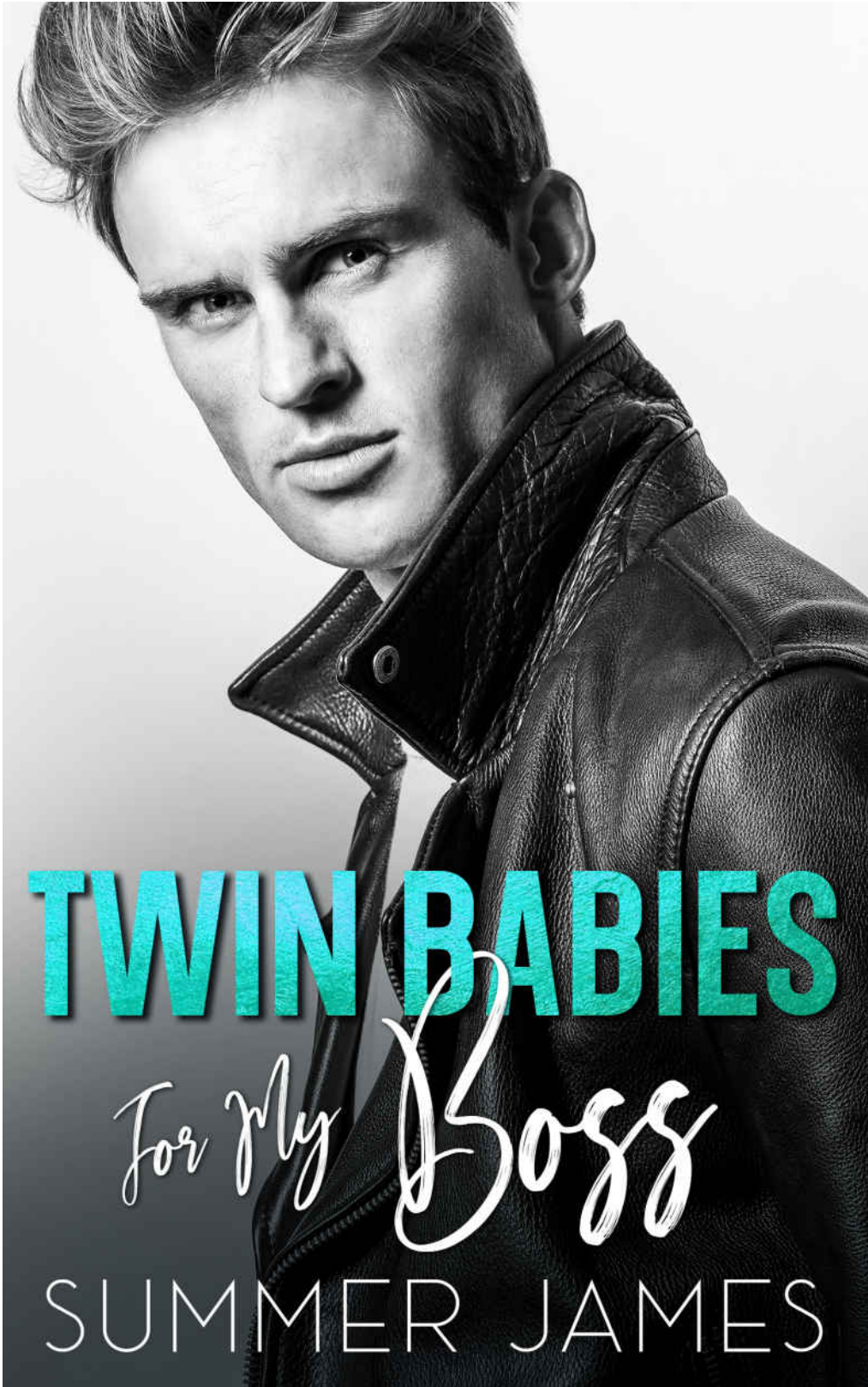


# TWIN BABIES

*For My Boss*

SUMMER JAMES



**TWIN BABIES**

*For My Boss*

SUMMER JAMES



*Twin Babies For My Boss*

An Age Gap Billionaire Romance



SUMMER JAMES



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Copyright © 2023 by Summer James

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.



