my back. Isla was right when she said the rug was comfortable, and her couch provided just the right amount of back support to keep me wanting to keep my butt planted while we chatted, ate and worked on that impossible puzzle together. We’re two hours in, and barely one quarter through.

“Ice cream and I are great friends. I’m a big fan of mint choc-chip.”

I nod slightly, conceding that her flavor choice is gold standard. “On its own, or with a scoop of chocolate fudge to add a little punch?”

She grins. “Add in a strong coffee to that and you’ve got yourself a dessert buddy,” she says, holding out her hand and letting me help her to her feet.

Wrapping my big hand around hers, I help her up, adding a gentle tug at the end so she has no choice but to brace herself against my chest. *God it feels good to have her this close.*

“You did that on purpose,” she says, smiling up at me, her voice a little huskier than it was a moment ago.

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t.”

“You promised no funny business.”

“I promised no kissing. There’s a lot we can do without kissing, Isla.”

Her body shudders in response and I feel each and every tiny tremor. “I’m sure there’s plenty. But that’s not what we’re here for, is it?”

“I don’t know, Isla. What exactly are we here for? I mean, besides you trying your best to convince me that my interest in you is completely misplaced.”

“It is.” She pushes back through her hand and steps away from me.

“Don’t you think I get to decide that?”

“Yes, actually. I do. Which is why I’m letting you know who I am—who the real me is—before you build up some fantasy of the rich heiress and her yachts and connections. Some men seem to think that being with me is an easy ticket to the high life. But all that stuff you see wealthy people doing on TV and in magazines isn’t my style. I like being right here in my apartment. I like eating the same food, doing the same activities, and I don’t think you understand how...simple I really am.”

“And I don’t think you understand that simple is exactly what I want. I don’t know what pre-conceived notions you have about me, but I don’t want nor do I need your money or your connections. I have plenty of my own, and frankly, I’m insulted you’d even *suggest* that’s what I was doing with you.” I lean over and grab my backpack, releasing a sigh as I do. “I came here tonight thinking, yes! Finally! Finally she’s getting it. Finally she understands that I’m interested in *her*. Not your name, not the people you can influence with it. Just you. If I wanted a yacht or a ticket to the high life, I could get it myself—the same as I have with everything else in my life. I’m not a man who preys upon the success of others to lift myself up. I’m a man who creates my own opportunities. I’m a man who works for what I want. And I’m a man who persists when others wouldn’t. I get that you’ve been hurt before, Isla. The kinds of walls you’ve got built up don’t come from living a fairy-tale life. But I also know that I don’t deserve to pay for the shitty behavior of others.” I sling my backpack on my shoulder and turn to walk out. “I’ll see you round, Isla.”

I get about two steps away before her voice stops me.
“Wait.”

Stopping, I turn and face her with raised brows. “Why?”

“Because...” She rolls her lips together, and fuck me if I don’t want to rush right over there and suck them free before laving every inch of her body with my tongue. I fucking ache for this woman.

“Because why?”

“Because you haven’t shown me what’s in your backpack yet.”

A smile bursts to life on my face and I swipe a hand over my mouth, slipping the pack of my shoulder with the other. “Showing you this makes me vulnerable, Isla.”

“I know you don’t think it, Banks. But I feel really vulnerable here too. I don’t...” Her eyes stray to the unfinished puzzle on the table. “I don’t share this with anyone either.”

“What about your ex-husbands?”

She barks out a laugh. “The last thing either of them wanted was to spend a night in eating takeout and doing puzzles. They were all about the show. They both wanted to be seen, and I quickly learned that my substance lied in being an arm ornament and a bank card. You’d have thought I learned the first time, right?”

“We all want to trust that the people we love, love us the same way we love them.”

She sniffs slightly as she nods, fighting against her emotions. “I might have a few trust issues.”

“OK,” I say, my voice whisper soft. “Then maybe we work through those one at time. Together.”

“I’d like that,” she whispers.

“Guess I should show you my weird hobby then, huh?”

“Is it D&D?” she asks, her hands fisted at her mouth in anticipation.

“No.” I laugh, unzipping the backpack and reaching in. “It’s weirder.”

A gasp escapes her mouth as I pull out the bamboo hoop securing a piece of cloth with the faded image of a dragon printed on it and colorful threads stitched over most of the print, bringing it to vibrant life. “You cross stitch?”

“Yeah.” I’m thankful for the pigment of my skin’s ability to hide the deep flush of embarrassment that reaches up my neck and makes me wish for a bucket of ice. It takes everything I have not to shove that hoop back into my bag and away from her inquisitive gaze

“Can I touch it?” she asks when she moves closer to get a better look.

My hand shakes. “Sure.”

With a slow lift of her hand, she runs the tips of her fingers over each careful stitch I’ve made, moving from the fire coming out of the dragon’s mouth, all the way to the tail then down to the unfinished claws. “What do you do with them when you’re finished?”

I bounce a shoulder. “Nothing. I put them in a box and store them all in a cupboard.”

“I’d frame them and put them on my wall.”

“There’d be no space on your walls if you framed every one I’ve completed.”

“You’ve done that many?” Her eyes lift to mine, and in an instant, the nervous vulnerability I was feeling completely dissipates, because in her eyes is nothing but wonder. She seems to actually think this is cool. *I knew I was falling for her for a reason.*

“Yeah,” I whisper, my eyes dropping to her lips because all I want to do right now is kiss her and make passionate love with her the way we did that first night. Except this time, neither of us would be leaving. We’ll be waking up next to each other so I can eat her for breakfast.

“Banks.”

My eyes snap to hers as I swallow my urges deep down.

“I think I want you to kiss me now.”

I slide the cross stitch back into my bag and set it aside.
“You think?”

“I know,” she whispers, licking her lips with her perfect pink tongue. “It feels like we see each other clearly now.”

I grin as I slide my hand against the curve of her neck and brush my thumb against the underside of her cheek. “And it turns out we’re both nerds.”

A smile brightens her face as she laughs. “Will you teach me how to cross stitch?”

I lean in and brush my lips against hers. “Abso-fucking-lutely,” I murmur, before kissing her with everything I have in me.

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ISLA

Something about the way he kisses me knocks the air out of my lungs. Every. Single. Time.

I can hardly do it justice describing it, but when Banks's mouth is moving against mine, nothing in this world compares. Not puzzles. Not choc-mint ice cream. And definitely not takeout Chinese or a night alone, snuggled under a blanket watching Netflix until I fall asleep. Previous to meeting Banks those were all of my favorite things. But now—as much as I've denied myself the pleasure—being kissed by Banks is definitely at the top of that list.

My body aches for more, and I moan into his mouth from the pleasure of it.

“I want you, Isla,” he murmurs, his hands wrapping around my waist before he hoists me onto the nearest surface, which happens to be the buffet I use to store all of my finished jigsaw puzzles. My back collides with the Tiffany blue wall as he pushes my legs apart with his knees and I make quick work of shoving his jacket from his shoulders. I need the heat of his skin. Now.

Tugging at the bottom of his shirt, I scrape my nails along his tender flesh, feeling the goosebumps develop as I glide my palms up to his ribs. “I want you too, Banks.”

He moans, sucking on my lower lip before he releases it with a pop then lifts his arms, helping me get his tee the rest of the way off. Then we just pause for a moment, his head hovering near mine, my hands against the warmth of his chest,

the rapid thudding of his heart beating out the only sound in the entire room along with our heavy breathing. We lock eyes, searching in each other for any sign of hesitation.

“Please.” I wrap my hands around his ribs and urge him closer, moaning when his mouth collides with mine again, his fingers sliding beneath my sweater and skirting across the soft skin of my belly.

Everything inside me flutters, both with anticipation and nerves. The last time we did this, alcohol was involved. So I didn’t pause to think about the size of my stomach, the stretch marks over my hips or the abundance of cellulite that covers my thighs. I am by no means a small woman and never have been. I’m tall and I’m solid, and I like junk food far more than I should and dislike exercise more than I have the right to. But I am me. And alone, there’s never anyone to answer to. Never anyone to scrutinize my curves and question whether I should be wearing what I’m wearing or eating what I’m eating. Being naked around a man with a body as perfect as Banks’s is... confronting.

“Maybe we should take this into the bedroom?” I whisper, shuddering as his fingers skirt along the hem of my yoga pants, causing my insides to tighten and throb.

“Soon,” he whispers, his mouth moving to the curve of my neck and sucking gently. “I want to taste you right here first. We never got to that dessert.”

I let out a moan as his tongue traces my pulse, but then I react by gripping his wrists when he goes to remove my sweater. “Wait.”

“What’s wrong?”

I shake my head. “Nothing. I just...It’s very open in here.”

“Are you worried someone will see?” He turns and looks over his shoulder like he’s looking for someone else in the room. “Is there someone here I don’t know about?”

“No. It’s just that last time, we were drinking. And this time, well, you’re about to get the real show in technicolor.”

“And?”

“And I have stretch marks and cellulite and *rolls* of skin where you have abs and muscles.”

He hooks a finger under my chin and forces me to look up at him while he places his other hand on the buffet beside me, his dark eyes boring into mine. “Do you honestly think I give a damn about any of that?”

“Maybe. I don’t know enough about you yet.”

“Well, considering I spent a single night with you then pursued you relentlessly for the chance at another, I think you can be pretty confident that I find you sexy as hell.” He places his hands on my thighs and pulls me against him, the evidence of his desire pressing squarely into the center of my aching core. “I’ve thought about you endlessly since that night. I dream about the softness of your skin and long to taste and touch you, sink myself deep inside you.” He moves to lift my sweater over my head again, and this time, when he makes it to my ribs, I let him, lifting my arms above my head then taking a deep breath as the cream fabric is pulled free of my hair, knocking my glasses off my face in the process.

“Oh shoot!” I grab for them, doing a little juggle before they clatter to the floor, but ultimately failing when they tumble to the ground with a clatter.

“Shit. That was supposed to be a really intense moment for us where I was totally focused on proving to you how sexy I find every inch of you,” he says, squatting down and scooping them up.

When he stands and gently sets them back on my face and hooks them over my ears, I’m smiling up at him. “It was,” I say, reaching up and running my hands over his well-defined chest again. “Your words and your actions were absolutely perfect.”

“Yeah?” He smiles, leaning in and brushing his lips against mine. “Because I meant it all. I’m obscenely attracted to all of you.” As he talks, he lowers to his knees, pressing soft kisses against the swell of my breasts, the curve of my belly, the faded stretch marks next to my belly button and then the angry-looking purple ones on my hips. “Every bit of skin.

Every soft curve.” He pressing my thighs a little wider and kisses me there too. “And every sweet-smelling valley. You’re soaked for me, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

A rumble of pleasure floats out of him, and when his eyes lift to mine, he hooks his fingers in the waist of my yoga pants then drags them down my legs, along with my underwear. Then I’m naked, save for my bra, and with the heat in his gaze and the way he licks his lips in anticipation of his next move, I completely forget what I was ever worried about when keeping this man out of my life and my bed. I obviously had rocks in my head.

“I ache for you, Isla,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss at the place where my thighs meet my sex. I shake from wanting more. “Tell me you’ve been thinking about doing this again as much as I have.”

“I have,” I admit, knowing that anything else would be a bold-faced lie. Ever since that night in his bed, I’ve dreamed of little else. It’s like he ruined me for anyone and everything else. Even my vibrator is no match for the sexual stylings of Banks Johnson.

He lets out a moan, reaching up and palming my breast, his thumb brushing across my sensitive nipple at the same time as his tongue connects with my clit. “God, you taste good. Better than ice cream in my opinion.”

I grin through my moan, leaning back as he buries his face between my thighs, his fingers tugging on my nipple as his tongue flicks and swirls around my sensitive bud. My hands grip the edge of the buffet’s counter, while my body seems to writhe of its own accord, wanting more and more until I just can’t take it anymore.

“Holy shit!” I call out. “Banks! Oh god!”

My head falls back and connects with the wall as my release takes over, weeks of pent-up frustration from denying myself this simple, perfect, yet oh-so-risky pleasure overwhelming me. I’ve known for a long time that I’m better

off on my own, but there's no denying the connection Banks and I share. And now that I'm letting him in, I also know I can't go back to whatever we were before. Question is, how far can I let him in without compromising on the promises I've made to myself?

"Mmmm." Banks moans as his arms wrap around my thighs and he flattens his tongue, lapping up my juices as he holds on tight, forcing me to continue to ride the waves of my orgasm until he's ready to bring me back down.

"Banks. Please. It's too much. I need you. I need you inside."

"God, you taste good." He lifts his head slightly, pressing a kiss then a long lick against my seam that causes my hips to jolt and for the both of us to laugh.

"Cheeky," I say, panting and smiling as he wipes over his face and pushes his jeans to the floor, cock in his hand as he rubs his tip through my juices.

