

THE WOLFE'S DEBUTANTE

Wolfe Brothers Book 4

Cora North



CORA
NORTH

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ISBN-13: 9798375100128

ISBN-10: 1477123456

Cover design by: Art Painter

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018675309

Printed in the United States of America

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1-ELEANOR

Standing between me and sweet escape, other than my sanity and my entire well-ordered life, is the climb down from this second-story window in the designer gown I'm wearing.

It's not that different from the one I wore at my debutante ball, a rite of passage for society girls like me. Except instead of white, this dress is red. And, instead of a perfectly polite and naïve seventeen year-old girl with a heart full of secret dreams, I'm a jaded woman of twenty-three and bride-to-be preparing to flee my engagement party.

Could I go back down to the party and say 'I'm sorry but the engagement is off?'

Yes but climbing out a window seems less terrifying than admitting what a total farce my relationship was in front of nearly everyone I know.

There's a twisted sense of satisfaction in the sound of tearing silk as my evening gown becomes a minidress. The evening breeze stirs my hair as I poke my head out the window. The country club's lawn is deserted and the darkened golf course stretches on for several acres. It's not far to a sturdy-looking branch of this butternut tree.

Now or never, Norrie.

With a deep breath, I reach for freedom... and nearly go splat in the rose bushes below.

"Eeeeeee!"

Luckily, the occasional bicep curl saves me from a broken neck since Tarzan isn't here to swoop in and do the honors.

Clinging to the branch below the one I was originally aiming for, I do a quick assessment.

Am I injured? No.

Did I scare the bejesus out of the poor squirrel who's chittering loudly at me now? Probably. (Do squirrels attack people?)

Are those rose bushes going to hurt like hell when I land in them? Yep.

"Sorry. Lovely home you have here," I tell the squirrel. I hope that he'll count us as friends soon.

I can hear music filtering through the lower level windows. The party's still in full swing. No one's missed me or suspected my flight yet. I need to get moving.

That's a problem though because my minor dislike of heights has suddenly become a full-blown phobia. And, oops. There go my heels. How far down is it? Maybe eight feet?

"I'll bet you could make that jump easily." The squirrel hops closer, its tail twitching. "I used to think you guys were just rats with bushy tails." He glares at me with beady little eyes. "No offense."

Okay. Just gotta let go of this branch and barrel roll maybe? I'm not a stunt woman. Also, *thorns*.

Chin up. You can do it, Norrie.

"No, I really don't think I can," I whimper to the cheerful little voice inside my head I labeled Mom years ago.

Too late, I realize I should not have thought of my mother. She wouldn't understand this hare-brained move from me.

Meanwhile, my father will be furious. I've always strived to be the perfect daughter, the poised and elegant girl who does everything right. Oh no. This will cause a scandal, won't it? I should go back inside. I'll simply go through with this party, marry Fox in six months and be grateful not to die an ignominious death of being impaled by rose bushes.

Don't cry. Don't freak out. You're a Fairfield. You can do this. With grace and decorum. You can... marry a man you detest, smile while doing it and be miserable until the end of your days.

"I can't do that," I tell the squirrel on the verge of tears. "Isn't there a lovely, *larger* tree you know of where I could live? Maybe a tree house? How did my life get this messed up? And, since when do I talk to squirrels?"

A piercing wolf whistle interrupts my emotional breakdown. "Nice legs. Has the squirrel answered you yet?"

My fear and distress are momentarily forgotten at the sound of *that* voice - Grayson Wolfe.

"Go away, Wolfe." The squirrel chitters angrily in agreement with me. "My friend says to go away, too."

Of course, he doesn't do that. He strolls right up to my butternut tree's trunk, too dapper for anyone's peace of mind in his tux, and leans against it, grinning like Christmas came early. Why is this man blessed with such devilish good looks and such a charming smile?

"Not going anywhere until you explain this one to me, Fairfield. Is this a new hazing ritual for brides-to-be? You're past your sorority days by now, right?"

"As if *I* would ever have done half the bone-headed things *you* probably did," I grumble. (It is a little hard to feel superior hanging from this branch though.)

My arms are starting to shake and my hands are already tender from the rough bark. I'm about at the end of my stay here. And, I'd really prefer it if Grayson Wolfe doesn't watch me break my ankle.

He's strong, Norrie. He could carry you someplace to get help if you do.

Yes, he could. But I don't want *his* help.

"Please, go inside and forget you saw me. Or go defile a golf cart with one of your bungalow bunnies if you want. I don't care."

“Defile a golf cart... bungalow bunnies?” he repeats before he throws his head back and roars with laughter.

“Will you *please* be quiet?” I hiss.

He doesn't stop laughing. He's enjoying this, the ass. He wipes his eyes and makes a show of clutching his chest as he says, “Come on, Fairfield. What's up? Besides you. Wait. Are you ditching Davenport?”

His blue eyes sparkle with mischief and I should *not* find that alluring. “Wolfe, I'm warning you-”

An ominous crack from my branch cuts off my feeble threat as I'm screeching again and the squirrel scampers back to the safety of the trunk.

“I've been a good girl all my life and this is what I get?! You're letting *this* guy watch me die?!” I scream, turning my face skyward.

“Hang on, little squirrel. No one's dying.”

I feel the tips of his fingers brushing my bare feet. That should *not* make me tingle in unmentionable places. I refuse to allow that tingle. I'll do what comes naturally when it comes to Grayson Wolfe instead.

“Why the hell are you kicking me, woman?!”

“Because you're tickling me when I'm scared!”

“If I was really intent on tickling you, I promise you wouldn't be kicking me for it,” he says darkly and damn if that doesn't cause more unmentionable tingling!

But his voice turns gentler, no longer teasing when he says, “Don't be scared, Eleanor. I'll catch you, okay? Look at me.”

Doing as he says, I look down into the deep blue eyes of an Adonis. An Adonis whose good looks hide the fact that he's a complete jerk from everything I know of him.

Beggars can't be choosers, Norrie. Let the jerk help.

“There are thorns,” I say to warn him of the roses.

He wades closer through them, uncaring for his finely-made tuxedo, and shrugs. “Every rose has them but there’s a damsel in distress to rescue.” He gives me a rakish grin. I should *not* be susceptible to that grin. (But I am.)

“I was doing alright before you got here. I was having a lovely conversation with my furry friend over there.”

“Sure, you were. God, you’re as stubborn as ever,” he huffs, standing directly under me now.

“Don’t look up my dress.”

He snorts back a laugh. “Little late considering the position. Does it help if I say I’m not enjoying it?”

Ouch, not really. “Promise you won’t drop me?”

“I won’t drop you.” His voice really is soothing when it’s low and soft like this. “You’re going to have to trust me a little,” he says next as his fingers skim across my bare calves.

Why does his touch have to do *that* to me?

It’s the situation. He’s nothing special. I might react this way if the chauffeur was doing the rescuing.

Somehow, I sincerely doubt my body would react to Old Simmons this way.

“On the count of three, you’re going to let go and I’m going to catch you.” I nod but he’s barely said, “One,” when the branch decides to shake me loose itself.

“AAAAAHHH!!”

A crack, a crash and loud *oofs* from us both but he does break my fall. He’s admittedly a very solid and nicely muscled landing mat. My goodness, he smells divine, too. I’m flat on my back on top of him, at heads and tails. Where is my head resting??

As I’m sitting up to thank him, I realize my legs are splayed open with my feet on either side of his head while his hands rest on my knees.

“Ouch. Fucking thorns. White lace, Fairfield?”

I slam my thighs together and scramble off him like he's on fire, shoving what's left of my ruined dress down as I glare at him.

He simply chuckles at that and starts to stand, offering me a hand up, when we hear voices coming our way.

"Eleanor? Where are you? You're being abominably rude to our guests disappearing like this. Do you see her?"

Oh no, it's my father.

Grabbing Grayson's hand, I yank with all my might to pull him back down. "What the hell, Fairfield? It's just your dad-"

"Snookums, are you out here? Everyone's worried about you," another voice calls in a saccharine-false tone of concern. *Fox*. I shudder at that nickname and how I used to think it was cute.

Grayson's shaking with suppressed laughter, mouthing '*Snookums?*' as we're face to face in the rose bushes but, as much as I don't like this particular Wolfe, *he's* never personally betrayed me.

"Please, don't say anything," I beg, quietly.

He doesn't reply, simply studies me silently as one set of footsteps draws closer.

"I'm sure your hair or shoes or the hors d'oeuvres or whatever you're worrying your pretty little head over are fine," Fox says, not bothering to hide his annoyance now that my father is further away.

I attended Yale, graduated Summa Cum Laude. I have my MBA. But Fox treats me like the ditzy trophy wife in the making he's decided suits him and his ego better. And, I was going to marry him?

Do not cry over that man, Norrie.

I don't but, before I can stop him, Grayson shoots to his feet and Fox gives a startled shout. "Christ, Wolfe! You gave me a scare hiding in the bushes."

“Gotta watch for us dangerous creatures lying in wait, Davenport,” he says, a touch growly. Oh, there’s that pesky tingling again!

“Have you seen Eleanor out here?” Fox asks, apparently rattled by Grayson’s (totally hot) growly tone.

I wrap my hands around Grayson’s ankle, prepared to give him a few scratches the thorns didn’t manage with my manicure if he gives me up.

“I might’ve seen her down by the bungalows,” Grayson replies with a smirk.

The bungalows are in the opposite direction of us and hopefully Fox will go that way.

But, even I know they’re hook-up central at these country club affairs. This cocky asshole. I dig my fingernails into Grayson’s ankle for the connotation on principle.

Fox is silent and I’m not sure what kind of non-verbal exchange is going on but I can sense the tension and testosterone in the air until, at last, Fox leaves.

He’s barely out of sight when Grayson hauls me to my feet, not seeming as distressed by the clawing I gave him as he should. “You’re much more violent than expected when you’re not being Little Miss Perfect, Fairfield.”

“Glad to amuse you. Now, let go of me.”

“Nuh-uh,” he says even as he does release me. “Tell me why you’re ditching your engagement party. I got all dressed up for the occasion.”

“You got dressed up to smooze for your big brother and woo unsuspecting women, Wolfe,” I call over my shoulder while searching for my heels. Now, if only I could find a golf cart. “And, I don’t owe you an explanation.”

“Well, unless you want to go back inside or find a new tree to climb, you’re not completely out of the woods. You didn’t drive here and the golf carts are all locked up for the night.”

“Dammit,” I sigh. He’s right.

“I could give you a lift... *if* you ask me sweetly.”

I do not want to ask him sweetly for anything.

Needs must when the devil drives, Norrie. And this devil probably drove.

“Fine. Would you please give me a lift, Mr. Wolfe, to somewhere that’s not here? Preferably my family’s estate? I’d be ever so grateful.” I’m sure to bat my eyelashes. I can lay it on thick when necessary.

“That wasn’t so hard now, was it?”

“I hope those roses left you with thorns where the sun doesn’t shine.”

He laughs out loud and my tummy does the most ridiculous flip when Grayson’s hand hovers at the small of my back as he guides me towards escape. “Come on then, squirrel.”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Oh, I think I will absolutely call you that.”

Insufferable man.

“Did you see any press loitering about?” I ask quietly as we get closer to the parking lot. We’re almost home free. It’s better than if they’d spied me hanging from a tree earlier but I’m still in half of a ruined dress and on the wrong man’s arm.

“No, I think the coast is clear,” Grayson says as we round the corner of the clubhouse where he says his Jeep is parked.

Sweet escape. I can almost taste it. *We’ll worry about the consequences for tonight’s lunacy tomorrow.*

In my euphoria, I’m prompted to do something completely insane which is fitting considering the rest of my decisions this evening. I decide to give Grayson Wolfe a thank-you kiss.

“For helping out a damsel in distress, Mr. Wolfe,” I say jokingly before grasping his broad shoulders and rising to my tiptoes.

I intended to aim for his cheek but, somehow, that's not where my lips land...

2-ELEANOR

How dare the guy I hate be such a good kisser!

It was meant to be nothing more than a flippant little thank-you peck but there is absolutely nothing flippant about this kiss. Holy smokes, I didn't know kisses could be this hot! From the moment, my lips veer from his cheek to his mouth, something primal and electric springs to life between us and takes over.

With my hands on his shoulders and his quickly circling my waist, he tilts his head and deepens my little 'thank-you kiss.' His warm hand spans the small of my back, making me come alive with more of those delicious tingles.

I don't pull back.

I don't stop him.

I don't want to.

His commanding mouth is slotted against mine, entreating me to open for him. I surrender readily to his firm, full lips, like a novice might yield to a master.

He tastes like expensive liquor and trouble, sinfully irresistible. The way his thumb strokes my cheek? As a lady, I probably shouldn't admit all the parts of me which respond to that simple touch.

And, what's worse? I'm kissing him back, happily and undeniably, allowing him to explore my mouth with his talented tongue while the hot, hard body I'm pressed against like glue awakens all kinds of naughty notions to go along with those tingles.

I even *moan*. I've dated Fox for a *year*. He never once made me moan during a kiss but one from Wolfe does it? So unfair.

As the far-too-long kiss stretches on, I become vaguely aware of noises nearby that weren't present a moment ago.

There's a clicking sound, some murmuring, a shuffling of feet and...

"Mr. Wolfe?"

"Grayson, look over here!"

Oh my God!

A handful of intrepid society page reporters and bloggers who've been assigned to cover the event that was to be Fox Davenport and Eleanor Fairfield's engagement party are standing a dozen feet away from us getting an eyeful. Grayson doesn't even seem to notice them.

As we break apart, a slow, smug grin spreads across his stupidly handsome face. "Are you a little squirrel or more of a minx?"

"I..."

"Knew you were into me."

My brain wakes from the spell he temporarily had my body under. "I... into *you*?! Why, you cocky asshole! I most certainly am not into you! It was only meant to be a simple thank-you kiss! You're the one who tried to swallow my tonsils!"

He's completely unfazed by my denials or the fact we've been photographed kissing outside my engagement party to another man.

Maybe they don't recognize you, Norrie. Your face isn't as well-known as-

"Miss Fairfield? Is that you?"

"Eleanor, look this way!"

"What happened to your dress?"

OH MY GOD!

The ensuing flashes resemble an electrical storm. I probably resemble the proverbial prey-in-headlights while Wolfe looks like... well, like a wolf who has marked his prey.

Meanwhile, my first scandal?

Check. Go big or go home.



I did go home by the way. Without Grayson's help, thank you very much. There'd been a fortuitous taxi on standby which I'd leapt into the way my squirrel friend might've leapt from one branch to another while that asshole stood there chuckling and ignoring the reporters' questions.

Twenty-four hours later, I'm in full-on hermit mode. I will simply never leave the house again.

I don't believe that's a reasonable solution, Norrie.

When you're hiding out from your very first scandal, it's a comfort to have your two best friends by your side. Even if the conversation is getting a little repetitive after twenty-four hours.

"Explain to me again *why* you kissed him," Constance says before adding her signature ending. "You should've called me. I was literally downstairs."

Believe me, I *wish* I had thought of that before climbing out that window.

Constance and I were debutantes together and her father owns a large architecture firm where she works. On the other hand, Drew's mother is the culinary director at the country club who says the only silver spoons she's ever had were ones she's polished.

"To hell with why you kissed him, tell us again what it was like," Drew says.

I should never have admitted how unexpectedly agreeable I found his kiss. "Clearly, I had hit my head at some point during the evening. It's the only rational explanation."

Constance sniffs disdainfully. Her older sister Camilla dated one of Grayson's friends for two and half years in

undergrad. It was obviously serious. Todd's grandmother's heirloom Harry Winston five carat diamond engagement ring was as good as hers until Wolfe interfered.

I was tearfully told the tale over brunch one Sunday years ago and, afterwards at the age of seventeen, I made a list - **Ten Reasons I Hate Grayson Wolfe**. I could probably still recite it.

Camilla's broken heart was Number Two right under the top slot - **Grayson Wolfe is a cocky asshole**.

My country club exchanges with the youngest of the four Wolfe Brothers have grown increasingly snippy over the years and the feelings of dislike are mutual, especially since I started dating Fox. They knew each other at Northwestern. They'd been friends until Wolfe Media had run the Davenports' family-owned newspaper out of business and Grayson had had the audacity to laugh in Fox's face over it. Naturally, it sealed my poor opinion of him.

Admittedly, there is a part of me now which is taking a petty satisfaction in knowing that me kissing Grayson will bother Fox. Is that what prompted my final act of madness last night?

Don't lie to yourself. You wanted to kiss him once to see what it was like.

Yes and there's my secret shame. I *hate* Grayson Wolfe but my body doesn't seem to agree with that decision.

"Dad's furious with me. My position at work might be in question."

"You work for your dad."

"But I'm the most junior-junior of associates, a glorified coffee-fetcher as well as the boss's daughter. What if this completely spoils my future credibility there?"

I'll be honest. I don't like my job at Fairfield Communications but it's what's expected of me. We all grow up and the majority of us are forced to make sacrifices when it comes to our dreams.

“Or what if you have to keep working with Fox?”

Ugh. Please, no.

But Fox does indeed work there and he’s not a glorified coffee-fetcher like me.

“Screw work and screw Fox. What are you going to do about this nonsense from a social standpoint?”

Constance holds up the horrid society page headline – *Wolfe Steals Debutante from Under Fiancé’s Nose* – and we all cringe in unison.

They could’ve at least given me proper credit as the runaway bride-to-be instead of making it sound like I was some hapless prize in their manly pissing contest. Eleanor Fairfield calls the shots in her own life.

“Christ, this one’s calling you The Scarlet Debutante. Who pays these people to write this garbage?”

One kiss, one ruined red dress and now I’m somehow the cheater in this picture.

A knock on the door interrupts our discussion. “Miss Eleanor, your father wishes to speak with you in his study now,” our housekeeper informs me.

I grasp my best friends’ hands, instantly shaking with nerves. He didn’t speak to me last night once he returned home after dealing with the fallout at the club. Anytime I’ve displeased him, the wait for his attention is doubly long and agonizing. So much for calling the shots in my own life.

“Please tell him I’ll be down at once,” I tell Mrs. Hadley, hating the quavering note in my voice.

My friends swoop in to reassure me the moment she leaves my room. “He’ll understand as soon as you explain how you caught Fox.”

Humiliation and anger burn through me again at the reminder. I wish I’d confronted him right then instead of bolting like a scaredy squirrel. I sent him a text after I got home last night to tell him why our engagement was off but it would’ve been nice to tell him off to his face instead.

From the moment my dad introduced us, Fox had acted like the perfect gentleman around me. Even when things began though, our affections had an artificial air to them. That's what happens when you're both trying to please your matchmaker and not sincerely into each other, I suppose.

And, he was *painfully* gentlemanly in one respect throughout our relationship. Is my father that intimidating or am I that undesirable? Maybe I'm not a supermodel but shouldn't the man who wants to marry you burn to be with you?

One thing is certain, I now know Fox isn't as squeaky clean as he's made himself out to be. And, I suppose my utter lack of heartbreak over the fact tells me something as well.

You were meant to climb out that window, Norrie.

Was I, Mom? Because I'm thinking throwing a drink in Fox's face and catching a ride home with Constance last night might've caused a bit less of a scandal.

3-ELEANOR

My father and I don't fight. I oppose him too rarely for that to be the case. He says he loves me and that he only wants to protect me. Except he wants to protect me from *everything*, including life itself.

"You should go to school here. Study this major. Get your MBA. You'll come work for me once you're finished. This young man is acceptable..." It's been this way for years.

When I was little and Mom was alive, he was different. Older and more reserved than most dads perhaps but happier. My parents found love later in life and Mom and Dad were well into their forties when they married and later had me.

Since her passing from an undiagnosed heart condition when I was thirteen, he's thrown himself into work. Not knowing how to manage a teenage daughter and his company, he'd packed me off to boarding school and the distance between us grew.

Reaching his study, I take a deep breath and open the door. On the other side, seated behind his large mahogany desk with his hands steepled together is Louis Fairfield, CEO of Fairfield Communications, my boss since I started working there after finishing my Masters in Business and my father.

He looks every single one of his seventy years of age today and I know that's my fault. Guilt pierces me.

"Eleanor, please have a seat so we may discuss this matter as adults." Even when he says we should discuss things as adults, he still treats me like a child.

Taking a seat, I know it's time to tell my father the reason behind last night's actions. If only my tongue would unstick itself from the roof of my mouth. He levels me with a long stare before I manage it. "How long have you been involved with Grayson Wolfe?"

"Involved with..." Oh my God, he's got this so wrong! "I'm not involved with him at all! It was an ill-considered act

on my part and then the kiss was captured by the press, making it appear like more than it was. In fact, I would say, in general, I hate Grayson Wolfe.” *Even if my body disagrees.*

“Hmm. Well, that settles that concern. It’s a shame in some ways that the two of you don’t get along but I’m going to trust you can be a professional around him despite disliking him.”

What the hell does that mean? Meanwhile, I still have to explain why I climbed out that window. “Dad, the reason I left the party the way I did-”

“Yes, yes... Fox confessed his indiscretion after I confronted him last night,” he says, testily. “I’m extremely disappointed and angered by his actions.”

Fox confessed to my father but not to me? *What an asshole.* Indiscretion is too polite a word for what I witnessed when I stopped by unannounced to retrieve my golf clubs shortly before the engagement party.

And, my father has already spoken to Fox while he’s made me wait? *I’m your daughter!*

I’m too annoyed and stung by these revelations to speak and my father carries on regardless. “Eleanor, I feel at fault for this debacle as much as anyone. I encouraged your relationship with that man and brought you on board at the company while you two were involved. Clearly, I was mistaken in his character and it leaves us in an unsavory position.”

“We both were mistaken about him, Dad, but-”

“What’s done is done. I’ve been on the phone the past hour making some new arrangements for you.”

“New arrangements for me?” A chill grips me. He’d used that same expression before he sent me to boarding school. I know I’m still two years shy of having control of my trust fund but he can’t actually pack me off to boarding school anymore, can he?

“Yes, this alters things but I cannot fire him outright for infidelity, particularly as you were not yet married. The

lawyers say it's not proper grounds." I knew this even if I sort of hoped otherwise. "However, I don't want you to be forced to see him every day."

I don't want to see him at all. I hope someone sends him to Mars indefinitely.

"As it turns out though, this may result in an excellent opportunity for you."

"Opportunity?" Why does opportunity sound a lot like punishment?

"One which will help you grow as a young professional and hopefully into an adult who doesn't climb out of windows to avoid unpleasant confrontations."

Ouch.

"I'm proud of the company I've built."

"Yes, you should be and I will gladly follow in your foot-"

"But, while we've been successful, I'll concede we're small-fry compared to some and time runs its course."

I'm not sure what he means regarding time but the 'some' he's referring to can only be Wolfe Media. We're regional. They're global. We operate a small wireless and internet provider which employs a few hundred people. They're involved in every aspect of media imaginable with tens of thousands of employees. We may be rich but they're *billionaires*.

"So, if you're not actually involved with Grayson, I see no problem with this solution. You'll be answering directly to the CEO though you can't entirely avoid the COO."

"You're losing me." There are also alarm bells going off inside my head.

"This way the papers will get over the flap you've stirred..." *I've stirred?!* "...while you get some more hands-on experience from the very best in the industry for your future pursuits."

"You've definitely lost me now."

“I’m talking about the temporary position you’ll be starting Monday as the new junior executive trainee... at Wolfe Media.”

I’m being sent to work at Grayson’s company?! I think I’d rather be packed off to boarding school again.



After tossing and turning most of the night, Monday morning finds me up at four AM.

I’m going to work at Wolfe Media after being caught kissing the recently-appointed Chief Operations Officer on Friday night. I feel like my father is literally throwing me to the wolves but he’s calling it an opportunity.

God, will everyone think I’ve slept my way into this job? After being hired by my father for my first one? Maybe the bulk of people who work there don’t care about the society pages. Who cares about one dumb kiss? At least no one else saw me hanging from that tree.

Maybe I can return to Fairfield Communications after this experience and show my father that I’m a serious businesswoman and serious about being part of our family’s company, that I can follow in his footsteps and someday take over as the CEO of Fairfield when he’s ready to retire.

Is that really where your heart lies, Norrie?

No. I’m bored to tears there but I ignore what my heart wants today. And everyday.

Maybe I can learn valuable things from Theo Wolfe, the CEO, and even contribute something to his mega-corporation. Little old me. Imagine.

Maybe I can manage not to strangle his brother while I’m there. Or kiss him again. (Would he want to kiss me again? But if Fox didn’t really want me, why would Grayson?)

So, here I am, out before dawn, with my bucket of balls and clubs. I’m nervous and this soothes me. It’s where I seek peace when I can’t find it anywhere else.

My father loves golf and it's a passion he's passed along to his daughter. Many years ago, he'd had part of our lawn made into a fairway at my mother's urging – the Fairfield Fairway – and taught me how to properly swing a pint-sized club from his knees when I was still quite small. He even had lights installed for evening practice. I'd eagerly wait for him to come home those nights, longing to show him how far I could hit the ball each time.

Later, after Mom died, I would come out here alone to practice, to think and to grieve. It's where I started talking to her in my mind and where the little voice of encouragement I labeled Mom first started popping up in my head, too.

It was another reason I hated being sent away to school. There was no golf at the strict and isolated, all-girls academy my father chose and, once I started at Yale, I barely touched my clubs. My friends didn't play golf and my father never had time for it anymore.

Then, Fox came along who likes golf, too. I thought that meant something positive for us. We'd be the couple who golfs together. But, once he realized I was good enough to beat him, he didn't want to play as often. *What a fragile little man-ego you have.* I wish I'd realized that sooner.

I know Grayson plays. He won our country club's annual teen tournament every year he'd been eligible. He'd gone on to play golf and swim competitively for Northwestern in college.

I'd heard about a 'scandalous incident' involving him and some girl on a golf course his freshman year, told to me in whispers at a slumber party, but my poor opinion of him hadn't been formed yet and I'd only giggled at the wickedness of it, wondering what it was like to be older but also young and free and reckless that way.

Not long after that, my mother had died and everything had changed. No reckless youth for me, no more slumber parties, no teen golf tournaments, no wicked behavior with boys on golf courses. Only studying and striving to prove

myself to a much older and overprotective father whose light had seemed to go out upon his wife's death.

Patting the grass, I test how much dew there is before setting up my tee. I select my driver and the satisfying thwack of it meeting the ball calms my troubled spirits. I hope this isn't the only peaceful moment I'll know today.

4-GRAYSON

W*olfe Steals Debutante from Under Fiancé's Nose*

I have zero interest in stealing debutantes but it's got a nice ring to it.

And, I'm enjoying the fact it must thoroughly piss off Davenport. That guy getting jilted by his fiancée in a publicly embarrassing manner doesn't bother me one bit.

The unexpected though thoroughly enchanting kiss has left me with a surprisingly pleasant memory - I can still hear her breathy moan from when I stroked her cheek in my mind - but I'm worried a guy like Davenport won't make the break any easier for her, particularly if he's feeling vengeful which I know that side of him first-hand.

Why do you even care?

I shouldn't. I don't even *like* Eleanor Fairfield. Mostly because she doesn't like me.

She was fine as a kid but, around the time she had her debutante ball, she became Little Miss Perfect around everyone else while always looking like she wanted to murder me with her eyes. I'm sure she's spoiled rotten by her old man and high-maintenance to the extreme.

And, the fact that she would be involved with a guy like Fox certainly doesn't speak well of her decision-making powers no matter how well she did at Yale.

Unfortunately, Mom and Dad have been pushing me towards the Fairfield girl for years, hoping we'd hit it off and make the ideal country club match and future business merger someday. No, thank you. I'm a fun guy. I want a girl who knows how to have fun as well. I'll have no society arrangements or business mixed into my future marriage.

I *may* have been vocal about this a time or two in mixed company but I can't recall a single thing I've ever done directly to her.

My phone buzzes and I'm not a bit surprised by who's calling. "Good morning, Mom. How are you?"

My mother cuts right to the chase. "Grayson, be nice to that sweet girl today."

"When am I not nice? And sweet? Fairfield loathes me and has made that very plain for years now."

"I'm sure you're wrong. Or, if she has a mistaken opinion of you, it's probably due to whatever that awful boy has told her." That awful 'boy' is the same age as me.

"Her dislike was evident well before she dated Davenport."

"Maybe if you two talk things through, she might see the real you and you'd discover she's quite a lovely person and, if you two were to see potential for something beyond an office relationship..."

Christ, I'm the only son without a woman, Eleanor's newly single again and Margaret Wolfe is immediately scheming. Mom never had any daughters and I think she's determined to get them through matrimony if nothing else. "With the utmost respect, Mother Dear, butt out of my personal relationships. Not that there is any relationship to speak of."

"Are you certain? That kiss seemed..."

No matter what I thought of the kiss, I'm not about to discuss it with my mother. "Tell me what you and Dad did to bring about this little arrangement."

"Excuse me? We did absolutely nothing. Louis approached your brother. Have pity on the girl, Grayson. Her engagement ended quite publicly and she's been sent off by her father to another company as if she's the one with something to prove."

"I do have pity for her in that respect, Mom. Why the hell didn't Fairfield make arrangements to keep Fox far from his daughter and let her stay at her job? It would make my life a hell of a lot easier."

“Grayson Montgomery Wolfe...”

The middle name is the signal you’re about to be in deep shit with my mother and it’s too early for that. “Fine, I’ll play nice, alright?”

“That’s all I’m asking,” she says before wishing me a good day and hanging up.

Sure, I’ll play nice. *But what variety of playing nice are we talking about?*

“Breakfast first, boss?” Alan asks from the driver’s seat. I used to give Theo hell for having a driver like our parents but, since I’m as swamped with work lately as he is, I’ve seen the light. Saves me time checking emails and such when I reach the office.

“Yeah, drop me off and I’ll walk from there, thanks.”

Once upon a time, I was a serious partier who avoided rising before noon on Mondays. Today, I’ve been up since six, checked the market, worked out, showered, dressed and am picking up breakfast for the crew before I arrive at Wolfe Media’s headquarters at eight sharp. I am mature as fuck taking Monday by the horns with a smile on my face.

As the car glides along the busy Chicago streets, I let my mind wander back to Friday night’s unexpected fun. Feisty and a bit unhinged, I’d never seen that side of Eleanor. Climbing out a window to escape her engagement party and then exchanging banter with me while hanging from a tree branch, who would’ve thought Little Miss Perfect had that kind of fire in her? Or that it would spark one in me?

Or that white lace panties would turn me on so much.

To be fair, she is pretty. Golden-brown eyes, soft curls a shade darker and full pink lips. She’s still got the same smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose she’s had since I first laid eyes on her. It had only highlighted the fact she was still a kid then. Now? Well, Eleanor is a grown woman without a doubt and I’m finding those freckles curiously intriguing, like her long, tan legs and those white lace panties.

My brother Oliver would probably tell me I need to get laid. It's been a bit. But, that kiss? Fucking hell, it was hot even if she seemed oddly inexperienced in her kisses. *Didn't Fox ever kiss you the way a woman should be kissed, little squirrel? I wouldn't mind showing you...*

I quickly shove that thought aside. She's starting at Wolfe Media today and I'm not about to fuck up my standing at our company nor will I fulfill Mom's country club match daydreams. The runaway bride-to-be will likely be Theo's headache more than mine anyway.

Not that she seemed like such a headache when she was in my arms, melting under my tongue and hungrily kissing me back while her sweet lilac scent invaded my brain. Even before that, the bickering was honestly getting me excited. It's definitely been a bit since I got laid if that was turning me on.

Nevertheless, it was one kiss and that's all there's going to be. Friday night was a total fluke.

"You're positive you don't foresee any issues working with her?" Theo had asked over dinner Saturday night when he shared the details of the deal he's made with Louis Fairfield.

"Positive. We're not friends..." The strong current of dislike between us has definitely ramped up since she started dating Davenport. *"But I'm mature enough to work with her without any issues."*

Theo had snorted over me labeling myself as mature but continued anyway. *"As scandals go, it's not the worst one you've been involved in."*

His wife and children's heads had popped up, curious to hear more of my past scandals while I'd glared at my big brother.

Fucking Davenport.

Dad had pulled strings to keep the video from spreading too far but it couldn't be hushed up completely. I regret to this day that it was Dena who suffered the most embarrassment from Fox's shitty act of revenge.

Wait, is that where Eleanor came up with the ‘go defile a golf cart’ thing? I’m chuckling over her indignant expression again as the car pulls to a stop. Little Miss Perfect does make me laugh occasionally, especially when she doesn’t mean to.

Armed with coffee and pastries a short while later, I exit the executive elevator and stride down the long, marble-floored hallway towards my office, delivering two of the coveted honeybuns to Paula and Claire, my assistant and my brother’s. Monday mornings cry out for honeybuns.

“Thank you, Mr. Wolfe. Your brother’s running late. He said he’d like to see you once he arrives,” Claire says.

My oldest brother Theo became CEO of Wolfe Media after our father’s retirement at the start of this year. He’s planning to take some time off when his wife Quinn has their baby later next month. However long he needs, I’m here and I’m going to fulfill my promise to him by being his responsible right-hand man while he’s away.

“After you’ve finished your breakfast, would you gather the stuff on Lone Star for me, Paula? Theo will want to see where we’re at ahead of the meeting.” The surly Texan is a thorn in my side but business rolls on.

“Of course, Mr. Wolfe.”

Mr. Wolfe. I’ve gone from ‘fetch us some coffee, Grayson’ to Mr. Wolfe around here. I’d be fine with them still calling me Grayson but I’ll admit it’s nice to feel like I’ve finally started earning some respect.

As the youngest son of a very wealthy family, there’s been plenty of assumptions that everything in life has been handed to me on a silver platter and, to be honest, it’s not totally inaccurate. I hated feeling like a family favor after I finished college and, in a rebellious phase, I had actively avoided my responsibilities here for a time. But this past year, I’ve been trying my damndest to prove myself to Dad and now to Theo, to show that I can not only contribute but lead.

As I’m nearly to my office door, Claire stops me. “Oh Mr. Wolfe, I almost forgot. Ms. Fairfield is waiting in your

office.”

“In *my* office?”

“Yes, your brother asked if you wouldn’t mind welcoming her since he was running late.”

“Fantastic,” I grumble.

5-GRAYSON

Dressed to impress in a crisp navy pantsuit, prim white silk blouse and sensible pumps, she's standing by my bookshelf behind my desk studying the pictures there when I enter. My treacherous eyes dip to her backside in those fitted dress slacks - *eyes up, Grayson* - as she realizes she's been caught snooping. Startled, she leaps back with a little yelp. So jumpy.

"Easy there, Squirrel."

Her mouth tightens even as her cheeks turn pink. I can't help recalling the torn red dress, darkened eyes and hungry mouth from Friday night as I look at the impeccably put-together young lady standing in front of me.

I know what you sound like when you moan.

I suppose saying that wouldn't be all that professional of me.

"Honeybun, Fairfield?" Her eyebrows raise to heights which suggest I've said something licentious. Holding in a sigh, I hold out the box. "Would you like one?" *Look, Mom, I'm playing nice.*

Suspiciously, she peers into the box. "Are those pecans?"

"Yeah."

"I'm allergic to pecans." Her tone makes it clear she questions my motives for offering them.

"Now, I know what to get you for your birthday," I mumble, setting down the box. So much for playing nice. "Did they get you sorted with an I.D. badge and such already?"

"They did, Mr. Wolfe." Ah, Mr. Wolfe. So formal. "I beg your pardon for poking around," she says with a stiff nod towards my bookshelf. "Your mother is in that one. She's a lovely woman. Pretty but so very kind, too."

It's one from Mom's birthday last year and, as I recall that Eleanor's mother passed away when she was younger, I dismiss any further notions of acting like a prick. I can't imagine how hard that must have been.

"Thank you. She always says very kind things about you as well." *She'd love for me to give her grandkids by you someday.*

A long awkward pause follows. I'm usually not at a loss for words with women but other women don't generally despise me. Just Fairfield.

"Despite how this came about," she says at last, "I want you to know I intend to give this my all. I look forward to learning from your brother."

"I'm sure you will. Theo's an excellent teacher. When did you arrive this morning?"

"I've been here since seven."

"Why so early?" *Little Miss Perfect.*

"I was ready and traffic was light. My driver offered to drive me around the Mile but I didn't see the point." I could scoff over a trainee having a chauffeur except I was raised in the same world she was, more or less. "I don't think your staff knew what to do with me."

"No, they likely didn't considering we weren't expecting to have an executive trainee starting today when we left work on Friday. But I suppose a lot changed after you climbed out a window."

She flushes and I regret my words. Louis Fairfield called Theo and I suspect she didn't have much say in this arrangement. Perhaps her Little Miss Perfect persona has as much to do with pleasing her old man as anything.

"Look, I know you don't like me and don't want me working here-"

"That was Theo's call to make, not mine." No, I don't want her working here but it's not all a matter of dislike the way she thinks.

But my brisk response sounds like an agreement to her statement and she blanches. A voice that sounds remarkably like my mother's or guilt (same difference) tells me I'm not making the new trainee feel very welcome.

"Please, take a seat." Gingerly, she does, perched right on the edge. "I'm aware of your education. Yale. Degrees in Business and Communications both. Earned your MBA this past spring. Very impressive. Perhaps you can tell me a bit about your experience at your father's company since you started there."

"Oh. Well, I would, um... sit in on meetings and take notes." The flush from earlier spreads all across her face and down her neck to her chest in a lovely and distracting manner. "I helped with some of the technology and equipment around the office. I was tasked with various errands, I mean... assignments throughout the day."

I think I have a good idea what her experiences at father's company might have been like if they were anything like my first few months here when Dad figured I didn't know my ass from a hole in the ground but wouldn't deny his son a job.

"So, you were the glorified coffee-fetcher and copy maker?"

Her lips purse and there's that spark I enjoy too much in those golden-brown eyes. "Look here, Wolfe. I can do much more than-

"Mr. Wolfe, here's the files you requested," Paula says, poking her head around the door and unintentionally interrupting us. *Just as it was getting fun.*

When the door closes, I decide it's best to cut to the awkward chase between us. "About last Friday night..."

"I'd rather pretend it didn't happen," she sniffs primly.

A slow, devious grin forms. "Which part would you rather pretend never happened? Do you regret ditching your fiancé?"

She rolls her eyes. "I regret that I can't go back in time to the day I said yes to a second date and change my answer. Not

that it's any of your business."

Good. Even if we don't like each other, I know that jackass was never worthy of you.

"You know Fox and I aren't friendly."

"That's putting it mildly, isn't it?"

"Fine, I'll be blunt. I hate him and he feels the same way about me. So, if you were to change your mind about the state of your feelings for Davenport, I'd like to remind you that anything you work on while here or anything we discuss in the name of business is not to be shared outside this office."

"I understood the non-disclosure agreement I signed," she says, heatedly. "I have no interest in being sued within an inch of my life and I'm not a mole."

"Good, I think Squirrel suits you better." I don't really think she's a mole.

But, as she sits there with her chin held high and fire flashing in her eyes, I have myself a little epiphany. Fairfield is more than pretty. She's beautiful. And, that's a dangerous discovery.

"Back to what you'd rather forget, you weren't injured from the fall, were you?"

"No, you were a serviceable landing mat. Still plucking out thorns I hope?" Not sure if I'm going to glare at her or laugh. Those thorns were no fucking joke. "I was referring to our kiss, of course."

"I'm thinking about sending Fox an autographed copy of that picture from the paper." She grimaces. *Alright, Mom, I know I'm being a dick.* "Forget I said that. It does make this whole situation-

"If you could've controlled yourself and accepted my simple thank-you kiss, it wouldn't have led to such an outrageous to-do in the gossip column."

Oh, here we go. "Excuse me? What do you mean if I could've controlled *myself*? My lips were minding their own business. You kissed me first."

“And, you *deepened* the kiss! It was just meant to be a-”

“A little ‘thank-you kiss.’ Yeah, I know. What kind of fairytale are you living in?”

“One where a gentleman accepts a simple kiss without sucking a lady’s face off!”

She really said ‘sucking’ and ‘off’ in the same sentence, didn’t she? What kind of dirty trick is that? *Down, boy.*

“You could at least stop pretending you didn’t enjoy it, Fairfield.”

“I most certainly did not.”

“I suppose that’s why you moaned.”

“I did not moan!” Hand to God, I swear to you, she moaned. “I have never once moaned from a kiss!” My eyebrows raise. “I mean...”

Unable to resist drawing nearer, I move from behind my desk as her rambling trails off. She stands to face me, shoulders squared. Damn, she really is radiant and there’s that irresistible lilac scent again.

“Davenport was clearly lacking if that’s the truth.” She’s in need of some good kissing to drive that idiot who never made her moan during a kiss completely out of her head. Christ, that line of thinking won’t do. “It only confirms what I already knew - that you were into me.”

If she could set me on fire with her eyes right now, she would. Not gonna lie, it’s fucking hot. “In your dreams, Wolfe.” Her words are contentious but that breathy way she said them is not.

“Are we talking about dreams now? I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours, Squirrel.” Mine have been full of her since that damn kiss.

She’s tall though I’ve easily got six inches on her even when she’s in heels and I already know how perfectly our bodies fit together. Lightly, almost by accident, my hand brushes the back of hers. She doesn’t move it away.

“I thought I told you not to call me that,” she murmurs.

I shouldn't call her that and I shouldn't continue goading her but, damn, if she's not got me stirred up again. How does she do that? I'm usually Mr. Easy-Going Charm with the ladies and they're all smiles and good times with me. So, why does arguing with Fairfield feel like it's feeding something inside me I didn't realize was missing?

Her eyes drop to my mouth. Her mind and her body may be in disagreement about the matter but I'd bet my entire fortune that, at this moment, she wants another kiss.

“What do you want to be called then?” I say quietly, my mouth so much closer to hers than it should be.

Standing face to face with heaving chests, hungry eyes and a box of forgotten pastries between us, I don't know what she might say. I'd like to kiss her before she has the chance to say anything. I want to claim another one of her moans. Maybe several of them.

She sways towards me like we're two magnets, attracted against our will. “My friends call me-”

“We're not friends.” *But my dick wants to be friends. Very much.* My hand trails up her arm until I'm cupping her elbow.

She glares at me but still sways nearer. “No, we're not.” She's inches away. Her free hand braces against my chest. One touch and I'm rock hard.

God, that fire in her eyes burns me up. Her prim blouse and bra don't hide the fact her nipples have pebbled. “And, we can't be friends until you admit you enjoyed our kiss, Fairfield,” I say, knowing it'll set her off, one way or another.

Those gorgeous eyes narrow. Fuck, I'm more turned on than I've ever been. “You're such a conceited jerk! I don't want to be your friend and how could I ever enjoy kissing a cocky ass-”

“Hello, hope I'm not interrupting anything.”

Startled, we spin apart at the voice of our intruder. My older brother and boss, Theo, has arrived at last. *Shit.*

6-ELEANOR

Admittedly, it wasn't the best start to my first day. Why does Grayson bring out the worst in me? And how embarrassing to have Theo walking in on us squabbling like children over that blasted kiss while I was fully prepared to give Grayson another one!

I've got to get it together. Thank God, I'm working under Theo and not Grayson.

Theo is kind, happy to give advice or offer me a challenge. We've spent a good deal of time together this morning as he's brought me up to speed about things Wolfe is currently working on and shared a bit about himself, his wife and children. A CEO and a family man who seems to have found the right balance of both.

Most everyone else has been nice that I've met so far. No one seems to care or know I'm the runaway bride-to-be/scarlet debutante stolen by a Wolfe. I've got a nice work space one floor below the executive suites where many of the top people in the company work.

I'll be working with the mergers and acquisitions team for the first few weeks, helping the big bad wolf gobble up sheep to expand their empire. That part doesn't appeal to me any more than working at Dad's office had to be honest but I'm here to prove myself.

It was clear no one knew what to do with me when I arrived at first. I felt like the new kid who got dumped into the group project last minute but that the teacher needed to place somewhere.

Then, Grayson caught me snooping around his office. I was staring at the pictures of his family, feeling irrationally jealous thinking about his sweet mother while missing mine.

Getting caught snooping was bad enough but how dare he look so hot standing there in his dark gray tailored suit? I felt like the little squirrel in the wolf's sights but in a strangely

erotic manner. For the first time ever, I wanted a man to... reprimand me. God, what is Wolfe doing to me?

I was hit by the fresh piney scent of his cologne while an unruly lock of his thick sandy blond hair had rested on his forehead. I wanted to sweep that lock of hair back, run my fingers through it, feel his broad shoulders under my hands again. I must be losing my mind and my body's taking over the reins.

From there, things had gone downhill. How does he infuriate me so easily? And, why am I so aroused by it?

I was literally torn between slapping Grayson for suggesting I had moaned and challenging him to make me moan again when Theo interrupted. Both behaviors would get me fired. *But oh, they both sound satisfying in their own way.*

It's noon and I'm joining a meeting with Theo. Drew has texted to ask if I might be free for lunch. I definitely need the outing. As for the meeting, I'm fully expecting to sit back, keep quiet and take notes like I would at Fairfield until then.

Think again, Norrie.

The team has been working on talking a Texan into selling his mid-range, regional media company to Wolfe. Claire, Theo's assistant, had given me a file to read over in preparation for the meeting on the owner who's coming into town next month for an in-person pitch. A bit of a modern-day cowboy, he's told them he expects to be thoroughly wooed if they want to buy his company. Apparently, they want this badly along with a few other potential buyers and Mr. Bent Jacobs intends to have them all jump through as many hoops as possible before he agrees to make a deal. I like him already.