# *Contents*

## 1. Chapter One

Scarlett

## 2. Chapter Two

Conrad

## 3. Chapter Three

Scarlett

## 4. Chapter Four

Conrad

## 5. Chapter Five

Scarlett

## 6. Chapter Six

Conrad

## 7. Chapter Seven

Scarlett

## 8. Chapter Eight

Conrad

[9. Chapter Nine](#)

Scarlett

[10. Chapter Ten](#)

Conrad

[11. Chapter Eleven](#)

Scarlett

[12. Chapter Twelve](#)

Conrad

[13. Chapter Thirteen](#)

Scarlett

[14. Chapter Fourteen](#)

Conrad

[15. Chapter Fifteen](#)

Scarlett

[16. Chapter Sixteen](#)

Conrad

[17. Chapter Seventeen](#)

Scarlett

[18. Chapter Eighteen](#)

Conrad

[19. Chapter Nineteen](#)

Scarlett

[20. Chapter Twenty.](#)

Conrad

[21. Chapter Twenty-One](#)

Scarlett

[22. Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

Conrad

[23. Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

Scarlett

[24. Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

Conrad

[25. Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

Scarlett

[Epilogue](#)

Conrad

[About the Author](#)

[Also By Summer](#)

[Damaged Professor - Sneak Peek - Chapter One](#)

## Chapter One

### Scarlett

Brody is in the kitchen, standing in front of the sink, both chubby hands pressed to his face. “Hey, Brody.” I lean down and wrap him in a hug. “What’s wrong?”

He snuffles before turning to look at me, his eyes red and lips puffy from crying. Even though his mom has tried explaining things to him, at six years old he’s too young to understand why so much has changed these past six weeks.

“Nothing. I’m— I’m just hungry,” he says but his bottom lip remains jutted out.

“That’s what I’m here for, buddy. I’ll make you a sandwich, OK? And mommy will be here soon, and she’ll tell us all about the cute little animals she saw today.”

That seems to cheer him up a bit more. “Do you think she’ll save any birds today?” he asks, his dark brown eyes glimmering both from the tears and with excitement.

I shrug. “I don’t know if mommy will see any today but—“ I crouch down beside him and point at the double glass doors

on the other side of the kitchen. “There is one on the fountain.”

The little guy loves birds. He turns around, his tears finally stopping, just as Gracie walks into the kitchen.

“What are you two doing?” she asks at the image of us embraced like that.

Brody frees himself from my arms and gives his mom a quick hug before grabbing her hand with both of his tiny ones and dragging her closer to the door. “Auntie Scarlett found a bird, Mommy. Look!”

“Why don’t you go look at it together while I make that sandwich,” I suggest but Gracie shakes her head.

“I’ll do that, Scarlett, you’ve done enough already,” she almost whispers before turning her attention back to her son. She plants a kiss on the top of his head and says, “You go see the bird, sweetie, and mommy will make your favorite one.”

Brody beams and I take hold of his hand, leading him over to the double glass doors, giving Gracie a few minutes to change and catch her breath.

From here we have a perfect view of the stone bird fountain in the middle of the backyard. Brody’s dad had the ornate fountain put in when Brody was a toddler and his passion for birds became relentless. There’s a small red cardinal sitting on the edge of the fountain, head tilting this way and that. “Wow,” gushes Brody, pressing both hands against the glass. “Look at it!”

“Remember, you have to be really still and quiet when you watch birds, or else you could scare them off,” I say, softly. I press a hand to the back of his shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

Brody is a cute kid. He’s got olive skin and hair just like his mother’s; a mop of curly black that can never quite be tamed down.

Behind me, I can hear Gracie finishing with his food. Before long, there’s the click of a glass plate being set down on the large oak dining room table. “Come on, Brody. Come eat your sandwich,” she says.

“Look at the bird, Mom!”

Gracie steps over to him, looking out the window. “That’s a cardinal.”

“It’s so bright! I love him,” Brody announces. He turns to go help himself to the peanut butter and jelly sandwich that’s been cut into triangles with the crust removed, just the way he likes it.

Gracie smiles at me. “He loves him.”

I laugh. That’s Brody’s favorite way to describe something that he likes. “He’s so cute.” Then I turn to my best friend and put both hands on her shoulders. “How was your day?”

She’s changed into her loungewear, ready to resume her routine for the past few weeks. “It was good.” Her eyes dart to Brody and back at me. “What about you two?”

Brody is perfectly happy at the moment but the changes in his mood still worry Gracie. “Did he ask about his dad or Becky again?”

“He hasn’t asked about her in weeks,” I point out. He still asks why his daddy isn’t coming around anymore but I’m pretty sure his nanny’s disappearance is no longer something he cares about. “And I’m sure that if Brody sees you in a better mood, he’ll also feel better. Gracie, you need to get out of the house for a bit. Look at you.”

I really don’t want Gracie to keep worrying about this. That’s the whole reason I’m here; to give her some sort of support.

“That’s why I decided to go back to work full-time,” she explains.

“That’s not what I meant.” I check her up and down.

“This is about the mom clothes?”

“This is about the mom clothes.”

Gracie laughs. “I don’t know. I’m tired. And bringing another babysitter might confuse him even more. Is this really the right time to try it?”

“Yes,” I say, firmly. “And don’t get started about Brody again. He will be happy when you are happy. And spending your days locked up in here because that asshole betrayed you is helping neither of you. You need just one night where you’re not trying to be a super mom.”