"Desperate," he counters, pushing his thick shaft in as he brings his mouth to mine and fills me completely. "Home."

Something stutters in my chest at his words as his hips begin to roll and we clutch on to each other, the firm collision of our bodies causing emotions and need to flow through me in a frightening way. Yes. I have feelings for Banks. Turns out, I have a lot of feelings for Banks. But I had feelings before too, and I've gotten to the point where I just can't trust them. More than that, I can't trust myself.

But I want to trust Banks.

Winding my legs around his waist, I grind back as he thrusts, my mouth resting against his shoulder as he tucks his face into my shoulder, sucking on my skin with a laving of his tongue until the both of us almost pass out from the intensity of our crashing hips.

"Fuck," he groans, stilling with a final thrust as my walls pulse around him, squeezing out our combined orgasm as we pant and kiss and laugh because honestly, that was crazy intense. Some things you do are better the first time, but with

Banks, that doesn't seem to be the case. I don't think I've ever been fucked quite so well. This could become an addiction if I'm not careful.

“Did you just give me a hicky?”

“Yeah,” he says, tenderly kissing the skin on my shoulder with wet lips. “Got a little carried away.”

I angle my head in a way that I can somewhat see the purple welt. “As long as it's under my clothes, and I don't have to explain it at the office on Monday, you can give me a love bite anywhere you like.”

He quirks a brow. “Anywhere? Well, in that case.” He hauls me off the buffet and starts walking out of the living room with me wrapped around him before pausing and turning side to side. “Wait. Where is your bedroom?”

“That way,” I say, nodding to my right side before he sets off walking again.

“You might be sorry you gave me permission to do this, by the way,” he says as we flop on the bed and he kisses me again, seeming just as hungry despite only finishing moments ago.

“I guess that's up to you, isn't it? Are you going to give me something to be sorry about?” I ask, knowing it's a loaded question, but the nerves and the trepidation and...I've got issues is all I can say.

Banks pushes up on his arms and holds himself over me, taking a long moment to search my eyes before he replies. “Not if I can help it,” he murmurs, before bringing his mouth to mine again.

ISLA

I'm not sure why, but for some reason when I head downstairs ready for work on Monday morning, I'm surprised to find Banks standing there, coffees in hand like always. I also don't miss the feeling of relief that hits me either.

"Hey," I say, smiling broader than I probably intend to as he passes me my coffee, made just the way I like it.

"Hey, yourself," he says as we start walking and his fingers catch mine. It's just a little hook off our middle and pointer fingers, like we're testing this out. Or more like he's testing me out. It's no secret that he's doing his best not to push me. But as was evident on Friday night when he almost walked out of my door, even a patient man like Banks has his limits. Time will tell if his limits and mine align. Because I can't promise to lower all my walls just because we get along and have mind-blowing sex. No. The only thing I can promise Banks Johnson is time. It's all I have to give right now.

"Why is it that you seem surprised I'm even here this morning?" he asks after a while of walking in quiet contemplation.

Swallowing the mouthful of coffee I've just taken, I bounce a shoulder. "I hoped that didn't translate into my expression. But obviously it did. I was definitely very happy though."

"Oh, I saw that too," he says, turning to me slightly and bumping me with his elbow. "And for the record, if that sun is

shining and the weather is suitable for walking, then I will still be here. Unless of course I wake up in bed next to you. If that's the case, I'll still get you coffee, but I'll send you to work with a different kind of smile. And if it's raining that day, we'll take your car."

The promise in his voice makes me squirm, and I wonder if I now look like I applied too much blush this morning.

"Admittedly, I did have a different kind of smile on my face this morning," I say, a warm feeling spreading up my arm when he laces our fingers completely.

"Oh, really?" He waggles his brows up and down as he looks at me.

"Mind out of the gutter. I was talking about a certain hicky that spells out somebody's name. I feel like you've staked out a claim."

"I have."

"We'll see," I say, grinning to myself as we walk along, quietly drinking and just enjoying each other's company.

I can't deny the warmth pooling in my lower belly as I think about the hicky on my thigh that spells out 'Banks'. Ridiculous as it sounds, it's also crazy hot. Looking at it and remembering his mouth on my body produced a carnal desire in me that did nothing but urge me to want more from the man who keeps showing up at every turn.

And when I get to work after a sneaky kiss goodbye out the front of the building, Karen seems to sniff out the change in me the moment I walk past her desk on the way to my office.

"You've had *sex*," she declares under her breath as she follows me in, closing the door behind her with a thud.

"That is such an inappropriate thing for an assistant to say to her boss," I say as I drop my bag and take a seat behind my desk, powering up my computer.

She plops herself in the seat across from me and waves her hand dismissively. "We are constantly inappropriate around

each other. So this is nothing. Tell me everything. I want details. Was it the dirty-talking guy who sent you flowers because they reminded him of the color of your lady lips?"

"You are so crass!" I cover my mouth and giggle, unable to hide the flush in my face as I cross my legs and sit back.

"What is on your thigh?" she gasps, her eyes going wide as she shoots out of her chair and leans in close, making me realize the letter 's' is poking out from underneath my skirt.

"That is nothing," I say primly, uncrossing my legs and pulling my skirt down lower.

"Oh, no, girlfriend. That is definitely something." She moves around to my side of the desk, and since she's my best friend, I hitch my skirt up a little and let her see my special little brand. She gasps and covers her mouth, stepping back with her eyes alight. "I fucking love this guy for you. When am I going to meet him?"

"I don't know," I say, pulling my skirt back down again as she takes her seat. "Everything about us is so new, and I honestly don't feel ready to put any extra pressure on us. I need to take this slow."

"A love bite that spells his name is not taking something slow, dear girl," she says.

"I kind of disagree with that because we've had a whole month of getting to know each other outside of the sheets before we got back into them again."

She nods her head slowly as she listens. "I like it. You're making him work for it."

"It's not even that. I just don't want to repeat the mistakes of my past by rushing into something just because it feels good. I've done that twice already and both times it turned out that those men were not the men I thought they were in the beginning. I came out of both those marriages with even worse self-esteem than I had when I went in them and it's taken me a long time just being happy as me. I don't want to give that away again. I want to be cautious this time."

“OK. I get it. I mean, I wasn’t around to witness the fallout of your first marriage. But I did know you during your second and I saw how much he broke you. So, I really do understand. However, I’m not here advocating that you marry the guy. Hell, I don’t even believe in marriage after the shitshow I witnessed growing up. Andy actually proposed to me not long ago and it honestly almost broke us up.”

“Are you serious? Why didn’t you tell me about that?”

She bounces a shoulder. “Because we managed to sort it out rather quickly. He’s the love of my life for crying out loud.”

“Then why don’t you want to marry him?”

“Because I don’t need that to be happy with him. And after we talked, he realized that he only wanted it because he thought it was the logical next step. After I assured him that all I want is him, it stopped being an issue for us.” She sits forward and looks me dead in the eyes. “Now, I’m not saying that you guys need to be super serious about each other off the bat. But I am saying that I hear you, and as your best friend I’m here to support you. Even if that means telling you that you’re being an idiot occasionally.”

“You think I’m being an idiot?”

“Well, yeah. Because you’re putting the pressure of two broken marriages on a guy who seems to be willing to go out of his way to be with you. He’s brought you coffee every morning and walked you to work, taking the time to learn as much as he can about you, and he even agreed to do a puzzle with you instead of going on a date—which was obviously an awesome idea because you look rather well fucked this morning.”

“You’ve got me there.”

“I know. I’m *very* perceptive, and as the perceptive one in our friendship, I’m also suggesting that you drop the idea of all relationships leading to marriage and a future right into the trash. No one needs that pressure. You and Banks can enjoy the absolute fuck out of each other and never commit to a

single thing besides fucking and making time for each other. All relationships are based on friendship. And if you add passion to that, you've got something really special. So just be clear about your boundaries with him and enjoy it." She leans in close and smiles. "I dare you."

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BANKS

“Shouldn’t you be at work or something?” I ask Ronan as he sits on one side of the bar, drinking Grey Goose while I take inventory—something he’s currently depleting on my dime.

“I should. But I just fired my assistant, and if I go back there, I’ll fire the whole damn team too.”

“Not the promotion you thought it’d be?” I ask, doing a quick count of the mixers in the cocktail fridge. It’s late afternoon, and the only employees I have on site at the moment are my manager and the cleaners. Ronan is the one freeloader, and if he keeps drinking at the rate he is, he’s going to be hammered before sundown.

“Nope.” He pops his P as he drains his glass then crunches on a piece of ice. “I thought I’d have this unstoppable teams of analysts. But instead, I have a bunch of green kids who are too scared to make a single fucking call without running it by me first. It’s painful. I’m just a glorified babysitter.”

“And what made you fire your assistant?”

“I told her not to let any of them in my office and she did. So now she’s gone.”

“Harsh.”

He shrugs. “Probably. I’m a cunt, aren’t I?”

I shrug. “Probably.”

Placing his hand on his face, he groans. “This was supposed to be career changing, man. If I can’t get these guys

investing like they know what they're doing, I'll end up making less than I was when I was on someone else's team."

"Then teach them how. Show them how to be the fearless investor you are. You've seen fucking *Field of Dreams* enough times to know that you have to build it before they come."

"Jesus. I swear that was the only video tape your grandmother owned."

"She watched that movie until the tape wore out. She was a big Kevin Costner fan and a hater of new technology. Took me ages to get her another working copy."

"She wouldn't switch to DVD?"

"No way. And now that there's internet and you can stream? She'd consider that the devil's playground. 'Not in my house,'" I mimic, causing Ronan to laugh just as my skin pricks and I lift my head, feeling her before I see her. "Hey there."

"You look surprised to see me," Isla says, walking toward me with that sultry sway of her hips that has me practically growling with a need to get her upstairs into my apartment.

Ronan lets out a low whistle. "Who is *this*?"

"This is Isla," I say by way of introduction. Isla smiles and pauses at the bar next to him. "Isla, this is Ronan."

"Oh!" She says immediately, holding out her hand. "The guy you grew up with."

"That'd be me," he says, nodding as he shakes her hand in return. "And you're the unobtainable woman obtained."

I wince before taking the bottle of vodka away from him. "That'll be enough for you," I say, shaking my head because the asshole is going to scare her away before we've even worked out what we are to each other. Luckily, Isla just laughs.

"Oh, I'm still unobtainable," she says.

Ronan gives me a look that's a mix between being disappointed the bottle is gone and thinking I've gotten myself

in over my head with this one. And maybe I have.

During the years of our friendship, neither of us could be what you'd call a long-term kind of guy. We've both been one-hundred percent career and goal driven. But where he and I differ now is that I've achieved all my career goals, and now I want something more. And I want that something with Isla. I don't care if I have to work every day to get it, I'm willing to put in the time until she's sure I'll never walk away from her. Which I won't, because after all, I did put my name on her. She's mine now.

"Sounds like you've got a battle on your hands, buddy," Ronan says, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his wallet. "Guess I should leave you two to it." He goes to put money on the counter to cover his drinks, but I wave him away—we do this dance all the time, but pride says he at least needs to offer. "Nice to meet you, Isla. Hopefully this guy treats you well enough that we meet again." He takes her hand and presses a light kiss to the back of it, causing a slight possessive flare to tighten my chest. But then he turns to me and gives me a salute, heading to the door with his hands in his pockets, whistling like he doesn't have a care in the world.

"I didn't mean to chase him away," she says once we're alone. "Your manager let me in, and I didn't realize you were entertaining."

I laugh as I close up the inventory folder and give her my full attention. "I wasn't entertaining. I was working. He was slacking off, and you came at the perfect time. In fact, any time is perfect where you're concerned."

"Such a sweet talker," she says, rolling her lips as she looks around the quiet space. "It's different in here when no one's around."

"Yeah. I kinda like it better this way if I'm honest, but I need the people in to pay the bills."

"I'll bet," she says, seeming a little nervous as she meets my eyes. "Is there...somewhere we could talk?" Uh-oh.

“Ah, sure. Is everything OK?” I step out from behind the bar in gesture for her to move toward my office.

“Everything is fine,” she assures me. “I was just thinking about things, and I realize that you and I haven’t really set any ground rules.”

We both step into my office and I press the door closed behind her, placing my hands on my hips because I’m pretty sure I want to be standing for this conversation. “Ground rules?”

“Yeah,” she says, stepping a little closer to me. “For our... whatever this is.”

I really want to call it a relationship, but I don’t think that’s what she wants to hear right now. “OK.”

“I realize that none of this has been particularly normal so far, and I’m more than aware that it’s my own hang ups over past relationships that’s been the anchor stopping us from moving forward.”

“OK?” I draw the last letter out, intrigued as to where this is going.

“I was wondering if maybe we could just take the word ‘relationship’ out of our vocabulary. I don’t want to slow down or go back to how we were before this weekend, but if we can stop looking at this like it has to lead somewhere, then maybe it will take the pressure off.”