Mike, the nominal head of the team, is full of the puffed-up bluster and know-it-all-ness I recognize from several of the men who work with my father. Another fragile man-ego, I'd bet. His ideas for the pitch are textbook correct with a dash of the style one would expect from a multi-billion-dollar buyer.

They're also all wrong for this particular seller.

“What do you think of that suggestion, Ms. Fairfield?” Theo asks as I’m scribbling down all the ways I don’t think Mike’s big slick cocktail-hour presentation will win Mr. Jacobs’s goodwill.

Looking up, I find the whole room staring at me. I nervously lick my lips. “Um... me?”

Mike seems annoyed that the CEO has asked the trainee for an opinion regarding his work on her first day but is too clever to say as much. Grayson’s silently observing everything.

“Yes,” Theo says, instantly drawing every eye back to him. “And, this isn’t to say you haven’t put together a fantastic presentation, Mike. But, Eleanor might have a fresh idea. We’re not selling anything to Mr. Jacobs but we are trying to sell him on us. Do you like this approach for our face-to-face?”

His eyes flick down to my notepad and I note one corner of his mouth turned up in a half-smile. *Dammit, you’re sitting right next to the CEO and you didn’t think he’d notice your scribbling?*

I don’t want to offend someone my first day even if I do think Mike’s going the wrong direction. Texans are famously proud of where they’re from. He turned down an offer from a Manhattan media group because he hated their pushy, we-know-best and New York-is-superior attitude. How can Wolfe Media from Chicago win him over?

“It’s hardly fair to put her on the spot like this, Theo.”

My eyes leave Theo’s to find Grayson’s across the table. Did he speak up to rescue me or because he doubts I have anything worthwhile to contribute?

“I apologize, Ms. Fairfield.”

I want to tell Theo no apology is needed, that I appreciate the fact he even asked me something. He stands to address the room before I can.

“In my opinion, this is not the direction we need to go with Mr. Jacobs. He called me and my brother city slickers

the last time we spoke to him. I think the pitch should reflect us and why we would be the best solution for his company's employees in a buyout but also appeal to Mr. Jacobs' *lone star* personality as well."

My eyes boggle and my cheeks heat up realizing Theo had indeed been reading my scribbles.

"I want everyone to present a new idea for the Lone Star meeting on Friday. Include data, budget and put together some visuals for me. We need to get cracking on this. He's coming to town in a few weeks and he's said one trip to Chicago will be enough for him. That's all for now."

A collective sigh from those present but no arguments.

As people start to leave, Theo dips down to murmur, "That includes you, Eleanor. It's your first day and you only had about twenty minutes to look over that file before this meeting but you're more on-track than Mike was. Don't be afraid to share your ideas with us going forward. You might be a junior executive trainee but, if you ever want to be an executive, you'll need to make your voice heard. Understood?"

"Yes, Mr. Wolfe."

I glance up to find Grayson is the only other person left in the room and he's watching us. "I'll look forward to hearing that pitch as well, Squirrel." I glower at him before he turns to his brother. "Lunch, Theo?"

Theo glances between us before shaking his head. "Are you going to behave or not?" he asks Grayson.

"I always behave," he says with a boyish twinkle in his eyes. Dammit, it makes me want to grin while I simultaneously want to stamp my foot and call him a liar. Why must I find him charming? It makes it harder to hate him.

"Alright. Lunch sounds good. Do you have lunch plans, Eleanor?"

Is my new boss going to ask me to lunch? With Grayson? Thank God, I have plans.

(Also, I'm mildly disappointed I have plans.)

“Yes, I'm meeting a friend today.”

The two brothers nod politely, telling me to enjoy myself but, before I can escape, Paula finds us. “Sorry, wanted to let you know I've confirmed dinner reservations for you and Ms. Collins at Next for eight o'clock on Friday night as requested, Mr. Wolfe.”

“Thank you, Paula,” Grayson says.

My eyes widen at the mention of the Michelin-star place. Dinner for two, huh? Why do I care? I don't. He can spend his free time however or with whoever he pleases.

But Friday at eight? The universe really does hate me.

Quickly gathering my things, I follow Paula out of the conference room, leaving the men the space. As the door closes behind us, my ears are burning and I suspect I'm about to be discussed. But whatever they might say isn't for me to know.

7-ELEANOR

“Excellent cuisine but where’s the restaurant?” I ask Drew, grinning as I take a bite of hot dog.

“Don’t hate on Al’s Original Chicago Dogs.”

“I would never,” I say, sincerely.

“But can’t you see it, Norrie?” Drew says, pointing towards the vacant building she’s led me to with our street dogs for lunch. “I think a green-striped awning would look wonderful.”

“Green seems to be your color of choice lately.”

She laughs, patting her freshly-dyed hair. Drew loves to experiment in the kitchen and in the stylist’s chair. He’d convinced Drew to go green for summer.

“What are we naming it? Drew’s Place or Drew’s Kitchen?”

“Something more eclectic. Affordable lunches, fine dining at night. Tastefully chic. Vegetarian specials every day.”

“And great coffee.”

She hums in agreement. “The big picture window would look out at the street. Don’t you love to people-watch while you eat?” I smile as she waxes on. “The kitchen was redone by the last owners. The appliances, ovens and range are all new and they are to die for, Norrie.”

“I’m not dying for a kitchen but I take your point. There’s an excellent space for an outdoor patio area, too. Do you think we could offer live entertainment?”

“Oh, wouldn’t that be cool? I’ll be busy in the kitchen so I’d have to put you in charge of that.”

“I’ll get right on auditioning some acts. So, what’s next, my dear restaurant entrepreneur?”

“What’s always next - money.” I frown, knowing this is a serious consideration for my friend. Her family isn’t wealthy.

“I could ask my father to invest again or, if he’d let me have access to my trust-”

“No, Norrie. I couldn’t ask you for money, especially not your trust fund. And, your dad would only point out again what a risky venture new restaurants are... which he’d be right.”

I nod while hating that it’s true. Constance and I were handed good-paying though mostly token jobs right out of college at our fathers’ companies while Drew worked her way through catering gigs, culinary school and is currently a sous chef under a big name at one of the hot spots in the city.

I’m no chef like her but I *love* the idea of the restaurant. For a few months in undergrad, I got a job hostessing and, crazy as it might sound to some, I’ve never been happier. I loved greeting guests, running meals out from the kitchen and enjoying the camaraderie of my coworkers.

“How long has this place been up for lease?” I ask, dreading that it will be exactly like the last location Drew fell in love with, gone before she had so much as one month’s rent to offer.

“A few days. I’ve got a meeting at the bank on Friday,” she adds, hopefully. “Maybe they won’t laugh in my face quite as quickly this time.”

I give her a squeezing hug. It’s hard to get a loan like she needs at our age but I know she could knock the socks off Chicago’s culinary scene given half a chance. “If they won’t back you, I’m going to someday,” I promise, picturing her little green-striped awning and all the happy customers we’ll serve. “I can do your books-”

“Yes, handle all the paperwork, please.”

“And, I’ll be your hostess while you’re the genius in the kitchen who keeps them coming back for more.”

“I love you for saying that, Norrie, and I’d love for us to do it together but you’ll be too busy being the CEO of

Fairfield Communications someday to worry about my little place.”

My smile fades at Drew’s truth. The restaurant is supposed to be her dream, not mine.

Once one of my grades had slipped from an A to a B, Dad had told me to quit the hostessing job. “*People don’t get MBAs to be hostesses at restaurants, Eleanor.*”

Drew will be the one to pursue her dream while I’m going to do what’s expected of me. Even if running a communications company doesn’t exactly sound thrilling to me.

Noticing my fading smile, Drew nudges me. “Enough about me and my high hopes. Tell me how’s it been today,” she says as we find seats on a nearby bench to finish our dogs. “Were you up by six to go smack golf balls around?”

“By four actually and yes,” I sigh. “But it’s not been all bad.”

I fill her in on the highlights and the meeting I attended before getting to the part of the day that’s troubled me the most.

“Please, don’t tell Constance,” I beg after admitting how childishly I’d behaved earlier with Grayson and how much the bickering had turned me on.

“How long have you felt this way around him?” Drew asks, plucking the pickle off her dog to eat.

“Just since what happened Friday.”

That’s not entirely true. I used to feel girlish flutters every time the handsome, youngest Wolfe brother had looked my way. Until the night of my debutante ball and the words, ‘*Hell, no, not a debutante,*’ had reached my ears. I suppose my list of reasons I hate Grayson should probably start from that night.

Drew finishes the pickle before she speaks again. “Okay, does he seem turned on by the interactions as well?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

How do you know if a man's turned on by you? I want to ask but it would only reiterate how Fox never expressed much interest in me that way. I guess my father's approval was more enticing to him than me. How depressing.

"Grayson has a date this Friday night. Not that I care but... well, my own love life is in shambles so maybe I do a little."

"Hmm. Well, if he's busy dating someone else, we can't let him have the upper hand on you in this regard. Do you think you can control the urge to argue with him? Avoid the temptation, so to speak?"

"Yes, I think so. I loathe the thought of Theo interrupting another squabble." *Or another near-kiss.*

"Okay, so you'll be a mature young businesswoman going forward. Keep your distance. That'll be your guide unless you change your mind about-"

"I will not change my mind."

"Alright. No snide remarks from you."

"I never-"

"And, no allowing Grayson to bait you into bickering."

"Right. Okay. You're right."

"Of course, I am," Drew says before her smile becomes a smirk. "The question is, how long until you both give in to what you really want?"

"What do you imagine we really want?"

"To kiss each other some more."

8-ELEANOR

Drew's crazy. Maybe I'd like to kiss Grayson again but he doesn't really want me that way. He's a freaking gorgeous, billionaire bachelor that every unattached, heterosexual woman on this planet probably wants. The man who asked me to marry him didn't even try to sleep with me, not once in a year of dating!

Grayson said it himself. He hates Fox. That's all that's going on in his head. He probably loves thinking he's rubbing Fox's nose in something.

Except Fox never cared about you, Norrie. He only pretended to.

Ouch, Mom.

But she's right.

Anyway, it's probably best if I continue to hate Grayson Wolfe. No more kissing, no more stolen moans from me.

The other night, I found my old list of reasons I hate him, the one I wrote when I was seventeen. Some of them are admittedly a little juvenile. I'm not sure why I wrote that I hate him for having perfect teeth.

But some still hold firm. He's still a cocky asshole, he ruined Camilla's happiness, he would rather strip naked and run around a room than be pushed into a conversation with me, he enjoys tormenting me... I've got my reasons.

To help me remember, I printed out the amended list yesterday - I struck off the perfect teeth offense - and posted it on my corkboard in my bedroom after I got home. You know, in case I ever start to doubt.

Hating from a distance and verbally sparring when we come into range of each other is what comes natural to us. It's safer than entertaining any other feelings. But, since I'm apparently turned on by the sparring, I'll follow Drew's advice - keep my distance and not engage.

I've managed to avoid him for the most part since Monday, except for one highly uncomfortable, shared elevator ride spent in deafening silence yesterday. Which was admittedly strange for us. He *always* says something to goad me and I *always* reply.

(Also, it's very unfair of him to be equally hot when he's silent and brooding as he is when he's chatty and charming.)

Maybe he's trying to keep things professional between us now that we're stuck working together temporarily.

Thursday morning, it's raining buckets when I get up so no driving away my anxiety with a golf club. Dad left the house before six, mumbling about some details he needed to see to at the office. I don't want to sit at the breakfast table alone. I've been a busy little bee this week but I don't want to sit alone at my desk waiting for everyone else to filter in again either.

So, I've decided I'll check out the employee workout facilities. If I can find myself a treadmill to sweat it out on for thirty minutes this morning, maybe it'll help me sleep a full night tonight.

I ride the elevator down to the lower level where the facilities are located and catch a faint whiff of chlorine. Claire said there's a lap pool.

It's only six-thirty but there's three guys I recognize from security lifting in the weights area. The cardio section across from them is completely vacant. I feel a touch self-conscious being the only woman present. Especially as these old running shorts are on the tight side. And my athletic top reveals far more of my freckles than my business-like blouses.

One of the guys lifting sees me glance their way and flexes quite obviously for my benefit. *Yes, those are nice pecs but I don't even know your first name. Please, don't creep me out.*

A little rattled, I decide to take a turn in the other direction and am met with a door labeled 'Pool.' I don't have a

swimsuit with me but I'd rather look like I know where the hell I'm going and maybe they'll forget about me.

Pushing the door open, I make sure to close it quietly behind me. There's something sort of hypnotic about the enclosed sound of an indoor pool area and I don't want a loud, echoing bang to disrupt it. It's a full-size indoor lap pool and the blueish lights reflect off the white tiled walls, a peaceful glow, and it's warm and humid in here.

A quiet splash draws my eyes to the pool itself and I realize I'm not alone. "Of course, it would be you," I mutter when I recognize him.

Even soaking wet and the entire pool-length away, I know it's him. He's unaware of me at least, fluidly making his turn, shifting from a backstroke to the butterfly with unfathomable grace. He slices through the water as if he's part marine mammal. I knew he swam in college but looks like he's not given it up.

Well, he got all those lovely muscles hiding under his tailored suits from somewhere, didn't he, Norrie?

Yes, he did. And, damn, those shoulders, that chest and back are masterpieces of male perfection, simply beautiful moving beneath his tanned skin.

If I thought the sound in here was hypnotic, it's nothing in comparison to the mesmerizing sight of Grayson swimming. Backstroke, butterfly, breaststroke, a seamless rhythm. It's a familiar pattern for him, I can tell. He could probably swim it in his sleep except his pace, while not quite racing speed, would have me gasping for breath at the edge of the pool if I tried to keep up.

Deciding not to intrude on his solitude, or start some silly argument, I slip back out the way I came.

Upon my return to the main gym area, I'm pleased to see Caroline from Accounts is an early bird today as well. I greet her on her treadmill and she invites me to take the one beside her. We exchange a few pleasantries before focusing on our workouts. Popping in my earbuds, I forget about the guys

lifting weights behind us and Grayson in the pool to set my own heart-pounding pace.

Thirty minutes later, I'm pumped full of endorphins and ready for the showers when my good mood is soured as swiftly as milk left in the sun on a hot day.

Entering the women's locker room, I hear voices within, two women apparently changing for their own workouts. "And, you think that's why she's here?"

"I don't know for certain but didn't you see that headline? Wolfe steals scarlet debutante or something." I will never live down that stupid headline.

"She seems nice and Mr. Wolfe likes her."

"I'll bet he does."

"I meant Theo and not that way."

"Well, I meant Grayson and definitely *that* way."

Damn. I don't know who they are, can't even see their faces, but they're eagerly discussing me and Grayson.

"You know I don't keep up with the society pages but I'll say lucky girl if she's nabbed him. She's not bad..." *Ouch*. "...but he's smoking hot, filthy rich and charming as hell, the whole enchilada."

"A very rare enchilada."

"I wouldn't mind checking out his enchilada. He's a fine fucking specimen without a doubt."

They start giggling and I crinkle my nose up, annoyed that they're objectifying Grayson this way.

Is that all that's bothering you about it, Norrie?

"You know that guy she was engaged to though? My brother went to Northwestern around the same time they did. There's some seriously bad blood between them." I know this but I'm curious what this gossipier's brother has told her. "He tried to get Grayson expelled from what I heard.

What? Fox never mentioned that.

“I have to wonder if Grayson’s really interested in Miss Debutante or simply interested in messing with the guy...”

Yeah, he didn’t mince words my first day. He *hates* Fox and he doesn’t like me.

Sick at my stomach at being the subject of this conversation, I back out of the locker room but soon hear the boisterous voices of the three weightlifters coming my way. Dammit.

In an attempt to avoid a run in with them, I blindly push through the first door I encounter.

Which happens to be the men’s locker room.

Oh no!

The men’s voices are louder as they start to enter. I’m trapped! I scurry past the (thankfully) empty changing area back to where the showers and toilets are located. If they’re showering or have to pee, I’m so screwed.

Kissing Grayson in front of the paps will seem like child’s play compared to being caught in here. I’ve had my one scandal of a lifetime, thank you very much!

I strain to listen for the three men. They’re in here but it sounds like they’re changing clothes. Thank God. *And ew, you guys probably need a shower.*

The sound of running water meets my ears... oh *NO!* *Someone* is already in the showers! And, they’ve just cut off the water.

Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God...

Speak up, Norrie! Speak up now before it gets awkward!

It’s already awkward, Mom.

Once more like a small, twitchy animal caught in headlights, I’m frozen in place as the man who was showering steps into view. I want to cry because *of course* it’s Grayson looking like a freaking Greek statue come to life with a towel slung dangerously low around his hips.

There's water lazily dripping off the ends of his hair to roll down those broad shoulders and cling to his perfect abs. I'd cling, too. I'm jealous of water. Why must he be so beautiful? Why can't I disappear on the spot like in a magic trick?

He catches sight of me and I can tell he's momentarily stunned. He even gives his head a shake before he speaks. "Fairfield?"

"I know I'm not meant to be in here," I whisper, trying my best to look at the floor even though my traitorous eyes are determined to flick over to his muscled calves and thighs. "I got turned around and... the other men came in." I jerk my chin towards the main changing area. "I panicked."

He's quiet so curiosity (of various sorts) gets the better of me. I have to look at him. He's staring at me with that damned trademark smirk of his in place and one cocky eyebrow raised in amusement. "You panicked, huh? Or were you trying to catch a peek of me in the shower?"

"It's the truth! I simply panicked!" I hiss between clenched teeth.

I know he's goading me but I'm indignant over the accusation. And, the fact I'd be tempted to peek intentionally if this is the view I'd get but with less towel.

"I didn't mean to see you here or in the pool!" Damn. I would let that bit slip out.

"You saw me in the pool? Why didn't I see you?"

"I was looking around at the facilities. Didn't want to disturb your exercise. Figured a billionaire would have his own pool," I grumble, angry that I've been caught in yet another embarrassing situation by my nemesis. In less than a week!

That smirk becomes a full-fledged grin and my cheeks glow warmly. "I do have my own pool but, with the heavy rain this morning, I came here."

It's obvious he's not a bit embarrassed to be caught wearing nothing but a towel. He crosses his arms over that

broad chest and shifts his stance, making his towel strain in a perilous manner against the mysterious and mouth-watering bulge underneath. What if that towel dropped? Like magic.

My eyes have a mind of their own as they trail down from those toned arms to that six-pack to the trail of dark blond hair below his navel leading to his...

Eyes up, Norrie!

As I'm caught in a contest of wills between my body's desire to keep ogling Grayson's body and what's proper, the men in the other room are finished changing but not finished talking.

"Hope the pretty brunette comes back to work out every morning." Caroline has salt and pepper hair so they must mean me. I'd almost be flattered if the guy didn't follow up his statement with lewd slurping noises. *Eww!*

Grayson's eyes narrow and, before I can say a word or even squeak, he's striding past me with fire in his blue eyes.

"Damn straight. All the blood left my brain watching the bounce, bounce, bounce of that sweet peach. I'd happily take a bite of that juicy as- Mr. Wolfe!"

"Gentlemen."

The amount of irony he packs into that one word is magnificent but, holy hell, that growly tone he said it in? I really need a shower now. A cold one.

"Save that kind of locker room talk for one outside of our place of business from now on or you can find another place to work out... and another place to work. Got it?"

With mumbled 'yes, sirs', they quickly make their exit as I picture Grayson standing there glowering at them. It's an intriguing image but I need to make my own exit ASAP.

"They're gone, Fairfield. So, if you think you can manage to find your way to the ladies' locker room on your own this time..." he drawls, amusedly.

Face on fire, I sprint to the door without a word of protest or another glance his way.

9-ELEANOR

Thank God, it's almost the weekend. I want to spend it at home, avoiding scandals and men named Wolfe or not think about how good one of them looked dressed in a towel.

Except Grayson's going to Next tonight, apparently on a date.

And, one Friday per month, like clockwork, my father and I have dinner there together. Lucky me, this Friday is the one. I'll be with my father and Grayson will be with another woman.

Why does that matter, Norrie?

It doesn't. But I might prefer to avoid being spotted. I can wear a floppy hat and sunglasses.

He knows your dad, Norrie. I don't think he'll wear a floppy hat and sunglasses as well, do you?

Dammit.

Anyway, we're set to return to the conference room again in an hour to present our new ideas for the potential Lone Star buyout. Taking Theo at his word, I've studied everything I could find about Mr. Jacobs and his company this week and I've been working on an idea for wooing him.

"Have you got your pitch together, Ellie?"

I glance up to find Mike hovering over my desk. "It's Eleanor." *Or Norrie to my friends, which I suspect you will never be.*

Since Monday when I came back from lunch and spotted Grayson having a chat with Mike, I've noted the older man's evident dislike of me. Granted, Theo did put me in an awkward position during that meeting but I'm sure Grayson said *something* and made it worse.

“Eleanor,” he repeats with unmistakable condescension as his eyes drop first to my chest - *gross* - and then to my laptop. “Do you need any help setting up on the technical end for your presentation? Mr. Wolfe likes visuals.”

“Yes, I know and no, thank you. It’s all on my USB drive,” I say, holding up the stick, “and I know my way around a projector setup.”

“Well, I’ll be looking forward to seeing what you’ve come up with.” *Hmm*. I’m not sure he’s looking forward to it for positive reasons. “There’s a chance Theo’s not going to make it in today by the way.”

This I did not know. “Why wouldn’t Mr. Wolfe be here?”

“His wife’s having contractions or something,” he says, offhandedly.

“Oh goodness, it’s a bit early for-”

“Either way, we’ll still be pitching our ideas to a Wolfe since Grayson’s here.”

“Oh.” My nerves catapult into the stratosphere.

“But then again, maybe that won’t be a problem for you. Maybe you’ve already won the younger Wolfe over before you even started, eh?” His eyes sparkle with malice as they crawl over my body again before he walks off.

Oh. Oh no.

The women in the locker room and now Mike. They’ve formed an opinion about me based solely on that horrible (wonderful) kiss and my engagement party disaster.

Worry stirs in my belly as the hour of the meeting draws nearer.

Worry needs some coffee.

The café downstairs is fine for grabbing lunch or a snack but their coffee is *not* great. I’ve noticed Theo brings his from home and Grayson seems to prefer the little pastry shop down the street for his caffeine fix. I brought in my own supplies to the breakroom on our floor from home a couple of days ago.

Drew's the chef but I'm a bonafide coffee aficionado. I go brew myself a mug and return to my desk, savoring the rich, fragrant aroma and looking forward to the first sip.

"Mmm, that smells amazing."

Startled by the unexpected voice, I slosh a bit down the side, scalding my finger. I glare over my shoulder as Grayson chuckles.

"Sorry. Such a jumpy little squirrel."

"You surprised me. Did you need something?" I snap, annoyed that he's made me jump again and annoyed by how good he looks in navy dress slacks and a white button-down rolled up to the elbows. The man has no right to flaunt his forearms this early.

"Wanted to make sure you didn't need any directions to the ladies' room today." I roll my eyes. "Did you work out this morning?"

"No and I won't after that disaster. Happy?" He probably is. Probably hated me being in his space. Probably hates sharing his enormous building with me, too.

"No, that doesn't make me happy. If anyone's bothering you--"

"Forget about it. I can work out elsewhere. Was there anything else you needed?"

"To wish you well for your presentation."

He would go and be polite, wouldn't he? Good manners are too ingrained for me to ignore it. "Thank you," I'm forced to say.

He grins like it's a victory. That grin is nothing but trouble. "You know, Fairfield, seeing you with that coffee..."

He leans over my desk, dark blue eyes holding mine captive as he braces one arm on the back of my chair and the other on my desk. I can feel his body's heat, count his eyelashes. He's everywhere. I can't escape. I don't want to. His delicious piney cologne, that deep voice, his irresistible

good looks, he's set off that horrible tingling sensation with half a dozen words and simply by leaning in.

"Seeing me with this coffee, what?"

"It makes me wonder if you'd be willing to grab a cup later..."

I gulp. "With you?" Is he asking me to get coffee like it's a-

"Well, I meant *for* me."

He smirks as his final words sink in and my cheeks burn in mortification. *You, cocky asshole.*

I shove my cup his way, enjoying how he's forced to leap back hurriedly to avoid getting splashed. "If you'll hold this for me, *sir*, I'll gladly brew a mug especially for you right now," I say in my most syrupy-sweet voice while batting my eyes dangerously.

He scowls at the drop that caught his loafers – *you weren't quite quick enough, Mr. Wolfe* – and shakes his head. "On second thought, Fairfield, I'm not entirely sure I'd trust a cup of coffee from you."

"Now, hold on. Coffee is sacred to me." How *dare* he suggest I'd do something evil to his? Even if a very petty part of me might have been daydreaming about it.

"See you in the conference room," he says with a wink before he strides away.

Yep, hating Grayson is the way it's going to be.

Shortly before conference time, I'm all set to go but I brew another cup of coffee and then decide to make a quick trip to the ladies' room.

And, it's when I return to my desk to grab my laptop and USB drive for my presentation that I make a horrible discovery. My newly filled mug of coffee has been knocked over and it's soaking both device and drive.

Oh no, oh no, oh no...

The laptop is fried. *Shoot.* Hoping to salvage my presentation, I look at the USB drive. No, it's soaked, too. It might work eventually but not until it's had time to thoroughly dry out. *Double shoot.*

How did this happen? My mug was sitting here perfectly fine when I left. Did someone accidentally bump my desk?

I glance around but see no signs of anyone or anything out of place until I spy Grayson standing beside Mike's desk, laughing with that gross man over something. Of course, he'd be pals with him. Why is he even down here? He's been hanging around the past hour. Didn't he have any important COO things to do upstairs in his fancy, private office? He'll probably have a good laugh over my coffee-catastrophe, too.

Wait.

As suspicion blooms to life, Grayson seems to sense my attention. He turns to face me, cocky grin in place and devious spark in his eyes. He lifts his own coffee mug as if in salute before bringing it to his lips. Then, he winks.

Son of a bitch!

I see red. Or worse. What's worse than seeing red? That's me. He sabotaged me!

Before I can charge Grayson's way, Theo steps off the elevator, calling out, "Conference room! Wasn't sure I'd make it in today but I'm curious to hear what everyone has to share."

A few pitiful, last-minute attempts confirm I can't use the visual material I've prepared. I can either tell Theo his younger brother is an utter cretin who sabotaged my presentation while attempting to not sound like a child throwing a tantrum or wing it.

Wing it, Norrie. You know this backwards and forwards even without those visuals.

"I hope so," I murmur while grabbing up my old school notes.

But as I head towards the conference room with everyone else, I note Grayson is holding the door open for us all. I'm

the last to enter so we're alone long enough for me to shoot him with my best 'die, bastard' look when I tell him, "I know what you did."

"What?"

"Despite your underhanded stunt, I'm going to kick ass in this meeting today and someday I'm going to pour an entire pot of coffee over your head in retribution. I'll only hold my tongue because I admire your brother and would hate for him to realize what an embarrassment you are to his good name by comparison."

He stares at me like I've lost my marbles at first. Then, his jaw clenches as his eyes narrow with unmistakable rage. But, Theo is already talking so I breeze past Grayson and prepare to give this presentation my all.



Having visuals during a presentation really helps alleviate some of that pesky public speaking fear. Without a laptop to fiddle with or graphics to distract my audience, I can feel every eye on me as I stand with sweaty palms and a pounding heart to give my opinion of the ideal way to convince Bent Jacobs that selling his firm to Wolfe Media is in his company's best, long-term interest.

"A barbeque? You think hosting a *barbeque* is going to impress Mr. Jacobs, Eleanor?"

Mike's sarcastic tone makes it clear he doesn't agree. And, he's not the only one in the room giving me an incredulous look.

Grayson doesn't look incredulous at least. No, he's staring at me like he'd enjoy nothing more than drowning me in his cup of coffee. He must be angry that I busted him. The fury is rolling off him in waves.

"Not just a barbeque, a family-oriented barbeque with a Texas flair to it."

“Are we looking to do business with the man or host a cotillion? Does anyone have a good mint julep recipe?” An outbreak of quiet chuckles around the table over Mike’s joke has me wishing for a cup of coffee to drown myself in.

Theo holds up his hand, clearly on the verge of calling things back to order but someone else speaks before he does. “That’s enough, Mike.”

My heart hammers in my chest at that barked command. *Grayson*. I’m shocked he would say anything in my defense... unless it was to make a joke of his own.

“Please, continue, Ms. Fairfield,” Theo says, graciously after a nod to his brother.

Stay of execution granted, I pour myself back into the pitch. “I spent the week going over everything we have on Mr. Jacobs and Lone Star. He’s a family man, devoted to his employees, some of which share kinship with him.”

“We’re aware of this,” Grayson says, without censure though he’s very obviously pissed off.

Was I a little hasty in my assumptions? I start to worry.

“Yes but did you know that every spring he and his wife hold a picnic for their company’s employees and families? It’s not something he reports on the company’s financial reports as he pays for it out of his own pocket. His grandfather was a cattle rancher and Mr. Jacobs hosts the event on the land he inherited from him. His wife’s family breeds horses and there’s always Old West performers and pony rides for the children and such. They’re very fond of the Cowboy/Texas Plains aesthetic and traditions.”

“And you think holding a hoedown will sell him on us?” Mike asks, dubiously.

“Wolfe Media isn’t just a giant company looking to snap up his smaller one. Despite its size, it’s still a family-run business, the same way Mr. Jacobs thinks of Lone Star. The third generation of the company’s leadership is sitting in this room with us.”

I look at Theo who smiles. I'm a little afraid to look at Grayson right now.

Oh God, what if I was hasty in my assumptions?

"So, I thought, we could host a barbeque somewhere away from the city. I have a friend who knows an excellent caterer."

"You have a friend..." Mike says, rolling his eyes.

"We'd invite Mr. Jacobs to bring his lovely wife and anyone from his company he wishes. You could have your family there along with several of the employees who could bring their families. Show him you're more than a huge corporate entity. Let Mr. Jacobs meet you on terms he's familiar with and see you as something other than city slickers."

"How much would this cost?" Grayson asks. Of course, he would ask. It's a valid question and a necessary one. And the one thing I don't have a great answer for off the top of my head.

"There are ways to keep costs reasonable. I have some notes here but my presentation had more precise figures."

"Where is your actual presentation anyway, Ms. Fairfield? It's hard to picture it without visuals," Mike says, giving Theo a knowing look. He had said Theo likes visuals.

"I had everything prepared but..." I swallow my desire to point fingers. There's a risk in having beverages around tech and I knew that. "There was an accident shortly before the meeting. My coffee wound up spilling. I'll have to wait for the coffee to dry to see what can be salvaged."

Grayson frowns while Mike tsks at me. "What a shame." Funny how Mike doesn't sound like he thinks it's a shame at all.

Wait...

"Well, for my part, I like Eleanor's idea, with or without visuals," Becca, another member of the team, says. I could kiss her for that.

“Yeah, I do, too,” another voice says, Glen, one of the oldest heads here. “It’s something he didn’t see from New York and I think it’s doable. Might set us apart in his mind from the other big names trying to woo him.”

They like my idea! Does the boss? “Agreed. I’d really like to see the numbers and what you’d prepared once you can recover the data, Ms. Fairfield.” He does!

“Yes, Mr. Wolfe.” Even if Theo decides to go another direction, at least he doesn’t hate it.

Elated, I turn towards the other Wolfe in the room, hoping to speak to him while dreading the fact I may soon need to make an apology.

But, he doesn’t want my apology. He shoots to his feet without a word and storms out of the conference room.

10-GRAYSON

“I’ll only hold my tongue because I admire your brother and would hate for him to realize what an embarrassment you are to his good name by comparison.”

Little Miss Perfect knows perfectly well where the soft underbelly is, huh?

It’s hard enough being the youngest of four brothers. Try being the youngest when the other three are *my* brothers.

Jonathan, sharp, shrewd and unafraid to defy our hard-nosed father since he could talk. Harvard Law graduate, college rowing champion two years in a row and youngest judge sitting on the bench in Illinois at his level.

Oliver, a brilliant physician and philanthropist, taking the fortune he inherited from our grandfather to do something so meaningful while I was out pricing yachts. Best damn pool player I’ve ever met.

And then Theo, anointed since birth to take over the helm of Wolfe Media from our father, the devoted family man and serious business leader who never caused scandals as an undergrad. My big brother who I’ve merely idolized my entire life.

No matter how sure of myself I pretend to be, I have my share of self-doubt, okay?

“What was that about?” Theo asks, coming into my office after the meeting has apparently concluded.

“What was what about?” I mutter as I’m scanning through the security footage I called for. Those guys know they’re on thin ice with me after the locker room bullshit so they got it up here pronto. We’re not trying to be Big Brother to our employees but we do have cameras in various places on every floor and they’re not for show. It’s surprising how many people tend to forget they’re there after a while.

“The way you left the meeting like you remembered you’d left your iron on at home. Are you still in a snit over Eleanor?”

“Excuse you? I am not in any sort of snit.”

“You seemed like you were on Monday. Certainly frustrated by the Fairest Fairfield at least.”

“And my boss called me down for it and told me to back off. Which I have.” *Mostly.*

It’s not been easy backing off but Theo was right. Bickering with Eleanor has gone from entertaining to more akin to foreplay for me. *Minus the follow-through.*

Didn’t help my steer-clear resolve yesterday morning when she showed up in the locker room eyeing me like her favorite candy after my shower or the fact she makes post-workout sweating look good with those fetching freckles beckoning my tongue to trace them.

Fuck, I hope my date goes well tonight. Maybe I can stop thinking of her then.

Anyway, it was embarrassing having my older brother tell me twice in the span of a few hours to rein it in on Monday like I was some horny teenager panting over the hot girl in class. I’m trying to prove myself to him, not prove I can score with the junior executive trainee. And, it’s not like I really think she’d want that either. Whatever sparks are between us probably confuse and annoy her more than anything.

“You left as soon as she finished her pitch, looking pissed off at the world and didn’t say a word.”

I was pissed. At her but also over my own suspicions.

After the meeting Monday, I’d taken it upon myself to talk to Mike, knowing how quick he is to nurse a supposed slight or insult. The guy’s a leftover from my father’s era, a favored hire for one of the board member’s who’s been gone since January when Theo took over. You’d think he might realize he could be on thin ice too but not Mike.

I wanted to make sure he wasn't harboring ill-will towards Fairfield but I feel like my words fell on deaf ears and possibly had the opposite reaction. Which was the last thing I intended.

I decide it's best I don't reply to Theo's accusation.

"I'm going with her barbeque idea."

"Great. It was the best idea."

"You didn't hear the others."

"I didn't need to. What she said makes sense. I left because I needed to look for something... and I just found it."

With a furrowed brow, Theo comes around to my side of the desk to look over my shoulder.

I double-check the timestamp to be sure. Today, right before the meeting. There's Fairfield at her desk with her mug of coffee, fussing with something on her laptop. She's adorable when she's flustered.

There she is leaving her desk, probably to hit the head. Too much coffee. Wish I had asked her to have coffee *with* me instead of suggesting she fetch me some like a prick. *Yeah, well, you can't do that, boss man.*

Empty desk and now there's Mike walking past. He stops and looks around. I knew it. Goddammit.

"What's he... *goddammit!*" Theo shouts, punching the back of my chair.

"Hey! I didn't do it!" Even if she sure was quick to assume I did. What have I ever done to her to make her think I'd sabotage an employee's presentation or potentially hurt my family's company to be a petty prick?

"No shit, you didn't do it. Get his ass in my office ASAP! You'll be there as my witness! And to keep me from doing something I'll regret!"

"Yeah, okay. Maybe someone needs to keep me from doing something I'll regret though," I say to Theo's back as he's already storming away.

He roars at Claire to hold his calls. Quinn's due in a few weeks and the stress and worry on top of running the company are getting to my brother. He doesn't need nonsense like this to deal with. Mike's going to catch all kinds of hell and will probably be lucky if he's still employed by the end of the day. I can't feel a bit of sympathy for him.

I send the condemned a vague message, hoping he'll walk in to this clueless and tell Paula to hold my calls.

"Actually, Ms. Fairfield is out here asking to speak with you, sir."

Rubbing my temples, I sigh. "Send her in." I'll get to clear my name but it doesn't take away the sting of knowing she automatically thought the worst of me.

I don't think she's thinking that now. She looks like a lamb heading to slaughter as she creeps inside. "Mr. Wolfe? Sir..."

"Come in and take a seat, Ms. Fairfield."

Instead of gesturing towards the chair in front of my desk though, I direct her towards the sofa by my liquor cabinet. I want a drink for this conversation. She perches on the edge, tucking her skirt around her legs with her ankles crossed like the prim little debutante. Where's that fire hiding now?

"Want a drink?" I ask, holding up a bottle of Johnnie Walker.

She shakes her head before slowly nodding. I pour her drink and then my own. Downing mine with a quiet hiss, I watch her take a sip. She immediately starts coughing. I knew she'd hate scotch.

"Sorry," she splutters, setting down the glass with teary eyes.

"Sorry for what? You don't have to apologize for disliking the drink," I say, coolly.

"That's not what I meant." She inhales and steels herself for the apology which, I've got to admit, I admire her for following through with. "I'm sorry for what I accused you of."

It was inappropriate of me to accuse you with no evidence. There was coffee all over my things and... it was Mike. At least, I think it might have been. I don't have any proof and you can tell me I'm-

"It was Mike and I do have proof."

"Oh!" Her cheeks glow the rosiest shade with her surprised gasp. It's utterly beguiling. "What proof?"

"The security cameras. There are cameras everywhere these days, you know."

She blushes even more furiously at the reminder of how we were caught on camera kissing not so long ago. "It was wrong of me to jump to the conclusion I did."

"It was. It showed a lack of maturity on your part though I suppose climbing out of a window to avoid an unpleasant conversation last week already demonstrated that."

She winces. *I know where the soft underbelly is, too.*

"What happens now?"

"My brother and I will be having a conversation with Mike, an unpleasant one."

"You won't fire him, will you? I couldn't stand to be the cause of-"

"That's not your decision, Ms. Fairfield. If it were solely mine, he'd be out on his ass already."

She blinks, plainly astonished. "I didn't expect that. Especially after the way I spoke to you. Fox is still working for my father, you know."

I don't know what game Louis is playing there, keeping him close and sending her away, but it's not like Fox will have a job much longer either way. No way is that prick working for us.

"Mike intentionally destroyed a company laptop and tried to sabotage a fellow employee's hard work. That's a firing offense around here. I can't speak as to what Fox might have done at Fairfield... beyond losing your affections."

I don't expect it. It's not her fire getting me hot and bothered this time. But, when Eleanor's nose crinkles up and her eyes fill with tears, I find myself sinking down beside her, wanting to wrap her in my arms and comfort her despite my lingering anger. And the fact that Fox obviously hurt this girl makes me hate him twice as much as I already did.

"I'm sorry, Grayson," she says croakily with her chin held high while mastering the tears that threaten. "What are you going to do to me?"

"To you?"

"You'll reprimand me, won't you?"

There is a very dark and dirty part of me that likes the idea of 'reprimanding' Eleanor but she believes *her* position is in danger? I might not like what she said to me but I'm man enough to take an accusation. I don't like her looking at me this way either, vulnerable and uncertain. I'd rather her bicker with me than this.

"Nothing will happen to you. It's water under the bridge. Think before you speak next time."

She sighs. "Thank you for being so magnanimous about it."

"Magnanimous? Yeah, that's me," I chuckle and she smiles. "You're lucky we had new windows installed recently. Otherwise, I'd make you climb down from mine as punishment, Squirrel."

She snorts at the ludicrous idea of climbing down from forty-stories up. "Are you trying to cheer me up?"

"Maybe."

"Even after I was awful to you?"

"Especially then. Because I know it will make you feel like *the worst*."

Her lips twitch and then she's laughing. Much as I like sparring with her, her laughter is every bit as alluring, a charming, melodious sound. Her beautiful eyes drop to my mouth as she quietly says, "Thank you, sir."

Call me basic but that ‘sir’ paired with her expression has my dick coming to life in an instant. She caught me off-guard last week but I know that look, that’s the look of a woman who wants to be kissed.

“I shouldn’t have teased you about fetching me coffee earlier,” I tell her, scooting closer on the sofa. Christ, she smells delectable, that soft lilac scent seducing me again.

She sits up a little straighter, her breasts straining against her blouse and I recall the softness of her skin from her torn dress that night. “I would make you some if you wanted. I love coffee and happily share when possible.”

So eager to please. *What if I want you to please me in another way?*

Studying her lips more intently, whether I should or not, I decide I’m going to kiss her. Or perhaps she’s going to kiss me again.

But before either of us can move, there’s a discreet knock. “Mr. Dennis has gone into your brother’s office and they’re waiting for you,” Paula says through the door.

Fairfield springs from my sofa as if we’ve been caught doing something illicit. We weren’t but I was seconds away from crossing a line I shouldn’t. She’s a trainee and, when Theo takes leave with Quinn and the baby, I’ll be her boss without question. Even if her position here is temporary, I can’t initiate anything and I’d better remember it if I don’t want another lecture from Theo.

“There aren’t any cameras in here, are there?” she asks, ready to flee.

“No, Ms. Fairfield. No cameras in my office. But I’ll say it’s best if you head back to your desk now.” Best for both of us. “I’ll see you on Monday.”

“Yes, Mr. Wolfe. Or sooner perhaps.” She dips into a girlish curtsy, making me chuckle at the absurd Eleanor-ness of it.

11-GRAYSON

An unpleasant meeting with Mike leads to his termination but the jerk acts ridiculously self-righteous for a grown man who was caught on camera pouring coffee on another colleague's computer because he felt threatened by her. Not to mention the insulting innuendos he made about Fairfield and me.

"Still wish I could've punched him," I grumble once Theo and I are alone again.

"Nope, not happening on my watch. Gray, remember what we talked about Monday. You told me you and Eleanor working together wouldn't be an issue. No fighting and no fu-"

"Watch it."

"I was going to say funny business."

I glare at him and his 'funny business.' "Well, you can stop the mother hen bullshit. There won't be any of either."

I'm nearly out the door when I hear Theo quietly murmur, "I wouldn't worry if you didn't sound so regretful about that."

Despite an easing of tension in my office earlier, there is *nothing* going on. We don't even like each other. No more kisses or thinking about her that way. She works for us. End of story.

I'm in a foul mood when evening arrives and I pick up my date. I should've canceled. I also really want to have sex tonight and to stop thinking about a certain brunette from work.

Gretchen and I dated on and off before she went to Switzerland last year to train for the next Winter Olympics. We'd reached a mutual decision to see other people while she was gone but now she's back and I'm more than willing to pick up where we left off. At least, my cock wants to.

“You seem different,” Gretchen says no sooner than we’re seated.

“How so? I’m still me.” I tilt my head to one side and give her my most charming smile.

She grins and shakes her head. “I don’t know. More serious maybe. Normally, you would’ve taken us to a drive-thru before hitting a club. A fancy place like this is so grown up for you, Grayson.”

I suppose it is. Our past dates usually consisted of take-out boxes, clubbing and sex against the nearest wall. Not necessarily in that order.

“The consequences of being a responsible adult these days, I’m afraid. But don’t worry, I’ll take you somewhere far less classy after this.”

She laughs and I feel her foot sliding against my ankle under the table. *Fuck, yeah.* We’ve always had fun together. No stress, no strings. Just a fun girl and a fun guy who enjoy hanging out together and the more intimate activities the dating label offers.

But do you feel anything for her? Does she light your fire?

No, I’m sorry to say she doesn’t.

Don’t get me wrong, she’s a great person. A good female friend who I’ve enjoyed having sex with in the past. But there’s lamentably nothing deeper than that... on either end. What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I make a real connection?

Jonathan, Theo and now even Oliver have each found their for-keeps girl. Is there one out there for me somewhere or will I be the fun, unmarried uncle to their kids forever?

What the fuck are you pissing and moaning about? You’re not as old as them! Are you ready to have Mom line up debutantes for you to court or something?

Hell, no. I know who she’d be bringing ‘round first if I was.

The server arrives with our drinks. I wonder what Fairfield would choose. Not scotch. I smile to myself remembering her spluttering after that sip. For some reason, I want coffee now. That mug she had this morning smelled so good. Or maybe that was her.

“Grayson, are you listening to me?”

I look up from the menu I was only half reading, drawn from my musings over Eleanor, to find Gretchen staring at me expectantly. “I’m sorry, I must’ve zoned out. Did you ask me something?” Yikes, there’s a pinched look if ever I saw one. *Women hate being ignored, you idiot.*

“I asked if you knew the gentleman sitting over there. He’s looked this way three times since we’ve been seated.”

“Oh, I...” Craning my neck around, I spy Louis Fairfield across the dining room.

He lifts his tumbler in salute and I return the gesture with mine. Always so reserved and distinguished acting, even when he’s trying to catch your attention.

He’s a few years older than my own father. He must’ve been past forty-five when Eleanor was born. No wonder he’s ready to sell Fairfield Communications to us.

I wonder if his daughter’s ‘temporary’ position with us will wind up being not-so-temporary. It’s not like she’ll be carrying on at her family’s business. She might wind up working for us for years. I’ll never be able to kiss her again, will I? Fuck it.

Theo had happily taken her on as his trainee as part of the preliminary discussions of the buyout but it can’t hurt to instill some goodwill with the old man considering his daughter and I haven’t been on the best of terms.

I start to excuse myself from Gretchen when I notice a flash of pink and sleek brown curls heading that way.

Eleanor.

She’s wearing some sort of wrap with a hood but I’d know her anywhere. My jumpy squirrel seems to sense me staring,

like prey being spotted by a predator. And when she turns and our eyes meet, time stands still and my heart thuds heavily in my chest.

And, there's the fire.

Fuck me.



“You had reservations here tonight as well?” I ask when we’re in range. She clocked it when Paula mentioned the place on Monday, I know she did and yet she didn’t say anything.

“Yes, one Friday evening per month. Dad’s a creature of habit.”

“Good, you can make a recommendation for me,” Gretchen says affably, having joined us. I make the introductions and Gretchen continues. “A year abroad and I’d still prefer a cheeseburger when I’m on a break from training.”

Eleanor smiles. “I love a good cheeseburger but one of my best friends went to culinary school. She’s broadened my palate and is quite the promising chef.” Her lovely smile dims when she adds, “Unfortunately, she’s had some unwelcome news today-”

“Exquisite tastes should be indulged, though in moderation,” Mr. Fairfield says ponderously from his seat at the table.

“Oh, I’d argue tasting exquisite things is not something to be missed whenever possible, sir.”

The Fairest Fairfield blushes at my arguably innocent statement paired with my less than innocent smile, and the accompanying tightening in my boxer briefs warns me I’d better watch myself before one of these two women (rightfully) throws a drink in my face.

“Are your parents well, Grayson? I didn’t have the opportunity to speak with them last Friday after we had

everyone get dressed up for no reason.” Eleanor visibly shrinks at her father’s brusque reminder.

“They’re well, sir, thank you. They were sorry to miss speaking with you and I, um... left sooner than expected.” *After kissing your daughter breathless.* Christ, this is uncomfortable. He’s not a bad man but he’s as stiff-necked as they come.

She’s barely looking at me now. Is it the reminder of last Friday night? Maybe what happened this morning at the office is still bothering her. God knows, she’s been on my mind constantly this past week. Against my will, of course.

“Well, we won’t keep you from your date,” Mr. Fairfield says with a polite half-bow towards Gretchen. “But I hope to see you on the links for your half-brother’s thing.”

Oliver’s ‘thing’ is a charity golf tournament which will be hosted at the country club next weekend. It’s a benefit for his free clinic for the homeless and underprivileged. “Yes, I’ll be there. We’re forming a family team as well as several for Wolfe Media.”

I would be there for anything Oliver’s doing regardless but I’m delighted Mom and Libby talked Oliver into a golf tournament simply because I love playing. I still swim daily for exercise but golfing is my favorite pastime. Watching that little white ball disappear into the cup, walking the course on a fine day. Or even a dull, wintry one. I don’t care. There’s nothing else quite like it for me when I want to find some peace of mind.

“Excellent. I’m getting a team together myself.”

“Will you play?” I ask Eleanor. I know she golfs. I’ve seen her out on the course a couple of times with Fox and back when she was younger with her dad. Does she have any friends she plays with? Would she ever want to play a round with me? We’d probably wind up arguing over something. *Or kissing.*

“Perhaps if I can find a team to join,” she says, looking to her father wistfully. He doesn’t appear to notice her

wistfulness. Oof. I know very well what it's like to have a father who places you well down his list of priorities at times.

Gretchen and I say our farewells and return to our table. Once seated, Gretchen gives me a mischievous smile. "So, that's *the* Ms. Fairfield... the scarlet debutante who was stolen by a Wolfe last week."

"Christ, not you, too." She laughs and I should've known the gossip is still making the rounds. It's not had long enough to die down yet. "She was only giving me a little thank-you kiss for helping her escape the party."

"Are you sure about that, Grayson?" she asks, her eyes tracking back across the dining room.

I can't help it, my eyes seek Eleanor again. And, she's looking back at us before she realizes she's been caught staring and quickly looks away.

When I turn towards Gretchen again, she's smirking. Uncomfortably, I raise my hand to draw our server's attention. "Shall we order now?" I say, evading the question.



I've been a horrible date tonight and I'm ashamed of that. I'm caught more than once glancing Eleanor's way. Should've canceled. My head's not in the game.

It's no surprise when Gretchen shoots down my offer to go dancing after the meal, saying she'd rather go home. I'm actually relieved. Eleanor and her father left a few minutes ahead of us. Jesus, why can't I stop thinking about her?

I walk Gretchen to her door and I'm a bit surprised when I'm invited in. "Grayson..." Gretchen slides her hand up my arm to my chest as she kicks off her heels. She bites at her plump bottom lip and gives me that unmistakable come-hither look.

A year ago, I'd have her pinned to the wall already, sucking on her throat with my hand working its way up her skirt. Why can't I do it? How do I gracefully turn her down?

I've never had this issue with a woman. Never! For fuck's sake, why am I letting Fairfield mess with my mind and my dick?

Whatever the reason, it's happening and this isn't.

"Gretch... I'm sorry."

"I knew it." Gretchen smiles knowingly and removes her hand from my chest.

"Knew what?"

"Growth, Grayson. Things are changing with you. I still have to focus on training and, when I'm not training, I want something fun and easy while I think you're moving into a new phase of your life; less partying, more business."

"I like fun and easy. I still know how to leave work at the office."

She gives me an affectionate smile. "That's not what I mean. It's not a bad thing. I'm happy for you but I don't think we're what the other wants anymore."

"I know I've been a shit date tonight. I'm sorry about that. You're a beautiful, fascinating woman..."

"And yet, I couldn't help noticing that you kept staring elsewhere."

I hang my head because how can I deny it? "She works with me. We don't even get along that well. I think she hates me. I'm not sure I like her either. It's complicated. You know me. I've never wanted anything complicated."

She grins like she knows the best secret and says, "Growth," again. How the hell is being obsessed with Fairfield growth? "I think something complicated might be in your future whether it's what you've wanted or not."

With that, Gretchen gives me a hug goodbye and I see myself out the door.

Is she right about the complicated thing? Messing around at work with someone who answers to me would certainly be complicated but that's never been my brand of trouble. My

father went down that path before I was born and, while I love my half-brother very much, I have no desire to have a workplace fling like Dad did, even if I'm not married like he was.

Anyway, even if maybe I don't truly dislike her at all, it's best if Fairfield and I keep things strictly professional going forward. No shared drinks, alcoholic or caffeinated, no more flirting disguised as bickering, no nicknames, no more kissing, no longing for more.

Grayson Wolfe is going to be a total grownup at all times in the office. I promised Theo and I want to prove myself to him.

Back at my place, I pull out my laptop. Me, working on a Friday night. What the hell?

But at the top of my emails, I see one which makes me pause. What does she want this late on a Friday? I just saw her. It's like I can't escape her. (Why doesn't that annoy me?)

To: grayson.wolfe@wolfemedia.com

From: eleanor.fairfield@wolfemedia.com

July 28th 10:43 PM (Attachment included)

Subject: Budget for BBQ

The coffee must've dried enough by now for her USB drive to work again. And, she sent this a few minutes before I got home. I click to open the message.

Hi,

I'm sorry to send this late on a Friday when I'm sure you're busy with your date but I wanted to forward this to you now that it's working. Also, I want to say again I am very sorry about the assumption I made earlier today and the unkind things I said.

I hope your dinner was good and your night is exquisite,

Norrie

Norrie? Grinning at her use of the word 'exquisite,' I'm about to open the attachment when another email pops up from her.

To: grayson.wolfe@wolfemedia.com

From: eleanor.fairfield@wolfemedia.com

10:54 PM

Apologies,

I should've probably included your brother on that as well but I don't even know if either of you want it. Not sure what I was thinking.

Also, I didn't mean to make any assumptions regarding your date or exquisite tastes with my remark. Please, ignore that.

Appreciatively,

Eleanor

Appreciatively, Eleanor? Oh, we're not letting it go at that until Monday. For better or worse, the fire is lit. I start to type.

12-ELEANOR

What possessed me to send Grayson an email late on a Friday evening? And to sign the first one Norrie? Or suggest that he was *busy* with his date, possibly indulging in those exquisite tastes he favors, and then make it worse by pointing out that I thought about that? Ugh. And, of course, she'd be gorgeous, too nice to hate and a freaking Olympian.

It was bad enough having to endure Dad's questions during the drive regarding my week at Wolfe Media after learning that Drew's loan application was denied while ruminating over the fact I'd wanted to kiss Grayson again in his office before Paula's timely interruption. I wish I could've gone to Drew's place to comfort her but she'd had to work anyway.

Then, to see Grayson and his stunning date and be aware that they were both glancing my way after we spoke, it was embarrassing. Does she know I kissed him last week? Did they laugh about it afterwards? Is she a better kisser than me? Is he kissing her right now? Why does my poor heart ache at the thought?

I'm ready to crawl into a corner of misery with a couple of slices of cheesecake - one for me and one in honor of Drew - when my new work laptop bleeps with an email notification. Oh my God. It's from *him*.

To: eleanor.fairfield@wolfemedia.com

From: grayson.wolfe@wolfemedia.com

July 28th 10:59 PM

RE: Ceasefire

Good evening Squirrel, (Or should I address this to Norrie?)

Thank you for your dedication to the company on the weekend. My brother and I agreed we liked your idea the best.

I'll look over this and perhaps we could meet in my office Monday morning at nine?

You don't have to apologize again regarding what happened earlier. I've forgiven you, water under the bridge. I'm magnanimous that way.

My night was alright but not exquisite. Did you enjoy yours?

~Grayson

P.S. Out of curiosity, what do you usually shoot in golf?

I smile at the subject line. Ceasefire, huh? And, his night was just alright? Does that mean he's come home alone? Probably so if he's answering work emails. And he wants to know my golf score? Deciding not to overthink things, I reply.

To: grayson.wolfe@wolfemedia.com

From: eleanor.fairfield@wolfemedia.com

11:03 PM

RE: Ceasefire

Dear Mr. Magnanimous,

Thank you for accepting my apology. Again. I had a good deal of wine with dinner or I wouldn't have signed that first email as I did. Only my parents and closest friends have ever called me Norrie.

I will gladly meet with you on Monday and I'm pleased to know you both liked my idea. My dinner was tolerable though less exciting than climbing out of windows.

Generally, I shoot in the mid-80s to lower 90s when I play.

And please stop calling me squirrel.

Appreciatively,

Eleanor

The reply bounces back moments later. I squeal like a teenage girl with a crush.

Hold up. Mid 80s? You should've played in college if you consistently shoot that well. Did Yale not have a women's

team?

With sincere admiration,

Mr. Magnanimous

My stomach is full of butterflies and I am grinning like the biggest goof as I reply.

They do but I was focused on my studies. Weren't you?

I'm blushing as I press send, thinking about that old story regarding Grayson getting caught with a girl on the golf course while at Northwestern.

Was I supposed to focus on something other than golf when I was in college?

I laugh out loud at this idiot, knowing very well he did.

I'll look forward to Monday. I'm sorry to say helping you down from that tree last Friday was more exciting than this Friday night's dinner but we can't dominate the gossip column every week, can we?

Regarding nicknames- as you wish, Norrie.

Goodnight~

As you wish? How dare he make my little romantic heart flutter with that line? And, I have a feeling he's still going to call me Squirrel anyway.



My second week at Wolfe Media went well with no coffee catastrophes or trips to the men's locker room. The meeting with Grayson on Monday morning had included his brother and was strictly professional. Is it sad that I was vaguely disappointed by that? I missed the odd sense of closeness I'd felt towards Grayson during our email chat on Friday night. I even missed bickering with him and those damned tingles it causes.

I know, I know, this is better. We're acting as professionals should. Hopefully, he won't have cause to

remark on my lack of maturity again. But, there's something about Grayson when we're talking one-on-one...

Best put it aside for now, Norrie. Today may be hard enough.

Don't I know it.

It's the weekend again and I've come to the country club today as an observer and to show support for the charity golf tournament. It's the first time I'll be amongst that crowd since the scandal broke two weeks ago. The gossip page has moved on but these people never do.

On top of that, my father didn't invite me to join his team, choosing three of his board members from Fairfield instead. Fine, I never explicitly asked him, they're around his age and they've played together many times.

Except, one of them had to drop out last minute and, somehow, Fox has taken that man's place. On my father's team.

"It'll look like you're publicly supporting him over me."

"Eleanor..." Dad sighs as the car pulls up the long drive to the club. "You're my daughter. Of course, I support you. I didn't invite him to join us, Mort did. He's simply one of three men playing golf with me today. It would be rude of me to refuse to play at this point as the tournament is for charity and he's still an employee for now."

He's still an employee at Fairfield and I've been temporarily shuttled off elsewhere. "A little rudeness is not always out of place," I grumble, earning another sigh from Dad.

I suspect Fox with his ass-kissing ways had planned on continuing to climb the ladder at Fairfield once we married, perhaps even taking on the role I intend to someday as CEO. Perhaps he believes my father will overlook his 'indiscretion' in time and he can carry on with his plans. Fox is older than me with more experience. What if I have to answer to *him* someday at my own family's company?

Would you do that? I think, staring at my father before the car stops.

Heading towards the green ahead of Dad, I can't help noticing some stares and even a pointed finger or two. I've gone from the resident Good Girl around here to the Scarlet Debutante who kissed another man at her engagement party in quick order. I wish Constance and Drew had been able to make it. Who will I talk to while I wait around for my father?

Thankfully, I see Margaret Wolfe at the registration table. Grayson's mom is always so kind to me but there's something about that which makes me ache for my own mother. Maybe I can be her shadow all day. *Do you have room for a lost girl by your side, ma'am?*

"Eleanor, I'm so glad to see you here. You're simply stunning in red."

"Thank you, Mrs. Wolfe. The golf dress is new so I figured I'd dress the part."

"Which part?"

"The Scarlet Debutante."

She laughs until she realizes I'm serious. Glancing over her shoulder, she shoots the gossips a scathing look. *Mama Wolfe, indeed.* "Hold your head high, darling. No one can fault you for breaking off an engagement. Better to realize your heart wasn't in it before the vows were exchanged." I really love this woman.

She introduces me to Libby Adams, Dr. Wolfe's girlfriend, who works in event management at a PR firm and has organized this with Margaret's help. "It's lovely to meet you, Libby," I tell the beautiful blonde who seems to glow when Dr. Wolfe approaches our group. He is a handsome devil without a doubt. Did I ever look that happy to see Fox? No, I don't think I did. I definitely wouldn't now.

"Eleanor," he says politely, "I'm glad you could join us today. Will you play?"

“No, I didn’t have a team to join so I figured I could come offer support and lend a hand if you need two free ones. But by the looks of things, there’s already several volunteers.”

“Yes,” Libby says, laughing. “I was pleased by how many I was able to round up on rather short notice. We may have more volunteers than golfers.”

“And plenty of press, too,” Mrs. Wolfe adds with a strained smile.

“Yes.” Dr. Wolfe’s single, clipped affirmative tells me he’s not thrilled about that. As the so-called Bastard Wolfe Brother, I know he’s had his share of their nonsense over the years. Completely unfair.

Recognizing a couple of intrepid society page reporters from the night of my engagement party, I find myself in total agreement with his attitude.

“Well, I believe we’ll do well enough for your clinic, baby,” Libby says and Dr. Wolfe’s expression softens as he turns back to her.

“You’re definitely going to do well today.” I turn at the sound of that familiar voice to find Grayson behind me, looking impossibly handsome in his fitted blue polo and white golf shorts. I guess if I won’t be golfing I can admire the view, can’t I? “I’ve got eight teams to enter, Lovely Libby.”

Libby rolls her eyes at his affectionate nickname for her - *better than squirrel!* - and starts entering his teams’ information into her tablet when he hands her his paperwork.

His blond hair is pushed back by his sun visor, giving his golden boy good looks a rakish air. My silly stomach swoops when he aims those sapphire blue eyes at me. “Good morning, Fairfield. Did you bring your clubs?”

My smile starts to slip, thinking about the fact no one asked me to participate on their team. When Grayson passes Libby an enormous check to cover all eight teams’ entrance fees, it slips further, the reminder that I don’t have access to my trust yet to put down the necessary donation to enter one of my own, assuming I could even find three teammates.

If I had access to that money, my best friend would already be following her dream instead of pretending that it's okay every time she gets turned down for a loan, saying it will work out someday.

"My clubs are in the car." Something hopeful and childish in me couldn't bear leaving them at home. "But I'm just watching today."

My smile disappears completely when I see my father approaching the registration table. With Fox. It seems our broken engagement hasn't changed anything.

He is objectively the same handsome man I'd said yes to a few weeks ago but how my opinion has changed since then. I can only see his eager expression and flushed face as he'd had another woman turned over his kitchen table when I look at him now. He never wanted me. Only the stronger tie to my father and the company our marriage would've brought him. Will anyone ever want me for me?

My father greets Mrs. Wolfe and I'm left to deal with him. "Eleanor, it's good to see you. You look... devastating." He holds his hand over his heart and is wearing the hang-dog expression of a jilted lover. The nerve of this man.

"What are *you* doing here?" Grayson asks Fox, that delicious growly tone coming out.

"There was a spot open on Louis's team. It's a shame your father didn't have another opening. We might've played and talked, Snookums."

"Don't call me that. Ever again," I snarl, my temper spiking. How dare he use that stupid endearment now? And like there's anything to talk about.

"Well, it's working out in my favor. Looking forward to having Norrie on my team today."

My mouth falls open, temper spike momentarily forgotten, as I turn towards Grayson who spoke. On his team? What's he talking about? And, he called me Norrie.

"What do you mean she's on your team, Wolfe?" Fox asks before I can.

Grayson throws an arm around my shoulders, grinning effortlessly at me like we're the best of friends. Damn, he smells amazing and his body is so warm and solid. *Hello again, Tingles.*

"A lady who can score in the mid-80s can always score a spot on my team, Davenport." He raises one eyebrow at my dumbfounded look, silently telling me to play along. To piss off Fox? Oh, I'll play along.

"To be fair, Grayson, you know I shot a ninety-one during my last round," I say, demurely. I'm not proud of it but I absolutely relish the flicker of fury crossing Fox's face.

"A ninety-one? Look at this jewel of a girl being so modest. Fairfield, my dad plays three days a week and is happy to hit a hundred. You're going to be great."

The strong arm around my shoulders gives a squeeze and I feel ridiculously warm and fuzzy inside thinking he might actually want me on his team. I'm supposed to hate this guy... right?

"Guess we'll see you out there today, Davenport."

"Yes and may the best and most *honorable* man win, Wolfe." Ick, this man acting so sanctimonious. *You're the freaking cheater!*

"Or the best woman," Grayson says with a nod my way. "Grip it and rip it, right, Fairfield?"

I'm reduced to giggling at him as Fox gives us a stiff nod and walks away. Good riddance. "Grayson," I begin, grinning from ear to ear, "That was..."

"Amazing, right? God, I enjoy pissing him off," Grayson snickers.

"Me, too. But, while I appreciate you doing that, he's going to know I'm not playing soon enough."

"Oh, you're playing."

"I am? On one of the Wolfe Media teams?" My heart is soaring.

“Yeah, I want you on my team, with me and my brothers.” He wants me on *his* team?! “Nothing better than ruining Davenport’s day.”

Right. He’s only doing this because he hates Fox, isn’t he? My soaring heart dips and I take a step away from where he still had his arm around me. It’s chillier without that arm.

He notices my move. “Is it alright that I called you Norrie? You said not to call you Squirrel.”

“And you’re actually going to listen to me about that?” He grins mischievously. *Probably not.* “Only my friends and family call me Norrie.”

“I’m not your family but perhaps we could be friends. Today only, of course.”

I roll my eyes but I’m fighting back a smile. “For today only, you may call me Norrie.”

“Knew you’d want to be my friend,” he says, striding away.

“Cocky asshole,” I mumble.

He spins more gracefully than you’d think possible for a man as tall and built as him, flashing a panty-dropping smile my way while walking backwards with his eyes never leaving my face. “Guilty as charged. Now, go fetch those clubs and meet me at the tee!”

13- ELEANOR

Three billionaires and a debutante walk onto a golf course...

It sounds like the start of a joke but this is no joke. Most people would be nervous being invited along at the last minute to play golf with their boss, his older brother who is their other *bigger* boss and their other brother who's intimidating in his own way.

Try it when you add an awful ex and a crowd of curious, scandal-loving onlookers to the equation.

Fox stands apart from my father's group, looking none-too-pleased when he catches my eye. I'll agree that ruining his day isn't a half bad way to spend mine.

The buzz of whispers following me as I make my way through the assembled crowd reminds me of an overturned beehive. Nervously, I hoist my bag higher over my shoulder trying to ignore everyone. Then, someone comes along to relieve me of my burden (and shield.)

"May I take that for you, Eleanor?"

"Judge Wolfe!"

"Be honest with me, how horrible are my brothers to work for?" the fourth member of our team asks me with a roguish grin as he carries my clubs and his own.

"Sir, I..." He winces at the 'sir' and I realize the difference in our age doesn't make him or Theo ancients. We're going to play golf together and I'm not a little girl anymore either. "Sorry. You prefer to be called Jonathan rather than Milton, yes?"

"Yes, please."

"To answer your question, Theo is terrific. I can't complain about him one bit."

“And Grayson?” he asks with his dark eyebrows raised with mischief.

“Is... not all that bad.”

Not bad at all.

He keeps surprising me, challenging that little list of mine and the impression I’ve held of him. He’s still annoying in his way but I’m finding him endearingly annoying lately. And, while he’s probably only doing it to anger Fox, it means a lot to me that he’s invited me to play on his team today. Does he know that?

Jonathan places our clubs in a waiting golf cart. There are more eyes turned my way from the bystanders, particularly female eyes, and I catch a few obvious looks of envy. I can’t blame them. I’m going to be golfing with three devastatingly handsome and ridiculously wealthy brothers even if one is married and one is seriously dating someone from what I’ve heard.

Nevertheless, I wish those onlookers wouldn’t keep staring at me.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Grayson says, moving up beside me after Jonathan steps away.

“I would require more than a penny.”

“I’ve got a lot of pennies.” He winks and I can’t help grinning. It’s funny how his presence makes those onlookers seem less significant in my mind.

“I don’t like being talked about unkindly.”

He sees the worst of the gawkers and pointedly turns his back on them. “You can’t control people’s perception of you so try to let it go. Those people want to tear you down because you’re bright and beautiful and it makes them feel big to make someone else feel small.” He thinks I’m bright and beautiful? “But you know what, Fairfield?”

“What?”

“Fuck them. People like that aren’t worth your time of day. They never will be.”

I smile and murmur my uncertain thanks before our attention is drawn to an announcement. The tournament's director lays out the rules. Every player's score will be marked down but the team will only count whoever scored best on each hole. The team with the least strokes after eighteen holes wins the trophy and bragging rights while all monies raised will go to Dr. Wolfe's clinic. A polite round of applause follows and we prepare to golf.

"I'm expecting you all to make my team look good today. Either way, that trophy is going on my mantle tonight," Grayson says to the three of us as teams are told their order for teeing off.

Jonathan shakes his head. "You did hear me when I said I've not played golf in five years, right?"

"I did. What kind of judge doesn't play golf?"

"Um... this one."

"Well, I suspect Fairfield won't let me down at least."

"What if I want that trophy for my own mantle?" I ask as I watch my father's team, including Fox, head towards the tee.

"She makes a good point, Gray. The lady should get the trophy if we win."

"Yeah, she's got to put up with your ultra-competitiveness for the first time whereas we're immune by now."

Grayson doesn't reply to his brothers but he's watching me watch Fox tee up. "You want that trophy, Norrie?"

I turn towards him, wondering if he sees the blaze of determination that fills me. "Very much."

"Shoot a hundred or better and I won't make you wrestle me for it."

I laugh at the mere thought of me trying to wrestle Grayson for anything. *Would you pin me, Mr. Wolfe?* Now, that's an intriguing thought.

"You're assuming we'll beat the other teams. My father's pretty good."

“And, I’m great. That trophy’s in the bag,” he says with a confidence that’s obnoxious yet strangely arousing.

Beating Fox does sound incredibly appealing. “To the victor goes the spoils,” I say, holding out my hand.

Grayson shakes it... and then pulls me a little closer to murmur, “I’ll have you know I love seeing a woman wind up on top.”

That’s an even more intriguing thought.



Grayson’s confidence is well-earned. He’s shooting an amazing game although I bested him on the third hole. I should definitely shoot close to ninety.

But we could overhear the celebration when one of my father’s old cronies hit a lucky hole-in-one, right ahead of us on number seven. Fox was dancing around like he’d done it. The other two men had laughed but my father had watched him with a stony expression.

If he displeases you, why did you let him play with you?

I’m wounded by it. I can’t deny that. Playing with the Wolfe brothers has taken away much of the sting but not all of it. It doesn’t help that they’re right ahead of us. My bruised feelings haven’t escaped someone’s notice either.

“You alright, Fairfield?”

We’re relatively alone while Theo’s helping Jonathan hunt his missing ball in the rough so he can hopefully finish this hole with no worse than a triple bogey. *He did say golf wasn’t his sport.*

“My father taught me how to play. I always wanted a chance to play with him in a tournament.” I clear my throat, pushing aside my emotions. “Thanks for letting me join you today.”

“Well, you’re kicking ass out here. You’d be welcome on my team again.”

His praise makes me feel like I could walk on air even if it is about ruining Fox's day. "How did you get so good?"

Grayson's looking at my father who's setting up at the next hole's tee. "My grandfather taught me the basics." A bitter smile. "I saw more of my grandfather than my dad the first five or six years of my life, I reckon, though Theo and Jonathan say I have no right to complain and it was worse when they were that age."

"My grandparents have been gone since I was very small. But that sounds exactly like something older siblings would say. It's a common tale for the kids of CEOs." I speak from experience on that last bit.

"Yeah. Once I started showing more promise for it than my brothers had, Dad hired a retired pro to teach me. He was a total hard-ass."

"Your father or the pro?"

"Both but I meant the pro. I tried to quit after he made me cry but Dad wouldn't allow it."

"How old were you?"

"Six."

"Six? Goodness!"

"My swim coach was worse. All I ever heard from either of them was I'd never be good enough to compete professionally. I only wanted to be good enough to impress my dad, to finally stand out at something my brothers didn't."

I roll my lips to hide my grin but part of me hurts for Little Grayson. "It would be hard standing out next to boys nine and ten years older than you. And even Oliver's a few years older."

"Yeah but try telling that stubborn kid I was as much. It felt like a race where everyone had a huge head start on me. I was constantly shadowing them, trying to gain their attention as a boy but sometimes..."

"You were the much younger brother and sometimes got left behind?"

“Yeah. Don’t get me wrong. They’re my best friends and the difference in age doesn’t stand out as much now. I know they’d do anything for me and I feel the same way about them.”

“I can tell.” I’m a little jealous. I’ll never have that. But I understand some of the feelings he mentioned even if I had no siblings to compete against. “Every night when he came home, I wanted my father to see how hard or how far I could hit the ball for several months. But he always treated golf as a pastime which took some of the pressure off. Unlike other things...”

“You mean school?”

“I mean everything,” I sigh. “You called me Little Miss Perfect the night of the party. Do you remember?”

He rubs at the back of his neck in a decidedly boyish way. “I’ve called you that in my mind for a long while.” He has? “It was petty of me though.”

“Well, I’ve tried being her for as long as I can remember to please my father. But I always fall short somehow and leave him disappointed.”

“Norrie, *no one* is perfect. But I can’t see how your father could possibly be disappointed by you. I fear you make it hard to dislike you the more time we spend together. Against my better judgment.”

“Against your better... oh, you!” I snap when I see that twinkle in his eye. He’s teasing me again. I appreciate the teasing this time.

Grayson discreetly jerks his chin towards Fox. “Would you tell me why you climbed out that window? You don’t have to but I’ve wondered.”

It’s not easy to talk about but I find myself wanting to tell Grayson. My anger burns yet again to think of what I saw that day. “I stopped by his house unexpectedly right before our engagement party. He didn’t realize I was there. He was too busy having sex with his housekeeper on the kitchen table to notice me.”

Grayson rolls his eyes. “Still a total asshole, I see.”

“Wish I had known that sooner. I should’ve-”

“Don’t you dare assign any blame to yourself. A man *chooses* to cheat, Fairfield. There’s no excuse or blame he can lay at your feet.”

But we weren’t sleeping together. Maybe he wouldn’t have cheated if we had been. He never tried to. What if there’s something wrong with me?

I don’t say that to Grayson though part of me wants to confide in someone. Twenty-three and still a virgin. With every passing year, voicing it aloud seems harder for me.

Constance doesn’t know. She assumed Fox and I crossed that bridge after months of dating and I let her. Only Drew figured me out. The timing had never been right with anyone else when I was younger and I’m glad now that I never did with Fox.

Doesn’t mean I want to remain a virgin forever, I think, staring at Grayson.

“One thing I’ll say about our kiss – I can’t feel bad about how it must’ve bugged the shit out of him.”

“Too true,” I say, laughing at Grayson’s wickedness.

“Say, Fairfield... he’s watching us now. How about I help you line up your putt?”

It’s not that difficult of a shot but if Fox is watching...
“Yes, I would love for you to help me. You were taught by a pro after all.”

Our eyes meet, sparkling over the little dance we’re engaging in - make the ex jealous but what else? This may be a dangerous dance for us to pursue.

Putter in hand, I center myself over the ball, feet spread past the width of my hips as the summer breeze catches the skirt of my golf dress, causing it to flutter around my thighs.
“Nice legs,” Grayson murmurs as he steps up behind me.

I flush crimson. He'd commented on my legs that night, too. It's hot out here but the heat is skyrocketing in new ways as his lean, hard body curves around mine, enveloping me as his arms wrap around me, his hands lightly resting over mine when we both grasp the club.

His sun visor bumps my ear but I can't think about that when I feel his warm breath on my neck. "Be the ball."

I can't help giggling. "Did you learn that masterful piece of advice from your pro instructor?"

"No, *Caddyshack* taught me that."

While I'm loose-limbed with laughter, Grayson takes the opportunity to hold me a little tighter, our hips rocking together in a swinging motion as we take 'practice' putts this way. Holy hell, he's got me tingling from head to toe. I don't even care if Fox is watching or not anymore.

"And let's get you that birdie, angel," he murmurs in my ear.

Angel?

Smooth as a well-oiled machine, our bodies move as one. A thrill races up and down my spine before I finally connect the putter to the ball. We watch that little white ball roll its way across the perfect green and make the satisfying sound of rattling into the cup.

"I got it!"

"Fuck yeah, you did."

Jubilant, I spin around in his embrace, half-tempted to kiss him again in celebration. But he's quickly stepping back, tugging off his sun visor to rearrange it. And, there's Theo and Jonathan coming up to join us, both of them shooting surprised looks Grayson's way.

Embarrassed and confused by what I'm feeling, I start fussing with my bag, trying to tell myself I don't care how it might've looked. We weren't doing anything inappropriate and I'm having fun. That's all... right?

Yet, when I risk a glance towards my father's party, I see Fox staring back at us, gripping his driver like he's trying to strangle it.

14-ELEANOR

It's no true championship trophy. It's eight inches tall, in fact. But it's shiny and silver and it's mine. I've never won an award outside of academic ones and this feels special to me.

And, the guy I supposedly hate is the person who seems to understand that the most.

"Love the way winning looks on you, Fairfield," Grayson whispers as I'm holding it close to my chest for the pictures after the tournament. I'm smiling so wide as I stand between him and Oliver my cheeks are aching.

"I think I might like being on top, Wolfe." Grayson grins like the devil at me.

"Well done, Eleanor," my father says, pleased and proud as he hugs me before telling me he'll have Simmons drive me home. "I want to get a jump on something at the office for this coming week but I'll use a car service."

Going into the office on the weekend? That's unusual for him the past few years but I won't question it though I worry as he gets older. I don't want him tiring himself out.

I'm tempted to ask Grayson what he's doing this evening - I'm foolishly reluctant to tell him goodbye - but his family is waiting for him. I'll be seeing him at work. Will I still be Norrie to him then?

I give him a wave which he returns before I'm heading off to find Simmons with the car.

"Eleanor, wait up!" a man's voice calls behind me.

I clutch my trophy a little tighter when I see Fox chasing me down but I'm standing tall, emotions in check, as he reaches me. "Yes, what is it?"

"I've wanted to speak with you, to apologize for what happened, for what you saw that day."

Now, he wishes to apologize? “Two weeks have passed since then. You’ve taken your sweet time with your apology to me, not that I want it. You ran to my dad quick enough though.”

“I didn’t think you’d want to see me. I wasn’t sure what to do.”

As he draws closer, I catch a strong whiff of alcohol on his breath. His eyes are bloodshot and his golf shirt is untucked and stained from a spill. Not at all how I’m used to seeing the usually impeccably tidy Fox Davenport. He must’ve been hitting the nineteenth hole hard while the post-tournament activities were wrapping up.

“You don’t have to *do* anything except leave me alone.”

“Come on, Eleanor. Can’t you give me a real chance to explain? You sent a break-up text after running from our engagement party. You kiss another man who you know I despise to get at me...”

“Maybe I kissed him because I wanted to. And, how dare you act like the wronged party? You *cheated* on me!”

“I know and I’m sorry for that. That woman doesn’t mean anything to me. She’s nothing, just the housekeeper.”

“Ugh, I don’t have the energy to point out all the ways you’re an asshole right now.”

“It was a weak moment on my part but, I swear, once we marry-”

“Once we marry?!” I could laugh if he wasn’t so infuriating. “We won’t be marrying. *Ever*. Be honest, Fox. Our affections never ran all that deep, did they?”

“So? Love is for fools and poor people, Eleanor.”

“Sweet Jesus.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. People like us marry for advantageous purposes all the time. We fit together socially. Your father and my parents would be pleased. I’m prepared to work while you do what ladies in our circles typically do. We make a good match. We make sense.”

No, we don't and I almost feel sorry for you if you truly believe that. We never understood each other at all.

“Your dad is barely tolerating my existence at work now.”

Yet, he tolerated you being on his team today. And, I see what prompted this apology, too.

I'm turning to leave him when he grasps my arm. “I've given six years of my life to your old man's company! He'll find a way to get rid of me if you won't forgive me!”

I hope he does. I wish he'd be a bit more proactive about it like the Wolfe brothers did with Mike for that matter.

But more importantly right now, there's a drunk man confronting me in a parking lot as it gets darker and I don't see anyone else nearby. I need to get away from him when he's like this. “Let go of me,” I say firmly, trying to mask my growing disquiet.

The anger burning in his eyes tells me he doesn't want to. If I yank, will he let go? If I scream, will someone hear me?

Before screaming is necessary, a figure appears from out of the shadows, startling us both. “Are you alright, Fairfield?”

Grayson. Thank God.

“Yes, we were having a brief discussion but it's over,” I say, glaring at Fox who drops my arm and steps back while Grayson takes another step forward.

The two men circle around me, like they're sizing each other up and squaring off. I know who I'd bet money on winning if it came to blows. What am I saying?! I don't want them to fight. Don't need more fuel added to the gossip train. But something very primal inside me is thrilled by the thought that Grayson might fight to defend me.

Fox's drunken bravado diminishes at last but he glares at us both, pitching his voice low for my ears. “If you think *he's* the answer to moving on, think again, Eleanor. No matter how charming he might seem on the surface, Grayson's always out

for what's best for himself and his family. He'll fuck you over and laugh about it in the same breath. You'll see."

"Thank you for your unasked-for advice regarding Mr. Wolfe. Perhaps I'll give my father a similar warning regarding you. And, I don't need another man to move on. I felt surprisingly little beyond disgust after I caught you."

"Didn't even shed a tear, huh? Well, that fits. A frigid, spoiled and cold-hearted little..."

Grayson takes two more steps towards us, his lip curled up like he's ready to pounce but Fox cuts himself off from finishing the insult. *Yes, you still work for my father.* Why did I ever put up with this man?

I give Fox my most scathing look. "No, I didn't shed a tear. For once, I was too busy being kissed by a man who knows how to care. And you know what? It was *marvelous*."

I'm shaking with nerves and adrenaline both when Fox finally storms off at that. Damn, that felt good. But the encounter has left me rattled in a not so good way.

"Hey," Grayson says softly, his warm hand reaching out, causing goosebumps to scatter up my arm with his touch.

"I hope he's not going to drive in that state. He might hurt someone."

"He's getting into someone else's car as we speak. Norrie... look at me."

I turn to face him, suddenly embarrassed over what I said to Fox about Grayson's kiss. He must've heard me. My emotions are having a field day with me, dammit.

"Come here." Without waiting for my protest, which doesn't appear anyway, he pulls me into his arms for a hug. God, it feels so good.

"This isn't about Fox," I say, angrily wiping a tear away. "I don't love him. I don't think I really ever did. It's about how blind I was and the time I wasted with him and..."

"I know," he says with a soothing shushing noise as he rubs my back. "You want to get a cup of coffee with me?" he

asks once I'm calm again.

"Don't you mean would I like to fetch you some?" I ask, looking up at him from beneath my teary lashes.

He shakes his head and gives me that charmer's grin of his. "No. Coffee, for you and me. Maybe some talking."

"I'm not up to arguing right now."

"No arguing. I declared a ceasefire, remember?"

I can't help smirking. "So, you wish to surrender?"

"Me surrender? Never. Didn't you ever watch *Galaxy Quest*, Fairfield?" I shake my head. "Never give up, never surrender?"

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"Oh my God, woman! We're getting coffee and you're seeing it."

15-ELEANOR

The summer evening is cooling off rapidly and my little red golf dress isn't much for warmth when Grayson has the top off his Jeep as we breeze along. "Here," he says, reaching behind him at a stoplight. "Put this on." It's a Northwestern sweatshirt and his, judging by the lingering scent of his cologne. It's far too big on me. It's perfect.

"Thank you."

That was rather dreamy of him, Norrie.

I know. Help!

My body is humming before a drop of caffeine is even added.

We go to the local library where they're serving coffee tonight and have small A/V booths for watching movies available for borrowing including the highly recommended *Galaxy Quest*. "My sister-in-law, Quinn, is a teacher and told me about watching older movies here in the past."

"I'm surprised you don't own a copy."

"I do but, if I took you back to my place, you might think I'm easy and not be able to control yourself."

Snorting back laughter, I settle onto the hard plastic chair next to him. The movie is funny. Even without comfy seating, I'm having a blast. It's refreshing escaping into a film and having an incredibly handsome man by my side doesn't hurt.

"Thanks for that," I tell Grayson as he drives me home later that night.

"You're welcome."

As he's pulling up to the front door, my belly erupts with butterflies. When was the last time a date made me feel like that? *Even if this isn't a date.*

He kills the engine and casually drapes his arm over the back of my seat. I'm a nervous wreck but an excited one. I can't decide what to do with my hands. Will he kiss me?
Please, do.

"Norrie..."

"Yes?" I squeak.

"I didn't like the way he cornered you earlier."

My butterflies feel decidedly limp-winged now. I do not want to talk about Fox. "I think it was the liquid courage."

"Maybe." He shifts in his seat and clears his throat before growing quiet, seemingly unsure what to say next. *Just kiss me.*

When I think the tension in the air will kill me or maybe I'll make the first move again and kiss him, he speaks. "This was fun tonight."

"It was."

"I enjoyed golfing with you."

"So did I."

"You got a spot in mind for that trophy?"

"The perfect one, right by my bed." *Hint, hint.*

His eyes flash and he licks his lips. "I was thinking maybe we could..." He leans towards me and my heart is about to pound out of my chest.

But right before my eyelids flutter closed, Grayson continues by saying, "What if we pretended we're together when he's around? You know, to make sure he stays away from you."

"Uh..." I lean back, cheeks flaming to think I almost kissed Grayson (again) when he was going a totally different direction than I expected. "I don't think that's necessary. He was drunk tonight but he's not a fool."

"He is a fool. He had you and lost you." *Oh, my heart.*
"But it would make him jealous as hell. And after what he

did, I thought you might like a little revenge.”

My eyes narrow. “Or maybe you enjoy rubbing salt in the wound.”

“Not *your* wound, Norrie. And, you did say our kiss was *marvelous*.”

“Knew you wouldn’t let that go.”

“Just pointing out it wouldn’t be a chore to pretend you liked me, would it?”

Sighing, I consider what he’s saying. It would be sweet in a way.

Not as sweet as the real thing, Norrie.

No but this is the only way I’ll ever have Grayson and maybe there’s things I’d like to explore, too.

“Won’t this be an issue with work? I don’t want more people gossiping about me.”

He shakes his head. “No, this would be a purely off-the-clock sort of thing when Fox is around and, if anyone’s gossiping about you, tell me and I’ll take care of it.” As if gossipers are ever that easy to quiet. “Only if you’re okay with this of course. If not, tell me to shut up now.”

I won’t tell him to shut up. “So, we’d only pretend we’re together at country club events?”

His eyes drop to my mouth and there’s something in his expression which makes me wonder if he’s actually thought this through at all. He seems unsure again. “Um, right. Only then. Just pretend. Nothing that would stir another scandal for you. Dancing, sitting together, a kiss or two, that sort of thing.”

“Hmm...”

“Or forget I made the dumb suggest-”

“No, let’s do it,” I decide, cutting him off. “It’ll be worth it to watch Fox stew.”

“Yeah? Okay then. Great. Okay...” He rubs his palms across the steering wheel and gives me a strained smile. He doesn’t sound great and okay. I don’t feel great and okay either for that matter.

But we bid each other goodnight with a friendly wave when I climb out of his Jeep.

I don’t even realize I’m still wearing his sweatshirt until I’m inside being greeted by Mrs. Hadley and Grayson’s pulling away. I fall asleep still wearing it.



“Let me get this straight - coffee and a movie, suggested fake dating around the ex, borrowed clothes, practicing golf swings with crotch-to-ass contact and exchanging emails? Sounds sexy as fuck to me.”

I give Drew my best incredulous look. “Exchanging emails sounds sexy?”

“You’re exchanging them at night and not really talking about work. Try this,” she commands, offering a spoon. She invited me over tonight to try her variation of seafood bolognese.

“Delicious, like everything you make.”

“You’re buttering me up so I won’t keep pressing you about Grayson.”

“It *is* delicious!” But, she knows me too well. “I really thought he would kiss me. And then, he had to go and make it about making Fox jealous. Maybe he’s a bit of a flirt but he doesn’t want me. Men in general don’t want me apparently.”

“Bullshit. You’re beautiful and desirable and men want you. Dollars to donuts, he panicked and spoke nonsense before he could commit to the kiss.”

“Grayson Wolfe panicked over kissing a woman goodnight?”

“It could happen!”

I'm not buying it but I am enjoying our ceasefire. I just wish I didn't long for more. Too bad there's not any opportunities to make Fox jealous on the immediate horizon either.

Thursday night and I've been at Wolfe Media for nearly a month now. However, Theo told me to take the lead on the logistics and organization of tomorrow's barbeque and I'm nervous about pulling it off. "*It's all part of taking on executive responsibilities,*" he'd said.

I'm not sure lining up caterers is something most executives do but I didn't argue with my boss. He's been tense the past few days as his wife's due date looms nearer. At least, I've had Drew's guidance for the caterer.

"I may be too nervous to eat much tomorrow."

"You have to eat. First off, the barbeque is to die for. I wouldn't steer you wrong. Second, you'll need your strength to keep up the email banter with Grayson. Has Fox bothered you anymore?"

"No, thank goodness."

I hope Fox will leave me alone and I wish his words about Grayson hadn't bothered me so much either. Once upon a time, I would've believed every bad word said of Grayson Wolfe. Now, I don't and I'm secretly fearful that I'll be crushed if my earlier opinion ends up being confirmed.

"Well, fake dating or not, I still say this business with you and Grayson is the sexy build up."

"Build up to what?"

"To sex, obviously!"

My cheeks grow warm over Drew's assumption but there's those tingles again. "Drew, even if I am attracted to Grayson, I can't get involved with him. He's my boss, more or less."

"I thought his brother was your boss."

"Technically, he is but Theo's going to be taking leave soon with his wife and Grayson's still the COO either way."

“This position with Wolfe is temporary though, right?”

“Well, yes.”

“The reason the whole boss-employee relationship is a no-no is that the boss holds power over the employee who is dependent on their job. But you’re not dependent on this job, not really. You’ll be returning to your father’s company once this is over. And, I know you and Constance have your reasons but Grayson’s never struck me as all that bad.”

I must admit, the more I see of Grayson, the sillier my little list of reasons to hate him seems.

Drew sets down her fork and takes my hand next. “I know you’re acting like everything is fine with the breakup and I’m glad you’re not sorry it’s ended. But, whether you were all that into him or not, Fox did something really rotten to you. Don’t you deserve to live a little? Living well is the sweetest revenge, they say.”

I smile, knowing exactly what Drew’s idea of ‘living a little’ will entail. “So, I shouldn’t dismiss the sexy buildup.”

“Enjoy the buildup to the mind-blowing bang, honey. With a man who knows what he’s doing. You still blush when I bring up the kiss you shared.”

I do, don’t I? And I do deserve to live a little. My position is temporary. I’ll return to Fairfield in a couple of months. I don’t want to stay a virgin forever and I can’t deny that Grayson turns me on like no other man ever has. Why can’t I enjoy this whatever it is?

“What if he doesn’t want me though? What if it really is only about getting back at Fox in his eyes?” a small, insecure part of me asks.

Drew snickers and shakes her head. “I have a feeling he wouldn’t have returned that little thank-you kiss with such enthusiasm if he didn’t want you.”