I take a pause and think about her words, wondering what they mean for me and what I want from her. Is this something I can accept if it means I have the chance to be with her?

“What are you saying here?” I ask finally. “That you want to keep hanging out and fucking each other, but you don’t want to put a label on it?”

She thinks for a moment then nods. “Yes. I think that’s exactly what I want.”

“So, what you’re asking for is a friends with benefits situation?”

Her brow lifts like she hadn't actually considered it that way before she nods. "I suppose so. But with some rules."

"Rules." I step closer to her, feeling the heat of her body against mine when I stop. "What kind of rules?"

She licks her lips as she tilts her head up to meet my eyes, and I take the opportunity to back her against the door, deciding I want to have her any which way I can. She smiles when I cage her in. "Exclusivity."

"Agreed. I would lose my mind if the new toy I just wrote my name on fell into the hands of someone less skilled."

"And modest too." She giggles as her hands lift to my chest and she fingers a button on my shirt.

"We all need to be aware of our talents, Isla. And yours is turning me the fuck on every time you move." I lean in, desperate to kiss her, but she places her fingers on my lips and stops me.

"We're discussing the rules."

"Hmm. Well, if we have to discuss things, we can at least make it fun," I say, sliding my hand down her side and dragging her skirt up her legs. Her breathing deepens but she doesn't object, and when my fingers slide into the side of her panties, her silken heat makes me groan. "Seems this is exactly what you wanted from me."

"I want a lot from you, actually. It's why I'm here." She gasps as I slide my fingers into her heat, massaging her tight walls as her breathing quickens and she clings to my biceps, her leg lifting to hook on my thigh and give me better access.

"Tell me more about this 'no relationship' deal."

"We get each other. No walls." She pauses to swallow as I slip my fingers in and out, using my thumb to apply pressure to her clit. "No finding reasons to stay away. We're together, but we're still ourselves—Oh god, that feels good."

"So you want all the passion and the benefits of a relationship without losing who you are as an individual?"

“Yes,” she gasps, her insides clenching around my fingers as her grip on my arms tightens. “Yes.” She spasms against my hand, her clit pulsing along with her orgasm against my thumb as she gasps and nods, riding out her release. “Yes.”

“OK,” I say, dropping my mouth to hers and kissing her softly as I fuck her gently with my fingers, bringing her back down slowly from her high. “I can do that for you.”

“Really?”

I pull my hand from between her legs and nod. “Yeah.” I bring my hand to my mouth and lick her juices from my fingers with a pleasurable hum. “For a woman who tastes as good as you do, I think I’d do just about anything.”

“I really appreciate that.”

“And I appreciate your honesty, because I think I’ve made my unwavering interest in you very obvious.”

“You have. And I know I’ve been playing my own cards close to my chest this past few weeks, but...” she says, sliding down the door until she’s on her knees. “I think it’s about time I get a taste of you too.”

I brace my hands against the back of the door. *Sweet Jesus I’m in for a treat.*

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ISLA

So far, being together without the pressure of a future has been amazing. We see each other a few times a week, spend Friday or Saturday nights together—depending on Banks’s work schedule—then spend a lazy day in bed, doing puzzles at my place or cross stitch at his. And I have to say I’m getting quite good at this new hobby we’re sharing. Banks even bought me a gold needle like his so it runs smoother through the cloth, leaving less of an imprint with each stitch. It’s been lifechanging. Actually, being with Banks has been lifechanging. I have no idea what I was fighting against in the beginning.

“Do you think you’ll ever want children?” he asks in the quiet of his room one Saturday night about two months into our new arrangement. *Oh, that’s right. I was fighting against rushing into any commitment.*

“What makes you ask that?” I roll over to my side so I’m facing him, and he places his hand on my hip, moving his fingers soothingly against my skin.

“Well, we do spend a lot of time performing the act that creates them, so...” He bounces a shoulder and smiles, and even though I’ve been the recipient of his magnetic smiles for months now, it still makes my belly flip.

“We do,” I say, placing my hand against his chest and playing with the tiny twirls of chest hair that dust across his steely pecs. “Which is why I have a birth control device fitted. That way we won’t have any mishaps.”

“You’d consider a kid we made a mishap?”

Lifting my eyes to his, I roll my lips together, nerves fluttering about in my chest now. It’s not that I don’t want children. Hell, if you could guarantee me a happy marriage that wouldn’t end in divorce and turn that kid into a transient being who floats between two houses, getting constantly introduced to one parent’s new girlfriends, while the other does little to veil the contempt she holds over her ex-husband’s—your father’s—philandering ways, then I’d be on board. But as the record stands, I’ve already proven my inability to maintain a healthy relationship with a spouse, so for the sake of everyone involved, I just don’t think bringing a child into an uncertain situation is the greatest idea. It’s not about me.

“An unintended pregnancy is definitely a mishap, but I would never call a child a mistake.”

“But you don’t want one?”

Pulling my hand back, I wiggle slightly on the bed, tucking them against my chest as I try to come up with an appropriate response. One that doesn’t have me coming off as a heartless and selfish woman, because that’s not where my intentions are. But that’s not easy to articulate. Especially when you’re a woman of a certain age and people start expecting you produce the next generation, like you’re some sort of surname factory bred to strengthen the family name.

“It’s not that I don’t want to be a mother. I genuinely do. I just don’t think it’s fair to bring a child into an uncertain situation.”

“You think I’d skimp on parenting duties?”

I shake my head. “No. I think you’d be a wonderful father. But as a daughter of divorce and a woman with two failed marriages in her past, I just don’t want to put my own child through custody changes and loyalty tests and...” I let out a sigh. “I just think kids need stability, and I’m not willing to have one unless I can be sure I can provide that.”

He studies me for a long time before he lets out his breath and nods. “OK,” he says finally, before rolling on his back.

“OK?”

He turns his head to look at me. “Yeah. I’m saying that I get where you’re coming from.”

“Are you mad?”

He frowns. “Why would I be mad? I asked a question and you answered honestly.”

“I suppose that depends on what your answer to that same question would be.”

With his hand on his chest, I watch the rise and fall of his body as he looks up at the ceiling before turning back to me and answering. “I’d say yes.”

“Does it change things for you that I didn’t give you the same answer?”

“No,” he says simply. “I think I’d be surprised if you did, considering your stance on relationships in general.”

“Listen, I know that what I’ve asked of you is a lot. And if you don’t think you can keep doing this with me, I’ll understand.” I lay my hand back on his chest, and he moves his hand to cover mine right away.

“I don’t want this to end,” he says, turning his whole body back toward me until he’s holding himself on top of me while pushing my hands up over my head. “In fact, no matter what rules or restrictions you want to put on this, no matter what name you wanna call it, I’m in this one hundred percent, Isla. Nothing is going to change that.”

Relief floods through me at the intensity of his words, quickly getting replaced with desire when his cock presses against my entrance and pushes slowly into my depths, making me moan and gasp with longing, even though we literally only just finished doing this less than half an hour ago. I just can’t seem to get enough of him.

“Harder,” I cry, my body aching with a need for more of him. “Harder.”

He draws his hips back, driving in harder each time, my body shifting up his bed with each solid thrust. It feels so

good, this slamming together of pelvises that seems to fill me so deeply I can feel his cock everywhere. Naturally, I want more of it.

“Harder!” I moan.

With an almighty thrust, he slams his hips into and sends my body directly into his wooden bedhead, my head hitting with such force that my body decides to respond by releasing some pressure at the other end.

That’s correct, ladies and gentlemen. I just farted during sex. And if that’s not embarrassing enough, I also came. *What the actual hell?*

Banks freezes, and my hands go to face to hide my mortification as I moan—both from mortification and the fact my orgasm is winding down. “Oh my god! I can’t believe I just did that!”

There’s a shaking sensation on the bed and when I peek through my fingers, Banks’s entire body is rocking with laughter. And since his cock is still buried in me, it feels pretty good.

“This is not the time to be laughing, Banks!”

“Really?” he asks, shifting his balance to wipe a tear from his face. “Because if this isn’t one of those times, I don’t know what is.”

“Oh, it’s fine for you! You’re not the one who just farted and came at the same time.”

He bursts into a fresh bout of laughter, rolling off me and landing on his back, clutching his stomach because he’s laughing so hard.

“You are so mean,” I say, laughing a little myself now. “I am never going to eat before sex again.”

“Oh god no,” he says, managing to get a handle on himself so he can give me a somewhat serious look. “That would risk losing those curves of yours and then *I* would die of sadness. Plus, seeing you lose control in any way is hot as fuck for me.”

“You think it’s hot that I farted and came at the same time?” Forgive me if I don’t believe him.

“Hell yeah,” he says, catching me about the waist then hauling me on top of him. I sit back so I’m straddling him, and the fact he’s still hard gets me feeling all warm again, toning down my embarrassment level. “You, my beautiful bedfellow and best friend, are what many would call ‘highly strung’. You like to be in control during any given situation and don’t tend to step outside your comfort zone without being pressed. So yes, seeing you lose a little of that control is a *very* attractive thing for me to witness. Shows me you’re human.”

Placing both of my hands over his pecs, I lean over him and smile. “Did you just call me your best friend?”

He tilts he said to the side a little and bounces a shoulder. “I did. Just don’t tell Ronin I said that, he’ll feel rather put out and replaced.”

“You can have more than one best friend.”

“You can.”

“And you see me as one of yours?”

“Between you and me, I see you as top of the list. I don’t hobby or fuck anyone else but you.”

I don’t know what it is about that sentence, but something inside me gets all warm and gooey, and I have to fight not to let my eyes fill with tears. So I lean in and kiss him instead, long, deep and slow before nudging my nose alongside his and whispering, “You’re my number one best friend too.”

BANKS

“Don’t tell Ash, but I think I like Isla even better than I like him. And that’s saying a lot,” Darren says, twisting the cork out of a bottle of wine in his kitchen while I help refill the snack bowls. Theo and Isla are both in the living room, laughing at how bad we all are at Pictionary.

“I like her a lot too,” I say, keeping my voice low because, as always, I’m careful not to say too much and spook her. Despite the fact we’ve been together for close to six months now, doing everything a normal couple would do, she still goes rigid the moment I mention anything about a future together. I’ve never had a serious relationship in my life, but this sure feels as close to one as a person can get without that added commitment, and even though I love every moment I spend with her, I can’t help but crave for more. I don’t know if it’s some carnal need that goes back to our caveman roots, but there’s something inside me that wants to own her completely. I want her to have my name and bear my children. The longer this relationship goes on, the more I want that. It’s an urge I can’t seem to shake.

“But?” Darren says, his artfully drawn brows raised as he studies my expression.

“It’s nothing,” I say, trying to brush it off. “Honestly, everything is great. She’s great. And I’m happy.”

“*But?*” he repeats, a little more forcefully this time.

“I’m fine.”

Placing the cork and the bottle on the counter, Darren looks at me in a way that tells me he isn't buying a single thing I'm selling. And rightly so, these days, I'm struggling with it too. Over the last six months, I've spent every day falling harder and faster in love with Isla Wright, and I want to make her my wife.

"That's a load of shit, and you know you can't put that past me. I've known you all your life Banks Johnson. Hell, we were raised in the same house for the most part. I know you, and I also know you'd *never* bring a woman here for me to meet if she didn't mean a hell of a lot to you. So fess us, or I'm gonna march right out there and ask her."

Chewing on the inside of my lips, I run my fingers along the edge of the counter as I consider my words. While I do, a montage of every moment with Isla goes running through my head. All the laughter, the comfortable quiet, the slow walks and the long talks. Everything about her turns me on—her looks, her mind, her sense of humor, and the way she lives her life. I feel like I've genuinely found the one person in this world I align with completely, and even though we're more compatible than most couples could dream of being, she's put a major roadblock in our path. If I continue following her rules, this is it. This is as good as it gets. And I'm not sure I'm OK with that.

"I'm in love with her," I admit, causing Darren to smile cautiously.

"But that's amazing. Why are you acting like it's a bad thing?"

"Because that's not what this is supposed to be."

He frowns and moves his eyes like he's trying to work this out. "What exactly is it supposed to be?"

"At most, I suppose we're FWBs."

"Friends with benefits?" He takes a steadying breath and straightens his stance, hands crossing over his middle. "Was this her idea or yours?"

"Hers."

“And now you’ve caught feelings and you don’t know how she’s going to take it?”

“Pretty much.”

“Have you discussed what happens if one of you wants more and the other doesn’t?”

“Not really. It was more of an agreement that we entered into a relationship without the option of moving it forward. She doesn’t want to get married again, and because of that she also doesn’t want kids.”

“And you want all of that?”

“Yeah.” I flash him a sardonic smile. “After the way grew up, I kind of never thought I would. Then I met her and...”

“Everything changed.”

I nod.

“Same happened when I met Theo. I thought I’d be bed hopping from here to eternity, but that boy—that *man*—turned out to be the greatest thing that happened to me. But do you know what made it so wonderful?”