God, I hope she’s right. I want Grayson and if he might want me too...

As if he senses I might be thinking about him, I get a work email notification on my phone, that little blooping noise making my heart go thumpity-thump.

“Is it him?”

I shoo Drew back to her spot but it *is* him.

To: eleanor.fairfield@wolfemedia.com

From: grayson.wolfe@wolfemedia.com

August 18th 8:31 PM

Subject: Hoedown Fashion

What the hell does one wear to a Texas-themed BBQ on a farm during office hours? Send help.

~Grayson

A mischievous grin lights my face as I reply-

I did not major in fashion but I'll do my best to help.

First, you'll need very tight blue jeans with an enormous, gaudy belt buckle. Then, find a plaid-patterned shirt complete with those fake pearl snaps in place of buttons and a bandana like a real cowboy would have. To cap it off, you'll need to wear a ten-gallon hat. I think a black one in your case. And boots! Don't forget the boots!

Please, don't forget the boots. I may be rather invested in seeing Grayson dressed like this now.

His reply bounces back in less than a minute.

A black hat? Am I a villain? Don't answer that.

I own several pairs of blue jeans. Good enough?

I'm giggling while Drew tosses throw pillows my way demanding to know what we're saying.

He emails again before I've caught my breath.

And, what will you be wearing, Calamity Squirrel? Are you going full-on Norrie Oakley or will you be in some version of a saloon-girl's attire?

On second thought, don't tell me. The anticipation will carry me through until tomorrow.

~Grayson

“Until tomorrow,” I repeat to myself with a private smile.

16-ELEANOR

The location is ideal, a lovely family-owned farm outside of Chicago that Theo had recommended when I started hunting for venues. The weather is splendid and, whether or not we close this deal, the employees from Wolfe Media and those from Lone Star who were able to attend have had a memorable day with their colleagues and families. I wish my dad could've made it but, of course, he has our company to run.

Sally Jacobs, Bent's wife, has been talking horses the past thirty minutes with Margaret and Theo's wife, Quinn. My intel had suggested Mr. Jacobs dotes on his wife and it's proving correct. She's pleased as punch to be the authority on the subject of horseflesh and you can tell the old man is delighted to see her enjoying herself.

Meanwhile, Mr. Jacobs has enjoyed telling Theo's children tall tales. I don't believe he actually wrestled rattlesnakes in his youth or ever caught three wild mustangs with one lasso throw but the kids are wide-eyed. Even the barbeque is up to his exacting standards. All in all, I'd call this bit of business under the guise of friendly hobnobbing a complete success so far.

"Told you I wouldn't steer you wrong," Drew tells me slyly when we have a second to chat. She'd asked her friend if they needed an extra set of hands with this particular catering gig so we rode here together.

"No, you never steer me wrong."

"True. Now, go talk to that handsome cowboy over there," she says, giving me a playful shove in Grayson's direction. "Ride 'em, cowgirl."

"Drew!"

I must admit, Grayson Wolfe looks fantastic in blue jeans and those boots. No, it's not a costume party so no enormous

belt buckles but we are on a farm. *And, he wore a black cowboy hat.*

“I did my best to act on a lady’s advice,” he says wryly when I take the opportunity to compliment him on his attire. “And, you look lovely in that dress, Fairfield.”

The blue, off-the-shoulder floral sundress, belted at the waist and paired with cowgirl boots are my own nod to our surroundings and the theme. “Thank you. My father couldn’t understand why I was heading to work dressed like this.”

“Did you tell him because you’ve brilliantly cracked the code for wooing surly Texans?” His voice is teasing but it pleases me greatly to hear those words.

“I hope I have. We’ll see, right?”

“We will. So, Drew’s the best friend you mentioned who went to culinary school and wants to open a restaurant, right?” he says, nodding in her direction. I wondered if he recognized her from the country club where she’s often helped serve.

“Yes, she is. We’ve dreamt about it since we were teens.”

“We?”

“Well, yes. But it’s her dream. I imagined it sounded like fun, running a restaurant and chatting with customers all day. I did some hostessing at a place near Yale. I really loved being part of the crew... before I had to focus more on my grades.”

He looks at me knowingly. “Was it more fun than dry boardroom discussions?”

I wave the question away. I know what my father expects of me and Grayson doesn’t push it.

“If Drew’s half as talented as her mother in the kitchen, she should definitely be packing them in to eat. How long has her mom worked at the country club now?”

“Eight years,” I say a bit more stiffly. Fox had never said it but his opinion of Drew being one of my closest friends as opposed to girls like Constance was obvious.

Grayson doesn't display any such attitude. He gives her a wave since she's noticed us looking in her direction and says, "I hope she gets her restaurant going someday. I'd go. Especially if you were there to bicker with me while I eat."

My lips quirk in amusement but I don't get a chance to respond. "Grayson, come here a sec," Theo calls and Grayson gallantly tips his hat to me before joining Theo and Mr. Jacobs for a discussion. Hopefully, a deal-sealing discussion.

On my own for a bit, I say hello to other faces I recognize. Most of them are from Wolfe Media until I find myself alone with Mrs. Wolfe at one point. "Eleanor dear, how are you?" she asks warmly, taking my hand in hers. "This was a marvelous idea by the way."

From there, we stroll towards the barn chatting. She asks if I'd mind helping her with the upcoming annual Founders' Ball at the club and I'm thrilled to agree. I really like Grayson's mom and enjoy spending time with her. And, maybe I'd like to dance with Grayson there... in the name of making Fox jealous, of course.

After that, I go to see the lambs I've been told of in the barn, finding them nestled in the hay by their mother. "So soft," I murmur, stroking its head.

I find myself humming to the sweet little creatures, a lullaby my mother was fond of singing to me. Even though I miss her today, as I miss her most days, I'm content I realize. The circumstances haven't been ideal but I'm enjoying my position at Wolfe Media and I'm enjoying this growing, if unexpected, closeness with Grayson.

I keep humming to the lambs until movement from somewhere in here draws my attention. "Somebody there?" I call, glancing over my shoulder. There's no answer beyond a horse softly whickering in its stall but I can't shake the feeling I'm being observed. "If you walk on two legs, please announce your presence. You're making the lambs skittish."

"I think it's you who's jumpy, Squirrel."

I shriek at the unexpected voice right above me and look up to see Grayson grinning down at me from the hayloft.

“You jerk!” The lambs bleat their agreement. “You frightened these little ones,” I hiss at him but I can’t really summon any anger when he’s grinning at me like that.

“My apologies, little lambs,” Grayson says. “Promise that, despite my name, I won’t eat *you*.”

I stare down at the lambs to hide the blush he causes with that intriguing emphasis. “What are you doing up there?” I ask once I’ve mastered it.

“Hiding out for a bit since I’m the unwanted kid brother.”

His words are casual but there’s something in his tone which prompts me to look up again. “Did something happen?”

“Nothing that hasn’t happened before. Mr. Jacobs wanted to talk turkey with the real boss at Wolfe and I was sent off to fetch drinks or muck out the barn or ‘whatever you’re good for, boy.’”

“Oh. That wasn’t kind of him.”

“No, it wasn’t but he’s selling to us so I kept my mouth shut.”

Spying the ladder to the loft, I ask, “Is there room for me to hide up there with you?”

His blue eyes study me as if I’m a puzzle he wishes to solve before he slowly nods. “There’s room.”

17-ELEANOR

Placing my hands and feet with care, I scale the ladder. “Easier than a tree,” I say lightly when Grayson greets me, helping me to my feet. Looking around, I scan our surroundings. Hay bales and the bale door is open to reveal a ripe summer orchard and the slowly sinking sun. “It’s a beautiful view you have though it’s warmer up here.”

He’s removed his hat and an unruly lock of blond hair clings to his forehead. I’m tempted to run my fingers through it, unstick it. Maybe lick the sweat from my fingers afterwards. *Goodness, Norrie.*

“Yeah, it’s beautiful,” he says, voice low and eyes on me. “Here, I’ve got a comfortable spot for watching the world go by... not that there’s a whole lot of world passing by this barn.”

There’s a blanket thrown across one of the bales of hay, a pretty red and blue plaid. Adjusting the skirt of my dress, I settle and my heartbeat increases when Grayson sits beside me. I think of Drew’s words and how she encouraged me to live a little.

But I can’t bring myself to ignore the wounded tone I heard earlier either. “So, Mr. Jacobs...”

“...loves the barbeque.”

“He strikes me as the sort who prefers one-on-one discussions though.”

“Yes, that’s true. I get it. Theo’s the CEO and has apparently achieved the magical age where men Mr. Jacobs’ age will take him seriously.”

“Your position is undeniably an important one. You’re second in command of an enormous operation worth billions while still in your twenties. It’s impressive, Grayson.”

“Not when my last name is on the building. Everyone figures I got where I am based on that alone. They’re not

entirely wrong either.”

“They are wrong though. You know what you’re doing. You’re going to be running things while Theo’s away in a couple of weeks, too.”

“Yeah... *that*,” he says and, for once, there’s none of the usual cocksure attitude I expect. Does Grayson Wolfe actually harbor some doubts like the rest of us? Surely not.

“You’re going to do great.”

“Right. Sure. Thanks.” Three words spoken with zero confidence.

“Grayson, I mean it.”

“One successful idea and you’re an expert on everything to do with Wolfe already, huh?”

The bite behind that question would normally lead to bickering between us. I don’t want to bicker. And, I see through the bait.

“No, I’m not. But I have been observing and learning. I sit through Theo’s meetings and he lets me ask questions and it’s clear he relies heavily on you. He has utter faith you’ll handle things while he’s away.”

Grayson doesn’t reply, doesn’t even look directly at me but I’m looking at him. And I see something familiar in the way he’s pretending to half-listen while hanging on to every word. I see myself, desperately wanting my father’s validation while he wants his brother’s.

“I’ll tell you something else. Every time your name is mentioned around the office, no one speaks of you as the glorified coffee-fetcher or copy maker or some family favor. They speak of you with respect and admiration, they speak of you as their leader.”

His lips curl up slightly and I see that familiar twinkle reappear in those blue eyes. “They do, huh? Do you speak of me with respect and admiration, Fairfield?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. They’re all clearly blinded by your charm but I never will be.”

For half a heartbeat, I have him. For once, I have him! And then, he tips his head back and laughs, realizing I was joking.

I love his laugh. I used to find it aggravating but I don't anymore. Quite the opposite. I'm not sure when that happened. His laughter makes me want to join in and I do. I reach for his arm to brace myself on the hay bale as we laugh like loons in a hay loft.

But as I'm realizing how hot his skin is under my fingers and how just touching his forearm is sending tingles and zings all through my body, our faces draw nearer. Like magnets, his full lips draw my eyes. Memories of our previous kiss assail me. I never knew it could be so... *wonderful*.

His eyes resemble dark sapphires as we gaze at each other; mouths so close, too close, and bodies drawing nearer. "Sorry my fragile ego needed a little coddling there."

"I don't think there's anything fragile about your ego but it's no problem. We all have doubts, now and then."

"Either way, you've managed to cheer me up," he says, his voice a delicious rasp that makes my nipples tighten.

"You should thank me for that," I whisper.

"A little thank-you kiss? Yes, I'd like that," he murmurs, letting his hand come slowly up to cup my face.

Strong, larger, rougher than my own, I love how his hand feels against my heated cheek. Then, he's lowering his mouth to mine and all rational thoughts abandon me.

Our lips meet and my heart races. Insistently and hungrily, he controls this kiss, deepening it precisely when I want him to, leading me where I long to go. He strokes my cheek and I moan for him, like I did before. He grins knowingly and I don't care. "Be quiet and keep kissing me, you fool," I warn him and he does.

Our lips meld together, our tongues dance. Another stroke of his thumb, another moan. I could kiss him forever, I think. Resting my hand upon his chest, I can feel his heart thundering beneath his ribcage. It matches my own's heedless pace.

“I thought we were only making Fox jealous,” I say when we part for air, wanting him to admit that he wants to kiss me regardless.

“Founders’ Ball is coming up. Maybe we’re practicing” I stiffen in his hold, not liking that answer, but then he smiles. “We’re exploring the chemistry between us, Norrie. Because, in case you haven’t noticed, there’s a fuck-ton of chemistry between us.” That’s better.

“Chemistry was my worst subject in school.”

“You’re acing it now.” His free hand makes a fist in the fabric of my dress over my thigh. I whimper and scoot nearer, wanting more of his touch. Grayson reads me like a book. “Come here,” he rumbles, pulling me into his lap with one smooth tug.

My little yelp of surprise is cut off by his lips finding mine again. I settle on my new denim-clad seat, savoring his masculine scent with my hands braced against his broad chest. God, how I *ache* for more.

His body is hard muscle against my soft curves. His hands explore those curves as we kiss until I think my lips must be swollen when I dare to run my fingers through the coarse silk of his blond hair. He hums like a contented beast as I do and I rock forward when he squeezes my backside.

“Grayson...” I blush, feeling his unmistakable erection, thick and hard, pressing against my bottom through his jeans. He *wants* me. *He* wants *me*. At least, this part of him does.

“I fucking hate blue jeans today.”

I giggle and rock my hips again, curious about and pleased by this discovery. The very few fumbles beyond kissing I’ve experienced never allowed me much opportunity to touch the guy’s body. I can’t say I’d wanted to with much enthusiasm either. I want to explore Grayson’s though. Every inch.

As the kissing continues with our bodies so close, the budding ache inside me grows more insistent. “Grayson?” I

don't even know what I'm asking for precisely but he seems to know exactly what I need.

"You want to come, don't you? Fuck. Please, let me make you come, angel," he growls as a wayward hand slides beneath my dress and up.

I nod helplessly, wanting that so badly.

Despite the warmth up here, he leaves a trail of goosebumps in his hand's wake; my calf, my knee, my thigh all feeling the effect. Something primal and all-consuming starts to unfurl and tighten within. A touch of nerves makes me want to close my legs but a deeper fire has them spreading farther apart for him as his fingers dance across the front of my panties.

His eyes dip down to where my dress is rucked up to my hips and he groans. "White lace again. Do you know how much I've thought of you and your white lace panties since that night?"

I shake my head as his fingers stroke me through the rapidly dampening fabric. "How much?"

"Far, far too many times to name."

He kisses me again and I'm torn between concentrating on kissing him back and what he's doing with his hand. The other one finds the tight little bud of one of my nipples through my dress and bra, cupping and tugging on it pleasantly, while I arch into him, eager for more.

I wish I was naked for him, want him to touch me wherever he pleases. I think I'd let Grayson do nearly anything he likes to me here in this barn. Where have all my inhibitions gone?

He nudges my panties aside and he's stroking my bare folds now, exploring, expertly thumbing my clit, making me wetter and wetter. I squeeze my eyes shut and my breath hitches. I can't believe this is really happening but there's no shame or embarrassment. I never want this feeling to end.

Soon, I can't concentrate on kissing him anymore. His mouth trails down my throat, devouring me as the hint of his

day's stubble rubs my delicate skin raw. I pant and grasp his shirt, nearly rending the sleeve in my desperation while he brings me closer and closer to a dizzying summit I've longed to reach.

"Please," I whimper and I get an approving growl in response. I'm nearly there, focusing intently on that peak, when he sinks one of his long fingers deep inside me. *"Oh!"* My brow furrows and I wince. I'm wet but it's more of an invasion than I expected, a mixture of pleasure and pain. My fingernails sink into the flesh of his arm.

"Fucking hell, you're so tight," he rasps, his voice deep and thick with lust. "You okay?"

Slowly, I nod while breathing in and out because I think I am but I'm also worrying I need to tell him something.

Except, his thumb rubs my clit just so as he pumps that finger inside me and whatever I need to tell him floats away.

Bliss descends without warning and the world breaks apart behind my eyelids as I cry out. Instinct takes over, my hips chasing his hand to ride out my release. Fleeting and yet earth-shattering, how can anything feel this amazing? Self-loving has brought me release plenty of times before but this? This is a revelation.

As the world tilts back into view, I realize I'm open-mouthed and wide-eyed with wonder when I find Grayson studying me again, slowing his hand's movements until he stops. He gently removes his finger and I clutch him a bit tighter, no longer thinking of it as an invasion, wanting more than anything for him to keep touching me.

"Look at you, so fucking glorious, angel," he whispers.

My heart becomes a puddle in my chest. I stroke his hair, his strong jaw and my words spill forth without thought. "I've never... that's never happened with anyone else."

A slow blink of those beautiful eyes. Two more and a small frown forms. "Never?" he repeats, clearly stumped.

Oh no. Why did I say that out loud?

The sudden urge to bolt from his look of inquiry is strong. He must sense it because his hands clamp down around my waist to prevent me from fleeing. “*Never?!*” he says again, angrily this time. “He *never* made you come?!”

Oh shoot! He’s totally misinterpreting things.

Before I have a chance to correct or dismiss or obfuscate, there’s activity below. Someone’s coming into the barn!

Breathless, we stare at each other, wondering who it might be or if someone from work is about to discover us. God, I hope not. A kiss in the society page’s gossip column was bad enough. Being fingered by my nominal boss in a hay loft would never be forgotten.

But my selfish worries are soon forgotten as a woman calls out frantically, “Theo? Are you in here?” She’s clearly scared or upset.

“Quinn, is that you?” Grayson replies, lifting me off his lap and hurrying towards the loft ladder.

I feel as unsteady as the little lamb on my legs after what happened but I don’t hesitate to fix my dress and join him.

Theo’s wife looks up at us from the foot of the ladder and is obviously far too preoccupied trying to stand to question what we’ve been doing up here. Her lovely hazel eyes are aswim with pain as she says through gritted teeth, “Grayson, the baby. I need Theo... Or find Oliver... I’m... God, this *hurts*...” Her frightening groan of pain the next instant sends shivers down my spine.

“Oh shit, Quinn. No-no-no-no-no. Fuckity-fuck, fuck, fuck!” Grayson stammers, temporarily frozen in place by a woman in labor until I give him a shove.

“Don’t just stand there, Wolfe! Go get your brother!”

He spins my way, looking adorably perplexed. “Which *one?!*”

“The doctor one or the husband one! Either one! Both! Move it, man!”

For whatever reason, that seems to stir him into action. He races down the ladder past his sister-in-law to tear out of the barn at lightning speed in search of the others while I climb down and do my best to soothe the laboring woman with my panties still damp and askew and my heart racing like a stampede of wild horses are in my chest.

18-GRAYSON

Last month, we kissed, something I never expected to happen in the first place, and I've been obsessively preoccupied by that kiss and by every little thing she does since then.

There had been a mounting, feral need to smash Davenport's teeth when I saw him grabbing her in that parking lot.

But after the time we spent together, all I really wanted was Eleanor in my arms again. When I dropped her off at her house that night, I was fully planning to kiss her and see where things led despite my promises to Theo. I don't know why I panicked. I've not been nervous over a goodnight kiss in ten years or more.

And then, like an idiot, I brought up Fox and suggested making him jealous some more.

Every time I see her at the office and can look but never touch, it's driving me mad. Then, holy shit, the hayloft happened. I'm so fucked.

I considered it an honor to get her off but it pisses me off to think that douche never once did. What is wrong with that guy? Cheating on a woman, especially when you're planning on marrying her, is bad enough but never even leaving your girl satisfied one time? That's a grievous sin without a doubt in my book.

Trust me, if she were mine, she'd be coming as often as I could manage it.

But, she's not yours nor is she supposed to be, boss man.

Sometimes, I really hate that Conscience guy living inside my head.

However, this isn't the top priority for any of us at the moment.

“Breathe, sweetheart. It’s alright. We’ll be at the hospital soon,” my brother reassures his wife while she has a death grip on us both in a horse stall.

“Not the hospital,” Quinn pants as she’s grimacing through a contraction. “Please, Theo.”

“We can deliver the baby here if necessary,” the farmer’s wife offers somewhat helpfully from the other side of the stall. “Seen lots of babies born on this farm. Not human ones but...”

“I’ve delivered plenty of horses,” Mrs. Jacobs declares, ready to roll up her shirtsleeves from her place beside Mrs. Hoskins. At least the rest of the day’s attendants are hanging around *outside* the barn.

Theo stares at them both like they’re crazy before turning to Oliver. “Do we have time to get her home from here?”

Oliver, having finished his exam of our sister-in-law - something I don’t want to think too hard about, thank you very much - nods and says, “Yeah, call the midwife and tell her to get her team ready. I’ll ride with you to be safe. If things change, we’ll need to do what’s best for you and the baby so you’ll have to be ready to go with that, Quinn. Understood?”

She nods and gives him a grateful smile. Quinn’s got some serious anxiety issues and hospitals in particular freak her out after losing her parents in a car crash when she was younger. A home birth has been the plan the whole time but she didn’t expect to go into labor two weeks ahead of her due date while enjoying a stroll through an apple orchard.

“Libby can drive us,” Oliver says.

“Okay but...” My brother lowers his voice. “I don’t know if I want the kids riding in the car with us.”

The three of us look at each other. My nephew and niece, Ryder and Jill, are ten and seven and, no, they probably don’t need to spend forty minutes riding in a car with their laboring step-mom. They’re excited about the baby but don’t need to be frightened by the realities of childbirth.

In a stroke of bad luck, our parents had left the barbeque right before Quinn's status changed. Jonathan and Mia aren't here today having court matters to deal with. We could call Mom and Dad to turn around and come back but it means more hassle and neither of the expectant parents need more hassle right now.

"I can drive them home."

"Are you sure, Gray? Jill's a bit frantic."

So are you. "I'm sure."

"I can go with him. We can keep the kids entertained and get them safely home for you."

The three of us look to the other person in the stall with us and Quinn, the one member of this little circle who's been silently offering her support without a peep of complaint and whose lap is currently acting as Quinn's pillow.

"Thank you, Eleanor," Theo says gratefully and it's decided.

And, that's how I end up driving two kids and the object of my desire to my brother's house as the August Friday evening turns into night.

"Quinn looked scared and Daddy snapped at me," Jill says worriedly from the back of my Jeep.

"This is a new thing for her. Don't new things make you nervous? They do me. And your father's worried about her so he might've been a little quick-tempered but I know he loves you so much. Everything will be okay. Your uncle's a doctor and he's going to take care of her," Norrie says, soothingly.

"One of my friends said he saw a video about childbirth online. He said there was lots of blood and stuff and the lady was screaming."

"I think videos like that might be hard for a young person to watch. I'm not sure I'd want to. Did you get enough barbeque to eat, Ryder? Are you still hungry?"

I catch my nephew contemplating her question, her cleverly distracting question, in the rearview mirror. "I could

go for a milkshake or something.”

Grinning, I tell them we’ll make a quick stop before finding a handy drive-thru for some shakes and fries. “How’d you get so good with kids?” I ask her when they’re busy.

“I’m not,” she says, giggling incredulously. “I’ve never spent much time with them at all. I’m saying things that I think might help me relax. Ice cream is always a good idea,” she adds, holding up her own shake.

“Well, you’re a natural with those two.”

She smiles and says, “thanks,” before taking a long sip. I can’t help staring at those sweet pink lips of her as she does, remembering her taste, white lace and thinking about all the things I’d like to do with her.

Which you can’t! Especially not now that Theo’s going to be taking leave.

I tell that Conscience guy to pipe down. I can *think*, can’t I?

19-GRAYSON

We arrive at Theo's house with the children, both of them pleasantly full and a bit sleepy despite their shakes, to find my parents, Libby, Jonathan and Mia are all downstairs.

After Mom and Dad take over with the kids, setting them up with a movie to watch, I turn to the others. "We're all waiting around on the newest Wolfe to be born, huh?"

"Looks like it," Jonathan says, pouring drinks for anyone who wants one.

"Quinn's sister and Theo are the only ones upstairs besides Oliver, the midwife and her team," Libby tells us.

"Do you want me to take you home?" I quietly ask Norrie. I really appreciate her coming with me and helping keep the kids calm but I don't want her to feel trapped here.

"No, I rode with Drew earlier and she says she'll be happy to come get me whenever. I kind of want to stay and make sure everything turns out if that's alright?"

"Yeah, it's fine," I tell her honestly. I don't want her to go yet. We've not talked about earlier either. Will we? How will that affect us Monday morning at work? We're still working together for the next few months and what about after the buyout? She might wish to remain with us. *Fuck.*

Our wait begins and I see Mia appraising Eleanor from across the room before too long. I realize they've not met. After making the introduction, I'm a little surprised when Mia says somewhat tartly, "You're the scarlet debutante and runaway bride-to-be from the country club, right?" I'm sure she's seen the picture and headline but it's not like Mia to be so pointed, at least not outside of a courtroom.

Eleanor smiles awkwardly. "I suppose I am, though my debutante days are technically behind me. It's nice to meet you."

“Yeah, I’ve served you hors d’oeuvres before... not that you’d remember me.”

Oh. That’s right. Mia was working at that banquet last year when Eleanor came home for the summer from Yale. What had I said of her then? Wait. Is Mia’s impression unfairly tainted by me?

Just as I’m wondering if I should step in and say something, I see there’s no need. Eleanor gives Mia a dazzling smile and her impeccable manners are impossible to deny. “I remember you! Your hair is so eye-catching, absolutely beautiful.”

Mia blinks and a flush stains her cheeks as she stammers, “Thank you.”

Eleanor’s eyes shift wickedly my way as her voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper for Mia. “That banquet was a tedious, stuffy affair and then one of the handsomest men present had the audacity to suggest he’d rather run around naked than speak to me. Such a blow to my ego.”

Mia’s tartness has completely disappeared and she’s looking my way as well. “Is that so? What an ass.”

“Oh, he’s the cockiest asshole I know but he has his charms.”

Mia laughs out loud as I huff. “Well, this has been enlightening, ladies.” Had I been that big of a dick to her last year? Were there other times she overheard me say things like that? That Conscience guy is after me again.

“Which catering service did you work for, Mia? One of my best friends worked for a few during culinary school and after but she’s a sous chef now.”

“Sterling Caterers and I hope your friend never had the misfortune of dealing with a manager named Linda.”

The two women fall into a discussion about caterers and serving. Even though Norrie only had a short time working as a hostess in undergrad, she sounds knowledgeable and I recall the spark in her eyes earlier when she mentioned Drew’s dream. It sounded like it was her dream, too.

Libby comes in with another update on Quinn's progress and the three girls settle on a sofa with their drinks soon after, chatting amiably. I'm glad. I want my brothers' women to like Eleanor and for her to like them.

Why? It's not like she's going to be hanging out with them much, right?

Again with the unwelcome observations tonight, this guy.

I know there's not much reason to be bringing Eleanor around often as an employee. Why would I? Still, I don't like thinking too hard about that when I *want* to have her around my family.

I see her scowling at her phone a little later and she steps away from the other two ladies to make a call. I'm still concerned about Davenport so, with that as the excuse, I follow her outside onto the garden terrace as she answers a call.

"I'm fine, Dad... No, I'm not with Drew. I'm with Grayson and the rest of the Wolfe family right now... Yes, it's Theo's house... No, it's not anything for you to be concerned about. I'll be home later than expected but... yes, okay."

"Do you need to go?" I ask once she's hung up.

She spins and releases a long sigh. "No, I don't need to go yet. My dad can get a little frantic when I'm not where he expects me to be."

"Oh." *Little overkill considering your age.* "Well, I guess he worries."

"Yeah, and then he plays golf with my ex-fiancé and ignores the way that hurts me while he treats me like I'm still a child the rest of the time." She rubs her hands over her face. "Sorry to whine. Not your problem," she mumbles, hugging herself.

"Don't be sorry."

Under the gibbous August moon, I step closer. Her breath catches and I can't resist pulling her into my arms. She melts in my embrace, nuzzling my neck. She feels perfect here.

“Have you talked to him about how these things make you feel?”

She shakes her head, her brown curls tickling my chin.
“No, he doesn’t mean to be but he can be hard to talk to.”

So is my father, or he was. But I always had Mom or my brothers and who has Eleanor got? Her mother is gone. She’s got her friends, yes, but is it enough? “Well, if you ever need someone to talk to, you can always talk to me.”

“Really?”

“Sure, angel.” Angel again. I’m not sure where it came from but it seems right when I’m holding her like this.

While I intend to comfort her, it’s hard to forget what it was like kissing her earlier, seeing that wonder in her eyes and feeling the silky, wet heat of her pussy as I brought her to release. My sweet angel, my little squirrel, the debutante stolen by this Wolfe. God, I want her even if I shouldn’t.

“Oh, hey,” a young voice says behind us, causing us to leap apart. It’s only Ryder with their dog, Marilyn. The Golden Retriever pads forward for pats with her tail wagging. “Marilyn had to pee. Baby’s here, did you know?” he says with all the matter-of-factness of a kid.

“What?!”

“When?!”

Thirty minutes later, we take our turn to head upstairs and meet the newest Wolfe. Quinn radiates happiness while holding her infant son. Isa is by her side, the proud new aunt. Theo’s on her other side, staring down at his wife and new baby in total wonder.

“Hey, mind another couple of visitors?” I ask to be sure. I know she must be exhausted. Mom and Dad are taking Ryder and Jill for the night and, hopefully, the new parents can catch some sleep.

“Of course, we don’t mind,” Quinn says with so much joy you’d swear she’s already forgotten how terrified she was or the pain from a few hours ago.

“Baby’s great, Mom’s great, I stood by and was amazed as always while the woman did all the work,” Oliver says, appearing from the master bath where he’s been cleaning up.

Quinn laughs and shakes her head. “I’m glad you were here though. Grayson, do you want to hold him?” she asks, beckoning me forward.

I’ve never held a baby so soon after it was born but I’m not going to say no, especially when my brother lifts the little bundle from his wife’s arms and brings him to me. “Here you go, Uncle Grayson.” Something about the way he says it brings a lump to my throat.

“Oh my God, so tiny,” someone murmurs in awe – okay, it was me – when two blue eyes gaze up at me and a tiny little mouth opens in a yawn. “Hey, kiddo,” I say quietly, strangely moved in a way I’ve never felt before.

I can practically *feel* Eleanor’s radiant smile, all the warmth of the sun, as she watches by my side, her hands wrapped around my bicep. She’s literally bouncing with glee. “He’s so perfect, Quinn. Simply beautiful,” she says, happily.

I turn towards her, meaning to agree with her statement, but our eyes meet and, holy fuck, my heart. This woman I thought I couldn’t stand, who I was convinced hated me just punched me in the heart with a single look. What is happening?

Theo lays a hand on my shoulder and lightly touches Eleanor’s elbow with the other. “I’m glad you both got to be here tonight.” We nod, neither of us knowing what to say in the face of my brother’s obvious emotion.

“And, Gray, I’m so relieved knowing you’re going to be handling things for me at work while I’m away. It’s a huge responsibility but I hope you know I have every faith you can handle it. I know our brilliant trainee will be in good hands while I’m gone, too.”

Even as I bask in Theo’s unchecked praise, once more, my eyes find Eleanor’s and my heart is pierced this time. *Oof*.

What happened earlier, that can't happen again, can it? Even if I want her more than I want air.

I look down at my sweet little nephew with the crown of responsibility resting heavily upon my head and know I am royally fucked.

20-ELEANOR

What happened in the hayloft has stayed in the hayloft and I'm not sure how I feel about that.

(Yes, I am. I'm not happy about it.)

“Good morning, Mr. Wolfe. How are you today?”

“Good morning, Ms. Fairfield. I'm well, thanks. And you?”

That's the extent of our personal conversations since the day Grayson had me climaxing in his lap in a barn.

We've not even been alone together in the three weeks which have passed since the day of the barbeque when Theo and Quinn welcomed their new baby boy to the world and Grayson became the temporary head of Wolfe Media.

No nicknames, no golf talk. Even the nighttime email exchanges have ended. God, I miss it. I miss him, the guy I supposedly hated. I've been sleeping in his damn sweatshirt, the one I keep forgetting to return, but it doesn't smell like him anymore.

But my time as a temporary junior executive trainee continues to roll along and I'm still learning as much under Grayson's tutelage as I was under his brother's. Unfortunately, there are so many inappropriate things I wish for Grayson to teach me now and that simply can't happen with our current workplace relationship.

“Temporary is the operative word here,” Drew reminds me over the phone. “I say, as soon as the opportunity presents itself again, bang him. Cash in that v-card for a dozen delightful O's and live a little.”

Stifling my giggles, I shake my head and make sure no one's eavesdropping. “He's got so much to deal with now. You can see the stress and strain he's carrying etched in every line of that handsome face.”

“Sounds like Mr. Chief Executive Hottie needs his gorgeous trainee to pop by his office with a fresh cup of coffee... and a blowjob.”

“Drew!”

I will not give him a blowjob at work, I will not give him a blowjob at work, I will not... who am I kidding?

“I’ve never given anyone one of those,” I whisper. “What if I’m horrible at it?”

“Honey, trust me on this, most guys, unless they’re a complete ass, appreciate the effort far more than they’re interested in critiquing your technique. And, if he knows it’s your first, that his cock is the first one you’ve ever sucked, he’ll probably get off on that alone. Most of ‘em are possessive little cavemen at heart to some extent.”

She sounds sure of herself but I’m not. Fox wasn’t into me enough to pursue a physical relationship but was happy enough banging his housekeeper. A year of little more than hand holding and kisses goodnight. What if there’s something repellant about me that eventually men are bound to pick up on?

With those uneasy thoughts circling, I head into a meeting with the mergers and acquisition team, led by Becca and Glen. They’re talking about an upcoming multimedia technology conference in Tokyo they’re attending. A trip to Japan would be amazing but a lowly trainee like me won’t be invited.

Legal joins us to walk through the finer points of the contract for Lone Star - Mr. Jacobs was so tickled by the barbeque and excited by the baby news he agreed to the deal before leaving town - and business carries on.

I’m glad for all I’ve learned with the team as I’ll be moving to a new area soon. But I’ll still be under Grayson... while not being *under* Grayson.



The second Saturday of September finds me heading to lunch with Constance and her sister before I'll be busy helping Margaret Wolfe nail down a few final details for next week's annual Founder's Ball at the country club.

Grayson and I haven't discussed it since the barn. Will he still go? Are we going to make Fox jealous there? Sad to say, even if all I can have of Grayson is a little fake dating and a random exploration of chemistry, I'll take it.

Despite her devastating dumping by Todd thanks to Grayson's interference years ago, Constance's sister Camilla has moved on and found the true love of her life. They got married last spring. Even with my own engagement's disastrous ending, I can take pleasure in other people's happiness.

"May I ask what Fox did, Norrie?" Camilla asks, kindly. "You don't have to tell me but I know it must have been something to send you out a window and down a butternut tree."

The three of us share a laugh. With time, it's become funnier to me, especially the part where Grayson came along. I sigh as I recall her question. "I caught him with another woman. In the act."

"Asshole."

"I can't believe he's been acting like he's the victim. You should've heard him at the Labor Day Regatta running on, especially about how you're too naive to realize that Grayson is using you to get at him."

"I'm rather glad I didn't." I *hope* Grayson wouldn't use me simply to get at Fox.

Leave it to Fox to be petty and cry far and wide amongst our circle over how devastated he is. He probably hopes to make it harder for Dad to fire him.

It does anger me being painted as foolish. Whatever bad blood there is between the two men, I don't want to be some pawn in their feud.

“My poor Norrie has been a trooper this whole while, Milla. She’s been shunted off to work for Grayson by her own father,” Constance says with her nose scrunching up in disgust. There’s nothing I find disgusting about Grayson anymore if I ever truly did. Not even close. I feel like I should tell my friend this but we’re sitting right here with the sister whose hopes he once spoiled.

“I’m sorry if me being linked to Grayson in those articles bothered you, Camillia. Please know that I never meant for the kiss to be anything more than a polite peck, a mere civility.” *Even if it wound up being much more.*

But Camilla laughs and waves a hand. “Oh darling, please don’t fret on my account. I’ve long since let my old grudge against Grayson Wolfe go. And, it was misplaced to begin with.”

Constance and I stare at her, slack-jawed. “What do you mean it was misplaced?”

“You haven’t told me this!”

“When I told you girls about Todd breaking things off that morning over brunch, I didn’t know all the facts. I was so angry and wounded and Todd had only mentioned his talk with Grayson, making it seem like Grayson had been the one to talk him out of proposing to me and moving on.”

I remember it well. Constance and I had been seventeen and hanging on to every word, sharing every tear poor Camilla had shed. We’d been ready to grab our pitchforks and hunt down one particular Wolfe that day.

“But, as it turned out, Todd had confided in Grayson about something which he hadn’t shared with anyone else. Grayson said it wouldn’t be fair to either of us if he continued seeing me or went through with a proposal when he couldn’t feel the same way I did. Todd is... well, he’s gay.”

We both gasp. Neither one of us had known!

“Todd was trying to live up to his family’s expectations by being someone he wasn’t. He called me a couple of weeks after the breakup and told me the full of it. I understand the

pressure he must've been struggling with and he admitted he felt so guilty because he wanted to love me but couldn't the way I deserved. Both of our lives would've been miserable if he'd gone through with the act while lacking the feelings. That's no way to love."

Something in her words strikes a chord with me - going through with the act while lacking the feelings. *'That's no way to love.'* That's true of the pitiful excuse for a relationship Fox and I had, too. There was no love between us. Our marriage would've been a disaster. I deserve better.

"Why haven't you told me this before?" Constance asks.

Yes, why?

"Because it was Todd's business to share or not share regarding his sexuality but, since he's openly involved with another man now where he's living in Denver, and quite happy from all accounts, I think it's appropriate to absolve Grayson of any wrongdoing in the matter, don't you?"

We both nod, a bit stunned. Once more, my past dislike of him seems entirely misguided.



That night, I return home after helping Margaret with the upcoming ball while wishing I could question her about her son without my reasons being too apparent. I eat a quiet meal with Dad who's obviously preoccupied by business and go up to my room where I've posted that silly list I made of reasons to hate Grayson.

I strike through reason Number Two with a pen. Camilla's hardly heartbroken anymore and Grayson was never really to blame for the past one.

I can't help laughing at number one. He *is* a cocky asshole but my feelings towards him have changed so much that I call him that affectionately in my mind.

He did tease me about my freckles once. Is that any reason to hate him? We were so much younger then. I still

don't know why he might've dumped a girl for ordering a second slice of cheesecake on a date but does it matter now?

There's a few others I cringe over, things I don't believe at all now.

I start to take it down but my eyes land on Number Five which could've been Number One – he didn't ask me to dance at my debutante ball.

'Hell, no, not a debutante.'

Why had he said that? I doubt he knows I heard him. But it had stung so badly at the time and right before Camilla's news.

Was I honestly that wounded by a young man who didn't like his parents pushing him to dance with a teenager? Who cares if he never wants to marry a debutante for that matter? No one's saying anything about marriage but we're adults. We may work together but we can explore something I *hope* we're both interested in, can't we?

Now, if only I can find my nerve and figure out the timing...

21-GRAYSON

Abraham Lincoln once said, *'Nearly all men can stand adversity but, if you want to test a man's character, give him power.'*

I can't command armies or pass legislation but my character is being tested in ways my fellow Illinoian might not have meant with those words.

The passing weeks haven't diminished my want for her, not at all. But it would be wrong to act and so I dream of her softness, her moans or the scent of lilacs in my bed every night and pretend it's enough.

"What was it like for you when you knew you wanted Mia but didn't think you could have her since she was your intern?" I'd asked Jonathan the other day when we'd been rowing. I'd promised to go rowing with him after giving him hell over that pitiful golf score of his.

"Pure torture. Who do you want that you can't have, Gray?" he'd asked before sweeping past me. *"Let me guess, she can score better than me in golf!"*

"Everyone scores better than you in golf! And, you're no help, prick!"

At least there's work to occupy me even if it's driving me mad. Mr. Wolfe, this. Mr. Wolfe, that. I'm so sick of my last name and all the people who are after me day in and out because of it. What I wouldn't give for one day where the only thing I'm asked to do is 'fetch us some coffee, Grayson.'

"Don't bullshit me. You love being in charge," Oliver had said to my whining last night during our game of pool.

"Okay, maybe I do." It is a thrill but... *"I miss Theo being there. I swear I'll dump your Harley in Lake Michigan if you ever tell him that."*

That's the thing. I love my job. *My* job. As Chief Operations Officer. Wearing both the COO and the CEO's

hats though? It's a bit much.

"That's why I'm pleased both you boys are there," Dad had told me during lunch today. *"I never had that."*

He loves to point out how much harder it was back in his day after Granddad retired and our uncle refused to work under his brother and before Theo finished school.

"You've got each other's backs. Theo will return in a couple of months. This is a character-building time for you." Jesus, please us, not the character-building speech again. *"Give him and Quinn this family time and he may be doing the same for you someday."*

Family time. Yeah, they deserve that. There's nothing that means more to me than family and I know my brothers feel the same. Except that they've all got women they're in love with who are part of that family circle now.

"I'm not expecting to get married or have kids anytime soon, Dad."

Though there is a lady I tend to think of lately when my thoughts stray in that direction. Ironically, it's the same one my parents hoped I might show some interest in when I was younger and I thought they were completely nuts.

I'm not saying I want to marry Norrie. Hell, I don't even know if we could tolerate each other for more than a month if we were to truly make a go of it. But she's the only woman I want.

"I had two boys by the time I was your age but things have changed, of course. Well, no one's going to arrange a marriage for you. We've got Fairfield in the bag without you marrying his daughter after all."

I wonder how Eleanor feels about her dad selling out to us. I recall how Fox reacted back when I thought we were friends and his family's newspaper fell victim to one of Dad's more cut-throat moves. Which was justified in my opinion.

The phones are ringing off the hook when I return from lunch. Both Claire and Paula's desks sit empty. Shit, that's right. Paula had a doctor's appointment scheduled this

afternoon and I sent Claire home early because she's caught a cold.

"Hello? Does anyone work here?" I jokingly call down the hallway where the other executive offices are and their assistants dwell.

Well, you do, dummy. Answer a phone.

"Wolfe Media Headquarters, how may I direct your call?"

"Grayson! I didn't expect you to answer."

"Hi, Mom. Why aren't you calling my cell?"

"Because I was calling to remind Paula to remind you that the Founders' Ball is tomorrow night."

I scowl at her round-about way of reminding me. No wonder Paula always knows my personal schedule as well as I do. "I know when it is and I'll be there."

"You should wear that midnight blue tuxedo of yours, darling. It goes well with your eye."

It's been a minute since Mom has given me fashion advice. I give her a suspicious "hmm."

"Eleanor's been a tremendous help organizing this year. You know she lost her mother around this time of year."

"I didn't. Thanks for the reminder."

"Grayson, as it's not a work event, and if you don't have a young lady already lined up as a date--"

"Need to answer these other phones now, Mom. Good-bye!"

The Founders' Ball. And Fox will be there. Even if I've been keeping my distance at work, I owe it to Norrie to follow through with what we agreed upon, right?

The phones keep ringing as I stand here grimacing at them. "Fuck it, we have voicemail." I march into my office to do my actual job.

Or my brother's.

The lines are blurred lately.

The lines are about to get blurrier.

There's a knock at my door twenty minutes later and I figure Paula's not back yet. Anyone who made it up here hopefully has some worthwhile reason for coming. "It's open!"

Eleanor pokes her head around the door. "Hi, can I come in?"

"Yeah, of course," I answer, my heart suddenly beating like a drum. This is the first time I've seen her today.

"Great."

It is pretty great when she walks in dressed like a naughty office daydream.

Fucking hell.

Still professional but not the crisp pants-suits she typically wears. Where has she been hiding this pencil skirt with the slit up to there? And the powder pink blouse she's wearing has this alluringly sheer quality to it. Is that white lace I spy underneath or my imagination? Those black fuck-me heels with the little strap and buckle at the ankle are making her gorgeous legs look even longer somehow. Holy shit, I'm in danger of getting a hard-on if I don't look away. But, I *can't* look away.

"I brought you a cup of coffee if it's not too late in the day for you, Mr. Wolfe," she says with a winning smile, slowly swinging her hips as she sashays across the carpet towards my desk. My cock swells with every step she takes.

Lord, I am being tested today, aren't I?

22-GRAYSON

Coffee. She's bringing you coffee. This is not fantasy time. And, don't pop a boner for fuck's sake.

Halfway to my desk, she stumbles in those heels. She manages to recover without spilling the coffee but the flash of embarrassment and frustration in her eyes over her misstep is oddly comforting. She's still my Norrie no matter how sexy she's dressed today.

"Whoops," she says, shooting an apologetic smile my way before she sets the steaming cup of coffee on my desk.

"You did say you'd pour coffee over my head someday." I relish her blush at the reminder of her threat from the day she thought I'd sabotaged her presentation. But, because I don't really want to revisit hard feelings, I take a sip. "Mmm, this is perfect. It didn't come from the café downstairs either, did it?"

"No, I made it for you. I brought a machine and the coffee from home which I keep in our breakroom."

Of course, you did. "Well, it's delicious. Thank you."

She's got a tablet tucked under her arm and she glances between me, my desk, the chairs opposite it and the sofa against the wall. "I had a couple of questions I wanted to pick your brain about, if you don't mind? I know you're busy..."

"I don't mind. Did you want to take a seat?" I ask, pushing back from my desk. Her eyes fall to my lap. *Yes, that's exactly where I want you to sit even if I can't say as much.*

"Sure."

Except she remains standing, biting at her delectable bottom lip, until, as if some invisible hand gave her a shove, she moves around to my side of the desk. Christ, all the blood in my body's rushing south as I watch her step between my thighs before carefully perching on the edge of my desk in

front of me. Definitely veering into naughty office daydream territory.

“I hope this is alright. We could both look at my notes together this way.”

“Um, sure. Okay.”

She shifts slightly and my eyes are glued to that enticing sliver of creamy thigh the slit in her skirt reveals as she recites her first question. What color panties is she wearing? White lace to match that bra?

“Mr. Wolfe?”

I have no fucking clue what her question was. I’m staring at her on my desk and picturing her feet propped on the arms of my chair with her legs spread. *Yes, that’s correct, Ms. Fairfield. I’d be happy to eat you out like this.*

“Um... let me ponder that one for a bit.” Goddamn, this is about to get embarrassing. I’ve got a lead pipe in my trousers and she’s going to notice that eventually.

She tilts her head to one side and raises an eyebrow. “Are you tense? You look tense. Which isn’t surprising, I realize. There’s a huge burden of responsibility on your shoulders. I know it must be hard on you.”

Hard-on is a very apt term. And that damn responsibility is the only thing keeping me from grabbing you and kissing you right now.

“I’m fine.”

That same partly embarrassed, partly flustered look from when she stumbled a moment ago flashes in those golden-brown eyes.

“Are *you* alright, Ms. Fairfield?” I ask, trying to figure out what’s prompting this visit and behavior. Something is definitely on her mind. (I hope it’s me.)

“Yes, Mr. Wolfe. Everything’s peachy.”

She beams at me, about knocks me out with that smile, leans closer and lets her hand brush my arm. My eager cock

twitches as the scent of lilacs surrounds me. I sit up straighter, our lips coming into range while I'm wishing for a way to discreetly adjust my trousers except she's too close. The horny flag has officially been raised below deck.

“So, your, uh... the other questions you had?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes! Of course!” She promptly breaks into giggles while tossing her curls. Hair tossing, giggling, touching me, sitting like this; did she have a cocktail luncheon? Or is there something in particular she's after?

Wanting to gain her attention, and unable to resist, I place my hand on her knee. “Norrie...”

She jolts like she's been shocked by high voltage and knocks her tablet to the floor. Both of us lean forward at once and wind up knocking our heads together. “Ow!” we say in sync.

A scramble ensues but my inconvenient boner keeps my ass connected to my seat until, next thing I know, Eleanor's down on the floor, wedged partly beneath my desk on hands and knees. Her ass is presented to me like a perfectly round peach wrapped in black silk blend. *Fucking hell.*

“Got it!” she declares as my traitorous hands are ready to go for it. But she raises her head too quickly and hits her head on the underside of my desk. “Ouch!” she whimpers, rubbing the spot.

“Jesus, come here, angel.”

Grasping her by the elbows, I help pull her out from under my desk until she's blinking up at me with those beautiful eyes full of embarrassment and frustration again. She's so fucking sexy and precious at the same time. Couldn't tell you if I'd rather bend her over my desk and pound her into next week or wrap her in warm blankets and snuggle her close at the moment. It's a toss-up.

She is also kneeling in front of me in the absolute ideal position for something besides taking notes. I am being tested today without a doubt.

“I knew I’d be terrible at this. I told Drew I would be,” she mutters, self-consciously.

I feel the corners of my mouth turning up even if I’m not sure what she means. “Terrible at what?”

“Trying to seduce you.”

“You’re trying to seduce me?”

“I know we said it was about making Fox jealous.”

Christ, why did I ever say that? If I could go back in time, I’d bite my damn tongue before the words slipped out.

“But you said we have chemistry...”

“A fuck-ton of chemistry.”

She smiles hesitantly. “And we could explore that if we were both interested. But maybe I misread it all. We never talked after what happened in the hayloft. I mean, why would you want me anyway?” she says quietly, her eyes dropping to the floor.

Grayson, you asshole. You fingerfucked her in a barn and then said nothing. How the hell do you think that made her feel? “You didn’t misread anything. Why wouldn’t I want you? I’m hard as a fucking rock right now for you.” A pleased grin as she realizes I’m not kidding. “I’m sorry we didn’t talk about it before now.”

She gazes up at me and I reach out to stroke her cheek. She nuzzles into my hand, pressing her face into my palm as if a touch of tenderness is an exquisite gift when she’s the damn gift. “I started to worry that maybe you didn’t like me that way at all or I did something wrong or-”

“Norrie,” I say softly, still stroking her satiny cheek. “I like you. That way. This way. Lots of ways. I definitely like you. I’m sorry if me not saying anything these past few weeks has hurt you. I thought if I left you alone it would be better.”

“Better for you?”

“Better for us both. I couldn’t pursue you no matter how much I wanted to. I wouldn’t wish to make you

uncomfortable that way. We've already had our taste of scandal together, right?"

"Right," she says with resignation.

"But it's not been better staying away. It's sucked. It sucks donkey balls."

A startled laugh from her as she agrees. "It has. I wouldn't want to put you in an uncomfortable position here at work either." She looks around before giving me a heart-stopping and mischievous grin. "But I must admit, I kind of like this position."

"Can't say I mind you being right there either," I say, chuckling.

"Grayson, how horrible have these past few weeks been for you with Theo gone?"

"Rough but I'm managing. Don't worry about me."

"But is there anything I could do to help? You seem very tense."

Her cheeks turn scarlet as she stares up at me, wide-eyed and curious. Fuck me, her hands come up to rest on my knees and her eyes dip down to my lap again. My heart is thundering so hard, how can she not hear it? "I-I'm a little tense," I stammer, practically panting with excitement.

"I could help relax you maybe. I'd like to try anyway. Could I try?" Her hands start fumbling with my belt buckle and I'm seriously in danger of coming in my pants. *Like a fucking teenager.*

Grownup, Responsible Grayson and that Conscience guy are like a tinny, worn-out speaker in the back of the room trying to remind me why that's a terrible idea while my cock is trying to tear its way past my zipper, shouting from the rooftops at top volume that she is more than welcome to try.

I slide my thumb from her cheek along her bottom lip. Her pink tongue darts out to lick it as those big eyes gaze back at me. "Um, the door isn't..."

Then, she looks up at me with the sweetest expression of uncertainty mixed with excitement and it undoes me. “I’ve never done this before.” I don’t imagine she’s ever given anyone a blowjob at work, especially knowing her old man was down the hall.

But before we can clarify that or lock my office door, *my* old man makes the most unwelcome appearance his entire life.

“Where the hell are Paula and Claire?” he barks as my door swings open and he traipses in uninvited. “The phones are going nuts out there.”

I roll my chair back half a foot, letting my hand drop from Eleanor’s face as hers leave my belt buckle. “Dad?! What are you-”

“I figured while I was downtown anyway after our lunch I might as well pop in to see how things are running with you in temporary command. By the looks of the empty desks out there, I feared I might find you in here bound and gagged after they held a mutiny...”

My father’s words trail off as he gets close enough to my desk to realize I’m not alone. His eyebrows shoot skyward and his mouth twists into a disapproving frown seeing a woman on her knees between my thighs.

My mind is completely blank as my mouth hangs open. ‘Guilty as sin’ is probably written all over my face as I stare back at him but leave it to Eleanor to think fast.

“Ah ha! Found it!” She holds up a finger towards me as if there’s something resting on the tip of it. “Damn contact lenses can be so tricky to find on carpet. It’s a pleasure to see you, Mr. Wolfe. You’ll be at tomorrow night’s Founders’ Ball, won’t you?”

Ordinarily, my father would still be suspicious but he’s always had a soft spot for Eleanor. I know her Little Miss Perfect persona at the country club goes a long way with most of the older folks in our circle.

He smiles indulgently at her and says, “That’s right. Margaret raves about all the help you’ve been this year.”

“That’s very kind of her. I’ve been enjoying the time with your lovely wife.”

They exchange a few more pleasantries as I help Eleanor back to her feet. I bite my tongue to keep from smirking when she says she’ll need to head to the ladies’ room to deal with her (nonexistent) contact. “I’ll see if Jordan from Ms. Donavan’s office can answer those phones if you wish until Paula returns, sir.”

“Yes, please do, Ms. Fairfield. And, if you have any additional questions for me, you know where I am,” I tell her as she moves towards the door.

“I think that’s all for now, sir. But perhaps I’ll see you tomorrow night at the ball as well?”

“You will. I wouldn’t miss it,” I promise her.

A thousand disasters couldn’t keep me away. We’ve not finished what you started yet.

23-ELEANOR

“I like you. That way. This way. Lots of ways. I definitely like you.”

Those words have stuck with me these past twenty-four hours like nothing ever has. Operation Coffee and a Blowjob might have been a failure but, despite that, we had talked which was something I had wanted, and maybe needed, even more.

“I wouldn’t label it a failure. If his dad hadn’t walked in...”

“Please, don’t remind me of the fact Mr. Wolfe found me on the floor of his son’s office contemplating oral sex,” I tell Drew as we’re heading into the country club.

She laughs, shaking her hair which is freshly dyed a vivid violet to match her dress tonight, and appears as unfazed by my mortification as she was the first time I retold the tale. I find myself laughing with her. “I never could’ve gone through with it. Assuming he didn’t get tired of my inexperienced attempts and told me to please stop-”

“Honey, I really don’t think you’d need to worry about that.”

“Well, I think perhaps certain first times should occur behind firmly locked doors and far away from potential discovery.”

“It’s clear you didn’t lose it in the backseat of someone’s car, though a hayloft doesn’t fit your criteria either,” Drew says, snorting back more laughter.

“God, not in the backseat! Simmons probably would’ve wound up pecking on the glass - ‘Miss Eleanor, your father expects you home at such and such time this evening so if you could wrap things up...’” A server approaches us with champagne as Drew cackles.

“Thank you for being my companion tonight, by the way,” I tell Drew once I’ve thanked him and he moves on. Grayson had sent me an email last night reiterating that he would see me at the ball but had a meeting that might run him late. Considering everything, I preferred not to arrive alone.

“No problem. Only way I’d get to be here as a guest. Now, let’s find me an outrageously wealthy and single silver fox to marry and give me all the money I need to start my restaurant.”

We giggle together and survey the crowd. No single silver foxes in sight, alas. “I’d be your silver fox if I could.” Drew grins and hugs me. I know people always warn you about going into business with your friends but I truly believe we would have such a great time running a restaurant together.

Just like at the golf tournament, there are people staring at me here, gossiping and making assumptions. I really don’t like it. It doesn’t help my mood that my mom passed away this time of year but I know she wouldn’t want me to sit around being sad all weekend. My father will be here later. He had a meeting, unusual for a Saturday afternoon, and said to go on without him. I know he’ll migrate to his usual set of friends and, other than an obligatory dance with his daughter at some point, he’ll expect me to socialize with people my age. I sigh, wishing we were closer.

Constance arrives with her date du jour, the heir of a banking fortune and an amateur military historian who her parents approve of. I wonder if that’s the sole reason she’s chosen to bring him since neither of them seem to have much to say to one another. He’s polite but dry as a stick. Constance wouldn’t crack open a nonfiction book about a hundred-year-old war unless you threatened to throw out her favorite pair of Manolos.

That would’ve been you and Fox, Norrie. Side by side but never speaking or seeking one another. Blessings can come in all shapes and forms, hard as some truths may be to learn.

I don't think Constance has any interest in marrying him but the lack of sparks between them brings back uncomfortable memories of occasions like this I'd attended with Fox. Never again. The next time I accept a man's proposal, only true love will induce me to do so.

Tonight is the first time I've truly thought of Fox in weeks but, like a bad penny, there he is in front of me the next moment. "Eleanor, you look lovely."

I do feel lovely in the buttery yellow chiffon gown with jeweled spaghetti straps but not because Fox says so. His tone is waspy, different than when he accosted me in the parking lot. I suppose he's accepted he won't win me back. He still has a job regardless.

His eyes slide over to Drew before he turns back to me and drawls, "Dating the help now?"

If he thinks he'll wound Drew that way, he's a bigger idiot than I thought but it does annoy me when someone treats my friend as less because she's not rich. I slip my arm through hers. "She's not an employee, she's my friend and, while I'm not into women, if I ever were to lean that way, I'm certain she'd be a million times better choice than my last relationship."

Drew snorts and cheekily adds, "I'm all for a little experimenting, Norrie. What sort of bonus will I get if I clean your house?"

Fox flushes at the insinuation and stalks off, leaving us to our champagne and laughter. Another glass helps me forget some of the more blatant stares and whispers. Like Grayson told me on the golf course, screw all of them.

The ball officially begins and couples move together on the dance floor, black suits and every color of gown imaginable swirl before my eyes. I've always loved a ball though it's been ages since I've found much delight in a partner. Perhaps I'll ask Drew to dance with me after all. We'll make all the tongues wag a bit more if nothing else.

My eyes are drawn to Jonathan and Mia dancing together, such a gorgeous couple, but the way they stare at each other stirs a deep ache in my chest. Much as I love her, it's not Drew I want to dance with.

I glance away from Judge Wolfe and there's his father. I flush recalling what he nearly interrupted yesterday but I smile to see him dancing with Libby who's radiant in a dress the shade of mint. Dr. Wolfe is nearby, deep in discussion with a fellow physician but his eyes never leave Libby as his father spins her across the room. What's it like to have a man look at you that way? To want you so completely?

Maybe you know, Norrie.

Maybe I might.

"I like you. That way. This way. Lots of ways. I definitely like you."

Where is he?

Margaret stops by to thank me again for helping and compliments Drew on her hair. Theo and Quinn aren't coming tonight, the tired parents opting to remain home with their kids. I can't blame them. If I could be home with a husband I adore and our sweet little baby... Oh, why does that image hit me so forcefully? I'm in no rush for children, no more than I plan to marry anytime soon.

Drew and Margaret start talking about food and I'm soon on the sidelines of an intense discussion involving the best ways to prepare artichoke so I drift away a few steps and observe the dancers some more.

The music is exactly what I expect at these gatherings, decades old favorites – nothing much changes in these circles – but there's something about Mancini's 'Moon River' which still stirs my romantic little heart. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* had been my mother's favorite film and the opening notes pierce me with hope and melancholy both.

From across the room, I feel eyes on me. I turn and there's Grayson.

Another tuxedo but this one a blue so dark it's nearly black. Midnight blue. It goes well with his eyes, I think as butterflies dance with the champagne I've consumed.

He's drinking me in with a smile playing at the corners of his kissable mouth. I feel flushed and giddy and any sense of melancholy vanishes as a longing spreads through my limbs and settles low in my belly.

Without missing a beat, he strides my way as the music swells, my heart thudding loudly between my ears and other places with every step. If I was conscious of the crowd before, I'm oblivious to it now. He's all I can see.

"Fairfield," he says, his voice a playful rasp that raises the fine hairs along the nape of my neck in the most delightful way as he extends his hand. "Would you care to dance?"

"You've never asked me before," I blurt out, unable to help myself.

He smiles softly, his eyes dropping to our feet before he raises them to meet mine again. "I'm asking you now."

"I'd love to dance."

He leads me to the dance floor... as the song ends.

"It's a very short song," I say, unable to hide or precisely explain my keen disappointment.

"Perhaps they'll play it again for us later," he says as his thumb strokes my palm gently. Why does it feel like a silent apology? He has nothing to apologize for.

"Where have you been tonight? You've not defiled any golf carts or rescued any other girls from trees on your way here, have you?"

He smirks and draws me close in preparation for the next song. "No defiling of golf carts and you're still my only squirrel girl." I'm ridiculously pleased by those words. "I've been busy conquering the world of media this evening... or trying to find a pair of clean socks that match. Maybe both. Speculate away, I'll never tell."

I burst out laughing as the band begins to play ‘Fly Me to the Moon.’ I think this man could do just that. And, if so, I intend to let him.



“If we keep dancing, they’ll never stop talking about us,” I murmur as Grayson whirls me ‘round the dance floor yet again. He is an excellent dancer but four dances in a row with the same partner simply isn’t done here unless you’re sickeningly in-love or trying to convince everyone you are.

“Are you worrying over your reputation?”

“Me? Worried? Never.” He chuckles, knowing perfectly well how I’ve desired people’s good opinion in the past. “I don’t mind if you don’t. Let them talk.”

Nevertheless, I can’t help another glance over my shoulder. Grayson’s fingers catch my chin. “Ignore them. Look at me. I’m catching up for all the balls here when I could’ve asked you to dance and never did.”

My lips part in surprise. I hadn’t expected him to say that. “We wouldn’t have danced together. We didn’t like each other.”

“I meant before then. I was thinking of your debutante ball. I hope you don’t know it but my parents wanted me to ask you for a dance and I said-”

“Hell, no, not a debutante.”

He cringes. “It wasn’t about you but I’m very sorry you heard me. I didn’t like being pushed by them that way even if it was only a dance. But, I want to dance with you tonight.”

I smile, allowing him to tug me a little nearer before I catch Fox’s eyes with the next twirl, his expression furious. Grayson sees him, too.

“Gotta admit, that’s part of the pleasure as well but a very small part,” he says, cockily.

I’m not as pleased by that. Is it only a small part? Or is pursuing me part of some larger maneuver for Grayson in their

ongoing cold war?

We take a break with the next song where we join Drew for a drink. “I can’t abandon my friend all night. She only came because of me and I’ve not seen her dancing yet.”

The three of us mix and mingle amongst his family next and then Grayson asks Drew to dance, shooting a wink my way after she agrees. *Yes, I see what you did there.* My heart swells with affection for him.

Mia and I are chatting companionably about her upcoming trial, her first, when my father comes over to claim his dance. I excuse myself and let him lead me away. “How was your meeting?” I ask, trying to think of something to say. How can you love someone so much but never know what to say to them?

“Still quite a few things to hammer out but it was promising. He’s young but knows his stuff.” I feel at a loss not knowing who he means or what deal he’s been making while I’ve been away. I intend to ask more but he changes course on me. “Are you happy at Wolfe Media, Norrie?”

“Yes, they’ve been very nice overall and I’m learning a lot.” No need to recall Mike or the trip to the locker room. It’s been a long while since Dad’s called me Norrie, too.

My father nods with approval. “Knew you’d make the best of it. Your mother would be proud. She loved coming to the Founders’ Ball every year and dancing to the same old songs. She’d be delighted if she could see you here tonight looking so beautiful and grownup. You resemble her greatly at that age, my sweet girl.”

My heart clenches and tears prick my eyes. He’s usually not very vocal about sentimental things. “Dad, I-”

He pats my shoulder, cutting off my words as he visibly swallows his emotions. “I may make an early night of it. I can have Simmons return to collect you if you’d like to stay a bit longer.”

“No, that’s not necessary. I want to stay but I rode with Drew.”

The song ends and he kisses my cheek, telling me to be careful, before heading out. I don't know what's going on with my father but he's not seemed himself lately. Then again, I've not seen much of him. My mother died but it's Dad and I who act like ghosts sometimes. We occupy the same house but rarely interact.

I catch a few more curious looks in my direction as I'm left standing on the edge of the dance floor. I spy Fox dancing with one of last year's debs, his hands roaming where they likely shouldn't when he sees me looking. I roll my eyes and turn away, hoping the young lady, or her parents, have the good sense to steer clear of him for anything more than a dance.

“Free for another dance, Fairfield?”

Grayson's returned and so incredibly handsome in his tux, causing those tingles and flutters and all the other feelings I can't seem to control around him. I don't feel like a ghost when I'm with Grayson. I feel alive and young... and reckless.

Drew's words come back to me. I deserve to have some fun tonight, maybe finish something we started yesterday. How do I casually suggest such a thing? “I was thinking we might...”

My words trail off as the band starts to play ‘Moon River’ again and a soft gasp escapes my lips. “They played this one already.”

“Hmm, I believe you're right. That band leader might be getting forgetful with age.” He's already pulling me into his arms and leading us effortlessly through the steps. “Do you ever go clubbing? Not country clubbing but to places where they play music from this century and you don't have to wear formalwear? Somewhere to dance with Drew or your other friends maybe?”

“No, not really. I'd like to sometime but my father never... You requested they play this song again, didn't you?”

He raises his eyebrows and pretends to zip his lips, making me laugh but also making my heart pound fiercely. He's thoughtful in ways I never imagined he'd be.

Allowing my head to rest against his chest, I listen to his heart's steady thumping. It's reassuring and it strengthens my resolve even as my eyes grow misty with emotion over the simple song and memories of my mother. When I look back up at him, he notices. "What's wrong, angel?"

"It makes me cry sometimes when I hear this song. My mother loved that movie."

"I'm sorry. I never would've—"

I cut off his apology. "Don't say sorry. I like to remember her, even when it hurts."

"It's been nearly ten years, hasn't it?" I nod. "I'm sorry for your loss and your father's. I can't imagine."

People have given me their sympathies so many times over the years but, for some reason, Grayson's words feel more meaningful.

I wrap my arms around his neck and glance up at him. We're not dancing now. We're entwined like lovers preparing to kiss. "I think I've had enough of the ball tonight."

"Do you want me to find Drew?"

"No, she drove her car. I'll send her a message so she won't worry." I've never offered myself to someone this way and I feel vulnerable but also empowered because it's Grayson. "I'd like for you to take me home... but maybe not home right away."

A long pause as he studies me before he nods. His voice dips, gruff and delicious. "As you wish."

Then, he leads me off the dance floor and out of the ballroom, his hand holding mine as tongues are left to wag in our wake.

24-ELEANOR

“Where do you want to go?”

“To the moon.” He chuckles at my whimsical reply. I sent Drew a message and one to my father saying I’ll be late returning home. How late, I don’t know yet. “Drive us around for a while, Alan. We’ve not decided on a destination yet,” Grayson tells his driver.

My cheeks flush at the driver’s curious glance before he quickly hides it behind a mask of professional indifference. I wonder what everyone we left behind at the country club thinks. Grayson helps me inside before raising the privacy screen. The interior is a soft gray leather and smells like his cologne. It’s comfortable here but my cheeks are still hot and my mind is racing.

“You’re thinking too much. Do you want anything to drink? Some water perhaps?”

“Water, please.” I’ve had enough champagne to make me a little fuzzy and I don’t need to be any fuzzier if I’m going to sound coherent.

I guzzle down the water as if all the answers to everything are at the bottom of the bottle. Grayson watches me, always studying me, as I set the empty bottle aside. “Better?”

“Better.” I smack my lips for emphasis and Grayson’s eyes seem to darken in response.

“Where am I taking you?”

“Places I’ve never been.” So much for sounding coherent.

“I’m not sure what that means.”

“Where do you take the other girls you pick up at balls?”

“I don’t pick up girls at country club balls, Fairfield, but may I claim I’ve picked you up?” His knuckles brush my cheek.

“Perhaps. You had them play a song I love a second time for me.” Like in his office yesterday, I lean into his touch, savoring his tenderness as much as his strength.

I see the conflict in his eyes before he even speaks. Does he really want me now that Fox isn’t here to observe? “Come Monday, you’ll still be working for me.”

“I won’t forever.”

“You don’t want to stay on with us?”

I shake my head, amused. “No, I like Wolfe Media but I won’t be staying there.” I’ll return to Fairfield as expected. It’s my duty. Surely, he understands that. He went to work for his father’s company, too.

“Okay but I’m still your boss for now. I couldn’t take advantage of you or-”

“You won’t be my boss for all that long and I think we both know I’m not afraid to stand up to you, Mr. Wolfe.” He grins until my hand on his knee starts to creep up his thigh. “I’m not afraid to kneel for you either,” I add, silently working myself up to the task I only teased him with yesterday.

You can do it, Norrie.

Thanks but, for the love of God, not now, Mom!

He swallows so hard I see his bowtie bobbing over his Adam’s apple. I’ve never seen eyes so dark blue. “Norrie,” he says, gruffly. “I want to kiss you.” Heat rushes all through me, my nipples tightening and my pulse racing. I want his kiss more than anything. He leans in. “If you don’t want that, tell me to stop.”

I won’t be telling him to stop. I lick my lips and tilt my head in invitation. “Kiss me, Grayson.”

And when he does, I *know*. No kiss, no touch, nothing in my life has ever felt this right. As his lips claim mine, I’d swear he could make the most hardened cynic believe in the power of a kiss again. He tips his head to one side, seeking entrance. I eagerly open for him.

The kiss becomes kisses, sweeping us away on a tide of passion. Every furious beat of our hearts, every stroke of our tongues, every dark rumble I draw from him and every soft moan he coaxes from me feels like victory. We're no longer the other's antagonist if we ever were. This triumph belongs to us both, a sweet triumph with the darker note of desire consuming its core.

When we're forced to part for air, his lips are swollen and I see the wolf in his eyes. It thrills me. And, frightens me a bit. "Grayson, I want you but..."

"I'll bet you taste this sweet everywhere, don't you?" he rasps, not quite catching my rambling, nervous words. He pulls back from our kiss, his hands already slipping under my ball gown, pushing it up.

Oh my God, yes!

And, oh my God, what's he doing?!

I want him but we're in the backseat of a car, though a very nice car, and he doesn't know the whole story yet.

But, I can't think, can't think at all when he's kissing me this way and his warm, strong hands are grasping my thighs. His powerful body pushes me backwards against the soft leather as he slides into the floor between my legs. His fingertips skitter across my flesh, up and up, until he reaches my panties.

"What color?" he huffs as my full-skirted gown prevents him from seeing as quickly as he wants.

"White lace. You seem partial to it," I tell him, giggling at his pitiful groan of longing when he's finally exposed that part of me.

"Fucking gorgeous." Like a wild animal, he buries his nose against my lace-covered mound, making me squeal and squirm with delight. "I want you naked," he growls and my pussy clenches with want.

Still, manners and modesty haven't abandoned me completely. "There's another man six feet away from us. You

want me naked, you'll need to have me behind four walls and a locked door."

"I locked the privacy screen."

"Grayson..."

"Right, right. Fuck." He looks back up at me, those dark blue eyes turned alluringly devilish beneath his thick lashes. "But I don't have to get you naked to eat you, little squirrel."

"Eat me?" I gulp. I want that very much but what if I can't come or don't know what to do or if I make some embarrassing noise or-

"Relax, angel. We're not all inept idiots," he mutters and I realize he means Fox. He tugs at my panties and I comply, lifting my hips without thought until the wispy barrier is gone. "Fuck, you're perfect," he says, leaning over me until he's kissing the trimmed dark curls and reverently inhaling my scent.

I whimper uncertainly. "Grayson, no one's ever..."

"He never went down on you? Jesus. He's always been a selfish fucker but trust me. You'll enjoy this. Let me please you."

Should I correct his assumption? No, I'm too eager for him to please me.

Slow and purposeful, he peppers my mound with soft kisses, moving over my heated flesh without haste. He brushes his nose along my hips and the tops of my thighs. His tongue makes a languid swipe along of my folds before he dips it between them, seeking out my nub. I mewl and dig my fingernails into the leather seat, watching him with rapt attention.

"Good so far?" he asks, thickly.

I nod and Grayson's tongue expertly flutters over my clit, causing the remaining bit of nerves to be replaced by increasing pleasure. I begin to melt under his ministrations and he hums with approval.

Sitting back momentarily, he practically tears off his tuxedo jacket and bow tie, muscles rippling under this dress shirt. It's sexy as hell seeing that unbridled passion in his eyes.

Next, he's sinking back down, his mouth returning to tasting me while his broad shoulders ease my thighs further apart. My fingers caress the soft material of his shirt before carding through his even softer hair. I'm so exposed but it's not as awkward a feeling as I feared.

He alternates between fluttering his tongue over my clit and licking my folds before he settles a little lower and he eases the tip inside my opening. I gasp, arching my back as my pebbled nipples strain against my gown.

"Touch yourself if you want," he growls and I meet his dark gaze, leveled at my breasts.

Panting and desperate to do whatever he wants, I lightly touch them through the dress.

"Do you like to have them licked and sucked?" I nod though I can't say for certain. "I lament not having two mouths. Play with those pretty tits if it stimulates you until I can have them."

I blush furiously at his words but then he's resumed his feast, arms looped under my thighs and his hands kneading my bottom.

He concentrates on my clit with his tongue again and now he slips one hand between my legs. My walls clench around his finger when he pushes inside me and soon there's a second.

"Grayson," I whine, not sure I can handle the stretch and burn of both digits. How will I handle his cock?

But, like before in the barn, he teases my clit just so and one of his fingers seems to have found that secret spot inside of me that makes the discomfort irrelevant. The building tension, deep in my core, starts to fray and snap, a mounting urgency with every lick, flick and stroke until I'm clamping a hand over my mouth to hold back my scream while

experiencing yet another one of those toe-curling climaxes courtesy of this man.

The intensity of this orgasm isn't something I'm used to and part of me is aware of the wetness of my arousal, the sound of that and how I would appear to others in this moment. That part of me tries to shrink and pull away.

Grayson isn't about to allow that.

"No. Ride it out," he orders firmly, holding my hips in place. "Keep coming for me and let me hear you." My moans I'd been trying to hold back are allowed to escape and I don't even care when he looks so satisfied by that.

Floating in my haze, I hum about the moon and hear him chuckling. Then, he starts licking me again. "But, I came," I whisper. "I already came."

"You can come again, angel." I think him both merciless and holy, his movements sure as his fingers pump in and out. "I love your taste and want more of your juices on my tongue," he rasps, lapping greedily at my opening.

And, as if I'm his marionette who awaits his commands, he's soon working me towards another release. My eyes widen in wonder as it builds. Never have I ever managed to make myself come twice in such quick succession.

His eyes flick up to mine and instead of fluttering his tongue across my clit, he sucks intently on it this time while he's fingering me. "Grayson... Oh, my God... *Grayson!*" I cry out, a long keening note. I'm astonished by the overwhelming pleasure flooding me again so soon and by everything I've been missing out on.

As the bliss begins to fade at last, leaving me boneless with heavy eyelids, I run my fingers through Grayson's hair again. He's still down there but his dominant behavior from a few minutes ago has turned into tender kisses and soft nuzzling.

Looking at him, my heart sighs. It would be so easy to fall in love if I'm not careful. And, I'm not sure what he feels for me beyond desire.

He gives me a final kiss down there and rises from the floor of the limo. He kisses my mouth, allowing me to taste myself. The kiss deepens and I can feel the proof of his own arousal throbbing against my thigh. God, how big is he? Two fingers felt like a lot. That's considerably larger than two fingers. Butterflies dance nervously in my stomach. I have to tell him.

"I don't know if I can... if I'm ready tonight to..." My fingers curl into his shirt, not wanting the separation. I shake my head, embarrassed by the frustrated tears forming in my eyes. Ugh, I'm sending mixed signals as my body screams for more and my mind tries to slam on the brakes.

But two blinks as those lush eyelashes sweep up and down and the wolf is tamed. "Is it too soon for that?" he asks, gently. "I know you were with him a long while."

"Him? You mean Fox? This has nothing to do with him. I don't think anyone would say it's too soon either," I snort and I can tell I'm confusing him. "Grayson, I want to have sex with you. I want... I want you to be my first." I exhale, anxiously waiting for my words to sink in.

His brows draw together. "The first to make you come that way, you mean?"

Okay, it's going to take a bit more to sink in. "I mean the first to have sex with me. Ever." Yikes, he's still looking blank. "As in, I'm still a virgin but tired of being one and am looking for your help with that."

His mouth falls open and then snaps shut as a speaker crackles. The driver. How could I forget the freaking driver?? Mortified, I hurriedly fix my dress even if he can't see us as the poor man says apologetically, "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't realize the tank was getting low. I'll need to stop for a fill-up soon if you want to, um... continue driving around."

Oh shit, he must've heard me! And, Grayson still hasn't said anything about what I admitted. He shoots me a final perplexed look before hitting a button to reply. "It's alright, Alan. We'll drop Ms. Fairfield off at home and get some gas afterwards."

We'll drop Ms. Fairfield off at home? That's it, huh?
Rejected by another man.

It feels like my stomach's been scooped out and my nerve endings have turned to glass. I face the window so he won't see me cry. He knows I'm a virgin and now he doesn't want me. There *is* something repellent about me, isn't there?

But this cocky asshole can't even let a rejected girl cry in peace.

"Norrie?" he whispers in my ear.

I shake my head, too busy hating his guts and trying my damndest to hold my angry, wounded tears at bay. "You don't get to call me that."

"Please, don't... I'd be fucking honored to be your first. But I'd rather talk about what you want a bit more and I'd prefer it if my driver isn't six feet away when we do."

I master my trembling chin as I glance his way. "You want to talk first? But you..."

"Fuck, I want you. Your news doesn't change that. If anything, I'm a little too excited about what you told me at the moment."

My lips twitch. "You are?"

"Yeah, I'm a damn caveman at heart apparently but that shit's not going to cut it. I need to make it good for you." I feel my shoulders shaking with quiet laughter and then he strokes my cheek *that* way again. "May I pick you up and make you dinner tomorrow night at my place? Would that be alright with you?"

As if I'm going to say no. "You may," I tell him softly before he pulls me close.

"And may I still call you Norrie?"

"You may."

We don't kiss or do anything else but he holds me all the way home. The comfort of his warm embrace is both addictive

and seductive. He makes me feel treasured and... I care about him. More than I thought possible.

I thought you were easy to hate but I think you'd be even easier to love.

My virginity has a rapidly approaching expiration date but it may be my heart that's in danger.

25-GRAYSON

Lately, it's harder for the four of us to get together like this. Between work, women, kids or whatever, there's a lot to pull us in different directions. But my brothers are still three of the most important people in my life. They always will be and they're usually who I turn to first when I'm in need of advice.

She's a virgin. I never expected that. I know, I nearly fucked up last night with my shocked reaction. But I'm trying to grasp how she's still a virgin after a year with Davenport. That guy was no choir boy at Northwestern, that's for sure.

Has she chosen me specifically because she's hoping to rub Fox's nose in it once all is said and done? I'm sick to my stomach at the thought. I know I was the idiot who suggested we make him jealous but she means more to me than that.

On the other hand, if she was saving it for marriage and we do this, will she have certain expectations of me? The fun guy bachelor inside of me is breaking out in a cold sweat thinking about those potential expectations.

Add into the mix the fact we are working together, that she answers directly to me for however long Theo's out, and this becomes Complicated with a capital 'C.'

So, it's fortunate for me that this little Sunday morning breakfast meeting has been arranged for a while. Unfortunately, or fortunately in my case, it's looking like Theo might not make it. He knows I'm not seeing anyone and he (rightly) suspects entirely too much when it comes to my attraction to Fairfield.

"Baby is probably sleeping and, hopefully, they are, too," Oliver says when he gets no answer from Theo's mobile.

Jonathan hums and puts down his menu. "Well, he already knows this anyway so I'm telling you guys. I'm going to propose to Mia soon. I picked out the ring last week when she was visiting her mom and Nana."

“Holy shit, congratulations, man.” It’s not like I didn’t know this was coming at some point. Despite his disastrous first engagement, I knew Jonathan was too smart (and way too much of a goner for her) to let Mia slip away.

“When are you proposing?” Oliver asks, not looking as pleased as I am.

“I’m thinking of doing it next month once she has her first trial behind her.”

“The party you’re throwing her?” Oliver’s eyes are narrowed. What the fuck?

“Yeah, that night. Why? You got a problem with me proposing to Mia?”

Oh, shit. Oliver was the one who was vocally against Jonathan marrying Danielle. Theo was too busy with the kids and I was still half a kid myself but I know it was an ugly argument between the two of them. I’m glad I wasn’t present for it. I don’t want to witness one this morning either.

Since our usual peacemaker and big-brother-in-chief isn’t here, I suppose I’ll give it a go. “Oliver, we know you love Mia like the rest of the family does. So, what’s the problem?”

“Yeah, I’d like to know what the fucking problem is,” Jonathan says, far more testily than I did.

Oliver shrugs sheepishly and grins. “Nothing. No problem. I’m thinking of proposing to Libby and didn’t want to do it the same day or some stupid shit like that.”

“Holy shit! Really?!” They’ve not been together as long but, then again, they’ve known each other all their lives so, if he’s serious, I’m happy for him.

Jonathan’s annoyed look morphs into an answering grin and peace prevails as the two men congratulate each other on their excellent luck. “I’ll congratulate you both once the girls actually say yes. Maybe they’ll come to their senses before that though,” I tell them as I’m calling the server over to amend our order. We need a round of drinks to go with this breakfast.

One toast leads to another and, three rounds in, I'm a little more loose-lipped than planned by the time my steak and eggs arrive to soak up the alcohol. "Have either of you ever been with a virgin?" I hear myself asking.

Jonathan's fork drops before his first bite of omelet reaches his mouth and Oliver takes a long sip of his scotch. "Does it count if I was a virgin, too?" Jonathan asks at length.

"It counts but it doesn't exactly help me. Have you been with one since you've been experienced?" Jonathan shakes his head.

I was a fumbling idiot my first time but at least she was experienced enough not to expect mind-blowing skills on this end. (Hey, I still gave it my all and got her off first, okay?)

I'm not a fumbling idiot anymore, far from it, but the sex I tend to have these days is *vigorous*. I don't think that would be ideal for Eleanor's first time. I don't want to hurt her either. Thus, the question I'm starting to regret asking had slipped out.

"Who's the girl?" Oliver asks, grinning at Jonathan. "Is she good at golf?"

Jonathan smirks right back at Oliver. "Did you send all the old country club gossips into a dither dancing with her half the ball last night and then disappear with her after her old man took off?"

These *assholes*. "I am not answering those questions. Don't either of you dare say her name or breathe a word of this to anyone either."

They hold up their hands in surrender. "I don't have to tell you to make sure you've got her well prepared before you get your cock anywhere near home base, do I?" Oliver says finally.

I roll my eyes at him and Jonathan adds, "Don't pressure her if she's not ready yet."

"I'm not going to pressure her! She wants to."

“Raise a glass to this poor woman with me, Jonathan, bravely letting Gray ruin sex for her.”

“Fuck off, fuckers,” I snarl as they sit here cackling. “How about you answer my earlier question though, Dr. Smartass?”

Oliver shakes his head. “I had rules for myself back then.”

“Even your first time?”

“Even then. No strings. No breaking innocent girls’ hearts.”

I would never want to break her heart.

“Who’s breaking innocent girls’ hearts around here?” our tardy fourth says, surprising me with his sudden appearance as he slides into the seat next to me.

“Hey, Theo.” That *almost* sounded natural coming out of my mouth. I’m only hyperventilating on the inside.

“I swear, if Jill asks to hang up one more boy band poster, I’m going to lose my shit.”

“She’s asked for *one* poster,” Jonathan states, dryly.

“One is too many. No more.” We all laugh at our exasperated brother and some of my anxiety eases as we move away from the topic of bedding virgins.

“The teen years aren’t far off,” Oliver reminds him.

“I really am not prepared,” Theo declares, stealing my drink. “Sorry, I’m late by the way. Scotch? You told them I take it?”

Jonathan nods in reply. “Oliver might have news, too.”

“Excellent, I’m eager to hear it and talk about something other than sore nipples and dirty diapers.”

Three of us wince in sync. “My news doesn’t involve diapers. Baby run you late?”

“No, the kids all slept late, even Matteo, and Quinn said I should lie in with her a bit...” Theo grins and says no more

but it doesn't take a genius to figure out she ran Theo behind in some pleasant manner or another.

“Speaking of lying in bed, have you ever been with a virgin, Theo?” Oliver asks while smirking at me.

You prick!

Theo's eyebrows raise in surprise though he nods. “Kathy was when we met.” The four of us hang our heads for a moment, thinking of his deceased first wife. “But I wasn't much more experienced at the time. Why are you asking?”

“Grayson's asking.”

Theo's smile thins out and his eyes narrow as the server arrives to take his order. “Check, please?” I murmur but Theo slowly shakes his head and I know I am not escaping that easily.

I'm not a kid but I'll always be the kid brother as far as Theo's concerned. Plus, he's my boss and has told me very plainly not to get involved with Eleanor. So, I'm bracing myself for his lecture or disappointment or whatever.

Instead, he simply asks, “How did your meeting with Fairfield go yesterday afternoon?”

Jonathan and Oliver remain quiet, neither having any direct interest in the company or how we run it. I'm shocked that's what he's asking. “It went well. Making progress and I think everything will be ready next month as planned,” I answer as the server returns with fresh drinks.

Louis had wanted to meet on Saturday afternoon and Theo had asked me to handle it this time with him on leave. I suspect Louis isn't ready to share the upcoming buyout with his employees yet. They'll be anxious enough thinking the vultures are descending but we have no plans to pick the place clean and sell off the scraps. It's a good operation with a loyal customer base.

Except for Davenport, I don't plan any major personnel changes once they become employees of Wolfe Media.

“And how does Eleanor feel about her father selling the company? Or us being the ones to buy him out?”

“We’ve not discussed it but she has said she doesn’t plan on staying with us after her trainee period ends.” Eleanor is a bright young woman, Ivy-League educated and she’ll have a glowing recommendation from Wolfe Media when she leaves. Plenty of doors will be open to her.

“Hmm,” Theo says, taking a sip of his own scotch. “Maybe that’s because I haven’t offered her the permanent position I’ve got in mind for her yet.”

Oh.

“I was planning on sending her to Tokyo with you next month, too.”

Well, fuck.

26-ELEANOR

All day, the anticipation has been building. And, the nervousness. He knows what I want, he said he wants me and he said we would talk about it. I'm still unsure what to do next though. Do I start taking off my clothes the moment we get inside? Ask where his bedroom is and let him lead from there?

You're overthinking it, Norrie.

Yes, I am.

Thankfully, Dad had made plans for this evening at the club so I was able to evade questions about my own plans. I didn't think I could keep a straight face watching Grayson shake my dad's hand after what he did to me last night.

"This isn't what I expected," I say as Grayson puts the Jeep in park.

"Is that bad?"

"No, not bad." *You're not what I expected either.*

He leads me from his garage towards the front entrance across a stone path which is surrounded by a lovely water feature. "Fair warning, Fairfield. I have frogs." On cue, three croak loudly to support his statement.

"They're charming," I say, giggling.

"They're annoying as fuck when they get going at night but I haven't had the heart to evict them. Jill and Ryder would never forgive me. They somehow found my fountain and now they won't leave. It's better than crabs anyway. Promise I don't have those," he adds with a wink, opening the front door.

I snort at his vulgar joke as Grayson drops his keys on the nearby table and the lights automatically come on. My stomach is churning with fresh nerves. Fox had taken me to his place plenty of times but, once I realized he wasn't going to do anything with me there, it ceased to stir any butterflies.

All my butterflies are stirring now because I'm doing this tonight, dammit.

My eyes widen at the tasteful and fully furnished interior. Aren't all bachelors supposed to have the obligatory leather sofa, old takeout in the fridge and neon beer signs hanging up somewhere? "Did you decorate?"

He chuckles and shakes his head. "We all have our talents but that's not one of mine. I told the interior designer I wanted it to be modern but comfortable and suitable for a family. She did the rest."

"A family?"

"This is meant to be a family home. It's far too large for one person indefinitely. It was a good investment but... who knows?" He shrugs and doesn't expand on that. "I bought it six months ago with a bit of my inheritance."

The gorgeous ten thousand square foot home on Chicago's Gold Coast probably lists for close to ten million but, when you're a Wolfe, that's 'a bit' of your inheritance. And, is Grayson thinking long-term in that manner?

You keep surprising me.

"How many bedrooms do you have?"

"Five."

"And yours is..."

He grins and points. "Right up those stairs. Want to check it out first?" He waggles his eyebrows.

Blushing, I swallow hard as my nerves increase, not sure what to say.

Grayson's hand circles my wrist, his eyes twinkling with playful warmth. "Relax, angel. Much as I want you, I'm not planning to deflower you on the staircase before I've even fed you dinner."

My shoulders shake as I laugh quietly. "Deflowering on a floating staircase sounds very uncomfortable and I am hungry."

He softly kisses my temple and takes my hand in his. “Are you sure about what you want tonight? There’s no right or wrong answer here. We can eat and talk and you can tell me to take you home. Or we can explore whatever you wish. You can change your mind at any point, too.”

My nerves dissipate. Whatever happens tonight, I trust Grayson to make this as good for me as possible. “I’m sure but thank you.”

“Okay. Promise I’ll never push for more than you wish to give.” Gratefully, I nod. “Come on. We’ll start our tour in the kitchen.”

We’d agreed earlier to make dinner together. I’d called on Drew for some advice and then conferred with Grayson. Our pasta carbonara might not impress a Michelin star chef but it’s fairly quick, tasty and enough to satisfy us. Conversation (and wine) during dinner helps me relax even further.

“I never expected to feel so comfortable with you.”

“Because you despise me?”

“Yes, utterly,” I deadpan.

“We all have our flaws,” he sighs dramatically. “I wasn’t as nice to you as I should’ve been.”

“Because your parents thought we’d make a good match?”

“Yes. Which wasn’t your fault. Well, you were a little too perfect which was annoying. It would’ve helped if you’d had horns growing out of the top of your head or something. You made it hard to come up with reasons I wouldn’t want you.”

“Fox didn’t want me.”

“Davenport is a fool. He wouldn’t know the Golden Goose if it bit him in the ass.”

“I think he saw me as his golden goose.”

“I’m sorry but that sounds about right for him. Anyway, as I was saying, you’re perfect.”

“I have freckles.”

“Your freckles are fucking precious.”

Warmth fills my belly as I bite back a grin at his words. “I’m not remotely perfect. I’ve misjudged you repeatedly for starters.” I admit how the whole Todd-Camilla debacle had led to my intense dislike along with the snub at my debutante ball. “It all seems so silly now.”

“I could see how Camilla misunderstood things. You were still a kid who cared about your friend’s sister’s feelings. I find that admirable.”

“Did you really dump a girl for ordering a second slice of cheesecake?”