“You became best friends too?” Because I already know that’s why I can’t see myself letting go of this woman.

“Yeah. But the real reason is honesty. We’ve always been upfront and honest about what we want from each other.”

I take in a deep, heavy breath. “So what you’re saying is that I need to tell her regardless of the consequences.”

Darren nods. “I know you to be a man who never backs away from a challenge, Banks. You’ve been a risk-taker all your life. This is just another instance where you need to risk something big to get what you want.”

“That’s the problem. Normally when I take a risk, I’m willing to accept the consequences. But here, I’m not. I don’t want to lose her.”

“Well, cousin,” he says, stepping forward and placing a hand on my arm. “Think of this this way, if you keep going the way you are right now, you’re going to end up miserable and

you'll lose her anyway. But that'll be long and painful instead of sharp and fast. And I really don't want to stand by and watch you go through that."

"I suppose you're right."

Darren smiles. "You know I am." He turns his attention to the other room when laughter erupts and Theo calls out asking if we need any help. "We're fine, baby. Won't be long!" he calls back before meeting my gaze again. "Ready to go back out there?"

"Of course," I say, picking up the snack bowls and following him to where Theo and Isla are sitting on the floor, rolling about cackling.

"What on earth is happening here?" Darren asks as Isla shakes her head and points at the giant pad of paper, unable to find her voice she's laughing so hard. When we look, it's to find a crude drawing of a dick and balls.

"It's not what it looks like, I swear!" Theo says, holding up a hand as his eyes move between Darren and I.

"So you didn't create a dick pic for our female guest?"

"No!" he insists. "I was trying to draw minions. But I suck at drawing and well, without the yellow, they ended up looking like a dick."

Darren rolls his eyes as we place the snacks and wine back on the coffee table and sit back on the floor with the other. "Lucky you're pretty to look at, Theo Casey," he says, leaning over to give his man a light kiss, just as Isla gets herself under control and reaches for a pretzel on the table, munching on it while Darren and Theo exchange a few loving words along with their moment. I look at her, wishing for something exactly the same but knowing that as things are right now, I'm never going to get it.

Darren is right. It's time to take a risk. Even if it means I lose it all.

ISLA

With his mouth against mine, Banks moves inside me with long sensual, *slow* thrusts. Most of the time when we have sex, there's a certain amount of urgency, dirty words followed up by friends directions like we can't wait to finish so we can take a break and do it all again. At this time... It's different... It's like he's purposely taking his time, drawing it out in a way that makes us feel a lot more like lovemaking than pure sex. It's beautiful. But at the same time, the intensity kind of scares me.

After Banks and Darren came out of the kitchen earlier tonight, the atmosphere of the evening became somber somewhat. Before then, we'd been talking and laughing as a group, and I was feeling so glad that I agreed to a night out for a change. But then, when our wine glasses and snack bowls were refilled, we went back to the game, and despite the laughter and the jokes still being there, there was this undercurrent that made me wonder if maybe I'd done something to annoy Banks, or if maybe I'd insulting Darren somehow and he didn't like me... I tried running back through the evening as much as possible and I was at a loss as to what I'd done, which means that something else might have happened. But when I questioned Banks on the way back to my place, he assured me that everything was fine. He just had a few things on his mind.

But now, as he works through whatever those 'things' are on my body, I swear I can feel his emotions leeching in through my skin. This love making feels like sadness and

longing. It feels like confusion and discontent. But most of all, it feels different. It feels like things are changing.

I'm not ready for things to change.

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BANKS

With Isla's warm, slumbering body sleeping next to mine, I stare up the ceiling of her bedroom, just holding her like I might never get the chance to do it again. It's highly probable that I won't. After the way she reacted when I brought up the subject of children, I think she's been more than clear about her stance on relationships and spending her life with another person. For me, the reward for taking a risk on love feels like the ultimate gain. But for Isla, a woman who's already taken that risk and lost twice before, I realize that the risk just may not be worth it for her anymore. Which means that maybe I'm not worth it. And as much as I don't like the prospect, I think I need to walk away from that.

Glancing over to the bedside table, the numbers on the LED clock flash a green 3:16 AM. I'm obviously never going to sleep tonight, so I slowly extricate myself from around Isla's body and get out of bed, pulling on my boxers before I pad out into the kitchen in bare feet.

As I'm filling a glass with cold water from the fridge, I hear movement behind me.

"Can't sleep?" Isla asks, stopping on the other side of the island counter.

"Not really. You need a drink?" I hold out the water glass to her and she moves around the island to take it from me.

"Thank you."

"No problem," I say, grabbing another and filling it. When I replace the jug in the fridge and close it, I turn to face her,

finding her sitting on top of the counter with her glass cradled between two hands.

“Want to tell me what’s on your mind?” she asks, one finger tracing small circles in the condensation.

“I think it can wait until morning,” I say. “You should get some sleep.”

“Looks to me like we’re already awake and that clock says it’s morning, so…” She bounces a shoulder and takes another sip of water.

I take a deep breath then drink down the entirety of my water, stepping up to the island bench and standing beside her, placing my empty glass in the sink before gripping the edge of the marble counter and flexing my arms. Why can’t I find the words?

“Hey,” she says soothingly, placing a cool hand on my back. “Whatever is on your mind, you can tell me, OK? We’re best friends, right?”

I smile, rocking on the soles of my feet as I gather every drop of courage I’ve ever had in me and force myself to meet her eyes. “I’ve fallen in love with you.”

The serene smile she had on her face a moment ago morphs into one of surprise and confusion. “What does that mean?” she asks, her brow creasing as she sets her glass to the side.

“Exactly that. I’m in love with you, Isla. I love the way you smile, and the way you laugh. I love that you’re a homebody, and I love that you’re willing to learn new things. I love listening to you talk about work. And I love watching you eat food. Hell, I love watching you brush your hair and pick your nose.”

“I *don’t* pick my nose,” she interjects, which is when I move so I’m standing between her knees, placing my hands on her thighs.

“You do a little. Everyone does a little,” I say with a smirk, and she rolls her eyes.

“I am not admitting to that.”

“It’s OK,” I say with a chuckle. “I love you, nose-picker, come-farter, puzzle-loving light of my life. And I know that at the beginning of this you said you didn’t want any pressure about being something more in the future. But, Isla, it’s been six months, and I can emphatically say that I don’t see myself going anywhere. I want you. I need you. And damn it, I want to marry you too. I want to build a life and make a family with you. It doesn’t have to be right away. I know I’m springing this on you right now, but I need you to know how I feel—what I want.”

“Oh,” she breathes, picking up her glass and taking a sobering sip as a battle of emotions wages a war across her face. My stomach turns sour immediately. This is exactly what I was afraid of.

“Fuck,” I say, stepping away and running a hand over the top of my head. “You’re still not interested, are you?”

“I didn’t say that,” she says, placing her glass back on the counter again. “I’m just...I’m processing.”

“Sure,” I say, realizing I’m sounding a little snooty because I just put myself out there and she’s not immediately jumping in my arms and declaring her never-ending love for me. Logically, I knew this was the likely scenario, but damn if I didn’t hope it’d turn out different anyway. “Process away.”

“It’s not that I don’t love you, Banks. Because I do. I genuinely love everything about you...”

“But?” I say, my guts getting sicker and more twisted the longer this drags out.

“But I don’t think I want to get married again. And not just to you, but to anyone.”

Clasping my hands behind my head, I stretch my head back and look to the ceiling before I release my hands and blow out a breath. “OK. So a couple of assholes before me ruined my chance with you, and that means no marriage, no kids, and that’s that?”

“I don’t know what to say to that. I’m sorry, Banks,” she says, emotion shaking in her voice. “I’m just trying to be honest about how I feel.”

“I know. And I appreciate it. I’m just trying to do the same here.”

“I know. And I appreciate it too. But I can’t change how I feel.”

“Yeah,” I say, scrubbing a hand over my face. “Me either.”

“Banks,” she says, as I walk back to the bedroom with my hands on my hips. “I’m so sorry.”

“Me too,” I say, pulling on my jeans and grabbing my T-shirt too.

“You’re leaving?”

“Yeah.” I pull the tee over my head and pick up my shoes. “And I know this looks like I’m throwing a tantrum because I’m not getting my way—and maybe I am—but yeah, I’m leaving.”

“I really wish you wouldn’t. We’re so great together. We… just work, don’t we? Am I wrong there?”

“Yeah, we work, Isla. We’re fucking fantastic together. You tick every fucking box along with a bunch I didn’t even know I had, but then there’s these optional extra boxes that I really fucking want, but you’ve already ticked those boxes in your past, and you didn’t like the way it was served so you just don’t fucking want it anymore. But I do. I want to try. I don’t want to stay just as we are, then be sitting there doing puzzles together when we’re eighty, looking back and regretting that we never took the plunge together. Because I want to do that with you. I fucking want all of that relationship stuff. And I’m not gonna keep doing this, hoping you’ll change your mind, or worse, guilting you into doing something you don’t want just to keep me happy. So, for your sake, and for mine”—I finish tying my laces and stand from the edge of the bed—“I think it’s best if I go back to my place, and you find some other guy to have a no relationship with. Turns out, I’m not as capable at it as I thought I would be.”

“Banks!” she cries, her hand wrapping around my arm as I pass her to walk out the door. “Please don’t leave like this.”

“I have to, Isla,” I whisper, leaning my forehead against hers. “I can’t change the way I feel, and neither can you. I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” she gasps, hiccupping when I press a soft kiss against her lips and then her forehead, before I finally let her go and head out of her apartment, her soft sobbing echoing behind as my heart turns heavy in my chest. I just blew it big time. *Fuck.*

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ISLA

“*W*hat the actual fuck?” Karen says, her mouth dropping open the moment she enters my office on Monday morning. For once I beat her in. After a weekend spent crying and wallowing in my own self pity, I just had to get out of my apartment and do something productive. “What happened to your face?”

“Banks and I broke up,” I inform her, the tone in my voice gone because I think I might have forgotten how to feel now. The whole point of Banks’s and my arrangement was to *avoid* situations like this. But it just goes to show I’m incapable of having any sort of adult relationship without it turning into a shambles.

“Oh no,” she coos, immediately closing and locking the door before sliding into the chair in front of my desk and placing a hand on my arm. “What happened.”

I shake my head, my stupid tears burning against the back of my eyes when I was sure I’d run out of the darn things. “He wants more. I told him I can’t give it to him. So he left.”

“Oh shit, sweetie. I know how much you liked him too. I’m so sorry.”

“I didn’t just like him, Karen. I loved him. He was everything I ever wanted—my friend, my lover, my confidant, my rock. We were so good together, and I honestly thought we were on the same page. But then...”

“He changed the rules,” she finishes for me, passing over the box of tissues so I can dab at my already swollen eyes. I

couldn't even wear my contacts today because they were so sore, so I push my glasses to the top of my head and dab at my eyes to stem the flow.

“I should have seen this coming,” I say once I've calmed down. “He asked me about kids a few months ago, and I explained that I wasn't willing to bring a child into this world when I can't guarantee stability, and I thought he was OK with that. He said he understood.”

“Does he want kids?”

“Yeah. He said he wants it all—the wedding, the kids, the happy ever after.”

She smiles softly. “And what do you want?”

I look up and meet her green eyes. “I want to not feel like this,” I say, a fresh bout of tears flowing down my cheeks. “It's not that I don't want kids myself—I do. I just don't want to mess them up the way every kid in my family is messed up. Taking marriage off the table in the beginning was supposed to be the thing that stopped things from ending like this. But it seems I'm doomed to repeat the same cycle, over and over. I just...I can't do this again. I'm not equipped to keep getting my heart broken.”

“Oh honey.” She places her hand on mine and gives it a squeeze. “It's not marriage that's the enemy here. From what I know and saw of your past relationships, it was the men being narcissistic cunts that caused your unhappiness. I don't think Banks is like that.”

“So what are you saying? That I should backflip on everything I've said and give into the guy? I thought you hated the idea of marriage.”

“I do,” she says, taking a steady breath as she searches my eyes and pleads for understanding. “And I'm not telling you to backflip, but I am going to point out that you have been married before. So that means you believed in it once – twice, even —so I guess what I'm saying is that you just have to have a good look at this situation and do what's right for you. Are you against marriage because it failed? Or do you hate it deep

down to your core? Because I kind of get the sense that you don't hate marriage, you hate having your heart broken."

I nod as I dab my tissue at my eye. "You're right. I do."

"If you love Banks the way you say you do, then maybe he's worth taking the risk of trying again for? Maybe, since you've already built a relationship on honesty, friendship and trust, you'll have a marriage like that too. And I'm not saying that you have to run out and marry the guy right away then start popping out his children, but maybe...just maybe...it's worth reconsidering."

"If Andy came to you and said he wanted to get married and start a family, would you give yourself the same advice?"