He chokes on his wine and starts laughing. “You heard about that?”

I shrug, sheepishly. “Word gets around. Especially gossip.” That I’d gobbled up any negative words about Grayson goes unsaid.

“We’d only been dating a couple of months. It wasn’t serious but, yeah, you could say that was the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

Not the answer I expected. “So, you took exception to a girl who enjoys cheesecake?” I like cheesecake. *A lot.*

“No, I took exception to her selfishness. I wouldn’t have cared if she ate an entire cheesecake if she wanted it but, while we were at dinner and she was lingering over dessert, I got a call from my mother that my grandfather had been admitted to the hospital. When I told my date we needed to leave, she nodded and then ordered a second slice. I paid the check, told her I’d call an Uber for her and that we wouldn’t be seeing each other again.”

“Oh, that was quite thoughtless of her. Was your grandfather alright?”

“Yes, he came home a couple of days later.” He rests his chin on his folded hands and eyes me seriously. “Are there

any other sins I must atone for? Davenport and I hate each other and that's not going to change."

"I've only ever heard his version, that you made light of your father pushing his own out of business and the enmity grew from there."

"That's part of the truth. His father owned an independent newspaper, not their only business but a significant one. It was mostly filled with gossip pieces. They printed some unsavory things about my parents' separation back in the day."

I know Michael and Margaret Wolfe had been separated before Grayson's birth and that Oliver Wolfe isn't Margaret's son. I can only imagine how the scandal-loving crowd at the country club must've discussed that.

"Your father didn't forget it," I surmise.

"No, he did not. Fox and I had a disagreement right after it happened. I could've shown more sympathy for his father's financial losses but Dad raised us never to apologize for sound business decisions even when they involve harsh decisions."

I'm not surprised by that. Wolfe Media didn't become a multi-billion-dollar behemoth by playing nice all the time and Grayson was a college student, not the man calling the shots.

"I'll admit I was a cocky asshole during the argument."

"When are you not a cocky asshole?" I say, jokingly.

He grins but then his mood clearly dips. "Afterwards, I thought maybe I should apologize for that at least but Fox had already decided to take revenge on me."

"Revenge is a dark word."

"It is. He fancied himself a junior journalist on campus. He did videography stuff occasionally. One night, he followed me and the girl I was seeing at the time. I took her to the golf course for a picnic under the stars."

"Sounds romantic."

"I was aiming for that. Anyway, we started fooling around and, uh... we got carried away."

Oh. I know this story. The same one I'd giggled over as a thirteen-year-old at a slumber party when I'd heard whispers of it. My skin is already crawling before he tells me the rest.

"Fox recorded us without our knowledge. He shared it with several people on campus and even some mutual friends around the country club."

"That's disgusting."

"I think he was planning to sell it online next but my father managed to get it hushed up. I didn't care as much about what anyone said of me but Dena started getting hassled over it. I tried to fix things but..."

"There was only so much you could do." I imagine what that must've felt like for her. I didn't like the articles that came out after our kiss was caught on camera. There was more than kissing going on that night. "What happened to Dena?"

"The gossip died down but not before we broke up. She said she liked me better as a friend."

"Grayson, I'm sorry."

"You didn't do it. We're both past it now. She's married and kicking ass in Seattle's real estate scene." He silently sips his wine and says no more. I have a feeling he'd rather not continue this line of discussion.

His mood finally brightens again after we've finished clearing things away. "Would you like the rest of the tour now?"

Our first stop is a billiards room which he says he wanted after Oliver did something similar with his penthouse. "But mine's much bigger."

"What's much bigger?" I ask, wagging my eyebrows and feeling bolder from the wine.

"*All* my stuff is bigger, baby. I'm the youngest but nobody is calling me the 'little brother' anymore," he says, as cocky as ever and making me laugh helplessly.

He leads me outdoors to a lovely garden space with a circular sofa and firepit and I see his personal lap pool. You can hear the city beat beyond the railing but this is a slice of heavenly privacy in the middle of an urban area. Indoors again, we pass through the main living area. It is a beautiful home and I picture myself spending more time here.

At the foot of the stairs, he takes my hand. “So, would you like to see the rest of the house first or...”

“I’d like to see your bedroom now, Grayson.”

“Okay.” The word is stated so nonchalantly he completely catches me off guard the next instant when he scoops me up in his arms. “Hold on!”

I shriek with laughter as he races up the stairs, carrying me down a short hallway and into the gorgeously-appointed master bedroom. “You’re breathing a bit harder after that,” I tease. No matter how much he works out, he carried a grown woman up a flight of steps at full speed.

“Nonsense, I could carry you around all night,” he says, setting me on my feet but keeping his arms around me.

“Hmm. Do you plan to?” I cup his jaw, enjoying the rasp of his evening stubble against my skin.

“Yep, I’m going to bang you against that wall over there first to prove myself. I’ll teach you to doubt my endurance.” His lips are inches from mine.

Sparks of desire fill me at the naughty thought though I know that’s not what I need tonight. “That wall is made of glass. We might give your neighbors a show.”

He smiles darkly but his kisses are soft. “I’m joking. There’s no fucking way I’m sharing you or your beautiful body with anyone else. And, I’m not banging you against a wall as it’d be too rough for your first time. But after the first few times maybe...”

Goodness, those words flew straight from my ears to my clit. “First few times, huh?”

“At the risk of being presumptuous, I’ll tell you now I’m willing to thoroughly explore any and all things you’d like to experience in the bedroom. Or outside of it.”

I bite my lip, knowing I’ll gladly share all these firsts with him. “You’re very direct about all this.”

“Would you rather I be indirect?”

“Considering my last relationship? No, I like that you’re direct and I’d like to explore those things with you, too. Do you like having sex against a wall?”

He snickers. “Very much but that’s because I like having sex. Period.” He slowly turns us, walking me backwards towards the bed with the grace of a dancer. “And, I’m going to *love* having sex with you.” My heart thumps wildly. “Against a wall or in a bed, I won’t complain. Though a bed is certainly more comfortable in general.”

His lips brush the shell of my ear and I shiver with anticipation. “Where else would you be willing to have sex with me?”

“Anywhere you want. In a car, a pool, a hayloft, an airplane, a bathroom stall... up a tree with you.”

The back of my knees bump his mattress. “Up a tree? That sounds scandalous. The squirrels would be shocked.”

“Poor shocked squirrels but I don’t mind a bit of scandal if it involves you and me.”

Neither do I. “Grayson, can I see you naked now?”

27-GRAYSON

“G rayson, can I see you naked now?”
As if she has to ask.

Smirking, I give her a gentle push to sit down on the bed. “Enjoy a front-row seat for the spectacular show you’re about to get.” That beautiful blush deepens as she’s giggling at me. Maybe I’m amusing but she’s bewitching.

I tug my shirt over my head, glad that I don’t have any buttons to bother with tonight. She scans my arms, chest, abs and shoulders just as she had when I’d discovered her in the men’s locker room that morning. I work hard for this body so, yeah, I appreciate the appreciation I see in her eyes.

My hands drop to my belt, relishing the way her eyes widen and pupils darken with my movements. She may be innocent in certain respects but she’s clearly excited for tonight. The combination of the two is turning me on like nothing ever has.

I shove my pants down after kicking off my shoes but leave my boxer briefs in place for the moment. Eleanor’s breath hitches as she studies my bulge through the fabric. “It’s big.” My cock twitches with excitement when she swallows thickly and licks her lips. “Did you... it *moved*.”

“Because you’re staring. It’s fucking hot when you’re looking at me like that.”

Her eyes glow with pleasant surprise over her effect on me. Does she not realize the effect she must have on men everywhere? Fucking Davenport really did a number on her.

Her eyes flick up to mine. “Can I touch it?”

I nod, not trusting my voice, and slide my briefs down past my thighs. My cock, which isn’t a bit shy about being stared at or touched, bobs free, hard and eager.

Determined but torturously tentative, she reaches out. “Oh,” she says softly as her hand carefully wraps around me.

I prefer a tighter grip but it still leaves me breathless. I keep my hands on my hips like they're glued there so she can explore without me pushing her for things. Tonight is all about her.

"It's so hard but the skin is smooth as silk." Her warm breath tickles my flesh and my balls are tight. She gives me a far too gentle stroke but I can't complain when she's so obviously pleased.

"I never believed boners made sense as a term until now," she says, whispering the word 'boners' in the cutest damn way. Her pearly whites sink into that plump bottom lip of hers before she strokes me again. *Oh shit.* Her innocent exploration will lead to an embarrassingly fast ending for me if I'm not focused.

Another stroke and I groan, letting my eyes close as my head rolls back. Her hand disappears the next instant, leaving a distinct ache in my balls and chill on my heated flesh. "Sorry, didn't mean to hurt you."

Jesus. "No, angel, no need for any apology. It felt good. A little too good."

She gives me a shy smile and I decide she needs some extra encouragement. I wrap her hand back around my throbbing cock while covering it with mine. "You're not going to hurt me. Hold it a little firmer. A lot firmer even. Yeah, that's good. *Fuck.*"

Her confidence blossoms under my praise and I show her how hard and fast I want her to stroke me. She quickly takes over. "Better?"

"Fucking perfect. You're an apt pupil," I tease but it's the truth.

Biting her lip again, she grins up at me like this is all for her when I'm the one getting a handjob. Good God, I can't help picturing those perfect lips closing over the tip of my cock. When she timidly cups my balls with her free hand, I'm in danger of coming all over her face. Not. Fucking. Happening. *This time.*

“I wanna see you now,” I say, gruffly.

Her hand stills and the shyness creeps back in. “Okay but you saw me last night.”

“There wasn’t much light in the car. I want to see all of you, angel. Here, naked in my bed.”

That blush, that smile. She nods and raises her arms, waiting for me to help her undress. It sends a thrill all through me.

When I pull her simple floral dress over her head, my mouth goes dry. She’s wearing a matching set of bra and panties. Her tanned skin with that smattering of freckles, her soft dark hair and golden-brown eyes, she’s gorgeous. “Red lace?” Fuck, the white lace nearly killed me and now this.

“I’m the Scarlet Debutante stolen by a Wolfe. Figured I’d dress the part.”

Chuckling, I kneel over her. “Stealing you has been the highlight of my year.”

“Is this flattery, Wolfe?”

“No, it’s the fucking truth.” *Except replace the word year with life.*

Cupping her chin, I lower my mouth to hers. Her lips are incredibly soft and she tastes divine. She melts into our kiss. I can’t wait to have her. My hand snakes around her back. One flick of my fingers unclasps her bra. Soft but firm, rosy nipples. Perfection.

“They’re not big,” she says with a pinched look. I’ve never understood why so many girls worry over what might be too big or too small when I always find their bodies simply beautiful, different from my own and enticingly soft.

“You’re gorgeous. From head to toe,” I assure her.

Bending lower, I kiss the top of one breast and then the other. I’ve wanted this for weeks and weeks but especially since last night. My lips close over her nipple before my tongue darts out to lick her. The bud pebbles instantly as she

squirms and moans, arching her back and looking surprised. “Okay there?” I ask, somewhat teasingly.

“It’s... wow. I felt that, um...” Her whole face turns red and she whispers the last bit. “...*everywhere.*”

“Good. That’s what I want.”

Urging her to lay back, I straddle her thighs. Those red panties beckon for me to remove them but I can be patient. I’ll concentrate on her breasts first. I want to learn her body and what really gets her hot.

With a sigh, her fingers sink into my hair, her nails lightly scraping my scalp which feels so good as I suck and fondle each breast while caressing her body. Her soft moans build as I continue my ministrations. My teeth gently nip at her collarbone and shoulder when her squirming becomes impossible to ignore. “Good or too much?”

“Great. But I’m...” She rolls her hips and huffs when I don’t finish her sentence. I wait for her to work past her modesty and tell me. “I think I could come if you touch me while doing that.” Her eyes dart down between us.

Oh, she’ll come.

I slowly trail my hand up her thigh until I reach the lace. It’s already soaked between her legs. Nothing makes me feel more sure of myself as a man than getting a woman aroused but, with Norrie, the sensation is magnified to an unbelievable height.

“I’ll have to inspect these,” I murmur, kissing her lace-covered mound right over her clit as I settle between her thighs. “My Scarlet Debutante.” Her belly quivers with laughter but she gasps the next instant when I lick her through the lace.

“More,” she begs.

“More what? More of this?” I kiss her down there again. “Or shall I taste you like last night?” I see the battle raging between bluntness and manners. “You’ll have to tell me.”

The battle is soon decided. She pushes her pussy right in my face and says, “More of your tongue and fingers, less of my clothes. Very little talking.”

I chuckle while sliding red lace over her hips and down her thighs. “That’s more like it. Yours truly aside, men are horrible mind-readers. Ask for what you want or take it. That, we understand.”

“Is this advice for the bedroom or boardroom, Wolfe?”

“Both.” I return my attention to her breasts as my fingers deftly stroke and explore her folds. “Does this hurt?” I ask when I slowly push one finger and then a second inside her tight, wet pussy.

“Not tonight, it doesn’t. It did a little the first two times.”

“I’m sorry for that.” If I’d known she was a virgin, I would’ve been more careful. “Have you ever used a vibrator?”

“*Grayson,*” she hisses as if I’ve told the crudest joke. Oh my God, that horrified expression is priceless.

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“I could hardly ask Simmons to drive me to a sex toy shop.”

“You can get vibrators other ways.” Another thought occurs to me. “Do you ever drive yourself places?”

“Barely. I have my license but Dad worries too much about me driving in the city. And as for vibrators, what if I got one and Dad found it? I’d die,” she whispers.

“No, you wouldn’t.” *And maybe he’d start to realize you’re an adult,* I think to myself but decide not to speak. “My cock is bigger than my fingers but I’ll do my best to prepare you, okay?”

Her eyes shine with absolute trust and it makes me that much more determined to do this right.

The handjob as I lavish attention on her breasts soon has the desired effect. She comes with a sweet little cry, her hands

gripping my shoulders as she looks at me with total amazement. What guy wouldn't feel like a freaking god when a woman looks at him that way? And, it's something new for her. It blows my mind and, admittedly, makes my cock even harder. Davenport was such a fool.

Leaving a trail of kisses down her torso, from ribs to belly to hips, I settle between her thighs again, ready for my next meal. "You did that yesterday," she squeaks as her legs try to close.

I give her a half-way annoyed look and use my shoulders to keep her spread wide open for me. "Did you not like it?"

"Well, I... yes, I liked it," she says, clearing her throat. I raise an eyebrow. "Okay, I loved it. But you don't have to again. I know men don't really care about doing that."

"You, the virgin in my bed, know exactly what men like and don't like, hmm?" Yeah, I'm being a cocky prick but I know my skills and am eager to flex them. "How about you lie there and enjoy it?"

"Fine. If you must," she says with a fake sigh of resignation as her knees fall apart.

"Yes, I really must." Scooping my hands under her ass, I roughly drag her pussy right up to my mouth, eliciting a shrill yelp and then a beautiful moan as I cover her clit with my mouth and begin to tease and suck.

"Oh my God," she whimpers, arching her back like electricity is coursing through her body as her fingers dig into my sheets.

"Oh my Grayson' is what you need to be saying," I huff and, to my surprise and delight, she merely nods and moans again as I eat her out for all that I'm worth.

When I've had two rounds of her sweet musky arousal coat my tongue and she says she can't take anymore, I crawl up her body to cradle her against me. "Oh my Grayson," she says, giggling in her afterglow as I rain down kisses on her shoulders and neck. Christ, she's so beautiful. How did I not realize it sooner?

“Do you want to keep going tonight?”

The giggles end and she nods. “Yes, please.”

My cock twitches in agreement. Yes, please, is right.

28-ELEANOR

“Nervous?”

I nod, watching him roll the condom on. This is it. Showtime.

“Okay, kissing is the ideal place to start and maybe it’ll relax you.”

He’s right and everything feels ideal when he talks to me this way. No games, no false flattery, no sly looks. Just us. His mouth finds mine and, while tasting myself on his tongue is still a strange new thing for me, I find pleasure in his kiss and it soothes my nerves once more.

“Is this okay?” he asks next, hovering over me with my legs spread for him while he’s propped up on his elbows, his powerful arms resting on either side of me.

“It is.” It truly is. “I like this, the way it feels like you’re holding me close,” I admit.

“I am holding you close,” he replies as he delicately noses my collarbone and tickles me slightly with his stubble. “Brace yourself. I’m going in,” he warns me. “But just a bit.”

I’m giggling at his silliness until his hand reaches between our legs to help guide himself. I’m too fascinated not to watch. He catches me and grins. I feel his warm length brushing against my entrance and I curl my fingers into his bicep, expecting pain. The pain doesn’t really come.

“It’s not bad at all. More of a stretch than anything.”

“Exactly what a guy longs to hear when he’s inside a girl.”

I laugh but Grayson’s starting to sweat. “Are you alright?”

“You’re so damn tight,” he groans. “It feels fucking amazing but I need to...” A deep breath and he goes a little deeper.

“You want to go all the way in? You can-”

“No, not yet,” he says, firmly.

He continues his slow forward progress. I start to worry that this isn't all that exciting for him. He likes wall sex. I'll bet Gretchen the cool chic/Olympian was down for wall sex. Meanwhile, this turtle's pace is a big step for me. It's like asking a coaster enthusiast to come on the merry-go-round with you.

“No, it fucking isn't like a merry-go-round,” he says, chuckling when I dare confess my fear. I'm too busy feeling the vibrations of those chuckles everywhere to argue. “Promise this is good for me, too. You're so tight, like a vice on my cock, but it's the best pleasure-pain I could imagine.”

Before I can fret or overthink, he gives me the deepest, most passionate kiss of my life. God, that kiss leaves my toes curled, my brain blissfully blank and my soul thoroughly touched.

The further he goes, the more stretched I feel. When he's surely all the way in, he glances up at me and licks his lips. “I'm going to thrust forward now for the final bit if that's okay.”

“Like a band-aid, poof, no more virgin.” He's so worried about hurting me and I want to show him that I'm stronger than he thinks.

“I'm sorry if it hurts.”

“Go ahead. I'm totally o-OH!”

Not totally okay.

And yet, the pinch and pain are soon forgotten when he's peppering my brow with soft kisses and murmuring sweet nothings in my ear. “You feel so good, angel. Like nothing I can describe. You're gorgeous. Tell me when you think you can stand for me to move. Touch me and I'll touch you. The distraction will help you adjust and forget any pain.”

I allow my hands to roam his shoulders and back. He's muscular and so very male, but there's no other word to

describe him except beautiful. I slide my hands down his toned back to his nice, firm ass. What a perfect ass he has. I want to bite it.

“As long as you don’t have rabies, Squirrel, I’d let you,” he says, smirking. I flush crimson, realizing I spoke aloud but he kisses me again before I can be annoyed.

His hands are no less busy than my own and his mouth is constantly in contact with my skin. He makes me feel so... *loved*. I have to be careful not to mistake physical intimacy for love.

“You can move,” I finally tell him once I’m sure my body’s adapted. His first few thrusts are slow and testing. I knew he’d be careful with me. I’m glad I trusted him with this.

“I don’t know if you’ll come on my cock without help tonight,” he says as he increases the speed and power of his thrusts. The bed is jostling beneath us as we rock together. I love the way this feels.

“I didn’t expect to come at all as a first-timer.” I didn’t expect that the sensation of his cock gliding along my inner walls would feel so delectable either. I’m getting used to it and I like it. “I came earlier, with your fingers and then your mouth.”

“We’re going for a hat trick if possible,” he says.

I start to laugh but there’s his thumb sneaking between us to stroke my clit. “Oh... Oh Grayson,” I gasp. How can pleasure spike this quickly and unexpectedly?

“Yeah, there you go,” he murmurs before his powerful hips are moving faster. It’s not too hard but it’s enough for me to feel every inch. I wrap my legs around his waist to hold on. “Fuck, yes. Like that,” he urges and I realize he’s close. He’s going to come. I can’t wait to watch him come.

Just then, his thumb strokes and his cock hits some sweet spot inside of me and that’s it. I’m ascending. I’m falling. I’m coming apart at the seams for him. My long, wavering cry of pleasure is punctuated by the wet sounds of our bodies

joining and moving together. What might've made me flustered to think of a day ago, makes me come that much harder. I scream his name as I fall from my peak.

He grunts and slams into me, a few final thrusts, and then I watch, enraptured, as Grayson finds his own release. He's magnificent. And, for one moment in time at least, he's all mine.

For several heated seconds, we're frozen in place, eyes only for each other as our hearts pound and we attempt to catch our breath. Then, with the grace of a predator, he rolls us over, pulling me up to his chest for a kiss. I sink into that kiss, wanting nothing more than to be held all night.

“Hang on a minute.”

He climbs off the bed and I immediately feel cold without him. But he's merely pitching the used condom. Deciding I have my own needs to see to, I scurry into the bathroom once he comes out. When I return, he's lying on the bed, smiling at me.

“Come here,” he says, lifting an arm to beckon me over. I happily rejoin him, nuzzling against his chest and playing with the smattering of dark blond hair there. He draws the covers up over us and I've never felt so sleepy and secure.

“Well, how do you feel now that you've accomplished that monumental task?” he asks as we're nestled close.

“Wonderful. I feel wonderful and it was wonderful, too.”

“That's the correct answer.”

I cackle and lightly smack his arm. “It's a relief having it over with.”

“You do realize I'd like to have sex with you again, right?”

I smirk. “Yeah and I'd like that, too. I meant having the first time over and done with. There's still a lot I'd like to explore... with you.”

He hugs me and a great wave of affection fills me, nearly makes my eyes water with emotion. I don't know if he could

ever love me but I'm afraid I'm already falling for him. Whatever we have, for however long we have it, I'm going to enjoy my time with Grayson.

I feel my eyelids getting heavier even though it's barely nine o'clock. "I'm sorry we hated each other," I murmur as I'm nodding off. He doesn't speak. "You make it hard to hate you."

He kisses my brow and sleep is claiming me when I think I hear him say, "I never hated you, angel. Not even a little bit."

29-GRAYSON

“*M*y father!” she had gasped, rising from her abbreviated sleep in a panic. “*If I’m not home soon, he’ll get worried.*”

“Is he going to come after me with a shotgun for deflowering his daughter if you spend the night?”

She had given me a half-hearted laugh but it was clear I’d need to take her home. She belonged in my bed all night. She might belong in my bed every night. Taking her home like we were teenagers with a curfew was not part of the plan.

But, I’d taken her home to avoid causing her distress and, while I’m not remotely afraid of the man, I don’t want the buyout to blow up because I slept with Fairfield’s daughter.

A beautiful late summer morning lifts my spirits when I head outside to swim laps the next day. By the time I reach the office, I’m whistling like the happily laid man I am. Eleanor’s at her desk, still the early bird, when I drop by her floor to see her. Her eyes are wide as saucers as I approach. Jumpy Squirrel Mode Activated. “Good morning, Mr. Wolfe.”

“Good morning, Ms. Fairfield. That smells good,” I say of her coffee. I lean in to quietly add, “But I already know you taste better.”

She gulps and fixes me with an incredulous stare. “*Grayson*, you can’t say things like that here where other people might hear you.” I straighten and look around at the completely deserted area that surrounds us. My lips twitch with suppressed laughter until hers do, too. “Alright but still...”

“Fine, I’ll behave but it’s true. I’d rather be tasting you than any cup of coffee this morning. Are you alright? Did you sleep okay?”

I get *that* smile, the one I was hoping for. “Yes, I’m fine, thanks. Wish I could’ve stayed.”

“I wish you would’ve stayed, too. I did stop by for a reason. I’ll be going to Tokyo for a conference before too long. Theo had suggested you come with me. Are you interested?”

“Me? To the multimedia tech conference?” I nod and she looks so excited. “I’ve never been to Japan! I’d love to go! But, do you think people would make assumptions about us going together?”

She doesn’t want people talking about us at work which I understand. The last thing I want is for Norrie to regret being with me the way people on campus made Dena feel. “It’s a business trip and we wouldn’t be alone.”

“I’m just a trainee.”

“You’re our junior *executive* trainee, the only one we have right now. I think we can swing an extra seat on the plane for you.”

She beams with happiness. Christ, she’s so lovely. “Then, I’d be delighted.”

“Good, it’s settled.”

The elevator doors slide open and there’s Glen and two ladies. They’re both lower-tier administrative but I recognize them.

“I’ll have Paula get you squared away with accommodations later.” I’d prefer she share my suite but appearances must be maintained.

Light feminine laughter reaches my ears and I turn to see the other two women watching us, their heads together and clearly in the midst of gossip. Eleanor pales and I wish she didn’t feel so anxious. “Something amusing to share, ladies?” I ask the gossipers.

Quickly suppressed smiles and demurely cast-down eyes. “No, Mr. Wolfe,” they say in sync.

“Hmm. Well, I’ll leave you to your work,” I say pointedly. They scurry away from my unusually dark look. Having an affair with someone from work is a new experience

for me, an admittedly titillating one. But I'll be damned if I let anyone make Norrie feel ashamed over it.

"I'm going to fetch some coffee," Eleanor says after greeting Glen.

I should return to my office on the floor above. Instead, I follow her into the breakroom. "Sorry. I don't wish to make you uncomfortable at work."

She shakes her head as she pours water into the machine. "You don't have to be sorry. It's a little awkward feeling like we might be spoken of but I won't be staying here indefinitely."

I'll miss her but I love the idea of being able to spend time with her without hiding from anyone. I wonder where she's planning to work after she leaves us. I don't get to ask because she's looking over her shoulder at me and grinning. "I didn't mind what you said earlier either."

"Is that so?" I move a little closer, pressing myself against her backside.

"Cameras?" she whispers, tilting her head back and exposing her neck for me.

I nose her pulse point, drawing forth a lovely gasp. "None in the breakroom." I place my hands on her hips and slowly grind against her. "I can't wait to have you in my bed again." I slide my hands down the front of her blouse, pleased when I feel her nipples hardened from my touch.

She bats at my hands, very half-heartedly. "You're incorrigible."

"The word you're looking for is horny." She laughs but shoves her ass back more firmly against my cock. "Can you come over tonight?"

"I don't know if-

The door swings open and we have just enough time to separate before I'm caught humping her ass. It's Becca coming for her own caffeine fix. Jesus, why do so many people work here?

Forced to turn away with my semi, I grab a mug and pretend to be busy as I greet Becca over my shoulder. I catch Norrie grinning at my poorly-veiled frustration. *Minx*.

Once I'm not as obviously turned on, I tell them I'll see them later. I need to leave her alone so she can do her work. And, God knows, I've got more than enough of my own.



Four hours later, I'm knee deep in my dual roles and growing increasingly frustrated. Tech problems in St. Louis, personnel changes in Miami, a busted deal in Dubai and construction delays at our new office in Milan all add to the never-ending fires I'm trying to put out today.

I've not seen Eleanor since this morning. I hope she's having a good day and not regretting anything from last night. I'm tempted to send her an email. Just an innocent little 'How are you doing? What color are your panties?' email. Harmless.

But before I can pull up my email, there's a knock on my door. "Come in." Oh, thank fuck. It's *her*.

"Becca sent me up with the final Lone Star offer for you to look over, Mr. Wolfe," she says, somewhat loudly. I'm not deaf so I'm guessing that was for the benefit of the ladies outside my door.

"Yes, thank you, Ms. Fairfield. I'd like to read over it. I could instruct you on a few points if you wish," I say equally loud. *Don't leave yet.*

"That'd be great!"

"Come in and close the door."

She gives me a sneaky grin, closes the door... then, locks it. My dick stiffens like a pointer spying a duck. "I really do have the papers to deliver but, mostly, I wanted to see you," she says more quietly as she rushes towards me.

I'm already rolling back from my desk, beckoning her to come sit in my lap. I love the weight of her here, the way it feels to hold her this way as her lilac scent swirls around us.

My chest constricts with joy and longing. What's she doing to me? I'm immediately stroking her smooth cheek and sinking my fingers into her silky soft curls. 'I wanted to see you,' may be my new favorite sentence.

"Paula's at lunch and Claire's busy on the phone and... Grayson, is this alright?" she whispers, looking vulnerable.

"Of course. I've been missing you, too." I may have taken her virginity last night but I think this woman's laid claim to something of mine as well.

She smiles and leans forward, her eyes dropping to my mouth. One kiss and then another, kiss after kiss. I'll never get enough. The phone rings and I pull away, grimacing. "Bad day?"

"Hectic and frustrating but better with you here. I'll let voicemail catch that." The phone quiets and I lightly trace her bottom lip with my thumb. "Can I see you tonight?" I don't know if she's up to having sex again this soon but I'm going to go mad if I can't spend some more time with her.

She nods, happily. "My dad called a few minutes ago. He's going to visit my uncle in Springfield this afternoon and won't be back until tomorrow. I can stay the night if you want."

It's obvious she means to keep this thing of ours a secret from not only people at the office but her father as well. I don't like it to be honest. "Yeah, stay the night. I haven't had lunch yet, have you?" She shakes her head. "Excellent. I'll start with you."

My hands grasp her skirt and bell-like laughter rings out as she shakes her head again. "You can't do that here, Grayson. I'll be all sticky afterwards."

"Not if I properly lick you clean. Or maybe I want to think about you sitting in the afternoon meeting all sticky from me later."

A shocked gasp from my prim little debutante makes me grin like the devil.

But maybe she's not so prim after all.

Sliding out of my lap, Eleanor gets on her knees at my feet. “I think turn-about would be fair play, Mr. Wolfe. You did offer to instruct me on a few points while I’m here.” She palms the front of my trousers. “There’s so much I’d love to learn.”

Holy hell. All the muscles in my body tense when her capable hands start undoing my belt. “Norrie...”

“I’ve never done this before so don’t hold me to some standard, please.”

“There are no... Christ,” I groan as she frees my cock. I’m so turned on by the thoughts of her sucking me and the primal thrill of knowing I’m her first that I can barely finish reassuring her. “There are no standards, angel. No one’s grading you here, least of all me.”

“But surely, there’s a proper way.”

I’d laugh but she literally has my dick in her hands and she looks so earnest. “Proper and blowjobs don’t really go together in the same sentence. Do what feels right to you. Ideally, it’ll turn you on as well as me.”

“But I’m not the one who’s-”

I silence her protest with a finger pressed against her lips. “Eating you out gets me hard.” Her cheeks flush. “I’ll enjoy it but I won’t if you dislike doing it. Understood?” I *really* hope she’ll enjoy it and want to do it again. She nods but her brow is furrowed with concentration. “Don’t overthink it. I promise you can’t make any wrong moves with me... as long as you don’t bite.”

She snorts at that before she starts stroking me, a grin both innocent and indecent on her face as she stares at my erection with fascination. It’s so damn hot the way she looks at me.

Moving her hand away, she leans over my cock and blows out a long breath. My dick twitches and she looks up at me mischievously. “There. I gave you a blowjob. How did I do?”

Chuckling, I allow my thumb to graze her lips again. “Fucking perfect.”

Mischief still dances in her eyes but she leans over me again. This time, she takes me partly into her mouth, closing her sweet lips around the tip of my cock. She licks the slit over the top and then swirls her tongue around the entire head. “Salty but nice,” she declares.

“Fuck, Norrie...”

“Yes, you can do that tonight,” she says, cheekily. “Right now, I’m busy.”

She takes me into her mouth a little farther and slowly grows more confident. Soon, she’s licking and sucking me like her favorite popsicle and my eyes are about to cross. It’s as much about exploration for her as it’s about pleasure for me but, goddamn, my balls are already tightening up from the most inexperienced blowjob of my entire life.

“How do girls get one this big all the way in their mouth?” she wonders aloud.

I resist the filthy impulse to put my hand on the back of her head and instruct her on how much more of me she can take. “Um... practice.”

“I’ll need lots of practice, I suppose.” Holy shit, she really is perfect.

And, in typical Eleanor form, she doesn’t do this half-heartedly. She keeps licking and sucking me, taking note of what draws moans from me while her eyes keep darting over to the way I’m white-knuckling the arms of my chair.

Best part? She’s getting turned on, too, just as I’d hoped. She lets her breasts rub against my thighs as she works me. There’s layers between us but she’s moaning now and then and I can see her thighs clamped together as she tries to control her body’s response.

At one point, she takes me as far back as she can manage. Despite my best intentions, my hips thrust forward a fraction of an inch and she gags when I go deep. “Oh sorry.” *She’s* sorry? She catches my incredulous expression. “Or did you like that?” Jesus, this girl.

“I liked it but don’t force it. I want you to be comfortable.”

Her eyes shine with affection and, damn, it pleases me more than the blowjob even. Fucking hell, I’m really falling for her.

“Anyway you want to touch me or suck me, I promise I love all of it.”

She looks like she got an A on a difficult paper. When her hand joins in to stroke me as she bobs up and down, I finally allow my hands to card through her hair though I don’t twist or pull. I won’t push for more than she’ll willingly give.

“I’m close,” I warn her. “Pull back if you don’t want me to come in your mouth.”

She doesn’t pull back. She keeps sucking and casts her big brown eyes up at me. One long, hard suck as she cups my balls and I’m lost. I grunt and spill while Eleanor does her best to take it all with her expressive eyes never leaving my face.

While I’m still panting with my head thrown back against my chair, she swallows, her nose twitching adorably. “Bad?” I ask.

“No, salty. Different. But not bad.” Then, she stands and guides my hand up her skirt. Up her soft, warm thigh, she leads me to her panties. “I was turned on, too,” she admits with a deep blush.

Her panties are soaked. Fuck. I let my fingers brush her clit and she whimpers. “Let me lick you now.”

She skips out of my reach, laughing, before I can hoist her up on my desk. “I think it’s best if we leave it there. Becca will be wondering what’s keeping me and you have an empire to helm. Plus, you need to straighten up,” she adds, her eyes dipping down to where my dick is hanging heavily between my thighs, still half hard and ready to go again if she wants.

With a sigh, I rise to my feet and get myself put together. As she opens the door, she turns and delicately dabs at the

corner of her mouth. “Thank you for taking the time to instruct me, sir.”

Fuck me.

I’m not getting jack shit done around here the rest of the day.

30-ELEANOR

As much as I enjoyed surprising him that day in his office, we've been perfectly professional ever since. It's fine. Nothing compares to the time I spend with Grayson away from work.

It's not every night we're able to see each other - we're keeping things quiet - but I can't complain. We talk, we laugh, we watch movies, we swim, we cook.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*" He repositions his arms, hitches one of my legs up higher around his waist and slams into me harder and faster.

Yeah, we do quite a bit of this, too.

"You feel so fucking good, angel."

Unlike him, words have left me. He gets a long, whimpering cry of agreement as the tingling pleasure radiates all through my body. The headboard bangs against the wall of his master bedroom as he bangs me into my next earth-shattering orgasm.

But even when he has me breathless and blissed out, he's not done. "If you insist on calling me Squirrel, I'm going to start calling you Rabbit with the way you go non-stop."

He chuckles and rolls to his back. "A wolf in rabbit's clothing maybe. I want you to ride me now."

"Ooh, I'm graduating to new positions now, am I?"

A sweet grin as he pulls me in for a slow, deep kiss. "You've aced the exam for missionary and received the highest honors."

I laugh at his silliness and get his help when centering myself over him. "You said you love a woman on top."

A grunt from him while we watch our bodies join as I slowly sink down, taking him inch by inch. He caresses my backside until he's fully sheathed inside of me.

“Oh my... that’s... *good.*” My loud moan fills the room when his mouth closes over a nipple, lightly sucking, and my clit finds the perfect friction against his hard body.

“Yeah, like that. Take what you want. You set the pace. You’re in control. You’re so good at this already. I’m going to come so hard with you on top.”

His praise sends tendrils of heat all through me again. I arch my back and cry out for more. His mouth, his hands, his cock. I’m on top but he’s in control as much as I am. I love the way his body moves with mine, *in* mine, the way he holds me, stares at me.

“Grayson, I...”

I love you.

God, I do. He owns me, body and soul.

“That’s right, angel. Don’t stop, don’t stop... *fuck!*”

From riding to hanging on for dear life as he pounds up into me, we hurtle towards our climax as one until that building tension snaps and bliss claims us both.

“That was the sixth time we’ve had sex but I’ve already lost count of the orgasms you’ve given me.”

“Endless orgasms for you. Are you getting tired of me yet?” I hear the amusement in his tone as he pulls me close after disposing of the condom.

“It gets better every time and it was already amazing.”

“Fairfield, I’ve already got a big ego. You’re supposed to keep me humble.”

I laugh and swat at his chest. “Fine. You’re tolerable in bed. I might keep you around for a little while longer until I find a suitable vibrator to take your place. Does that help put you in your place?”

“Nope.” He nuzzles my neck while holding me tightly.

I’m not tired of him. I don’t think I ever will be. Will he tire of me though? He’s too good-looking, too sexy and too loveable to settle for anyone less than extraordinary. Certainly

not meant for a girl who can't even woman up enough to tell her father about our affair or that she'd rather do something else for a living.

"Drew will be here soon." We'd invited her over tonight because she's got a new recipe she wants us to try. I also love that there's someone in my life who knows Grayson's in my life. And, it's easier to tell my father half-lies. I *will* be having dinner with Drew.

"Let's shower then before she arrives."

"Ooh, can we have sex in the shower, too? Two new things in one night?" I ask, curious and always eager to explore with him.

He laughs, helping me out of bed. "I think you're the one who can go non-stop like a rabbit around here."



"No, you want to *stir* it. Like this. *Gently*. You're not beating it to death," our chef says, growing flustered.

I smother my snickers as Drew continues critiquing Grayson's form until she's satisfied. He doesn't seem bothered in the slightest. He's been a very agreeable man during this entire impromptu cooking lesson.

Probably has a bit to do with the two rounds we managed to fit in before Drew arrived.

He's wearing a t-shirt as he mixes, showing off those nicely toned arms of his. He held me in them a short while ago while pinning me to his shower wall and pounding into me like an animal. Holy hell, it was hotter than anything I'd ever expected.

I shift my hips, trying to forestall the blooming ache those memories summon. I catch him staring at me with that devilish grin of his. I'm flushing from that grin and it's not an embarrassed flush. It's a 'when can we go back to bed or shower together again' flush. What has this man done to me?

I'm turning into a sex maniac but there's so many things I'd like to experience with him.

I'm not sure I'll be able to get away from Dad and the house the next couple of nights before we head to Tokyo. I have no idea how we might be together there with a handful of other execs going as well but, by God, I'm going to try.

“What do I add to this next?”

“These are ready to fold in,” Drew says, passing me a small bowl of some chopped nuts.

Before I can even ask, Grayson does. “What kind of nuts are those?”

“Pecans.”

“Norrie's allergic to pecans. You'll need to substitute with something else or leave them out.”

“Oh, Norrie! I can't believe I forgot!” Drew cries.

“No harm done.” It's been a long time since I mentioned being allergic to pecans to Drew and she's cooked for many, many people these past few years. I'm far more pleased that Grayson remembered and spoke up to care if she forgot one person's allergy.

“Well, I feel horrible but we can easily leave them out. Glad you've been paying attention, Grayson,” Drew adds while giving me a significant look. I know what that look is saying. Would Fox have remembered about pecans? No, I sincerely doubt he would've.

As our meal goes into the oven, Grayson asks Drew more about her future restaurant plans. She gets a little carried away waxing on but I can't really blame her. Especially when her enthusiasm gets me wound up as well. “Tell him about the bake-back idea.”

Drew shares her ideas for donating bread baked in her hypothetical restaurant's ovens to the local soup kitchen each day. “It's not an original idea but I figure for every loaf I bake to make dishes with or sell, I could do a second to give away...”

I'm smiling listening to her, wanting her to have this dream more than anything. "I still think a little patio area for live music on Saturday nights would be ideal once we get rolling."

"*We?*" Grayson says, eyebrows raised at me.

Shoot, this is the second time I've claimed Drew's dream as mine in front of him. I've lost count of the times I've said something like this in front of her. Deep down, I want this dream to be mine, too. But I know it's impossible.

"Norrie would handle all the boring business stuff for me and be my Hostess with the Mostess."

"So, are you serious about going into business with Drew?"

"No, I..."

"She totally would be *if* she weren't going to be running Fairfield Communications someday."

Grayson's brow furrows. "You're planning to run your father's company someday?"

"Well, yes." Why does he look so puzzled by that? I told him I wasn't staying at Wolfe. Where did he think I was going if not to work for my father again? "Obviously, I'm not ready to take over yet but that's what my training at Wolfe is helping with."

He's still looking incredulous. Does he think I can't handle it? He's currently helming a multi-billion-dollar company while shy of his thirtieth birthday. Why should I not be capable of running a far smaller company someday?

"Have you spoken to your father about your plans?"

"Oh, he knows." He has to know, right? Why would I double major in business and communications both and get my MBA if not to take over the company someday when he's ready to retire?

"But have you spoken to him about it *recently?*"

He puts so much emphasis on that last word and something uncomfortable stirs in my gut. “Yes, I have.”

It’s not true but I feel defensive now. Grayson’s raising my hackles, something that’s not happened between us lately, and I want to talk about something else. “What wine would you recommend with our meal, Drew? Grayson has an impressive cellar.”

I lead her down the steps away from Grayson’s perplexed look and the worries about my future his questions managed to raise.

31-GRAYSON

I dropped Eleanor off back at her house after our dinner with Drew. I don't know what to think. She can't open a restaurant with her best friend like she clearly wants to because she's planning to go back to Fairfield? Except she won't be running Fairfield Communications someday when her dad retires because it will soon be another division of Wolfe Media.

I can't believe her father hasn't told her. Or what if he's not told her because he's planning to change his mind about our deal? The papers aren't signed yet. If I fuck this deal up, Theo and Dad will never let me forget it. What the fuck?

I don't want another relationship to implode because of a business deal either. I lost a so-called friend and, in a sense, I lost a girlfriend over one that was completely out of my hands. I'm directly involved this time. What if Eleanor blames me? Goes back to hating me again? She means too much to me to let that happen.

Making up my mind, I take the turn towards Theo's house instead of my own. I'll have to come clean but the cat was half out of the bag already.

Julieta lets me in and says I'll find them in the kitchen. I know my way around the house well enough. God knows, I've spent plenty of time seeking my brother's counsel here in the past twelve years since he bought the place.

"Hey, I was... oh sorry!"

"It's fine, Grayson," Quinn says with a smile, buttoning up her top.

She hands Matteo to Theo for burping and I'm struck by the domesticity of the scene. A mother nursing her child, a father proudly holding his son, a couple at complete ease together in their kitchen. They're so happy.

And, I'm... *jealous*.

Sure, I've felt envy towards my older brothers in the past but never quite this keenly or for a reason like this. Huh.

"Hey, how's work?"

"Good," I answer, shaking off that odd jealous feeling. "Lone Star is officially ours."

"Excellent. Knew you'd manage it." Theo turns his proud smile my way and, fuck, it still lights me up. Will I ever stop being the little brother craving his validation?

"I've got a potential issue though if you could spare me a few minutes..."

A look is all it takes for Theo to decide this potential issue is important to me and delicate. Without a word, he hands Matteo back to Quinn and gestures for me to follow him. "Alright. Hit me with it," my brother says as he closes his home office door.

"First off, I'm involved with Eleanor. It's private and it's between us but it's relevant information in this case which is why I'm telling you." Theo shakes his head and goes to pour us both a drink. "I know you told me to stay away from her..."

"But you didn't."

"No, I haven't. Before you gear up for a lecture, I'd like to point out that Quinn was your kids' nanny-"

He holds up his hand and chuckles. "I'm not Dad. I'm not going to lecture you, Gray." Handing me my drink, he sits and shrugs. "You're adults. I know you and you know what I expect at work. Beyond that, I'll leave it to you two to figure things out. So, what's the issue that brought you here other than making this confession?"

"Have you talked to Louis the past few days?"

"No, why? Does he have a problem with you seeing her? How does Eleanor feel about the buyout?"

"He doesn't know we're seeing each other and I don't know how she feels about it because she doesn't know yet."

"Oh shit."

“Yeah.”

“I assumed...”

“There’s been an epidemic of assuming going on from the sounds of things. You mentioned offering her a job when her trainee period ends. If she wanted it, would you consider letting her have some significant role with Fairfield Communications when we take it over? Maybe heading it for us at some point?”

“A role, yes. Taking over, not likely. That plum’s been promised to Becca weeks ago. She’s part of our company’s future leadership and she’s been with us for seven years.”

“I know but it’s Eleanor’s family’s company.”

“It won’t be once the deal is done. I’m not saying Eleanor won’t be an executive one day. She’s got lots of potential but the ink on her MBA hasn’t dried yet. She’s untested.”

He has a point and I highly suspect her heart wouldn’t be in it anyway. “I’m worried about the deal turning sour. Do you think Louis has changed his mind?”

“He’s getting a good price. I took his daughter on at his request. We’ve kept this quiet as he wants until he’s ready to make an announcement. I don’t think he’s playing games with us. He’s been friends with our parents for decades.”

“Davenport still works for him.”

“Yeah, that guy. Dad still hates his father’s guts.” It was more than a sound business deal to Dad. It was revenge. But considering it involved my mother, it made it hard for me to feel sorry for Fox.

“My feelings towards the son are the same.”

“Are you going to tell her?”

“I’d rather give her father the chance to tell her. It’s their family’s company. If Dad had decided to sell out before we came on board...”

“Yeah, I would’ve wanted to hear it from him,” Theo agrees.

Of course, that wasn't going to happen. Theo and I, this company our grandfather founded is in our blood, same as it was with Dad.