Pressing her lips together, she laces her hands in her lap and sits back against her chair with a sigh. "I know. I sound like a hypocrite. But Andy and I have a different set of values than most—and we will have kids one day, they just won't be born in wedlock. But to answer your question, if he came to me and explained that it was a relationship-ending decision for him to get married, then yes, I would consider it. Sometimes little pieces of paper and gold bands are important to people, and in the grand scheme of things, it wouldn't change *how I* love him, but if it makes him feel more complete, I'm OK with that. But I wouldn't change my name," she says, smiling as she pushes up from the chair. "That's mine. I guess what I'm saying here is to just follow your heart, Isla. Love is about compromise, it's about giving a little to get something really amazing in return, and from how happy you've been this past six months with Banks... gosh I'd hate to see you give that up because of a couple of turd burgers who treated you badly. You deserve your happy ever after—marriage, no marriage, kids, no kids. Whatever it is *your* heart wants, go out there and make it happen."

"Gosh. You've made all the mush in my head even mushier."

"I know. But you're gonna be OK. And I'll still be here no matter what you decide." I nod, blowing out a heavy breath as she exits my office, leaving me on my own with a hell of a lot

to think about, because at the end of the day, I don't really know what I want anymore. Well...besides Banks, of course. But the question is, can I want what Banks wants?

I have a lot of soul searching to do.

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BANKS

“*Y*ou look like shit.” I step back as Ronan pushes his way into my apartment and takes a slow look around. “When was the last time you cracked a window in here?” He lifts the lid of an empty pizza box then dusts off his hands. “Better yet, when was the last time you went outside? Took a shower? Shaved?”

“I’ve showered,” I grumble, picking up the pizza box and as many empty beer bottles as I can manage. Ronan scoops up the rest of the mess and follows me into the kitchen, tossing it into the trash before he lets out a steady breath.

“Talk to me, man. This isn’t you.”

“Yeah. Well, it is now.” I move back into the living room and drop my weight onto the couch, putting my feet up on the coffee table.

Ronan takes the seat next to me. “You know, in all the years I’ve known you, I’ve never seen you torn up over a single girl. What was it that is different about this one?”

I shrug as I fold my arms across my chest. “She got me. I could be myself around her.”

“Could she be herself around you?”

“Yeah. It was the whole point of us being together. We wanted someone who liked similar things and who it *felt* good to be with. We were just so fucking compatible, and I’ve never had that with anyone in my life before. But she didn’t want any strings and I...well, I did.”

“And now it’s over. Just like that?”

I shrug again. “I’m not sure how it’s supposed to keep going when we both want different things.”

“What do you mean you both want different things, man? When you started dating Isla, you told me she’s twice divorced and really nervous about repeating the mistakes of her past, right?”

“Right.”

“And then you said that you were going to *prove* to her that you weren’t anything like those other guys. You said you were gonna stick it out, no matter how hard she pushed because you *knew* you two were made for each other.”

“Yeah, but—”

“But what, Banks? What’s fucking changed?”

“I told her I want more, and she said she didn’t.”

“Forever?”

“Jesus, Ronan! I don’t fucking know. Maybe after six months, she’s just realized that I’m not the guy for her.”

“Bull-fucking-shit. I think you just threw a bomb at her feet and when she didn’t give you what you wanted, you high tailed it out of there.”

“Fuck off. I was just honest about how I feel.”

“As was she. Right from the start, right? She said she didn’t want to get married again. And when you brought up kids, she didn’t say she didn’t want them—she just said she didn’t want them unless she was sure she was in a stable relationship. One where her partner doesn’t throw a fucking tantrum and leave her when he doesn’t get his way.”

“That’s not fair. I’m allowed to want what I want.”

“Yeah, you are. And I love you, man. You’re the closest thing to a brother I’ve ever had. But this isn’t you. You’re not the kind of guy who walks away. I mean, imagine you did get married and then later on you found out she *couldn’t* have kids—would you leave her then?”

My mouth drops open, but my gut twists up tight. I really don't want to hear this. But damn, he's right. "No," I say, shaking my head. "I would never."

He places a hand on my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. "So why are you giving up now? You love her, right?"

"Of course."

"So what would you rather do? Go and find some other girl to marry and have kids with? Or be happy and in love, taking a risk with Isla? She might change her mind, but she might not. Either way, do you really want to give what you have with her up?"

Looking across the room to the crate I put all our cross-stitch stuff in, I think back over the many hours we've spent together just being...us. And when I think of a future without that, it's bleak as fuck. I want her back. However she comes, whatever the future holds, one thing is absolutely certain. She and I belong to each other.

"I want to spend my life with Isla."

He claps me on the back. "Then you gotta go out there and get her, brother. Do the grand gesture."

"Such as?"

"Tell me the one thing you can get her that she can't get herself?"

"Fuck. There isn't a lot she wants. Despite her name and her money, she likes simplicity. What she cares most about is fairness and being an agent of change when her and her cousins take over Wright Media. Not that any of those old guys seem willing to step down any time soon."

Ronan grins as he sits forward and pulls his cell from his back pocket. "I have an idea."

"What kind of idea?"

"Well, what are you and I both really good at?"

"Knowing the right business to invest in and which ones to steer clear of."

“Exactly. We’ve made a lot of people a lot of money.”

“I have no idea how that’s supposed to help anything here. I’m not looking to invest.”

“No. But we know lots of people who invest in everything from bank bonds to bitcoin. Between us, I reckon know every broker, banker or financier on Wall St. That means, that with our powers combined—”

“Holy fuck, Ronan,” I say, his plan dawning on me and straightening my spine as energy floods my veins for the first time since I walked out of Isla’s apartment. “You’re brilliant.”

He laughs while he fires off a bunch of messages. “It’s why they pay me the big bucks, my friend. You want power? I can find a way to get it for you.”

And as we work through our combined contacts in an effort to formulate our plan, I wonder if it’s going to be enough to show Isla how much she means to me. I hate to admit it, but blindsiding her the way I did then storming off was childish. I let my pride get in the way of the facts that were laid out before me. I’m in love with Isla. And she’s in love with me. At our very core, she and I want the same things, but what Isla really needs is someone to standby and support her because no one else before me has. Everything else? Well, we’ll work it out eventually. But one thing is certain, I can’t walk away from her. I never should have, and I’m going to bend over backwards and accomplish something huge for her to prove to her that I’ll never turn my back again.

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ISLA

“Does anyone even know who called this meeting? Or what it’s about?” my Uncle Bruce asks, frowning at his watch as he sits in his big chair at the head of the boardroom table, Wright Media’s logo proudly displayed on the wall behind him, framing him like it’s the halo of power.

To his left is my father, Paul, and to his right is my other uncle, Graham. They nod, backing Bruce up as they look across the table to my cousins and me.

“I didn’t have anything to do with this,” one says, while the other lifts his hands and adds that it wasn’t him either.

All eyes fall on me. “Well, it definitely wasn’t *me*,” I shoot back with a frown. “We’re not the only people in this world with the power to call a shareholder’s meeting.”

“We’re the only people with enough collective power to vote on anything,” my father points out. “Whoever called this meeting had better have a good explanation or I’ll be billing them for all of our time.”

I press my lips together, deciding it’s not worth entering into any further debate until we know exactly why we’re all here. Bruce taps his fingers on the table obnoxiously, and when the door finally opens, I almost want to kiss whoever it is just for making that impatient grumbling stop.

But then, I turn to see who it is, and I don’t just want to kiss him. After a huge amount of thought and soul searching, I think I might want to marry him—if he’ll still have me, of course. Third time’s the charm, right?

“Banks?” I say on a gasp, shooting to my feet as he steps through wearing one of his tailored suits and a stony expression.

“You know this man?” my father asks, to which I nod and slowly lower myself back into my seat, the absence of any sort of warmth in Banks’s eyes making the contents of my stomach sour. He’s not here for me. And after refusing to consider his proposal when we last saw each other, maybe I deserve that. Maybe I deserve whatever’s coming here. *I should have said yes. I should have at least said I’d think about it.* But instead, I watched him walk out of my apartment and my life. I have so much regret now.

“Good morning, all,” Banks says, business in his tone as he ushers in his friend Ronan. “We’re still waiting on a couple of people, but we have their permission to get this ball rolling in the meantime.”

“Exactly what is this about? Who are you jokers?” Bruce bellows, his jowly cheeks shaking along with his frustration.

“We,” Ronan starts as he and Banks take a seat, “are representative of the bulk percentage of your shareholders. And we come with a proposition for you.”

“You think you own the bulk of Wright Media’s shares?” Uncle Graham scoffs. “That’s impossible. The family owns control.”

“You’re right,” Banks says. “Each member of the Wright family has a certain amount of shares in their portfolio, giving the family that magical fifty-one percent to swing any motion to challenge leadership.”

Uncle Bruce starts chuckling, my father and Graham joining in before Bruce abruptly slaps the table. “You’ve got rocks in your head if that’s what you think is happening today.”

“Not rocks,” Ronan says, opening a folder in front of him and taking out a sheet of paper. “A different number.” He pushes the sheet of paper across the table, and the older

generation snatches it up before muttering things about impossibilities.

“So,” Banks starts, addressing the three brothers clearly, “in a vote to replace the current leadership with the next in line, Isla Wright, Kenyon Wright and Darius Wright, all we’d need is one percent more.” Banks’s eyes swing to me, warming just a touch before they move onto my cousins. “The swing vote will fall to you three.”

Warmth blooms in my chest as Banks finds my eyes again and lets that cool façade of his slip just enough for me to read his intentions. And it really is all about me.

Without being asked, without knowing how I’d respond, and without any guarantee this Hail Mary of his will pay off, he’s stormed the castle of Wright Media to fight off the dragons so his Rapunzel can take her rightful place in this world—at the head of Wright Media. This beautiful man is giving me the one thing I’ve always wanted and never been able to get for myself. The chance to make a difference. And if I hadn’t decided I wanted to marry him before, I certainly do now. Hell, I might even give him babies after this one too. He’s truly proving his staying power and the lengths he’ll go to to fight for me.

“*Thank you,*” I mouth to him, tears catching in my eyes as his turn tender before he nods then turns back to Ronan.

“Fifty percent!” Bruce yells, slamming the piece of paper on the table. “How on earth could you even manage that? It’s impossible.”

“That’s a question I can answer for you, father,” a voice from the doorway says, causing us all to turn our attention to Tanner Wright, Bruce’s only son and original heir to the company throne. He’s also been marred as public enemy number one after dragging his father through the courts to make him honor his commitments to Tanner’s disabled sister, Camille. It was a PR nightmare and saw our share price plummet. I did *not* enjoy work while that storm was brewing, but I still understand why Tanner did it.

“You don’t own enough shares to do this,” his father responds.

“I didn’t,” he says, grinning like the cat who got the cream. “But as Camille’s court-appointed guardian, I control her shares, and Ash, well, he very kindly sold me his. So now I do.”

“I vote with Tanner!” Kenyon yells, shooting his hand in the air like he’s in grade school.

“Me too,” Darius joins in, meaning I have a massive smile on my face as I nod and look back to Banks.

“Me too,” I say, wishing I could reach him from where I’m sitting to at least hold his hand. As it is, all I can think about is touching his skin again, kissing him and making never-ending love to him. He’s just given me the most wonderful gift, and I don’t think I can ever repay him. But I’m sure going to try.

“The ‘I’s have it,” Ronan says, standing up as he closes his folder and grins. “Let the minutes reflect that Isla Wright, Kenyon Wright and Darius Wright are the new heads of Wright Media effective immediately.”

“You...You can’t...You can’t do this!” Bruce bellows, his head shaking as he looks to his brothers who just sit in stunned silence. I don’t think I’ve ever seen my father or my uncles look dumbstruck before. But now, looking at all three of them sitting there with their mouths open and their eyes bugging out, I realize that no one has ever kept them down before either. They’ve lived so long with their power that they just couldn’t let it go.

“We have, and we did. Best of luck, and we’ll see you at the next shareholders’ meeting,” Banks says, standing with Ronan and heading out with Tanner, leaving us all in the boardroom with our stunned parents.

“You’ve betrayed us,” Graham says, completely bewildered.

“Technically, father,” Darius says as he rises from his seat. “You three have been betraying us all along by refusing to retire and refusing to make changes that would actually see

this company grow instead of turning into the dinosaur of print it's becoming. Now that we're in charge, we'll be able to start diversifying like we always wanted to do, and you can sit back and watch your dividends roll in while you enjoy the sweet life of retirement. You're welcome."

Before any of them can formulate a response, Darius, Kenyon and I file out of the boardroom, noting that we need to sit down together and prepare for what's next. I couldn't agree more, but right now, there's something else I need to do that's far more important than anything to do with this company. I have to find Banks.

Excusing myself, I head straight for the elevator bay, hitting the button rapid fire until a car arrives and I jump inside, banging at the lobby button like it'll make this thing go any faster.