"She's going with me to Tokyo next week. I know you're still on leave but, while I'm gone, can you discreetly check around, make sure Louis isn't backing out?" I want to enjoy whatever moments alone I can get with Norrie there, not fight over her father's decision to sell and failure to inform her.

"Sure thing, shrimp." I hate when he calls me that and he knows it. Prick. But I also know my brother would do anything in his power to help me and to see this deal through. "How serious is it between you two, Gray?"

"Not certain but it feels pretty serious to me."

A lot serious. I'm in love with her but I don't want to tell Theo that before I say it to Eleanor. And, I'm hesitant to tell her until I know how she'll feel about me once she learns the truth.

Theo and I finish our drink and I decide it's time to leave him to his family. I'm almost to the door when he says, "Just make sure your feelings for Eleanor don't get in the way of closing the deal with her old man. We've wanted Fairfield Communications for a long time."

"I know and they won't. It's in the bag," I say with more confidence than I feel.

32-ELEANOR

From the moment we step off the plane, my heart knows it's like nowhere I've ever been. Tokyo is stunning at any time but in autumn? It's indescribably beautiful.

The fall foliage is spectacular surrounding ancient pagodas and modern skyscrapers alike. The people are so welcoming and polite. There's all these little differences even with ordinary things which makes everything exotic and fascinating while there's so much life going on around us.

"You've got your face pressed up to the window like a child on their first field trip," Grayson murmurs under his breath as the rental car takes us towards our hotel. His smile is affectionate despite his teasing words.

"I feel like one today," I admit. "I have a modest must-see list. I hope I can get to them all."

"We will," he promises me and I return my attention to the window, glowing on the inside.

As we head into the hotel, the rest of our party is a few paces ahead. Grayson's hand is lightly resting at the small of my back. Such a simple touch but there's something possessive, dominant about it which I love. I've been craving his touch. We've not been alone since the night Drew came over to cook with us. I feel like I'm ready to combust.

Grayson's been distracted this week and I've been busy, too. There's been no coffee and blowjobs, no quickies in the copy room or any other naughty office hijinks I've fantasized about. It's for the best. If I can have him outside of office hours, I prefer that anyway.

Now, I may be imagining this but he had seemed a bit distant for a day or two after our dinner with Drew. Not sure what to make of it. However, that distance is nowhere in sight when he leans into my ear. "I want to take you out tonight." His hand still rests at the small of my back, prodding me along and making my body tingle with anticipation from head to toe.

“What about them?” I whisper, nodding towards our coworkers who are a dozen feet ahead of us now.

“We’ll all have drinks together after the conference today. Then, you’re going to bow out of dinner, claiming jetlag. They won’t question my plans when I tell them goodnight.”

No, they would never question you, I think, smirking at him before I agree to the plan.

“We have you in your requested suite, Mr. Wolfe,” the clerk says a short while later. “And here are the room keys for the rest of your party.”

Grayson passes along keys to everyone but fails to give me mine. “Looks like we’re on the same floor, Ms. Fairfield.” My stomach flips at the way his eyes snag mine with those words.

As we head to the elevator, Grayson mentions a teleconference scheduled with the office in Sydney and suggests we all meet in the lobby in ninety minutes to head to our first joint meeting.

The others are on the floor below us and, the instant the elevator doors close behind them, Grayson makes his move. “Finally.” He pulls me into his arms, startling a yelp from me.

“I’m positive there’s security cameras in here,” I tell him dryly though I love the way he’s holding me. “And, it’s rude to kiss in public here, isn’t it?”

“Yes, quite scandalous but don’t worry. I won’t do anything *too* dirty,” he tells me playfully while nuzzling my ear.

As we only have a floor to travel, the delicious nuzzling soon ends and Grayson takes my bag along with his, striding ahead of me down the carpeted hallway. “Which room am I in?” I ask, holding out my hand to take my key.

He doesn’t answer until we’ve reached a door, one of only a few on this floor. “This one.”

Nodding, I open it and my breath catches. Goodness, it’s jaw-droppingly gorgeous and the view! “Is that Mount

Fuji?!”

“It is.”

I’ve stayed in some nice suites with my parents when we used to travel together but never anything quite like this. “How many reward program points did this cost?” I ask, hurrying towards the window to look out on the thrumming city below.

“I don’t know. It’s where I always stay in Tokyo,” Grayson says, setting down our bags.

“Where you always stay? La-di-da, Mr. Billionaire.”

He shrugs out of his suit coat and gracefully moves towards me. My pulse picks up and my whole body grows taunt with longing. “That’s right.”

“Where’s my room?”

He plants a soft kiss on my lips before answering. “You’re standing in it.”

“But...”

He holds up a second key card and grins. “This is for the suite around the corner but I thought while we’re here in the same city and you don’t have to mind Dad’s curfew...”

My belly swoops with excitement and desire. He grinds his thickening erection against me. “I thought you had a call with Sydney soon.”

“Silly me getting the time zones confused. It’s not until later this afternoon.”

“Then, show me the rest of the suite, Mr. Wolfe,” I say, nonchalantly. Except I pull out of his reach, kick off my heels and start unbuttoning my blouse, walking backwards so Grayson can see every inch of flesh revealed. “Be sure to show me the bedroom first.”

He does.



“Are you going to photograph everything?”

I scowl but take the picture of the little bean-filled cake shaped like a red snapper anyway. “I’m sending this to Drew and challenging her to make one.”

“You’re a cruel taskmaster. Pronounce it again for me.”

“Taiyaki.”

“Better.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Cocky asshole,” I whisper, hoping no one seated nearby overhears. I was completely floored when we strayed from our hotel to the streets and I learned Grayson actually speaks Japanese.

He chuckles, his eyes bright and dreamy. “I’m hardly fluent but I took it in school and didn’t forget it right away. Dad sent me abroad a good deal last year when I said I was serious about being involved. I don’t know if he thought it was a punishment or not but I loved traveling, especially here.”

“So, you’ve got a favorite hotel suite and favorite restaurant and-”

“Favorite traveling companion,” he says, touching his glass to mine. *Oh, my heart.*

We’d got through the meetings earlier after a very active time in his suite before that. Or *our* suite as he’s insisting I call it. I love the sound of that.

Tomorrow, we’ll have a little time to visit the Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden with the group before the conference gets rolling. “I can’t wait to see everything,” I sigh.

He checks his phone while I’m savoring the last few bites. When he looks back up at me, I can tell something has shifted in his expression. He drums his fingers on the table and I begin to worry he’s bored waiting on me to finish.

“We can go if you wish. You mentioned that nightclub here you like. I’ve never been to a nightclub.”

“You’ll go to one tonight with me. Eleanor, may I ask you something personal?”

I’m caught between a blush and a scoff. “I think we’ve gotten rather personal with each other already, haven’t we?”

“Yes but that’s sex.”

His blunt tone leaves me rattled. “Isn’t sex personal to you?” I hate that insecure, quavering note in my voice. Sex seems extremely personal to me but then I’m still relatively inexperienced and he’s not. And, all of this feels like more than just sex to me.

“Sorry, that came out poorly. Sex *is* personal. But between sex and money, people tend to speak more freely about one versus the other in my experience and I wasn’t sure which category you might land in.”

“Oh. Alright, money. What did you want to ask?”

“I believe you don’t have access to your trust fund yet.”

“Not until I’m twenty-five. Dad set it up that way years ago. Eighteen more months until I can take that wild trip to Vegas and blow it all. You’re not about to tell me you’re bankrupt or owe people money over here, are you?”

“No,” he says, snickering quietly. “You’d like to help Drew open a restaurant someday if you can, right?”

“Well, yes. But I’m-”

“I know you said you’re planning to go back to Fairfield Communications and take over for your father when he retires but is that where your heart lies, Norrie?”

“I...” *Is it, Norrie?* “Of course, it is,” I say firmly to that voice and to Grayson. “It’s Dad’s company. It’s his dream.”

“*His* dream. That doesn’t make it yours.”

“Would you say that of yourself and your family’s company?”

The answer is plain as day on his face - not on your life - even if he deflects by saying, “Two of my brothers did.”

“They’re not *you*. You love being at Wolfe Media, part of your family’s legacy.”

“Yes, I do. You’re a great fit there by the way. Theo’s planning to offer you a position with us at the end of your training period. A very good one with an excellent salary. Though it would mean...”

“I’d continue to be your subordinate?”

He nods. “Maybe not directly under me but yes, so long as I’m the COO, everyone but Theo is essentially under me.”

I can’t carry on a secret office affair forever nor do I think I’d like being known as the boss’s girlfriend by everyone. It was difficult enough in a way at Fairfield while dating Fox who wasn’t my supervisor. I don’t like being the subject of people’s gossip.

“I appreciate whatever offer Theo has in mind but I can’t abandon my father.”

He huffs. “You wouldn’t be *abandoning* him. Have you truly talked about this lately, honestly and openly with no assumptions being made? You said you had but I don’t think that’s true.”

Under the weight of his accusation, I shake my head, feeling defensive but also chastened. I had lied the other night when he asked me about it.

Grayson reaches for my hand and I’m a little reluctant to give it at first. “Norrie, please?” Slowly, I relent, unable to resist his plea or his touch. “I’m sorry if I’m being too intrusive. I know you say it’s hard for you to talk to him but...”

Conflict rages in those dark blue eyes while I mull over the strange conversation we’re having. Is my dad going to appoint Fox as CEO? Is that what Grayson’s trying to protect me from? Dad would *never*... would he?

“Your relationship with your father is not something I’m trying to be in the middle of. But I really think you need to have a conversation with him about your future career wishes

and his own plans. That's all I... it's best if that's all I say for now, I think."

I give him an uncertain nod before the server returns and no more is said of the matter. I want to do more sightseeing and go dancing tonight. I want to make love in our suite again.

But Grayson's words can't be completely forgotten. When I caught Fox cheating, even though I didn't love him, I still felt like a fool. I don't want to wind up feeling like a fool again.

33-GRAYSON

A few nights ago, I was in bed with Norrie at the suite in Tokyo feeding her various delicacies as we recuperated from our very active days and nights.

During the day, we worked, hung out with our co-workers and hobnobbed with new acquaintances. But at night, she was all mine and exploring Tokyo with her, seeing it through her eyes, made a fascinating place even more exciting for me. I want to show her the whole world, everything she wishes to see.

She could barely walk when it was time to catch the car to the airport. She blamed her shoes and too much sightseeing when the others expressed their concern.

Maybe that's partly true.

But, I'm the filthy beast who ate her out like tomorrow wasn't coming (so she'd better) and took her again and again the instant the doors to our suite closed behind us throughout our stay. I can't deny her, can't resist her, can't possibly ever get enough.

I'm still jet lagged as hell even if Tokyo feels like a distant memory. I've slid back into the cold cruel reality of work, demanding my attention morning, noon and night. Eleanor's not been over to my place since we returned. I hope that means she's been talking to her dad about things and her future plans.

When we see each other at work, we're always around other people. I hate this sneaking around. I'm sick of it. I want her to be mine and I want everyone to know it.

An email pops up on my screen and my heart literally skips a beat.

To: grayson.wolfe@wolfemedia.com

From: eleanor.fairfield@wolfemedia.com

October 10th 11:49 AM

Re: Lunch

Want to go eat lunch with Drew and I?

I grin and compose a reply:

I think you meant to ask if I want to eat you for the rest of the afternoon and maybe we can see Drew later.

Her reply bounces back in seconds.

Behave. Come have lunch with us. Unless you're too good for street dogs or have better offers.

Excuse me? I'll have you know I love street dogs and there's no better offer than time spent with you.

She doesn't write back and I wonder if I've pushed it. We've not talked about our feelings just as we've not discussed our original plan of making Fox jealous in a long time. I'd rather forget I ever said that. But, neither of us has said anything about the long-term either.

Deciding not to overthink it on an empty stomach, I grab my jacket and go to meet Eleanor and Drew.



“Right there. That’s the one that’s meant for us,” Drew declares as she points out the restaurant for lease.

“There, huh?” I look over the building and the neighborhood. It’s a great location. The former owners retired and moved to Arizona or it would still be a thriving eatery. This block is real estate gold and probably costs one’s weight in gold in it for rent. Drew’s got a good eye for location.

“Yeah, it’s the absolute perfect spot.”

“I thought the last one was the perfect spot,” Eleanor comments, wryly.

“Norrie, the world is full of perfect spots if you open your eyes.”

I chuckle and return to eating my hot dog while the girls plot out menus, seating arrangements and live entertainment. I really like Drew - from her excellent dishes to her currently pumpkin orange hair - and I wish she and Norrie could see this vision of theirs become a reality.

“I have a meeting with the bank next week but I’m not expecting anything.”

I catch Eleanor looking my way. “We could... I could ask my dad or...”

“No, Norrie. Not that again. This place is too expensive for me and I know I’m just dreaming. But it’ll happen someday. I’ll find the real perfect spot, don’t worry.”

The girls link arms and we stroll back the way we came. I follow a few paces behind them, being sure to take note of the realtor’s name first.

Has Eleanor talked to her father yet? She’s not said a peep to me so my gut says that’s a no. Christ, I can’t keep my mouth shut indefinitely. Louis is coming in for a meeting soon. The news will be released shortly afterwards. If he’s not going to tell her and she’s not going to ask him anything, I’ll have to do it before then or I’ll risk losing her. I can’t lose her.

We bid Drew goodbye on the street and we’ve not been alone together since Tokyo. My cock starts getting ideas. “There’s a hotel across the way. I could get us a suite and we could take the afternoon off to-”

“Are you suggesting I play hooky with you, Mr. Wolfe? Do you have inappropriate behaviors in mind for the trainee?” she asks, slyly.

I grin back at her. “We could sit and watch television if you want. We don’t *have* to do anything inappropriate, Ms. Fairfield.” Oh, I want to but I’m not lying either. I miss having sex with her but I miss *her* even more.

“But there are so many inappropriate things we might do,” she says, the minx.

“I love the way you think...”

Just as I lean in to steal a kiss, there's a gaggle of employees from Accounts coming out the door to head to their own lunch destination and I'm forced to take a step back.

What good is money and power if I can't kiss the girl I love?!

When they've passed, Eleanor's already got her hand on the door. "How about you come over to my house tonight?"

"Really?"

"Yes, my dad is going out and I thought we could play golf together."

Still sneaking around the old man then. But, I'll readily agree to anything that gives me time with her alone. "Golf? At your house?"

She grins and nods. "In a sense."

"I'll bring my clubs."

34-ELEANOR

Tree Golf was invented by me many years ago as a way to practice the accuracy of my drive and amuse myself.

Only children come up with all kinds of games like this because sometimes, a lot of times, you're your only playmate.

"Actually, I can see my brothers and I playing this," Grayson comments. "Nice sweatshirt, by the way." I grin. I'm wearing his Northwestern sweatshirt that I never got around to returning. I can tell he doesn't mind. I may need him to wear it again though so I can have his delicious scent back. "Next target?"

"The butternut tree," I say, pointing. Grayson nods and quietly watches me line up for this round. The ball sails through the air before landing a mere two feet from the agreed-upon target. "I don't believe you can make a better shot than that. Do you yield yet, Wolfe?"

"Haven't I taught you better than that? Never give up..."

"Never surrender."

"Yes. Now, don't distract me when I'm about to swing, Fairfield."

I zip my lips and take a moment to appreciate his form, his very fine form, when he sends his golf ball soaring through the night sky.

"The lights are helpful," he says as we walk towards the butternut tree to see whose ball is closer. He's smirking the next instant. "Well, will you look at that?"

"You probably disturbed an entire family of squirrels."

"I apologize to your kin," he chuckles. "And you wanted me to surrender..."

"Cocky asshole."

"That I am but I won this round."

Despite getting beat at my own made-up game, I'm enjoying this tonight. I've missed him so much since we got back. I was glad Dad had plans even if I know I need to have a talk with him soon about me and Grayson. He's too important to me to remain a dirty secret.

That's not all you wish to tell your dad about, is it, Norrie?

No, that's not all. I want to tell my father where my heart lies and that it doesn't lie behind a desk at Fairfield Communications indefinitely.

My trainee period with Wolfe Media will end in a couple of weeks. I'll finish it and I'm learning a lot that I could possibly apply to any business, including the one I want to try with Drew. I'm already making plans for how to convince my dad to let me borrow in advance on my trust fund.

Like admitting to my father that I've been sleeping with my former nemesis turned boss however; broaching the topic will probably be the hardest part but I'm not the same girl who climbed down a tree to avoid her engagement disaster a few months ago. I can do this. I just hope it doesn't break Dad's heart.

"So, another round?" Grayson asks, pulling me from my rambling thoughts.

"Another round."

And, this one brings a better outcome for the mistress of Fairfield Fairway.

"Congratulations," Grayson says when we note that my ball is four inches closer to the appointed oak.

"Is that an admittance of defeat?"

"I think it's time for a break in play, don't you?" I can't complain about the evasion when he pulls me close and walks us further into a wooded section of the lawn. "Can anyone at the house see us here?" he asks huskily with that devilish glint in his eyes.

I slowly shake my head. His mouth hovers over mine but I'm too impatient. I rise to my tiptoes and bring our lips together.

A kiss, a caress and suddenly we're both aware of how long it's been since we've been naked together. Far too long. "This will be the second round of golf course sex for you, won't it?" I ask as he's trailing kisses down my throat.

He continues kissing me, slowly tugging the sweatshirt over my head, but his eyes rise to mine and there's too much sincerity shining in them to doubt him when he says, "This is a fairway in a backyard and you're the only woman I can think of anymore, angel."

God, this man.

I don't think sex up against a tree is something one plans for but I'm learning there are times when sex is going to happen and it's going to happen right now so hold on and enjoy the ride. "Condom?" I pant, breathless with desire.

"A good wolf scout is always prepared," he says, plucking one from his pocket.

"A wolf, yes, but I can't see you as a scout."

His shirt, my skirt and panties soon litter the ground at our feet. The bark is rough against my back with only a t-shirt left on but I don't care as my fingernails mark his. He's mine.

Grayson's arms are wedged under my knees, his hands gripping my ass as he holds me in place, thrusting up into me so deep. I savor the way he feels as he moves inside me, love taking every bit of him in. Impossibly, his low grunts with every thrust are getting me even hotter. "Fuck, angel. Like that," he rumbles before kissing my neck.

The woods are quiet around us. Not even a squirrel stirring. I wrap my legs around his waist tighter and soon I'm moaning his name, over and over.

Afterwards, we're stretched out on the neatly kept grass, catching our breath and caressing each other gently as the stars shine above us. It feels like a perfect moment for confessing feelings. Do I dare?

But, there's a familiar ticking sound I can't quite place suddenly interrupting my blissful afterglow. It's not a creature and no cameras like the night I crash-landed on Grayson after falling out of a butternut tree. It reminds me of a countdown somehow. Is it the...

"Ah, fuck!" Grayson shouts as the sprinkles turn on all around us.

I screech and then we're both laughing. "I'm sorry! I forgot!"

"Come on!" he says, helping me gather up quickly soaked clothes before we race for it.

We're drenched when we reach the house, not to mention the disheveled state of our clothes and hair from earlier. Mrs. Hadley gives a shocked yelp when she sees us creating puddles on her neatly polished floor. "So sorry. I can mop it if you-"

"No, no, Miss Eleanor. I'll handle this. Your father is on his way home. Go get yourself dried off and your young man can use the downstairs lavatory to..."

"He'll come get dry with me," I declare, feeling wicked but so alive as I leave my poor, scandalized housekeeper behind and tug Grayson up the stairs to my room.

Grayson smiles wryly at my uncontrollable giggles as I gather some towels for us. "You're enjoying yourself."

"I am. So much," I agree. I wanted to come clean to Dad about Grayson. May as well be tonight.

He takes the towels from my arms and lays them on the bed before cupping my cheek and giving me a slow, sweet kiss. That kiss feels full of promise and there's so many things I would promise him.

But my body gives an enormous shiver no sooner than the kiss is over. "Go take a shower, angel. You're freezing."

I am but I don't want to admit it. "Only if you'll take it with me."

He grins and shakes his head. “No, not this time. Not when your father could show up any time and he doesn’t even know about us.”

“I want to tell him.”

His eyes are so soft when he says, “I’m glad to know that. But let him see us together for the first time when at least one of us is dry and fully dressed, alright?”

“Alright,” I say with a pout.

The shower is exactly what I need to warm up but I’m quick. When I come out of the en suite, Grayson is still in my bedroom, studying my corkboard.

“Much better being warm. Do you want to take one, too?”

He turns and immediately I can tell something’s off. He’s looking at me but not making eye contact. He rubs his hand over his stubbled jaw and angles his body towards the door. “Actually, I think I’ll go home. I am drenched and maybe both of us should be dry and fully dressed before we talk to him about us.”

“Grayson? Is there something-”

He steps up to me before I can finish the question, gives me a strained smile and drops a kiss on top of my head. “I’ll see you tomorrow at work.”

And with that, he’s gone, leaving me confused and worrying I’ve done something wrong. Maybe he doesn’t want my dad to know about us after all.

35-GRAYSON

*T*en Things I Hate About Grayson Wolfe

The title kind of says it all.

Look, I don't care if she hated me when she was a teenager. And if she hated me when she was with Fox, I understand that, too. But why is that list posted in her bedroom? It's not old. It's printed on Wolfe Media letterhead for fuck's sake.

Yeah, I'm a cocky asshole. I'll fully admit I'm not perfect. And yes, I'd unintentionally hurt her with my 'hell no, not a debutante' and all the rest of it. But I thought we'd moved past that stuff and maybe she saw me differently now.

Maybe I could have overlooked the list or even laughed about it with her... but there was Number Eight glaring at me in black and white:

He'll never be half the man his brothers are.

Little Miss Perfect still knows where the soft underbelly is.

"You make it hard to hate you," she'd said the first night we'd slept together. Hard to hate but she's never said she *doesn't* hate me. Never said she loves me either.

My pride (and my heart) had been pricked so I'd left after she finished her shower. Today, I'm regretting that. I should call her, ask her to come up to my office. We need to talk. About several things.

But before I can call Eleanor to come up here, someone else is paying me a call.

"Mr. Wolfe?" Paula says through the intercom, somewhat uneasily, "There's a Mr. Davenport here to see you."

What in the fuck is *he* doing here? And, how did he make it up to my floor, right outside my office? Security is officially back on my shit list.

“There you are!” Fox barks as soon as he sees me. “How long have you been planning this, asshole?”

“Paula, call security,” I say calmly before turning to face Fox. I’m not afraid to get physical with him if necessary but I’d rather get him out of my sight without touching him. “I’m guessing you’ve discovered you’ll be unemployed before long?”

Louis said he was planning to speak with his employees including Fox after his upcoming meeting with us but maybe not. Does that mean he’s finally told Eleanor?

“This is all about getting back at me from the video of you with that girl in college, isn’t it? You arranged this whole thing, didn’t you?!”

The elevator doors have opened. Nice to see security is so prompt at least. “I wish I could say I had but I hardly had to arrange anything, Fox. In fact, I’d guess you walked right into this noose. I’ll admit it’ll be sweet firing your ass if Fairfield doesn’t do it first. They say revenge is a dish best served cold after all.”

The words have barely left my mouth when I realize it isn’t security stepping off the elevator. It’s Norrie. *Shit*. I don’t want him near her after his aggressive behavior at the golf tournament.

He looks over his shoulder and spies her. Aware of his expanded audience, a malicious gleam appears in Fox’s eyes. “You’re just like your old man, aren’t you, Wolfe? I told you, Eleanor. He’ll fuck you over and laugh about it in the same breath. You’ll stoop to any level to get what you want, to make my family pay for daring to speak against yours decades ago.”

“And, you’re still hanging onto that. I told you back then that publishing garbage about my mother put your father’s newspaper in my dad’s sights before either of us was born.

End of story. I couldn't have stopped him if I'd wanted to. I didn't want us to become enemies over it but, by making that video and sharing it the way you did, you made yourself mine."

"I've given years to that old fart's company! I've kissed his ass and even kept my hands off his daughter's to get what I deserve!"

Eleanor gasps and I'm wondering if Mia would take my case after I punch this fucker's lights out.

"I would've married daddy's precious princess, knocked her up a couple of times and become the CEO of my own company when he kicked the bucket but you waltz in to buy Fairfield up simply so you can spit me out!"

She doesn't gasp this time but her utterly shocked expression says it all. She hasn't had that conversation with her dad like I'd hoped. And, Fox just confirmed what she had suspected. She was nothing but the golden goose in his eyes. Fucking bastard. I want to comfort her but first I want to get rid of him.

I summon every ounce of my hardass father that's in me and say in my coldest voice, "You give yourself too much credit. We've wanted Fairfield Communications for years. Seeing you lose your job out of the deal was merely a bonus."

Security arrives the next moment and it's time for Fox to go but he won't go quietly naturally. "I'd tell you to fuck yourself, Wolfe, but, knowing you like I do, I'd guess you've been busy fucking her to make your revenge complete... assuming you could get past the chastity belt."

"Shut your mouth, Davenport, before I decide you don't get to ride in my elevator again," I say with a meaningful glance towards the windows. I direct security to remove him from my sight before I can literally hurl him through one of them.

I regret the show Claire and Paula witnessed though I know I can trust them to keep quiet. Right now, I need to explain things to Eleanor and hopefully ease the blow of

finding out in this manner about her dad's decision to sell his company and the fact she won't be its CEO someday if I can.

Except, when I turn to where she'd been standing by the elevators, Eleanor's no longer there.

36-ELEANOR

“I told you, Eleanor. He’ll fuck you over and laugh about it in the same breath.”

“We’ve wanted Fairfield Communications for years.”

“I’d tell you to fuck yourself, Wolfe, but, knowing you like I do, I’d guess you’ve been busy fucking her to make your revenge complete.”

This cannot be happening. Is Dad really selling to Wolfe? Without saying anything to me? But even worse than that, I’m left wondering if Grayson truly cares about me at all or if I’m only a pawn in their vicious game.

Talk to him, Norrie.

I should but there’s someone else I want to talk to first.

“I’d like a moment with that man!” I shout as I catch sight of the security guards who are practically dragging Fox towards the front doors.

“You’ll need to have your moment outside, ma’am. Mr. Wolfe wants him off the property.”

“No, you’ll let me ask him a few questions here. Mr. Wolfe would feel more strongly about you not leaving me alone with him than him being off the property.” At least, I *think* Grayson would be more concerned for my safety than anything but I’m questioning so many things at the moment.

The guard who spoke looks around for a moment and then nods. They step back enough to give us a little privacy to speak while keeping close enough to be threatening. “What do you know about my father selling to Wolfe?”

Fox huffs angrily. “Only what I found in his papers when I was in his office alone for a few minutes earlier this morning.”

“You snooped through his things?” He rolls his eyes at my shocked question. Why am I even surprised he’d snoop after what I just overheard? “Are you sure about what you saw? When was this decided? When is he selling? Do you know if my father-”

A nasty smirk appears as Fox realizes what I’m asking and what it means. “You didn’t know about the buyout, did you?”

A cold, sick feeling overwhelms me. I want to pretend otherwise but it’s pointless.

He laughs cruelly. “He’s protected you like some vestal virgin for so long from everything but he never tells you anything. Why would he trouble that pretty little head of yours with unsavory business deals? It’s not like he ever intended to turn things over to you.”

His words cut me deep, laying bare all the wounds of my flawed relationship with my father. It hurts far more than seeing him with another woman hours before our engagement party.

But I won’t give Fox the satisfaction of knowing that and I realize I have nothing else to say to him either. He’s not who I should ask about this. “Good luck job hunting,” I say coolly, turning on my heel.

“Stop acting so high and mighty, Eleanor.” He jumps in front of me and leans in, his stale breath on my cheek making me recoil. “Don’t pretend you didn’t spread your legs for Wolfe just to get at me. Everyone saw you plastering yourself to him at the Founders’ Ball. It was all about getting even with me, wasn’t it?”

No, it wasn’t. Not for me.

I’m aware of the elevator opening again and I know without looking that Grayson has joined us by the way Fox’s expression twists with hatred.

“Does everyone here know you’re his whore, too?”

It’s almost like I’m watching another woman do it when I slap Fox hard across the face except the stinging in my palm

cannot be denied.

To hell with the sting. Slap him again, Norrie.

I'd love to but Grayson's by my side in half a heartbeat, his hand gently taking mine. He takes away the sting with a soft caress and prevents me from further violence. "I believe I gave an order, gentlemen," he says to the security guards and they don't hesitate to remove Fox from our sight.

I watch him go, feeling confused, hurt... and angry.

"I didn't want you to find out that way," he murmurs once we're alone.

"Did you want me to find out at all?"

"I thought you knew back when your father called Theo to arrange your position in July."

Holy shit. "This was decided the morning after I left the engagement party?"

I can't believe it. And yet, some of the things he said that morning about being proud of the company but aware of certain realities make a different sort of sense now.

"To own a communications company, he really is shit at communicating," I say under my breath. Grayson's lips twitch but it's not funny to me. The cold, sick feeling from earlier becomes a spark of rage. "You knew and hid it from me!"

He looks down at his feet and the spark becomes a flame. Fury washes through me like a powerful tide. If I don't want to slap another man today, I need to get away. I pull my hand free from his, planning to run. Where? I don't know. Away from Fox, away from Grayson, away from men who make a fool of me.

But he's faster and stronger than me and no one stops him as he takes out his badge, swipes it against a secured door and hustles me into a large meeting room which is currently dark and empty.

With the lights off, I take advantage when he momentarily releases me to spin away and take flight again, a squirrel running for her life. I'm fortunate I don't run headlong into

something as my heels clack across the floor, past rows of chairs and towards the podium up front.

“Goddammit, I didn’t plan to hide anything from you! Let me explain!”

He chases me in the semi-darkness. My adrenaline spikes. I’m breathless when he catches me, his strong hands holding my upper arms. He has me pressed against a wall. I catch an intoxicating whiff of his alluring cologne and a small shriek escapes my lips, the insane tension and thrill of being caught. It feels so... primal. Despite what I’ve learned today, the flame of fury burns in a new direction - desire. What is wrong with me?

His hands disappear again. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you,” he says, plainly mortified by his actions.

I don’t want his mortification. Not at the moment. “You don’t frighten me. You piss me off.”

He chuckles, uneasily. “I know.”

“You lied to me all this time.”

“I didn’t lie to you *all this time*. I thought you knew until the night Drew made us dinner.”

“That was weeks ago, Grayson. Before Japan, before last night. You kept it from me. All those questions over dessert in Tokyo...”

“I wanted you to hear it from your dad,” he says as he strokes my cheek. God help me, I still want his touch even when I’m angry at him. “It’s your family business. I hated that you didn’t know but I thought he owed you an explanation.”

“He did. He does. But that’s not why you kept it from me. You just didn’t want to stop fucking me.”

“That’s not true.”

“And now, I’ve heard it from Fox instead so thank you for that. Well, you got what you wanted most, didn’t you? Revenge against him.”

“That’s not what I wanted most,” he says, growing louder.

“That’s all we ever were, another tactic to make him pay. Sex was merely a bonus of this sick little game.”

“No, it fucking wasn’t! Stop making me into that kind of guy! I would never use you that way, Norrie.”

“Only my friends may call me Norrie.”

He looks like I slapped him and, even in my anger, I regret saying it.

“Right. Only your friends and I’ll never be that because you won’t allow it. I’ve never stopped being that guy from the list in your eyes, have I? You hate my guts. You always have and always will.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about your little list - ‘Ten Things I Hate About Grayson Wolfe.’ You’ve got it posted on your bedroom wall.”

Oh shit.

I’m ashamed and embarrassed he saw it, especially knowing at least one of those reasons was bound to hurt him. Number Eight. It’s not true. Why didn’t I rip it down the last time I bothered looking at it?

But the bigger part of me is still angry at him.

And now, he’s angry, too.

Except he’s close, so close. Even in our anger, our bodies seek each other’s heat and we’re breathing hard for reasons neither of us can deny. His mouth is inches away. I can already taste his lips. I crave the clash that’s coming.

“Maybe I am that guy. Maybe I didn’t want to stop fucking you, no matter what,” he growls.

I twist and pant, like cornered prey, as he cages me between his body and the wall. I can’t stop wanting him. “Maybe I’d keep fucking you even when I hate you. Are there

cameras watching us here?” I murmur, knowing he’ll understand my meaning.

He groans and shakes his head.

I don’t know who moves first but, when we touch, fury steps back and desire takes over. Our mouths crash together, a frenzied, ravenous meeting. One kiss and his control is quickly slipping while mine is an afterthought. His hands are grappling with my skirt as I tear his shirt from him like a woman possessed, the buttons going *pop-pop-pop* and scattering around us.

“Even if you hate me, it’s you I want, only you.” He whisks away my panties. “I didn’t use you to get back at him.”

“How can I be sure?”

He palms my mound, roughly stimulating my clit until I’m throbbing with need. “Because I said so.”

I bite his bottom lip with our next kiss. “Why should I trust your word?”

He bites me back. “Because I said so.”

“Cocky asshole.” I palm his rock-hard erection through his pants.

“That’s me. And you’re still Little Miss Perfect.” He pushes my hand off him. “Do you know how fucking crazy you drive me?” he rumbles, his fingers tracing my dripping folds.

“Shut up,” I pant when he kneels for me. I want him, only him. At this moment, I don’t even care if he was using me to get at Fox. I’d want this anyway.

He grasps my knees, urging me to open up for him. I surrender gladly. And when his mouth closes over my clit and he begins to suck, I moan helplessly for him.

He’s not patient like usual. The finesse I’ve become accustomed to isn’t there. He *devours* me. It’s harsh and too much but it’s so good. I cry out in ecstasy regardless of the scrape of his stubble or the relentlessness of his tongue. If I

imagined him being on his knees meant I was in control, I was completely wrong. Grayson Wolfe owns my body as surely as he'll soon own my father's company. I'm his feast to enjoy and yet the pleasure is all mine.

I'm still boneless and shaking from my orgasm when he stands and I hear the hiss of his zipper. He gives me one searching look and I realize he's waiting for permission. I have a choice to make.

My choice is yes.

It's always yes for him.

I nod and, the next second, he hoists me into his strong arms, spreads my legs and pins me to the wall, impaling me on his cock in one swift move as he growls my name like a curse. The pleasure-pain rips through me, amazingly good and overwhelming, but it doesn't diminish my confused emotions.

Angry sex. That's what this is. It's fucking hot.

He shifts into a punishing pace that barely lets me catch my breath but I hold on for dear life, longing for the way he makes me feel. I hardly have time to spiral with him before he's pulling out of me, uttering a shocking obscenity which makes me spasm even harder.

The emptiness without him filling me, it twists my climax until it hits an excruciating pitch but then I feel the warm jets of his release spilling across my thighs, giving me an unfamiliar and erotic thrill. Oh right, he's not wearing a condom. He kept his head enough to avoid that potential whoops, unlike me.

Afterwards, I want to lean into him, want him to hold me tenderly like he always does. And yet, something holds me back.

This was angry sex. It's rather hollow if you're still angry once it's done.

I feel a wall rising between us, one that I thought had been blasted away the past few weeks, as he lowers me back to my feet. "This wasn't why I brought you in here."

“Are you sure?” I clip, wanting to guard my wounded feelings.

His eyes turn cold to match my tone. The sick feeling in my stomach from earlier returns. “Perhaps it was then. The man you hate would do such a thing, wouldn’t he?”

“Maybe he would.”

He pushes away from me with a snarl. Trembling, I adjust my skirt and locate my underwear calmly like he didn’t just fuck me into next week against this wall, ignoring the damp, sticky remains of our actions, my tender back or the building ache where my heart lies. I’ve always felt closer to Grayson after sex. Now, it feels like every second is leading us farther apart in more than just the physical sense.

I’m nearly out of the room when he calls my name. I turn and he’s standing there in his ruined shirt, zipping his pants back up with his tousled hair which beckons for my fingers. I stand my ground and wait for him to speak. “Can we talk about this?”

“No. I’m apparently long overdue for a conversation with my father,” I say in a horrible, cold-hearted tone of self-preservation before I walk away.

37-ELEANOR

The grandfather clock chimes in the foyer when I enter the house. It's only three o'clock. My father wasn't at his office. I was told he'd left work early. Drawing a deep breath, I shrug out of my jacket and look for him in his study. I'm done dreading confrontations with him. It's high time I learn to face difficult conversations and speak my mind. And, high time he learn how to speak plainly with his daughter.

Except, he's not here.

Maybe he's not home yet. Mrs. Hadley's off today or I'd ask her.

Deciding I want a shower and fresh clothes – I *did* have unexpected wall sex at work an hour ago – I hurry upstairs but worry starts to gnaw a hole in my earlier anger and resentment as the warm water cascades around me. Can I forgive Grayson for not telling me? Or my father? Is he alright for that matter? He's seventy. Is there a reason he's selling out and being quiet about it? Oh God, what if my dad is sick?

There's still no sign of him in the house when I return downstairs. I'm about to call his phone when, through the large windows at the back of the house, I see him. He doesn't look sick. He looks happy and content, driving one ball and then another across our little fairway. I bite back an unexpected grin. It's been so long since I've seen him play simply for the sake of enjoying himself. I open the patio door to join him.

“That one went two hundred yards if it went a foot.”

He places the next ball on the tee. “Don't flatter me, Norrie. Maybe one-sixty. I can't turn back time and my swing has lost power in the last twenty years but at least I can still hit it straight.”

I shade my eyes with one hand and reconsider the distance. “I still say it went one-eighty at least. My eyes are better than yours.”

He tips back his cap and chuckles. “We’ll call it one-eighty then. What are you doing home this early?”

“I could ask you the same.”

“I asked you first. Your driver is in the bag if you want to join.”

He brought my driver out with him? Of course, I want to join him. “You’re selling Fairfield to Wolfe Media,” I say matter-of-factly as I pull on my gloves and place my tee.

He nods and I catch a twinkle in his eyes. “Did Grayson tell you?”

“No, Fox did.” The twinkle disappears and he grimaces. “Dammit, Dad, why didn’t *you* tell me?”

He sighs and sets down his driver. “I planned to tell you but then hesitated. I didn’t want you to try and talk me out of it until a closing date was settled.”

“Why?”

“I’m ready to retire. I’ve *been* ready to retire. At this point, I’m only waiting for the legalities and for Theo to sign the dotted line.”

“I don’t understand why you’re selling. You’ve devoted your life to that company.”

“I have but that’s my biggest regret, Norrie.”

“What do you mean?”

“When your mother passed, I threw myself into work to bury my grief. But it was a mistake. There was something more important I should’ve thrown myself into instead.”

“What?”

“You, sweetheart. You needed your father more than the business needed me.”

My chin starts to tremble but anger is there, too. “I was right here. I did need you. And you sent me away!”

His eyes are full of remorse. “I know. I’m sorry. I doubted my ability to raise you without her, and thought-”

“Thought what? That a school could raise your child better than you could?”

“I’m sorry, Norrie. I can’t undo the mistakes I’ve made but I’m going to try and change going forward.”

“By not telling me any of this upfront!? By keeping me in the dark?! How’s that changing anything?! You want to retire? Fine! But I thought... I thought you wanted me to take over for you someday!”

My anger and hurt blazes forth again. I whack the golf ball at my feet hard. It lands well off course as I spin back towards him.

“But, that was ridiculous of me to assume. You never wanted me there, never seriously. You don’t think I can handle it. It doesn’t matter how hard I studied at Yale. I was never going to be good enough. Is it because I’m not a son or-”

“Now, hold on. I have never once wished for you to be anything other than who you are. You’re my daughter. I love you and I’m proud of you, end of story.”

“But you’d already chosen Fox to take over someday, hadn’t you? It’s why you pushed us towards each other!”

“Norrie, I didn’t choose Fox to take over. He’s a few years older than you and has more experience so, yes, I considered he might be a good interim leader until you were ready but I would never choose him over you. Once you two started dating though, I hoped you might be loving partners who could work together in the future. It’s a lot to manage on one’s own.” He hangs his head. “But I was wrong about him. I’m ashamed of ever introducing you to him in the first place. The night you fled from your engagement party, it opened my eyes. I spent the entire night sitting in my study reflecting on all the mistakes I’d made.”

“You could’ve talked to me then! And why does he still work for you?”

“Because I had no legitimate grounds to dismiss him until I fired him this morning.”

“You what?”

“I’d been planning to allow Grayson that pleasure once the buyout was done because I knew it would cut Davenport to the bone to have the man he hated be the one to let him go.”

“Why would you care about that?”

“He cheated on you. He cheated on my daughter. I’m not a violent man but that doesn’t mean I’m above wanting revenge. But this morning, I caught him in my office snooping and fired him on the spot. I’ll admit it felt very satisfying.”

He strides over to me, eating up the distance in mere seconds. Which is admittedly brave considering the way I’m still angrily clutching this golf club.

“Norrie...” He takes one of my hands in his and I glance down. His hands show his age, weathered and spotted, and yet they’re still my father’s hands, the same ones which first helped wrap mine around a golf club. “You were always good enough for me, sweetheart. Too good for this bitter, inflexible, difficult old man and you’re too good to be held back from the things you want in life. I couldn’t watch you working away at our little telecommunications firm for forty years or more when I know it’s not where your heart lies.”

“How would you know that? How would you know anything about what I want?”

“I haven’t been there the way I should’ve been after your mother passed. I’m not worthy of a daughter like you, Norrie. I know that. Your mom was more nurturing and smarter than me in so many ways. But, I’m not blind. I saw how bored you were at Fairfield though you tried hard to hide it from me.”

“You did?” I ask, wincing. I thought I was a better actress. Guess not.

He nods. “I don’t pretend to know where your path will lead you but, once the business is sold, I’m going to spend as much time as I please hitting a golf ball around and you’re

going to go out there with the money you need to pursue something you feel passionate about.”

I’m still shocked by his revelation but the wound no longer feels beyond healing. “We need to talk about things. Big or small. Important or stupid. Regularly, dammit.” A tear escapes and he catches it with his thumb.

“Yes, we do. *I* need to do better. *I want* to do better for you. Please, Norrie, can I have another chance?”

His chin wobbles with his plea and it turns me to mush. My anger towards him burns out. When he asks to hold me, I don’t resist. I love him too much. There’s flaws in our father-daughter bond but they’re not insurmountable. There’s regret that our relationship isn’t everything it could be but maybe it’s not too late to change that.

When we’re both a little more composed, I sniffle and ask, “Are you sure about this, Dad? You built that company from scratch.”

“I did. It was my dream. But businesses come and go. That’s the way of the world. And, I never meant for my dream to become your burden someday. Go find your own dream to pursue.”



Dad and I make a simple dinner together in the kitchen. It’s something we’ve rarely done but I’m determined we’ll do more going forward. As I come to accept that he’s selling the business, I feel a sense of freedom with the news. Being CEO of Fairfield Communications was never my dream. I thought it was a duty for me to take up when the time came but my father saw the truth and wasn’t going to saddle me with the responsibilities of running a company I didn’t want.

We discuss the details of the sale and how he’s made sure that those employees who want to continue in their jobs will have that opportunity under Wolfe Media. “It sounds like you and Theo discussed a great deal in the course of one conversation.”

“No, not all in that one conversation. I’ve had numerous conversations with him and with Grayson since that day making sure everyone was provided for... except Fox.”

We share a brief and devilish smile over that before I grow somber again. “I’m still angry and hurt that Grayson knew and didn’t tell me.”

“The same Grayson who you swore you hated when I told you about the position at Wolfe?”

“I don’t hate him.”

“Oh, I figured not,” he says with a smirk. “I saw the picture of that kiss. I saw the way he danced with you at the Founders’ Ball and I’ve noticed the way he looks at you more than once.”

“Dad!”

“And in case you were unaware of it, it’s hardly just the women who love to gossip at the country club. I have it on good authority you left with Grayson Wolfe after I left that night, young lady.”

I’ve turned red as a tomato while glaring at him. “I am twenty-three years old!”

“I know,” he chuckles. “I wouldn’t want him to take advantage of you in his capacity as your boss but, beyond that, it’s not my business. I only want you to be happy.”

“We were happy. Or I think we were. But it’s going to take a little time to work past this.”

“This isn’t Grayson’s fault. I should’ve been the one to tell you, Norrie.”

“I haven’t spent years hating you. Old habits die hard.”

“They do but don’t let them die too hard.”

Dad tells me he’ll take care of cleaning up the kitchen after that so I go upstairs where I can think. My eyes land on the corkboard no sooner than I reach my bedroom. That stupid, juvenile list. I wish I could kick my own butt for printing it out and leaving it there.

After I've ripped it down, I lay down across my bed with a sigh. I want to call him. Or email him. It's how our ceasefire began.

But I need time to work through these lingering feelings, especially that sad bit of me which worries revenge against Fox meant more to him than I ever did.

38-GRAYSON

To: eleanor.fairfield@wolfemedia.com
From: grayson.wolfe@wolfemedia.com

October 18th 6:25 PM

Subject: I fucked up

“I think all your emails should start with that in the subject line,” Jonathan says dryly from behind me.

“Fuck off.”

“Be sure to sign off with ‘please forgive my sorry ass,’” Oliver chimes in.

“Is that your company email?!” Theo gives me a horrified expression before he starts smirking. “Start with ‘I’m an idiot but I’m *your* idiot.’”

“I hate all three of you.”

“He invited us over and this is the thanks we get, guys.”

The blank body of the message taunts me along with my brothers. I close the laptop on my groveling email and beat my head against it instead. Oliver grabs the back of my shirt. “As a doctor, I’m going to beg you to stop beating your head against that.”