"Come on, come on." My heart is beating wildly and the only thing I'm concerned about right now is finding Banks and telling him I was wrong. There's a reason he and I found each other, and I'd have rocks in my head if I thought keeping us from building a future together would somehow protect my heart. Because it didn't. I fell in love with him body, mind and soul, and every day without him is just a waste. And I don't want to waste time anymore.

The moment the door pings open, I shoot out into the lobby, looking everywhere for the top of Banks's head in the crowd. He should be easy to spot since he's in a group of three giant men, but when I can't find him, I make a dash for the exit, shooting out onto the sidewalk and looking in both directions.

"Banks!" I call out, not because I see him, but in the hope he'll hear me and stop moving. But as I swivel my head left to right and find nothing, I all but give up.

That's when I hear the unmistakable rattle of lots of little pieces inside a cardboard box. *Banks.*

With a happy gasp in my chest, I spin around and find Banks standing against my building with a puzzle in his hand

and a smile on his face. “I thought we could go somewhere and puzzle this out.”

Tears heat my eyes as my feet carry me at top speed, slamming my body into his chest as my arms wrap around his neck. “I missed you so much,” I cry, clinging to him and crying into his neck. “I’m so sorry I chased you away.”

“I’m sorry I left,” he murmurs near my ear, his hands moving to cup either side of my head as he pulls us apart slightly so he can look me in the eye. “I’m sorry I tried to change the rules. I’m sorry I considered doing a single thing that could make you not be in my life anymore. I love you, Isla, and I want to be with you. I don’t care how. I just want you, and I want to see you happy. I hope what we did up there in that boardroom goes some of the way to show you how serious I am.”

With tears streaming out of my eyes now, I nod, taking a deep breath to steady my voice so I can speak. “I want to get married,” I blurt, loving the way his eyes pop and his smile widens as the words leave my life.

“Are you kidding me?”

“No. I’ve been thinking long and hard about it, and I never had what we have before. I was stupid and reckless before, getting married for all the wrong reasons, but with you, Banks, all those reasons are right. You’re my best friend. You’re my heart. And you’re my soul too. So, if there’s anyone in this world worth risking my heart on, it’s you. Because you own it anyway. From the day you marked my thigh with your name, I belonged to you. And I really hope you still want to belong to me.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” he says, bringing his mouth to mine and kissing me so long and hard that I never want to let him go. And I won’t, because while I was scared of what might come before, I’m not anymore. Banks has just done the impossible, he’s forced my uncles to retire, and he’s taught this skeptic that true love and happily ever afters really do exist. He and I are living proof of that, and together, we can do anything.

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EPILOGUE - BANKS

Twelve months later...

“Are you guys seriously planning on driving all the way to Atlanta?” Ronan says as I hand him the keys to the bar so he can watch over it for me while we’re gone. “That’s a solid thirteen hours on the road.”

“Which is why we’re taking our time, sight seeing and checking in a hotel along the way. Isla is too pregnant to fly, so this is better than her going into labor at high altitude.”

“Dude, all you’re doing is risking her giving birth on the side of the road.”

“She’s thirty-four weeks. We’re gonna be fine.” It’s at that moment my darling fiancée hits the horn to hurry me along. “I should get going,” I add with a smile. “Hormones make her impatient.”

Ronan laughs as he leans around me and waves to Isla. “I’ll take good care of the bar for you. Drive safe. Keep my favorite girl happy.” I’m one of the lucky ones whose best guy friend gets along with his partner like a house on fire. Despite Isla’s protestations that she prefers to be home more than she likes socializing, she sure is good at it. I don’t have a single friend or family member she hasn’t won over with her easy smile and can-do attitude. My parents think she’s amazing, and I’m sure that if my gran was still with us, she’d love her too.

“Will do. And thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Any time. Enjoy the wedding.”

Yes, a wedding. But, no, it's not my and Isla's wedding. That's going to come in the near future—some time after the twins are born so they can be little flower girls for us. It's going to be great. Just like Isla's and my relationship has been from the get go.

Sure, we kind of started things a little backward, but once we got to know each other and realized the both of us would be willing to move heaven and earth for the other, there was nothing left standing in our way.

These days, I'm still running the bar, but I also have a small role to play in Ronan's new company that he started after his promotion didn't pan out the way he expected. He decided that if he wanted to be the king of Wall St, he'd have to handpick the people he works with and build a business from scratch. I'm more of a silent partner than a fully-fledged and active partner, but for a control freak like Ronan, it works well. I help him out when he needs it, and in turn, he's always willing to help me. I think the free vodka might have a lot to do with it, though.

Work wise for Isla, everything has been going great as well, she got to become the contributing member of Wright Media that she always wanted to be. And when she's not working, she loves spending time on her new hobby—painting pictures and turning them into puzzles.

When we moved in together a couple of months after reuniting, I insisted we have a room dedicated to hobbies. It's in there that we spend the vast majority of our downtime, enjoying each other's company while working on projects that help reinvigorate our minds so we can go out there and face the hustle bustle of the world again come Monday morning.

I wouldn't say we're both total introverts, but we definitely ride the line of needing plenty of time to recharge in the quiet of our home in between our busy work and social life. So with that in mind, taking a couple of days out between now and her brother, Ash's wedding in Atlanta is just the getaway the both of us need leading up to us becoming busy parents. It's something we're both really looking forward to, but since it's the first time for us both, we know we're going to be in for a

learning experience. Two babies at once is not going to be easy.

“You need to pee before we leave, gorgeous?” I ask when I climb back into the car and lean across the console to press a kiss against her sweet lips.

“I’m fine. But we both know that could change in the next fifteen minutes, so I’ve plotted our route with every gas station and fast-food outlet marked just in case. I am *not* going to be squatting by the side of the street. I’ll get stuck down there like that weird witch lady in *Dark Crystal* who can remove her eye.” She does an impression of Magra grunting and groaning and I immediately imagine the scene from the movie.

“Oh, honey, those are the noises you make whenever you get up off the couch,” I tease, lacing my fingers with hers once we’ve settled into the stream of traffic to start our journey.

She gasps in mock horror. “You are so mean.”

“I happen to love the sound of you groaning. Getting off the couch or otherwise.” I lift her hand and press a kiss to her knuckles.

“You are too smooth, Mr. Banks,” she teases in return. “Keep that up, and when we get to that hotel tonight, I’ll be the one to make *you* moan and groan.”

“Can’t wait,” I say, waggling my eyebrows and looking forward to every bit of this trip we’ve planned together. Better yet, I can’t wait for the rest of this life we’ve planned together.



ISLA

“Um... Banks?” I wake to the warm gush of something flowing between my legs, unable to stop it, I realize it’s my water. The damn thing just broke.

“Mmm?” His sleepy arm slides over my well-rounded belly. “Everything OK?”

“My water just broke.”

“What?” He sits up ramrod straight and flicks the light on, jumping out of bed and babbling stuff about it being too soon, and the birth plan, and how are we supposed to get back to our OBGYN in time when the babies could come at any moment. “This is too soon!”

“I know,” I say, laughing despite the tension of the moment because my beautiful fiancé is having a bit of a meltdown and one of us needs to be calm. “You’re going to have to drive me to the nearest hospital.”

“OK. I can do that,” he says, pulling on his clothes and becoming a whirlwind packing machine.

I get up and he’s straight at my side, helping me get my clothes and shoes on. Then he just stops and looks at me with wide eyes.

“The babies are gonna be OK, right?”

Reaching out, I touch his face and press my lips to his in a soft kiss. “I think they’re gonna be great. If they’re anything like you and me, they’re just too impatient to keep on waiting for the things they want.”

“I like that idea,” he says, nodding as he looks around to make sure we have everything. “Let’s go. Do you want me to carry you? Are you in pain?”

“No pain. Just a little crampy. But I’m OK. Nervous, but OK.”

He stops as he pulls open the room door and looks back at me. “I’m nervous too. We’re about to be parents, Isla. Fucking parents.”

“I know,” I whisper, leaning up against his broad chest as I gaze up at him lovingly. “And we’re going to be great at it.”

With a quick kiss and a steadying breath, we bustle out of the room and down to the car, heading straight for the nearest hospital where we spend several hours monitoring the babies and me before they decide they’ve had enough of waiting and make their way into the world less than two minutes apart.

“Seems we missed the wedding,” Banks says as we cradle the girls in our arms after the arduous task of giving birth to them and cleaning up after is complete, and we’re alone in our room. Despite them being early, they’re strong and more than ready to be part of this world. We’ve been asked to stay in the hospital for a couple of days to monitor them, but so far, so good. Our girls, Kylie and Kaylie, just couldn’t wait to meet us.

“I think Ash and Tahlia will understand,” I whisper, marveling at the dark wispy curls on our girls’ heads and the little snuffly noises they make as we huddle together and just cuddle up as a family for the first time.

“Do you want to call them and let them know why we didn’t show?”

“Just tell them we ended up taking a detour and got waylaid. That way, they get to keep their day and the wedding is all about them.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Ash will understand that there’s no way I’d miss his wedding if I couldn’t help it. And you know they’ll all rush out here the moment they find out. So give them their special night, and we’ll make it up to them when we tell them tomorrow they got nieces as a wedding gift.”

“OK, I’m texting from your phone. Saying that we went to the wrong place, but we promise we’ll make it up to them later.”

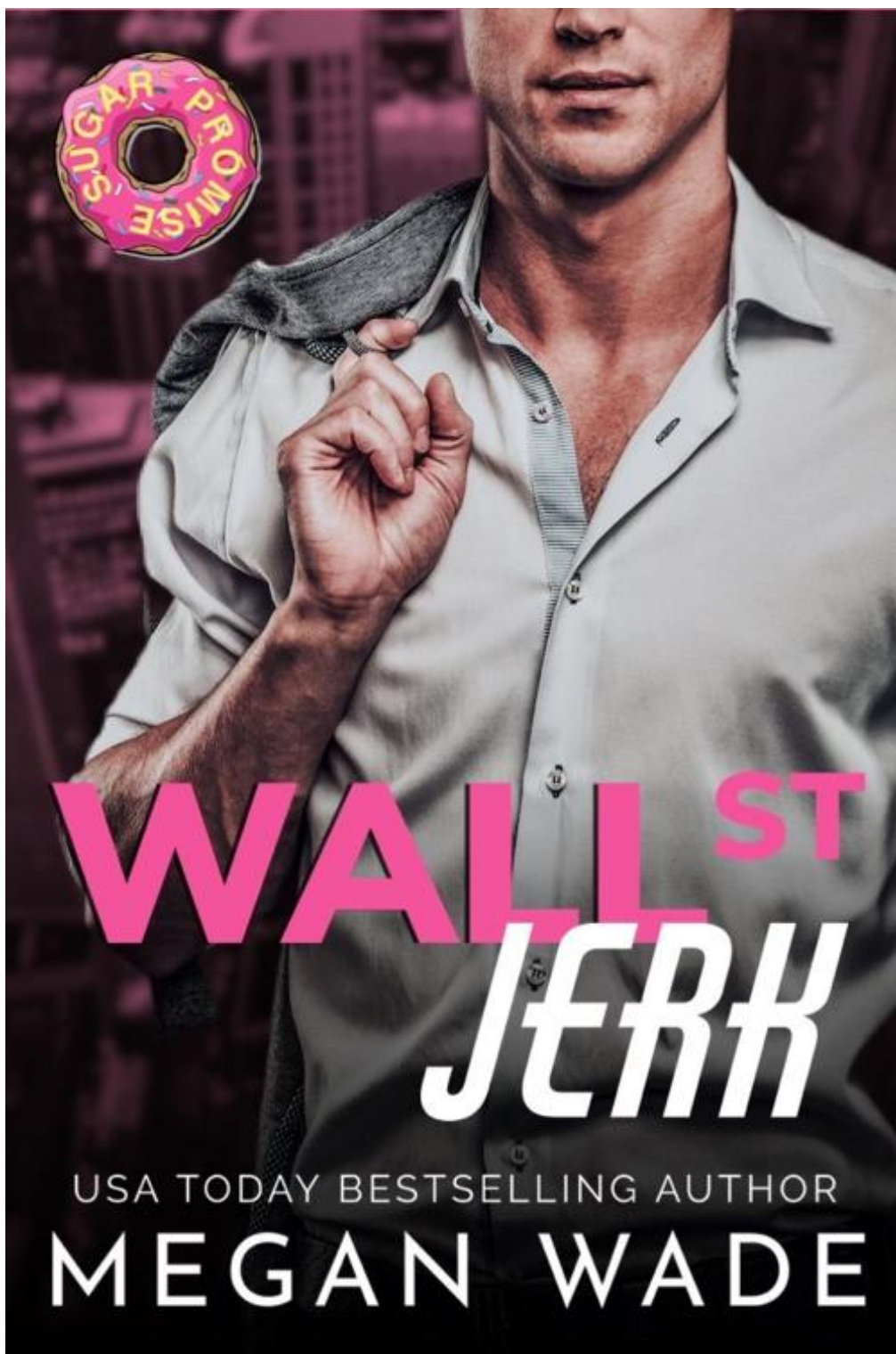
Leaning into his shoulder, I smile, because that's exactly how we started—by ending up in the wrong place. And even though I didn't think I would ever be ready for a serious relationship again, that wrong place ended up being the right time for both of us. Just like this was the right time for the twins. And like their parents, they didn't come into this world following the rules. I'd like to think they followed their little hearts, just like Banks and I have been in our journey to each other. Sure, we haven't done much of anything the 'right' or traditional way. But we've done it in a way that has made us happy. And because of that, I know deep in my heart that we share a love that will last a lifetime. With a man like Banks on my side, anything feels possible.