“Fine.” I move the laptop aside and use the desk instead. Yeah, this is harder. I deserve that.

I can’t believe I didn’t tell her when I had the chance, can’t believe the rotten luck of that asshole finding out and being the one to break the news to her.

And, no matter how much I wanted her at the time, I can’t believe I fucked her in that meeting room the way I did. What the hell came over me? I never meant to be that rough or unhinged with her.

“I was like a possessed man,” I mumble to myself.

“Goddammit, Gray. Talk to us,” Theo barks, cutting short my babbling.

Sighing, I lift my head from the desk and stare at my brothers. Fuck, my head hurts. Jonathan sets down a tumbler of scotch in front of me. My head’s already hurting. Why not? I tip it back and come clean about what’s eating me up. They listen like they always do when I need them.

Six days. Six miserable days have passed and with every passing one I’m growing more convinced I’ve lost her for good. I don’t care about the dumb list. I care about her and how hurt she probably was thinking I used her to get at Davenport.

She called Theo the day after our last encounter saying she needed to take a few personal days. I can hardly blame her considering what happened. Theo’s still planning to talk to her about the position he’d like to offer her. I don’t tell Theo but I hope she decides to open that restaurant with Drew instead. Whatever she decides though, I want her to be happy.

“I asked if one of you could stop by to talk. Didn’t expect all three of you to show.” I can’t help grinning at my brother after enough drinks. “I love you, guys. You know that, right?”

They smile back at me. “Yeah, we do and we love you, too, shrimp.” I scowl at the nickname coming from Jonathan and the absolute audacity of Theo ruffling my hair.

“I acted inappropriately at the office with Eleanor, Theo. Again. Can you come back to work and be in charge? You’ve probably forgotten what that’s like. God knows, Quinn rules the roost at home.”

He smirks and doesn’t take the bait. “I’ll be back at work tomorrow.”

“You will?! Hey, I didn’t really mean for you to come back sooner than planned. It’s okay. I promised you I could handle it and I am-”

“I know you are. You’ve been working your ass off, Gray. I’m only coming in for that meeting with Louis. We’ll be putting ink on paper with the man.”

Shit, that’s right. I hold my aching head but I think my heart aches more. “She hates me for it. I never wanted her to hate me in the first place.”

“I highly doubt she hates you over her father’s decision to sell his company,” Jonathan tells me.

“I should’ve told her. I was trying to compose a groveling email when you guys got here.”

“An email? That’s your idea of an apology?” Oliver says, incredulously.

“It’s how our ceasefire started.” His dark eyebrows rise higher. “It’s kind of our thing.”

“Okay, send that email then.”

“But don’t flood her with them,” Theo adds.

“Says the man who sent Quinn thirty-seven texts when he fucked up.”

“Hey! At least I didn’t have to fly to another country to win my woman back, Jonathan.”

“I’d never been to Ireland. And it didn’t take me a month of moping to pull my head out of my ass and go after Mia unlike *someone*.”

“Shut up,” Oliver tells him. “Libby needed time to simmer down. And I was a dumb fuck.”

I find myself laughing with them despite the worry that plagues me and my wish to make things right with Eleanor again. “Yeah, okay. I’ll send this and see if she’s willing to let me do some groveling in person next.”

But before it’s finished and sent off, I receive an email from a realtor about a potential investment I’d looked into which gets me thinking...

39-ELEANOR

“Are you certain, Ms. Fairfield?” Theo asks over the phone. “I believe you’d be an excellent fit for this position and you show a lot of promise as a future executive. I could make accommodations if there’s any personnel issues you’d prefer to-”

“Thank you, truly, for the offer and your faith in me but I’m thinking about taking my career in a different direction.”

“Eleanor, he’s my brother but if there’s anything he’s done or said while acting as your supervisor that has made you-”

“No, Theo. Nothing like that to worry about. I needed a few days to work through some things but I’m planning to come in tomorrow. If that’s alright...”

“Of course, it is.” He sighs through the phone. “Do you foresee a way you might forgive him or...” He quickly cuts himself off from saying more. He’s Grayson’s brother. I’m my father’s daughter. Intertwining family and business can be a delicate blend. Or a volatile one. We both know it well. “My apologies. Those aren’t questions for me to ask.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you in the morning. Goodnight.”

Six miserable days and six long and lonely nights. Another one looms before me. Can I forgive Grayson? Yes. In my heart, I already have. Can he forgive me?

I return to the three-way chat I was having before my call from Theo.

Drew: *Still wallowing?*

Me: *Yes.*

Constance: *Don’t. It’s bad for your complexion.*

Me: *Who says that?*

Constance: *Everyone, darling.*

Drew: *I don't say that. I say let's go eat an entire cheesecake when I'm in the mood to wallow.*

I laugh but the laugh turns into a sob the next moment.
Me: *I miss him. So much.*

Drew: *He misses you, too. I know he must.*

Constance: *If he's got any sense at all, he misses you horribly and his life is in shambles without you.*

Me: *I love you both. You know that, right?*

Constance: *We know.*

Drew: *Hang on. I'm getting a call.*

Constance and I continue to chat but Drew doesn't return and we say our goodnights at last.

Dad pops his head into my room no sooner than I've laid my phone down. "Are you ready for tomorrow, Norrie?"

I nod, hoping I am. I'll be going to work tomorrow and my father will be coming in to sign the papers with Theo and Grayson. Dad asked if I wanted to join him in the meeting and I agreed. Not because I feel a strong emotional attachment to the business but because I know my father has over the years and I want him to have someone in his corner who understands that.

He said he's going to try harder with our relationship and I intend to let him. The past few days, we've talked and golfed and hopefully started building new bridges over those old distances between us.

He's told me he's giving me the bulk of the sale to go towards my future dreams. When I told him that my future dream was opening a restaurant with Drew, he had turned pale with shock momentarily but then smiled, only making me promise to spend wisely. In return, he's offered any guidance he can give and declared he'll be our first customer.

I haven't told Drew about my plans yet or the money from Dad because deals can fall apart at the last second and I couldn't bear to disappoint her. But one day, our restaurant dream is coming true. For both of us.

Once Dad leaves, I stare up at the ceiling like I've done the past six nights feeling lost and empty.

Haven't you had enough wallowing by now, Norrie?

I smile thinking of that beloved voice which sounds noticeably irritated tonight.

I really have spent enough time wallowing, haven't I, Mom?

Maybe Grayson and I can't work past this but what if we can? Isn't what we had worth fighting for? I love him and, whether or not he might love me, shouldn't I show him how wrong my stupid list was? I'd removed it from my corkboard in a wounded daze the other night. I wish I could burn it.

Well, why couldn't you? Or why couldn't you compose a new list?

I could do that. I think it's still in the wastepaper basket. There's something oddly satisfying in the thought of burning that rubbish.

And a new list, I could do that, too. Oh my goodness! Like a floodgate has been opened, ten reasons and more come stomping into my brain, demanding to be heard. They won't be silent until I write them down.

As I'm finishing my list, my laptop bleeps with a notification. My pulse swiftly accelerates and my heart *hopes*.

To: eleanor.fairfield@wolfemedia.com

From: grayson.wolfe@wolfemedia.com

October 18th 10:27 PM

Subject: Surrender

Eleanor,

I am miserably missing you again tonight. The past few days have been hell. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for not telling you. I'm sorry for ever making you think he had any place between us. He means nothing and there's nothing worth winning which could ever compare to having you.

So, I'm waving my white flag. I'm handing you my sword. I'll give you a winning handicap in a round of golf if you prefer. I surrender. To you. Always and only to you.

Can I see you? Tomorrow after work if you have time, there's something I'd like to show you.

I miss having the privilege of calling you Norrie by the way.

~Grayson

Grinning despite the tears gathering in my eyes, I reply.

I'm too busy burning a terrible top-ten list to accept your surrender at this time. I've been working on a new one but I will gladly meet you tomorrow after work.

I'm miserably missing you, too.

Appreciatively yours,

Norrie

P.S. I'll beat you in a round of golf someday, fair and square.

40-ELEANOR

Not going to lie, I'm nervous walking into the office this morning. But if the past few months have taught me anything, it's how to hold my head high in the face of adversity or potential scandal.

The guys at the security desk give me a friendly wave. No odd looks. Guess Grayson was right about no cameras aimed at that particular wall in the meeting room.

I ride the elevator with Caroline from Accounts. She tells me about her new grandbaby. Becca greets me in the breakroom like normal. No one acts any differently. Maybe Fox's awful visit has passed under the radar. Good.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I head to my desk. Theo's waiting for me there. My grip on my coffee mug tightens but my smile doesn't falter. "Good morning. When you said you'd see me in the morning, I didn't realize it would be so early. Welcome back by the way."

He grins and thanks me before asking if I'll be joining my father for their meeting at two. I tell him I will. "Great. Grayson won't be in today until then."

"Why not?" I blurt out before I can help myself.

"He didn't tell me precisely. He just asked me to let you know. I'll see you later. That coffee smells good."

With that, Theo strolls away, leaving me far too curious to relish my first cup.



I had too many cups of coffee. Meeting time arrives and I'm on pins and needles wondering if I'll see him at last. Has it really only been a week? It feels like forever.

"Are you alright, Norrie?" my dad asks when I go downstairs to greet him.

“Yes, just a little nervous.”

“It’ll be fine. The foundation is laid and, so long as it’s solid, this part usually goes smoother than you think.”

I nod, absently. “I wasn’t referring to the deal to be honest.”

He pats my hand, lovingly. “Neither was I.”

As luck would have it, due to an electrical issue, the meeting is moved at the last minute to one of the larger rooms on the first floor. *The* meeting room from the other day, in fact.

My cheeks grow hot the second I set foot in it with Dad. I surreptitiously search for cameras to be extra sure Grayson was right. None are aimed towards a certain wall but, God help me, how am I supposed to keep a straight face in here?

Legal from Wolfe and Dad’s attorney are already here along with his assistant and Claire. Theo comes in right behind us and shakes hands with my father. “You’ve got an amazing daughter, Louis. If she happens to change her mind once her training period ends, she’d always be welcome here.”

Dad beams at me until I tell them both to stop making me blush. Everyone takes a seat and I nervously brush my palms down my skirt. Where is he? He asked to see me after work but I know he wouldn’t miss this. True, Theo can handle it without Grayson but... does he think I’ll resent it if he sits in on the sale of my father’s business? I won’t. I’m quite acclimated to the decision now and-

“Sorry, everyone,” that familiar deep voice says as the door behind me opens. “I didn’t realize that the meeting location had changed.”

Swiveling in my chair, I turn to see him. One glance and he knocks the breath from my lungs. Yes, it’s not any different than the other tailored suits I’ve seen him in but he’s as devastatingly handsome as ever and I have to stop myself from racing across the room into his arms.

He finds me in the crowd around the table and his gaze never wavers from mine as he walks towards the table until he's seated next to Theo. His eyes flick to the wall and a slow smirk appears. I have to bite my tongue to keep from giggling.

The lawyers start talking and still he stares. I'm the object of all his attention. It would make me uncomfortable except I can't look away from him either.

At last, someone clears their throat, I don't know who, and it breaks the spell long enough for us to recall our roles here; me to support my father and him as COO of Wolfe Media. Nevertheless, our eyes are repeatedly drawn back to each other, as if they've been deprived of something necessary for too long. And perhaps that's the case.

No sooner than the papers are signed and the handshakes are over, Grayson steps up to me. "Can we get out of here, Eleanor?"

"Norrie," I whisper softly. "I'm Norrie to you."

He smiles. "Can I take you somewhere, Norrie? There's something I want to show you."

"The workday isn't technically over yet... but I have a feeling the boss might cut me some slack," I answer with a grin.

A quick word to my father as Theo amusedly shakes his head at Grayson and then we're out the door.

On the street, Grayson guides us as we fall in sync with our steps, quietly walking side by side. Neither of us speaks and a weighted awareness of that builds but it's tempered by my belief in my father's words - *'this part usually goes smoother than you think.'* Whatever needs to be said will be but, for now, this is enough. And, wherever we're heading, I trust Grayson to lead me there.

Three blocks of walking and I recognize the restaurant space that was for lease, the perfect spot Drew had pointed out to us not long ago. "Oh no," I sigh. "It's been leased. I hope Drew isn't disappointed."

“She’s not. She’s ecstatic. The electric blue hair really brings out her eyes if you’ve not seen it yet.”

“How would you know that she’s... Grayson?”

“She’s still convinced it’s the perfect spot. I hope so but the question is, do you agree?”

My mouth falls open as I look at the restaurant again and see Drew inside speaking with a couple of men. They’re in construction hats. I whirl to face Grayson. “What did you do?”

“It’s Drew’s dream but it’s not just hers. At least, I don’t believe it is. Norrie...” He slowly takes my hand in his, pulling it up to his chest. “Do you want to sit behind a desk for the next forty years or do you want to open a restaurant with your best friend? I’d really like to know.”

“I’d like to open a restaurant with Drew. I told her and my dad I would. He’s giving me money to do it from the sale of Fairfield Communications.”

“Oh. Well, I’m glad you talked to him about it. Especially since I contacted the realtor the day she showed it to us.”

I shake my head with disbelief but also excitement. “You leased the space for us?”

“Not exactly.” He sheepishly rubs at the back of his neck. “This is a hot area in real estate. I’d hate for you ladies to open your restaurant and the rent go up the next month so I, uh... bought the building for you.”

“You what?!” I’m shocked. Gobsmailed. Flabbergasted.

“Of course, I wouldn’t want to be your landlord. There’s another role I’d prefer in your life so I’m planning to sign the title over to the two of you and-”

I throw myself at him before he finishes with a shrill cry of “Thank you!”

And, because it pleases me to do so, I give him a simple ‘thank-you kiss,’ too. Lovingly and openly, I kiss Grayson

Wolfe on the sidewalk outside me and my best friend's future restaurant.

For a simple kiss, there's quite a bit of heat packed in it. And some tongue. Someone might've moaned. (Okay, it was me.)

"That was the best thank-you kiss I could ever receive," he murmurs once I pull back, slowly licking his bottom lip with a roguish smile.

"Keep looking at me that way and you may get another."

He chuckles and then cups my face, his eyes alight with emotion. "Norrie, I love you. I want to be with you, not to show anyone up, not to get some revenge, not just for sex - though, please God, let's do that - but because I love you. I have fun with you and I hope you have fun with me. And even when I'm feeling low, you bring me joy. I'm addicted to the feeling and want to be with you for as long as you can tolerate me."

With my heart soaring, I twine my fingers together through his thick hair, gazing up at him with absolute adoration and reply, "I believe I can tolerate you for a very long while, Mr. Wolfe, because I love you, too." The softness in his eyes when I say those words makes my heart melt with happiness. "But this goes against your earlier declaration regarding debutantes, doesn't it?"

"I have a new declaration. I want a debutante but only one, only you. You're *my* debutante and that makes all the difference."

Glancing over my shoulder, I realize Drew's been watching us from the window, her gleeful look mirroring my own. "Shall we go inside your new business, Ms. Fairfield?" Grayson asks.

A thrilling sense of purpose and challenge fills me. But so does a brief flicker of worry. "What if it fails? So many restaurants do."

"Then, you fail. We all do, now and then. But I don't believe you will. I think this is going to be the most successful

eatery in the area... especially after I order all my employees to eat lunch here every day.”

I lightly smack his arm before stopping his ridiculous mouth with another thank-you kiss... and another. I have a lot to be thankful for after all because nothing could make me happier than having this man's love and loving him in return.

41-GRAYSON

“Finally convinced you to play hooky with me and see how nice it is?” I tease from between her thighs. Her response is unintelligible gibberish but it’s blissed-out-by-orgasms gibberish so that’s good enough for me.

After we’d briefly spoken with Drew and the contractors I’d hired, there was nothing I wanted more than some time alone with Norrie. The moment I had her inside my house, we couldn’t keep our hands off each other. In fact, I was too impatient to finish carrying her up to my bedroom.

“Staircases aren’t really all that comfortable, are they?” she mumbles.

They aren’t but her legs are still splayed open with her skirt rucked up around her waist and her taste still flavors my tongue. She’s so fucking sexy and precious at the same time.

“Promise I’ll finish the job in bed.”

“You’d better,” she snickers quietly, her hand gently twisting through my hair and filling me with such a sense of contentment. “Someone told me I should ask for what I want or take it. And I think I want to ride you next, Mr. Wolfe.”

“I am at your command, Fairfield. I surrendered after all.”

But if this is surrender, it sure feels like victory.

She’s mine and I’m hers. This is where we belong. No, not laying on a floating staircase after I’ve had Norrie for a late lunch. I meant together. And loving each other.

“Come on, angel,” I coax, helping her to her feet and leading her up the stairs.

“Oh wait, I need my messenger bag. I have something for you, too.”

After retrieving the bag, she pulls out a folded up piece of paper and then beckons me to join her in bed once all our

clothes have been removed. Undressing Norrie is one of my very favorite things and there's plenty of kissing and caressing going on. Perhaps that paper can wait a little longer.

"No, it can't. Please, Grayson."

Well, when she says please, I can't tell her no. I lay back on the pillows and she curls up beside me, tucked perfectly there where I want her. I kiss the top of her head, whisper, 'I love you,' again because I can now and wait to see what she's so eager to share.

"The other list was written by a misinformed teenager and reprinted by a woman stubbornly trying to hold on to her anger. This one was written last night by who I am now." She passes the paper to me and I unfold it.

Twenty Things I LOVE About Grayson Wolfe

"I like this title much better," I say around the lump which is quickly forming in my throat. "You accidentally left I'm a cocky asshole as Number One." She gives me a mischievous smile. "Alright, that one can stay."

"It's meant affectionately now if that softens the blow."

"It does."

"About that old list and Number Eight, Grayson. That wasn't true. Not at all. I hope you know that."

"I do." I clasp her hand and pull it up to my chest, right over where my heart beats. "In here, I do. Sometimes, I just need reminding."

I'd go to war for my brothers and they would do the same for me. I was the last one born but it doesn't make me the least.

"I love this whole new list you've made," I tell her before swiftly pulling her on top of me and earning an adorable shriek of surprise. "In fact, Number Nine-"

"Grayson Wolfe is an absolute god in bed?" Yes, I quite liked that one."

"Me, too. But I think it deserves a higher ranking."

“I suppose the order of reasons is negotiable. Convince me.”

I nip her bottom lip and nuzzle her throat where the sweet smell of lilacs is most heady. I grip her hips, urging her to slide down my length. “Well, I do love a challenge.”

“Yes and you love a woman coming out on top,” she whimpers, arching her back as I thrust upward, filling her and feeling that irresistibly sweet pussy welcoming me home. “Oh my God...” she cries as she starts to rock her hips.

“Nuh-uh. What do we say?”

“Oh my Grayson,” she corrects with a laugh which soon becomes a moan.



The day I convinced her to play hooky with me all afternoon is going on a top-ten list of my own - **Top Ten Best Days Ever**.

Since that day, we’ve been inseparable away from the office while keeping things quiet at work.

Today, however, Eleanor finished her trainee period with Wolfe Media, a few days after Theo returned in a more regular capacity.

I won’t pretend it’s not nice having my burden at work halved with my brother’s return but, while I’m going to miss seeing Norrie during the day, I won’t miss having to keep my feelings for my woman hidden.

“Grayson, they can all see us.”

“Let them,” I murmur, lowering my mouth to meet hers. I don’t care if we’re in the main lobby at five o’clock when so many employees are heading home for the day. She’s mine and I want everyone to know it.

She makes no further protest. In fact, she kisses me back with equal passion until the unexpected and loud cheers from Paula, Claire and some of the other ladies has me blushing - *Me!* - and suggesting we head on.

That night, we're officially sharing our relationship status with the people who mean the most to us, too. Yes, they all know but they've let us have our space for eleven whole days before butting in as families and friends tend to do.

My parents, brothers, their ladies, Theo's kids, Louis and Constance are on their way to my house for dinner. Drew, Norrie and I are currently knee-deep in food prep.

"It's good practice for the restaurant's opening," Drew says, breezily. She's by far the most at ease in the kitchen but we are capable of following orders - need something chopped, stirred or mashed? I'm your guy - and we've made a savory meal to enjoy on a late October evening.

With a few renovations and hiring to do, Norrie and Drew have been busy bees but soon things will be ready for The Butternut Tree's grand opening. "Why The Butternut Tree?" I ask of the name.

"For the tree, its nut and the squash with that name which I'll be using in some of our menu offerings," Drew replies.

"And because it was a butternut tree I was climbing down before I fell on you that night at the country club, Wolfe."

I grin, liking that answer very much. "You mean, when you fell *for* me, Fairfield."

"Cocky asshole." Yeah, I am but she doesn't disagree.

I follow Norrie down to the cellar to select a few bottles of wine when Drew shoos us out of the kitchen. There's already whiskey for those who prefer it, as well as seasonal coffee ready for brewing when desired.

Alone for a moment, I catch her by the arm and spin her into mine. She grins up at me with that feisty look I adore. "Now, to be clear, Grayson, we're a couple and everyone knows it but you can't kiss me all night when we've got company."

"Says who?"

"Says me. Your parents and my dad will be here."

I think Louis is coming around to the notion his little girl isn't a little girl anymore. But even better, father and daughter have been communicating and growing closer which is what I want for them.

And my parents, especially Mom, won't complain one bit about me finding love with the girl they always thought would be perfect for me. She *is* perfect for me but not because they decided it years ago. She's perfect because she challenges me, puts me in my place when I need it and loves me for who I am.

I catch her chin, slowly rubbing my thumb over her bottom lip. "You better brace yourself, Fairfield. I'll be kissing you and doing so often tonight. I'm an affectionate man and your lips are even more irresistible when they're swollen from my kisses." I love watching her melt from my words as much as from my touch.

"So long as you remember there will be children present."

"Don't worry. I may kiss you during our dinner party..." I lean in close, taking satisfaction in the way she shivers with anticipation when I promise her, "But I'll be worshipping you tonight."

Her golden-brown eyes are blazing with arousal when the doorbell rings from above, announcing our first guests. I guide her up the stairs so we can answer together. She breathes deep as I reach for the door and blows out a long breath. "Don't be nervous. They all know you already."

"Your other brothers and your parents might only know me as Eleanor, the good little debutante from the country club."

Cupping her cheek, I kiss her lightly on the brow. "You've always been more than a girl in a white dress with perfect manners. They'll all see it and they'll see how much I adore you, too."

I open the door where the frogs are serenading my parents with their croaking. Don't the damned things hibernate or

something?

Mom's eyes light up as she catches sight of Eleanor's hand in mind and Dad grins as if he knew this would be the case all along. *Parents.*

But honestly? I'm no longer bothered by their old scheming. Because, when Mom envelopes Norrie in a loving embrace and I see my girl's eyes sparkling with happy tears, I know she's going to fit right in with this Wolfe pack of ours perfectly.

42-EPILOGUE

Eleanor-

Nine months later

Time has a way of flying by when you're having fun and life with Grayson, along with doing something that I love for a living, is an absolute blast.

After splitting my time between two homes for several months, I moved in with Grayson a few weeks ago. I miss seeing Dad daily now that we've grown so much closer but we speak everyday and this is much more convenient for the restaurant. Not to mention, Grayson loves it when I'm vocal in the bedroom which would've been a bit awkward when it came to facing my father across the breakfast table the following morning.

Speaking of parents, while Dad is enjoying playing golf to his heart's content, I love having Margaret as a regular part of my life. Mom's voice is still there, that little voice of encouragement when I need it, but there's so many new people to share my life with now. Men who are like big brothers to me now and their wives who are like sisters. It's marvelous.

The frogs are croaking in a disgruntled fashion as Margaret and I enter the house. We'd been out for a brief shopping expedition - Mia and Jonathan recently shared the news they're expecting with everyone and cute onesies had to be found - when I find my father sitting in my living room with his feet up, looking uncharacteristically disheveled with dirt all over the floor.

"Dad, are you alright?" I ask, dropping my bags to hurry to his side.

"Yes, I'm right as rain, Norrie," he answers, chuckling. "I simply tweaked this old knee of mine and told Grayson he'd have to take it from here if I'm to have any hope of dancing with my girl tonight."

I'm relieved it isn't anything serious but I'm eyeing the trail of dirt leading to the patio doors suspiciously. "Take what from here?"

Dad pretends to zip his lips before rising to his feet. "I'm sworn to secrecy in this matter or I promise I wouldn't keep you in the dark, love. I'm going to shove off for now but I'll see you kids tonight at the party."

"Yes, I'll see you there, too, sweetheart, and tell Grayson I said goodbye. Louis, what has my son done now?" Margaret asks, following my father out the door. Her tone is as affectionate as it is exasperated and I can relate. Grayson has a knack for bringing out both of those emotions in the people who love him.

Left on my own to discover what Grayson's up to, I follow the trail of dirt out onto our patio. I find my man wrestling an impressive-sized sapling wrapped in a (torn) burlap sack into a large hole he's apparently dug in our small garden. This man.

"Do I even have to guess what kind of tree that is?"

Looking over his shoulder at me, he smiles and the breath is knocked clean out of me as it often is by that smile. I'm suddenly not thinking about pointing out how large butternut trees grow to be. I'm thinking how hot he looks with that charming grin of his when he's sweaty and a little dirty. There are those damned tingles again.

As if he can guess the nature of my thoughts, he tugs his t-shirt over his head, wipes his face and tosses it aside. That does it. I wolf whistle, earning his laughter, and tell him, "Nice muscles."

"Thank you. My girlfriend makes me swim a hundred laps a day to keep them."

"I do not!" I gasp before strolling over to wrap my arms around his waist, loving the heat of his skin against mine and the piney scent of his cologne teasing me under the earthier notes of dirt and manly musk. "I simply reap the benefits of your devotion to your routine." I graze his sculpted abs with

my knuckles and teasingly let them wander towards his belt buckle.

“Your dad?”

“Went home.”

“My mother?”

“Same. She says goodbye. We’ll see them in a few hours but we’re all alone now.” His blue eyes light up and darken in the same breath. I get a hungry, toe-curling kiss before I can dazedly ask, “Why are you planting a butternut tree in our garden, Mr. Wolfe?”

“My squirrel needed a decent tree to live in.”

Rolling my eyes incredulously, I jerk my chin towards the house. “What do you call that place?”

“Oh so you’re finally willing to answer to Squirrel?”

“I suppose so,” I admit, holding him a little closer. “I surrender.”

“Knew you would eventually,” he murmurs, expertly stroking my sides until I’m quivering with need. “But I was referring to the real squirrel sitting over there.”

He points towards the railing and, sure enough, there’s a squirrel chittering at us, no doubt displeased that the installation of his new home has been disrupted.

“Ah, well if that’s the case, please carry on,” I say, stepping back with curtsy for our little furry friend.

Grayson chuckles at my curtsy. “You could help me...”

“Or I could pour myself a cool drink and watch all your manly efforts. And once you’re done, I’ll take you upstairs for a shower and get you good and clean.”

“Hmm, I like your idea better.”

“I thought you might.”

Once the job is done, we both stand back to admire his hard work as our new bushy-tailed resident checks things out.

“Maybe there’ll be little squirrels climbing that tree someday,” Grayson says, nuzzling my ear.

Looking up at him with so much love in my heart, I answer, “Maybe so. You said it yourself, this house was meant for a family.”

The smile he gives me then? It’s going on a new top ten list - *Moments I’ll Never Forget*.

And when he carries me upstairs afterwards, we bypass the shower for the bed first. We can always wash the sheets later, right?



Grayson-

One year ago tonight, Eleanor Fairfield fell out of a tree and stole my heart. Okay, maybe it would be more accurate to say I saw her in a different light for the first time that night but it didn’t take her long to win me. From that first little thank-you kiss, I was hers.

Since Drew and Norrie opened The Butternut Tree in late autumn last year, they’ve been busy-busy and I’m so damn proud of them and their amazing kitchen crew and waitstaff.

Norrie is thoroughly enjoying greeting the lunch crowd regulars every weekday, including yours truly, Theo and other folks from Wolfe, booking acts for their Saturday night live musical acts and managing all that boring paperwork stuff that Drew never wanted to do.

She says the advanced waitlist for their dinner seating is embarrassingly long at this point - “*We’re already booking tables for New Year’s Eve. It’s July!*” - so I’m eyeing the building next door for a possible expansion. Don’t tell them that though. That’s my secret for now.

Anyway, to celebrate the anniversary of Eleanor Fairfield’s flight from an engagement party and into another man’s arms, the girls have closed the restaurant tonight to host

a little private party for the staff and their families. Okay, it's to celebrate their success but I'm claiming the other reason.

Standing back, I let Norrie and Drew greet their guests and can't help but be impressed by the team they make. The Haughty Little Miss Perfect Debutante I used to envision when I thought of Eleanor a year ago couldn't be further from the reality of who she is, bright and beautiful, sparkling with warmth, vivaciousness and a curiosity to explore all the exquisite things life has to offer. And, it's my honor to share it all with her.

"Grayson... are you seeing this?" A poke in the ribs draws my attention away from Norrie to find Constance by my side, pointing towards the TV which is on but muted at the bar. I take a step closer and see a face I'd rather forget - Fox Davenport's.

I've barely thought of him since the day he last stormed into Wolfe Media and spilled the beans about the buyout. After Louis fired him, I heard he left town for South Bend where he'd started working for some local gossip rag as a reporter. Getting back to his family's roots, I guess.

At first, I assume he's reporting some story that's been picked up by a larger news carrier until I realize *he's* the story. ***News Reporter Turned Peeping Tom - Claims He Was After a Story.***

"What a sleaze," Constance says disgustedly from beside me.

"Uh-huh. Without a doubt."

Asking Constance if she wants a refill, I turn my back on the television - he means nothing to me though I hope he'll make better decisions with his life eventually - and decide I've stood to the side long enough. I go find my woman and see what I can do to help with the celebration.

The rest of our evening passes with good food and good times as it should. A band has been hired to perform so people can cut loose after enough drinks. Louis manages to dance one with his daughter despite the knee. We'll be playing golf

with him and Dad tomorrow. I've already bet money she'll beat both their scores but we won't tell them that.

After Norrie has left her dad's side, I sit with him and my brothers watching her having the time of her life dancing with the other girls, the ones she affectionately calls her sisters these days, her two best friends and my brothers' wives. Nothing makes me happier than seeing Norrie having a blast.

As the party's finally winding down, I take my turn to dance with her. I nod to the band's leader to take us back a few decades and slow things down several notches while some guests are gathering up their things to go and others are boxing up leftover cheesecake to relish later.

"Moon River? Very smooth, Wolfe."

"I try." And with the way she snuggles into my arms, I know I've succeeded at being smooth.

"I overheard you earlier, by the way. Never thought you'd be so old-fashioned as to ask my father for my hand."

"I didn't ask him for your hand, Fairfield. I was merely discussing possibilities. You're getting ahead of yourself."

She scoffs - she knows me too well - but it was more about stating my intentions than seeking permission. I love this woman with all my heart. I'm going to marry her. Let's hope she says yes. Hopefully, she'll enjoy the surprise honeymoon I'm planning to spring on her, too.

Sweet lilacs and the scent that's all hers surrounds me as we sway until the song ends all too soon. "It is a short song," I say, disappointed like always when I'm forced to let her go on the dancefloor.

"A short song, yes, but I'd rather have a long-lasting love story instead, wouldn't you?" she asks, eyes twinkling with affection and mirth.

"With you? Oh, yes. There's nothing I want more," I promise before sealing those words with a kiss.

AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for reading! Please consider leaving a review on Amazon as readers like you help other readers find new books.

Want more of Grayson & Norrie? [Click here](#) to get a free 4500-word sweet and steamy bonus story when you join my newsletter and find out what Grayson's planning for their honeymoon.

I loved writing this series and, while I'm contemplating revisiting the Wolfe Family again someday, look for a new series set in San Francisco to start this year with a familiar face or two. [Subscribe](#) to my newsletter for updates and read on if you want to check out the first chapter of the first book...

TAMING THE BOSS

Chapter 1

Grace

There are three rules when dealing with a difficult boss, aka a *boss*hole - kill them with kindness, learn when to tread carefully and *never* fall in love with them.

The last one may see like a given but, trust me, it happens. It's just not going to happen to me.

Especially when my current boss tells me to stay late for his weekly poker game.

After grabbing a mango smoothie from the juice place next door, I take my spot in line at the corner deli. The sun is shining on this beautiful spring afternoon in San Francisco and the man standing in front of me smells divine.

Tall and broad-shouldered, nicely muscled under that bespoke suit, thick black hair. Stubble covers what I can see of his chiseled jaw. With his phone at his ear, an expensive wristwatch draws my eyes before I notice his left hand. Big, strong, masculine. Nice. No wedding band. Perfect.

He's angry with whoever he's speaking with on the phone. His voice is deliciously gruff and that berating tone leaves me flustered in an unmentionable manner. Accent is East Coast, definitely not my typical easy-going California Guy type. *Maybe I'm sick of my type.*

But it sounds like he's had a worse day than I have. That's a shame.

Sipping my smoothie, I'm prepared to simply enjoy the view in front of me - an overworked, underpaid assistant seeks entertainment wherever she can find it - but, as the line scuttles forward a few feet, he turns to face me unexpectedly. Caught off guard by his sudden pivot, I stumble into him with my drink. "Oh, I'm so sor-"

His eyes are the color of bitter chocolates and he's undeniably gorgeous in a bad guy way but his savage glare cuts my apology short as he mutters, "Fuck's sake."

He glances down at his jacket, searching for spilled mango. This poor grumpy hottie needs someone to lighten his mood.

"I'm afraid there might be some..." I point towards his sleeve, daring him to look closer before I quickly bring my finger up to lightly brush the tip of his nose. "Made you look!" I say while giving him my sunniest grin.

Three long, slow blinks of those lush eyelashes any girl would kill for causes my lady bits to flutter before his brow furrows, incredulously. "Did you just do 'made you look' with me?"

Well, that went over like a lead balloon. "Umm... yes. I'm not sure why. Just wanted to make you smile." God, he's staring at me like I have three heads. "I didn't get any on you. I'm-"

"Is your blood sugar low or is this normal behavior for you in public?"

Okay. He may be hot but he is *not* friendly.

I feel further chastened when he steps back from the line and curtly gestures for me to move ahead of him with a silent but unmistakable hand motion. Geez. The other people around us are watching the exchange so I give him an uncertain smile and step forward.

He exhales loudly behind me as he steps back into line. I didn't mean to make his bad day worse. It makes me nervous,

thinking I've done that. And, when I'm nervous, I tend to babble. "I suppose I am hungry. Not that there's anything wrong with my blood sugar. Healthy as a horse. I didn't mean to bump into you though. I do apologize for-"

"Shhhh..."

Did he just *shush* me? Holy cow, he did. I've been shushed by a stranger while trying to make an apology.

Sighing, I accept that some people simply don't want to be cheered up before stepping up to the far friendly man behind the counter and giving him my boss's stinky sandwich order - limburger on pumpernickel with mustard and raw onions. (No, you do not want to stand within ten feet of the man after he eats this sandwich.)

"Got you ready, Grace! Anthony, you're up!"

My less than friendly line neighbor walks up to the counter with me to claim his order. I feel his eyes and hazard a glance. Maybe he wants to be friendly now. "Limburger?"

"It's for my boss. He's-"

"Never would've figured you for a Grace."

My cheeks flush, knowing he's making a rude reference to my name and earlier misstep. I've been called Grace Without Grace more than once in my life but I don't have to stand here and take it from some jackhole in a fancy suit.

"Yes, I'm occasionally clumsy," I say after a deep breath, "but no one will ever mistake you for a gentleman with that sort of behavior."

He smiles darkly when he leans in close. "I've never claimed to be one, Grace."

Holy moly, why did that send such delightful shivers down my spine? I'm half-drunk on his cologne, like cedar and rum got together to tango. I need to get out of here.

Without another word, I leave. No more grumpy, bad guy, stud muffin a-holes at the deli. One bosshole to deal with is enough.

Back at work, Mr. McCoy takes the bag from my hands with the same finesse as lions sharing a gazelle before uttering a gruff, “Thank you, Grace.”

I never would’ve received a ‘thank you’ when I started. It’s progress. Perhaps someday Mr. McCoy may graduate from my boss-hole to simply my boss. He’s the latest in a string of boss-holes for me. And, I’ve tamed every single one of them thus far.

I’m asked to set up the game table and set out the ashtrays for the cigars. Yuck. But I desperately need this job. My Dream Canister won’t fill itself. Yeah, the Dream Canister is just a cookie jar where money is hidden away. But I’ve got *plans* for that money and I’ll get an extra fifty in my paycheck for staying over... if he doesn’t wind up losing too much tonight.

“Mr. Sorvino! I’m so pleased you could make it for our little game!” I hear McCoy say as I’m setting out cards and poker chips a short while later.

He’s been excited all day over the prospect of Mr. Sorvino joining the game tonight. I’ve never met the Billionaire CEO of Golden Gate Security Tech but McCoy is hoping he’ll become the law firm’s newest high-flying client. What do billionaire tech geniuses look like anyway? I’m picturing pocket protectors and dorky glasses but I shouldn’t stereotype.

“If you’ll head through those doors, my girl Grace will pour you a drink.”

His girl Grace? Ew.

I’m prepared to greet the mysterious Mr. Sorvino with a sunny smile when *he* walks in the room. “You again, huh?” that gloriously deep voice growls.

My eyes grow wide as saucers. The grump from the deli (and ridiculously hot bad guy) is Mr. Sorvino? What the H-E-double hockey sticks?

His cologne is like catnip to me and those dark eyes hold dark promises when he approaches. “Limburger is your boss, Grace?”

“Mr. McCoy loves that sandwich.”

“Yeah, his breath says as much. How long have you worked for him?”

“Two months.”

“Hmm. You’ve been an assistant to others though?”

“Yes. Five in the past eight years.” Eight years of bossholes and my Dream Canister is nowhere near full yet.

“Who did you stay with the longest?”

“I was with Mr. Jennings’ firm for three years before I came here.” The biggest bosshole I’ve ever met.

“Any reason you’re not still there?”

“He didn’t need me anymore.”

I tamed him.

No, it wasn’t all me. The only person who can really bring lasting change in us is ourselves but he’s a better man than he was when I met him. “He retired and moved to the Caribbean.”

“Huh.”

“Did you want my CV?” I jokingly ask.

He doesn’t answer but there’s something appraising in his look as the other men start filtering in and I become busy with my duties as poker night hostess.

**

An hour later, I’m trying to discreetly signal my boss. The stench of cigars, stinky cheese and flop sweat from the amateurs is strong. Cleaning up will be a chore. They all look in need of some fresh air and fruit and veggies.

Except for *him*.

Surrounded by tendrils of smoke with the cards expertly held in one hand as he sip his scotch, Mr. Sorvino looks like

he's been dropped here straight from some movie set. Like an Italian James Bond. The only thing he reeks of is intoxicating masculinity. Dark eyes and crisp white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, strong forearms, legs spread, posture of a predator ready to strike. Oof, I need a long, hot shower later and the vibrator is invited to join.

I've caught him looking my way more than once. Those looks make me all shivery inside, like you're on the verge of catching the flu except in this case you're eager to succumb.

Imagine Mr. Hot Grump naked in your bed. How savage he...

"Grace?"

"Yes?" They can't *hear* my thoughts, right?

"Another round."

"Yes, of course."

"You didn't tell us you were bringing a card shark to the game tonight, McCoy," Mr. Allen grumbles as he loses again.

"Thought it would spice up our game. You learned all about gambling on the mean streets of NYC, right, Sorvino?"

"Something like that."

"Classic story of the poor kid doing well, eh?"

I cringe at my boss's tactless words. Meanwhile, Sorvino looks like a big cat eyeing a mouse. "Guess so."

"Well, we're gentlemen here," Mr. Allen sniffs.

"Yes, it's a pleasure to play with gentlemen," Mr. Sorvino repeats. Electricity crackles between us when he looks my way. "*I've never claimed to be one, Grace,*" he'd said at the deli.

"Mr. McCoy, your wife has been calling..." Nudging, as opposed to ordering, usually works with him. "She would appreciate a call back when you have a moment," I say, sweetly. "You know what they say, 'Happy wife...'"

“Happy life,” he grunts before folding to give his wife a quick call.

Holding the decanter, I cross to Mr. Sorvino’s side of the table as the game carries on. “You’re not going to spill that on me, are you?” he murmurs, eyes fixed on his cards.

“You never know. It might look as good in your lap as in the glass.” His eyes leave his cards to find mine. “Made you look,” I whisper.

There now. He *can* smile. And Good Golly, Miss Molly, it’s an *incredible* smile. Maybe it’s best if he’s usually grumpy. Think of all the poor, unsuspecting women whose panties would melt if he was aiming that thing willy-nilly out in public.

Unfortunately, part of our conversation must’ve been overheard. “You’d look good in my lap, darling. Might bring me some luck.”

Ugh, Mr. Rosen. Of Mr. McCoy’s poker buddies, he’s my least favorite. Time for Grace’s Warning Smile. “Mr. Rosen, how have you been?” I say, all sunshine. “Did I tell you I ran into Mrs. Rosen at the farmer’s market last weekend? We were elbows deep in asparagus and spring peas when she mentioned...”

Mr. Rosen’s ruddy old cheeks turn redder and his lips are now zipped. Grace’s Warning Smile once again silences this breed of bosshole.

“Does McCoy always have you serve during his poker games?” Sorvino asks quietly in a tone that borders on pitying. I don’t like that.

“I’ve never considered myself too good to pour anyone a drink. I’m an assistant. I am here to *assist* him.” He simply smirks like he knows a secret I don’t.

“She’s the best damn assistant I’ve ever had, too,” McCoy says as he rejoins the group.

Oh! He might be on track to graduate to simply boss earlier than I suspect-

“Grace, empty the ashtrays and fetch us another box of cigars. Wife’s appeased and we’re just getting started.”

Okay, still a boss hole.

“Best assistant you’ve ever had? I’m between assistants at the moment,” Mr. Sorvino says with a look that has me pleasantly shivery again.

“Well, you can’t have Grace. She’s *mine*.”

I do *not* like the way he says that.

“Right. I’ll deal this round.”

The game progresses. One by one, the other players fold until it’s only my boss and Mr. Sorvino left. I’ve never seen the stakes so high in one of these games. Mr. McCoy seems to think his three of a kind will win him the pot but, if he loses, it’ll be goodbye, fifty-buck bonus for me.

Mr. Sorvino signals me to come over with a raised finger. I said I wasn’t above pouring a drink earlier but it grates that he’s smirking at me as if he knows better.

Money for the Dream Canister, Grace. Money for the...

“Raise,” Sorvino says, tossing chips on the pile.

Mr. McCoy nervously tugs at his collar before he seems to reassure himself. Three of a kind is a good hand.

But Sorvino notices the gesture, too. He’s subtle but only a fool would mistake that subtlety for inattention. He’s been keenly keeping tabs on the game and his fellow players all evening.

“What was in that smoothie you had earlier, Grace?” he asks as I’m pouring his scotch. His voice reminds me of a freshly-procured honeycomb, rough to the touch but utterly delicious.

“Mango.”

“I hate mangos. Raise.”

Mr. McCoy gulps but doesn’t fold.

“Maybe you’ve never had a good one.” Why are we talking about mango smoothies? Everyone else is focused on the game.

“Maybe not. Do you buy them at that farmer’s market you mentioned?” Did I mention the farmer’s market? Oh yeah, I did. “Raise,” he says before I answer.

Still, my boss stays in.

“I sometimes do. I love farmer’s markets.”

“Of course, you do.”

“And you don’t?” I feel my lips twitching into a grin which he doesn’t miss. *Of course, you don’t*, that grin says.

“Maybe I’ve never been to a good one,” he says and, for half a second, I get another one of those rare and wonderful grins. *Panties, I apologize.*

Daring a glance at his hand, my heart drops. Four of a kind. Fiddlesticks! Definitely goodbye, fifty dollar bonus.

When it’s time for the cards to be laid out, McCoy reveals his with a flourish. Then, his smile curdles like out of date milk when Sorvino shows his.

“You’ll have to allow me a chance to get my revenge on you, Sorvino,” he says as affably as a man who just lost several thousand dollars can manage.

“Maybe someday but I believe I’ll call it a night. How much is that? One-fifty?”

Cheese and crackers, one hundred and fifty thousand dollars?! And, McCoy gives me fifty bucks to stay hours over and play his waitress and maid?!

“Um... Yes. Well, this is a little awkward...”

When my boss sputters out that he doesn’t actually have that kind of money on hand, the look on Mr. Sorvino’s face is downright beastly. The other men at the table make their excuses and slink off, grateful not to have lost nearly as much to the card shark in their midst.

“You bet money you don’t readily have available?” Mr. Sorvino growls. “Where I come from, guys who couldn’t pay up weren’t invited to play again... after they had a few fingers broken.”

Mr. McCoy turns white as a sheet but, heaven help me, that *voice*.

“Of course, I’m more civilized than that. So, I’ll make a deal with you - I won’t tell anyone about your *ungentlemanly* betting practices... if you give me Grace.”

Other Books by this Author:

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cora North



Cora North loves reading and writing about hot billionaires and the feisty, sunny or witty women who they were meant to fall in love with. She began writing for fun a few years ago before deciding to switch to original romance beginning with her Wolfe Brothers Series. Whether the scene is steamy, swoony or tugs at the heartstrings, Cora delights in giving her couples their happily ever after in the end.