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THE END...ISH

Want some more fun-loving action in the Wrong, Wright world? [Wall St Jerk](#) featuring Ronan is up next. You can continue reading for a quick peek at the first few chapters....

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BECCA

Rolling out of bed, I squint against the bright sunlight as I sit on the edge of my mattress and groan into my hands. I should never have stayed up until 5 A.M. knitting a sweater when my normal bedtime is 9 P.M. Nothing is pretty in the morning after a binge, and since I'm skating on thin ice with my supervisor already, I imagine today could be the day it's all over for me. *If only admin work didn't bore me stupid.*

Dragging my feet across the cool floor, I trudge my way into the kitchen and drop a pod inside my Keurig, shoving my favorite mug—handmade with 'knit happens' painted on it—underneath the spout in preparation for the flow of wake-me-up juice that's about to pour into it.

"Dad had better love this," I say to myself as I pick up the finished sweater from my kitchen table and hold it aloft for inspection. The cable design he chose is probably the most difficult pattern I've tackled yet, and the cashmere yarn cost me a bomb to boot. But since it's a sixtieth birthday present for the best man I know, I can't really gripe about it too much. And what's even better is that I got it finished in time to give it to him at dinner tonight. The all-nighter I pulled will have been worth it when I see the joy on his face once I hand it over. He's going to love it.

My father has a great love of handmade gifts—the mug was a result of his latest pottery class—because he considers the time and effort put into creating more valuable than any gift you can buy at the store. To him, throwing money at something is easy. He likes that the things you make are a one-

of-a-kind labor of love. And as I set the sweater into the tissue-lined gift bag, I'm inclined to agree. The mug he made for me is my favorite, not because of the funny knitting pun, but because my dad made it specifically for me with his own two hands. Sure, it's slightly wobbly, and if I fill it too high it rocks and splashes coffee out the side of it. But there's just something really special about it. It was thoughtful.

Setting the gift to the side, I turn back to my coffee just as it finishes brewing, a buzzing spurt and a warm scent filling the air telling me that clear-headed reality is about to be mine.

Splashing just the right amount of milk on top so as not to cause a spill, I take my first warming sip just as my phone buzzes against the counter, a text from my work bestie, Nina, lighting up the screen.

Continuing my leisurely caffeine imbibition, I disconnect the charging cord one-handed then swipe my thumb across the screen, the words, **where the hell are you?** popping up and prompting me to frown because as far as I'm aware I don't have to be anywhere besides drinking coffee in my kitchen right now.

Scrolling back a little, I find a series of text messages inquiring as to my whereabouts before telling me the meeting is about to start. *What meeting? It's 7:00 o'clock in the bloody—oh shit.* The moment my eyes land on the time I realize I have severely fucked up.

It's not seven. It's *eleven*.

Which means I somehow slept through my alarm—*again*—probably due to the fritz electric in this crappy apartment building. Which means I am now so incredibly late that I missed the monthly team meeting. *Which means* my absence will have been more than noted. And with performance reviews coming up, this couldn't have come at a worse time. *Shit, shit, fuckity, shit!* I was really counting on getting a raise this year. I wanted to use it to finance a move into a better apartment with amenities that actually work and a super who doesn't look at me like he's just *waiting* for me to need his

‘help’. Just the idea of that sweaty, gold-toothed smile sends a shiver up and down my spine.

Fuck my life. I’m going to be stuck in the dungeon/admin pool earning a pittance forever.

Groaning, I down my coffee and type back, asking her to cover for me because I’m stuck on the subway. A tiny white lie that will have to suffice because telling them that my body clock is out of whack because I was knitting all night isn’t really going to cover my ass. Neither is the fact that my electric went out. Most people set alarms on their cell phones these days and my stubborn refusal to do so means I rely on a very old analog clock because it’s the only thing that’s loud and obnoxious enough to get me out of bed each morning. I sleep right through my gentle, musical cell alarm, but my trusty eighties clock’s bleating gets the job done ninety-nine percent of the time. The other one percent is slowly becoming the reason my boss is likely to fire me. I really can’t win.

When I get a **hurry!** texted back, I dump my phone in my bag and set about throwing on the first work-appropriate outfit I can find—a knee-length plaid skirt, a white blouse, a fawn sweater vest I knitted in the fall, and a pair of black loafers—then race out the door while still brushing my hair. My makeup of basic mascara and lip gloss gets done in the subway car, and I pull my unruly dark curls into a tight bun just as I walk into the building that houses Pierce Goodman, the wealth-building company I work for. With barely a breath of air in my lungs, I burst into the meeting room with excuses at the ready, only to find it empty save for the last person I wanted to run into—my boss.

Matilde Moonen is a stern Dutch woman who’s heavily accented, so whenever she’s unhappy with me, I feel like a little kid in the headmaster’s office, close to tears.

“Nice of you to grace us with your presence, Rebecca,” she says, closing her laptop and lifting cool blue eyes my way.

“I’m so sorry. I was stuck on the—”

“Subway. I know. Unfortunately for you, you’ll need to make up the missed hours since you don’t have any more Paid

Time Off.”

“That’s fine. I’ll work through lunch and stay back half an hour each day for the rest of the week.”

“No need to tell me. You can discuss making up your hours with Ronan.” Wait. What?

My hand flies to the base of my throat. *Oh no.* “R-Ronan?” I gulp. “As in ... Ronan Kennedy?”

“The very one.” I really don’t like where this is heading.

“*The* Ronan Kennedy?” AKA the devil on the top floor.

The instigator of mental breakdowns.

The career killer!

“Is there another?”

OK, OK, he isn’t the literal devil, and there’s no real killing involved. But by all reports, he’s a nightmare to work for. Since making partner, he’s gone through assistants as fast as a teenage boy goes through Kleenex. No one can adequately meet his demands and they either quit from the stress or he fires them for being incompetent. It’s gotten so bad that management has started pulling people out of the admin pool to keep up with demand, and it looks like I’m this month’s sacrifice—*where’s Katniss to volunteer as tribute when you need her?*

“And why do I need to discuss my hours with ... ah ... Mr. Kennedy?” I swallow hard.

“Because there was a vote, and you weren’t here to decline your nomination.”

“My n-nomination? Who nominated me?”

Matilde chuckles as she rises from her chair. I don’t think I’m getting that information. “You’ll need to report to him immediately, Rebecca. And be warned, he doesn’t react well to tardiness. But you’re a fast worker and a quick learner, so maybe that’ll make up for it.”

“One can only hope,” I wheeze, already sweating profusely as I turn away to go and face my doom.

OK. So, Ronan Kennedy is my new boss. I can handle that. I'm adaptable. And sure, I was barely getting by with my old boss, and now I have to face the man who's known to fire assistants on a whim, but I'll be OK. Surely. *Gulp.*

Oh God. Who am I kidding? I'm fucked! Who cares if I'm a "fast worker" and a "quick learner?" Ronan isn't going to give a shit about that if I'm always late. It's time to take some drastic measures to ensure I never sleep through my alarm again. I know exactly what I have to do.

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RONAN

“*W*here the hell is my assistant?” I demand when I walk into my office and there’s no one at the desk outside. It’s almost midday and the phone is ringing off the hook, the message light blinking like mad. There probably hasn’t been anyone manning the phone all morning. I pick the phone up and put it straight back down again. I’m so sick and tired of the incompetent staff in this place. I don’t have time to deal with the ridiculous call volume myself, which is why I have an assistant in the first place. So, *whatever-her-name-is* had better have a damn good excuse or she won’t have a job anymore.

“Are you talking about Rosa?” one of my analysts, Scott, asks as he follows me in to discuss the critical issues facing the company we just took a pitch meeting with.

I shake my head and frown as the phone starts up again, the noise getting to me. “I don’t know what her name is. The one with the ... the braids,” I grunt, gesturing to my own short, professionally styled blond hair as I pick the phone up and put it back down *again*. If it’s important they’ll call back later—hopefully when I don’t have to answer it myself.

“That’s Rosa. And you fired her yesterday.”

I stop moving and drop my weight into the high-back chair behind my desk, clasping my hands across my chest as I do. “I did?”

“Yep.”

“Huh.” I have zero recollection of doing this. But then, I’ve fired a lot of people over the last few months so it’s no

surprise they're all starting to blur into one.

I used to think I was a fairly patient man. After all, I worked my way from absolutely nothing to become one of the most renowned venture capitalists on Wall Street, advancing through the ranks to make partner before most of my peers made associate. I'm in an enviable position. But while more responsibility means more rewards, it also means more stress. And ever since making partner, I've realized that my patience is rather thin.

Back when I was just a budding analyst, the only thing I had to worry about was me and my targets. But now that I'm the one on top, there's a hell of a lot more at stake—my ass and my bottom line are dependent upon the quality of my team. So if my team fails, I fail. And one thing I can tell you for certain is that Ronan Kennedy is no failure. No way. No how. I've worked too hard to be brought down by a bunch of silver-spoon carrying trust-fund kids whose daddies paid for their college.

“You don't remember firing her?”

“It might help for you to jog my memory.”

Scott frowns like he's not sure if I'm serious. Then he jumps when the phone rings again. I'm quick to pick it up and leave it off the hook this time. My eyes remain on Scott expectantly. He clears his throat.

“She, uh, put the CEO from a company whose proposal you refused to fund through to you,” he says, and I instantly remember. That was definitely a fireable offense. “Poor girl left in tears.”

“Poor girl?” I scoff, leaning forward to rest my elbows on the desk. “Do you have any idea how much time that mistake cost the company in wasted time? I was on the phone for over an *hour* listening to that guy lament the decision I made not to fund his business idea. That's an hour I could have spent looking into proposals from entrepreneurs who actually have something worth investing in. I am not the complaints department. I am the man who decides who gets a chance and

who doesn't. And that mistake cost her hers. Time is money, Scott, and I don't take kindly to having mine wasted."

"Understood," he says, moving to sit in the chair across from me. "Let's hope the next girl they send up is better at screening those calls then."

"Yes. Just like I hope *you've* gotten better at looking into the players behind *this* proposal," I say, gesturing to the tablet he holds in his hands.

Sweat beads on his upper lip as he clears his throat. It's well known that I have high expectations when it comes to this game and those who work under me. I want my team to have their ear so close to the ground that they can look at a proposal and know on instinct whether it's a good investment or not. Then I want them researching the fuck out of it, finding all of the dirt on every single person with an iota of power involved. Then I want to know the technical details of the products, a breakdown of all competition, and an estimate of the market demand. All so that when they sit across from me and tell me why we should invest, they have one hundred percent confidence that backing this project will be a win for Pierce Goodman and for our team. I expect my team to be as hungry as I am, and if they don't measure up, well, out the door they go. Assistants. Analysts. I don't care what role you play, disappoint me—get in my way—and you're gone.

"I have," he says, swallowing hard as he swipes at his screen. "And I think you'll be pleasantly surprised with what I've found."

BECCA

“*I* am so totally jealous of you right now,” Nina says, a wistful expression on her face as she watches me pull my things from my desk drawer and drop them into a cardboard box. I don’t have a huge amount of personal stuff adorning my desk, but there are a handful of photos, a cute little cactus, a couple of pattern books I like to browse through, and of course I have my knitting bag. That’s something I don’t go anywhere without. I’d rather knit with just my fingers than sit around with nothing to do but make idle chit chat if I’m honest.

“Jealous of the fact that I’m going to have to start looking for a new job before long?” I ask, glancing up at her as I set my green and red cactus on top of my belongings so it doesn’t get squashed or damaged. “In case you haven’t noticed, most of the girls who go up to the top floor only last a couple of months, and they don’t come back down here again. They’re out on their ass. And I for one, can’t afford to do that. I barely have any savings as it is.”

Twirling side to side in her desk chair, Nina flicks her blonde hair over her shoulder and lets out a longing sigh. “I think I’d happily look for another job if it meant I got to spend one on one time in the presence of Ronan Kennedy.”

“Nina, I don’t think you’re hearing me. I’m worried for my employment status here.”

“Oh, I hear you. But, have you seen that man up close?” She fans at herself dramatically. “I was in the elevator alone with him once, and I all about self-combusted from his

gorgeousness alone. It should be a sin to be *that* good-looking *and* that wealthy.”

“Pity it doesn’t make him a nicer person,” I say, slinging my purse over my head so it sits across my chest. “Did you even see Rosa on her way out yesterday? She was a sniveling mess and couldn’t stop calling him *El Diablo*. I don’t know about you, but I don’t have sympathy for any devils—no matter *how* good-looking or rich they are.”

Nina blows out a raspberry and waves her hand in the air dismissively. “I doubt he’s *that* bad. Besides, Rosa was always prone to dramatics. Remember that time she cried over the printer jamming?”

“Yeah. I do. And she was eight months pregnant at the time, and the entire toner cartridge exploded all over her white shirt. So, I think we can forgive her that one.”

“Sure,” she says, with the bounce of her shoulder. “I still don’t think it could be that bad working for him, though. Especially for you, because you’re a gun.”

“A gun?”

“Yeah. Like, you blow through all of your work faster than a normal person. It’s why you’ve gotten more chances from Matilde than the rest of us combined.”

“I really don’t think that’s true,” I mutter, hefting the box into my arms. “I’ve been on thin ice around here for a while.”

“And yet *you’re* the one who got chosen by the powers that be for a promotion.”

“Promotion,” I scoff. “More like a banishment. I’ll be lucky if I last more than a month. And before you get all swoony over the man again, Rosa isn’t the only ex-employee with a nightmare story to tell about Ronan Kennedy. He’s been on the top floor for less than a year and he’s already gone through *six* assistants. And God knows how many analysts he’s gotten rid of in his quest for the perfect team. By all accounts, the man is highly strung and has a temper to boot. So, I suggest you take a good look at this”—I use my index

finger to circle around my face—“because it won’t be around much longer.”

“You know what? I don’t believe that. I think this is the role that’s going to turn everything around for you. Just think, if you can make it just six months as Ronan’s assistant, the extra money will not only build your savings, but it will also give you the chance to move out of that shitty apartment building that I swear should be condemned by now.” Nina found a dead rat in the stairwell once and has refused to visit me at my apartment ever since. I shudder at the memory because honestly, I don’t blame her. I’ve lost count of the dead rats I’ve found. Not to mention the roaches. I want out too.

“Six months?” With a raised-brow sigh, I slip my fingers through the handle of my knitting bag and balance it swinging beneath the box. “I think pulling that off would take some kind of Christmas miracle, and since it’s now January, it’s too late for that.”

“You’re going to do great, Becca. I have the utmost faith in you!”

“Faith. OK. Well, how about we catch up for lunch tomorrow and I’ll tell you how far that faith is getting me?” I suggest as I step away from my old desk, butterflies flitting around in my belly at the idea of heading toward my new one on the thirty-fifth floor.

Nina’s eyes light up. “Yes! And you can tell me all about your new boss in *great detail*.” She waggles her brows, and I can’t help but laugh as I take one last look around then head for the elevators.

“Knock ‘em dead, babe!” she calls after me when the doors open and I step inside. I throw a half-hearted smile over my shoulder then swallow down my nerves as I hit the button for the top floor and ready myself for what’s to come. I’m glad Nina has faith in me because all I have is a great sense of dread. While I was hoping to get a raise this month, becoming the executive assistant to Wall Street’s biggest jerk wasn’t the kind of leg up I had in mind.

Just as the elevator doors close, my cell buzzes in my purse to tell me I have a message. I do a slight balancing act to get to it, and when I hold it up, a text from Nina fills the screen: **Take pictures! Lots and lots of his forearms and his ass :drooling emoji:**

Rolling my eyes, I drop my cell back into my bag, the dread feeling a little less poignant as I laugh at my friend's antics while the elevator makes its climb. Unfortunately, the trip from admin to the top floor is shorter than expected. And when I step out, it's to the sound of none other than Ronan Kennedy, doing what Ronan Kennedy does best—yelling.

“Research? This is nothing more than a pathetic lack of effort. Do it again. And if it's not done to my satisfaction by the time I leave this office tonight, I don't want you to bother coming back tomorrow.”

Gritting my teeth, I take a deep breath and force my feet to move, one in front of the other. It feels a lot like one of those scenes in a gangster movie where the bad guy gives someone a shovel and tells them to start digging. In this instance, I'm the one with the shovel and with every step that takes me closer to Ronan Kennedy's office, I'm digging my grave a little deeper.

RONAN

“Don’t just look at me, Scott. Get the fuck out and get to work,” I snap, causing my analyst to turn and scurry out of my office with his head down, tablet tucked under his arm.

With a discontented sigh, I turn away to look out the window, trying to talk myself down so I don’t go out there and fire every single person on my team for letting him walk in here underprepared. They should be looking out for each other. But instead, they’re all too focused on themselves to have any kind of idea what real teamwork is.

I know I have a reputation for being a hard ass, but I’d rather that than have a single member of my staff thinking they can walk all over the top of me or turn in half-assed work. And so what if I have a high staff turnover and send people cowering whenever I walk into a room? My methods get results. It’s *because* of my reputation that we’re the one team in the company with our projects all in the black.

That’s more than I can say for Pete Greer down the hall. He got made partner a year before I did, and last month one of the projects he invested in went bankrupt. The senior partners are livid, and I’m just over here with an ‘I told you so’ smirk because it was a deal I refused. After looking into the management team, I found someone with a sketchy financial past and put the deal in the discard pile immediately. They say everyone deserves a second chance, but people who don’t know how to manage their money tend to repeat the same mistakes time and time again. I need to see evidence of them

righting their wrongs before I'll allocate any of the funds to them that I have a say over. In this guy's case, I was right to pull back. Pete, though, he has a thing about trying to prove he's better than me, and sometimes that competitiveness causes him to make dumb calls.

Due diligence is *everything* in this game. If you don't know what you're investing in, you don't know your risk. It's why I'm so hard on my team, and it's why management lets me get away with being heavy-handed with the pink slips. Still, there's only so much leeway I can take advantage of. And firing my entire team in one go might be the thing that pushes me over the line and gets *me* fired. And since I really like earning the big bucks, I might hold off another day or two.

"My cactus!" My head snaps around when I hear a yelp, prefaced by a clattering of things scattering across the floor.

"Shit. I'm so sorry," Scott bumbles, kneeling just outside my door in front of the dowdiest dressed woman I've ever seen. He scrambles to pick up the balls of yarn that are skittering and unraveling across the floor. *Wait. Yarn?* Who the fuck brings yarn to Wall St? Little grannies?

Lifting my foot, I bring the tip of my shoe down on top of a wayward ball then crouch to pick it up. My fingers sink into it. It's a soft, dusty blue cashmere that is surprisingly pleasant to touch. In fact, as I wind it up and follow the yarn trail to its owner, I'm reminded of the one person in my past who gave a damn about me as a scrawny kid—my best friend's grandmother.

Granny Dee was a stern woman and an avid knitter. The click-clack of her knitting needles while Banks and I did our homework at the kitchen table with his cousin, Darren, is a sound I'll always remember with fondness. It was her relentless insistence that Banks and I better ourselves that turned me into the man I am today. The scratchy woolen sweaters she made us wear, however, are something I'd rather forget. I don't think I've owned anything knitted since I left college and got my first job.

“It’s fine. I wasn’t really watching where I was going either,” the brunette woman with the messy bun says as she tosses her things back into a box and shakes her head despondently, scooping the soil from her plant into a broken pot.

Seeing her like that, I make the snap assumption that one of my colleagues has taken a leaf from my book and fired a team member for not being hungry enough. But then, I could tell you this girl wasn’t built for Wall Street just by looking at her outfit. She’s wearing loafers, a knitted sweater vest and a pleated skirt in an office where everyone else sports a smart gray or charcoal suit over a sharp white or pale blue shirt—the outfit of the serious investor who has no time for flair—and to top that off, she’s sulking over a broken cactus pot and spilled knitting needles. Where this girl belongs is in a library or a farmhouse in the country somewhere. The mind boggles over who in their right mind hired her here in the first place.

“I’m assuming this belongs to you,” I say, holding out the now wound-up ball.

Her shoulders stiffen and she jerks her head up with a gasp, meeting my eyes with the most azure blue gaze I’ve ever seen.

“Please don’t fire me,” she whispers, slowly getting to her feet.

“Why on earth would I fire you?”

“Isn’t that what you do?” Something inside me shifts and I falter slightly as she takes the yarn from my hand, I almost release it too early.

“Not without cause.” I’m quick to clear my throat and regain my composure as I step back from her, unsure why her comment made me feel so off-balance. Shouldn’t I be glad that my reputation precedes me?

“I’m knitting a scarf,” she blurts suddenly, her eyes flicking down as she shoves the ball of yarn into a carpet bag.

“I don’t recall asking,” I state, annoyed at my reaction and annoyed at her for causing it. Maybe I *should* fire her? If she’s

worried that I'm going to, then I obviously have the power to do so. That can only mean that she's the new assistant HR had sent up. And so far, I'm not impressed. "But since you feel the need to tell me all about yourself, how about we start with a name?"

She scowls before she clears her throat and sets her spine straight, a sweet scent touching my nose as she steps closer, jutting her hand out in greeting. "Becca Maxwell. I work in admin. Well, I don't anymore. I'm to be your new executive assistant."

A slow grin curves my mouth as I look from her hand to her, my eyes taking in the mousey girl with the amazing eyes and more curves than a woman dressed so matronly has a right to.

"They sent *you* up *here*?" I question, my hands sliding into my pockets as my grin turns into a chuckle. "To be *my* assistant?" I take another step back and shake my head. "You know what, you were right in the beginning. This isn't going to work. Go back down there and tell them to send someone else." I spin on my heel and head back into my office, suddenly feeling lightheaded. *Does she smell like ... jellybeans?*

"And what's so wrong with me?" she demands, following me in with an adorably indignant jut of her chin. "I'm just as capable as anyone else down there, if not more so. I'm probably the fastest and most efficient admin assistant they have. I'm also great at communicating, and I'm excellent at leading and working as part of a team. So, you don't get to take one look at me and make a judgment about what you think I can and can't do because you'll be wrong, and I'll prove it. I don't know if you have something against me being a woman or if you just have something against me being fat. But I'm pretty sure that no matter how you look at that, turning me away at this point counts as either wrongful termination or discrimination at best."

"It has nothing to do with either of those things," I growl, reeling because this confrontation has gone from a nuisance blip in my day to turning me the fuck on. "I simply don't want

an assistant who's too clumsy to get out of the way when someone's walking right at her. In this job, I expect every member of my team to have their wits about them at all times. You very obviously do not."

"Then what about him out there?" she demands, holding her hand out and gesturing toward Scott who's now holding her box and knitting bag and gaping at us. "Is he fired too?"

Scott's eyes bulge, and he looks like he wants to dive behind something and hide.

"He's on his final warning," I say, noting the visible relief in the set of his shoulders as he puts the items on the nearest desk and scurries away, probably hoping that if he stays out of my way he'll be safe. *Good luck with that, buddy.*

"Then I think the very least you can do is let me have a warning too. Not that having some guy slam into me when I was waiting outside your door is in any way my fault, mind you. But since I just got this job and I don't feel like explaining to my slimy landlord why I can't make rent this month, I'd appreciate it if I could be judged on my work and not my ability to dodge obstacles."

My eyes narrow slightly as the words *slimy* and *landlord* burrow their way into my brain, causing long since buried memories to rise to the surface. As I push them away, a sense of protectiveness surges inside me—something I was too young to provide when it was my mother on the slimy receiving end. It causes the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end. *If he or any man ever dares to make her feel uncomfortable, I will rain hell upon them.* I honestly have zero clue where all this is coming from. Normally, I can find a woman attractive and do nothing about it. But in Becca's case, something about her looks combined with her fire, combined with her tapping into something from my past is making me feel all kinds of unwanted things. Many of them completely inappropriate for the workplace. This reaction to a woman—any woman—is new, and I'm not quite sure how to handle it besides get away from her as fast as I possibly can. But she's right. I can't fire her based on looks alone. I have to let her do the job first. *Shit.*

“Fine.” I have to swallow a massive lump in my throat before I can even talk. “Set yourself up at the desk outside my office. Gatekeep both the phone and my door. I don’t want to be interrupted for the rest of the day. Understood?”

Blinking rapidly, she sucks in a deep, lung filling breath that only accentuates the size of her chest as she nods. “I can do that. Anything else?”

“Don’t fuck up,” I say, standing there with my teeth clenched tight as she whispers an OK, then turns and saunters out of my office, her head held high and her ass swaying so hypnotically my balls ache. The moment she takes a seat at her desk, I stalk over to the door and slam it closed, taking in gulp after gulp of air as I try to figure out what the hell just went on.

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