“Look who’s talking.” She raises both eyebrows. “When was the last time you had a proper night out?”

She’s not wrong, though my lack of fun was because I had a goal to achieve. Finishing my studies required countless hours of undistracted studying and once I was done with that, this happened. Gracie never asked me to abandon everything and come live with her to help her get through the divorce but for me there was no other option.

We’ve known each other since I was in the fourth grade, when we met up in detention. She had worn spaghetti straps and refused to change into gym clothes. I had punched a boy in the face for snapping my bra strap. We’ve been inseparable ever since.

“One more reason to have some fun tonight,” I point out, hoping to avoid another conversation about my commitment issues. “We both need it. I’m going to call Jamie, and Mark, and Taylor. And while I do that, you’re going to find a babysitter, and then you’re going to take a hot shower and get dressed for a night out on the town.”

“You’re doing it again, Scarlett,” says Gracie, but she sounds amused. “Handling life like you’re already the world’s most hotshot CEO.”

“Sometimes, what life needs is someone that’s going to step up and handle what needs to be handled,” I tell her. “And that’s what I’m staying with you for, isn’t it?”

Gracie leans forward and gives me a hug. “Tell me it’s gonna be fine.”



I hug her back and then look into her deep brown eyes. “It is going to be fine, Gracie. Go and find someone, while Brody’s eating. I’ve got this down here.”

Gracie nods and drifts out of the room. I can hear her going upstairs, and then the click of the bedroom door closing. I sit down at the table across from Brody. “Hey, kiddo.”

He looks up at me, happily munching away at his sandwich. “Mhm?”

“How do you feel about meeting someone new?” I ask.

Brody nods. He chews, swallows, wipes at his face with both hands, and smears peanut butter over his cheeks by accident. “I love it! Who?”

“A new babysitter,” I say. “I don’t know her name yet, but I bet that your mom is gonna find someone really fun to watch you.”

Brody asks, “Is she gonna like birds?”

“Yes,” I say, without hesitation. “She’s going to love birds.”

That’s the job of a babysitter, after all. To love whatever the kid’s super into. And I know that Gracie’s going to pick someone that has great reviews.

“Cool!” Brody grabs the last triangle of his sandwich. “Can I go color?”

“Sure,” I tell him, and just like that, the kid is off.

Staying here with Gracie, I’m torn. I’ve always loved kids. When I was younger, the thought of having one or two was

really lovely. I thought, hey, I could take them here and there, have fun adventures, and fill a home with laughter.

But the older I got, the more I realized it wasn't that simple. I mean, look at Gracie and her husband! They were together for almost eight years, and then he just ran off with the nanny! She's not the only friend I know who had their spouse cheat on them. Mark's girlfriend slept with his brother while they were dating just three years back, and as the fallout spread in a ripple effect, it almost ruined the whole family.

The thing is, relationships are restrictive and they can easily leave you with deep scars when they are over. All that mess that comes with them—it scares the shit out of me.

And I'm not the kind of person to be scared easily. I'm a college graduate with an MBA in marketing. When it comes to the business world, I can do just about anything—lead meetings, discipline other employees, handle workplace confrontations—but that seems a lot safer than putting myself out on the line with a significant other. I don't want anything in my life that is going to negatively affect my career. And let's be honest. Getting cheated on? That would totally put a cramp in my work schedule.

But tonight's outing isn't about me, anyway. I pull my phone out, shifting to a different chair so that I can see Brody through the open door that leads into the living room, and then I set about inviting our friends to a local club. Mark and Jamie respond almost instantly, but Taylor takes a few minutes longer to confirm that she can come, too.

Once I've got the time settled and the location confirmed, I get up and start making my way up the stairs, too. The bedroom door is closed but I let myself in. "Alright. We're going to The Spot."

Gracie appears from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her bare form. "Where?"

"The Spot," I say. "It's somewhere that Mark wanted to hit up. He says it's pretty new, but that it's supposed to be a killer location. I think you could use somewhere new. This way you don't have to deal with Billy."

Billy is her ex-husband's best friend, and also owns one of their go-to drinking spots; The Lion's Den, out on eighth. Not a single person from their friend group has been there since David took off with the nanny. It sucks because it really is a good bar, but we figure that if there is even a chance of Billy trying to talk in his best friend's defense—it's not worth it.

And it's definitely not something that Gracie needs to be dealing with.

"I feel like that's such an imposition," says Gracie, with a sigh. She drops down onto the edge of the bed. "We should just go to the Lion's Den. Everyone loves that place, and I know we all miss it. It was like our Cheers. I can put up with Billy for one night."

"Gracie, the whole point of going out to get drinks is so you don't have to put up with anything," I remind her, heading into her closet. It's a good size walk-in and it's perfectly organized with everything from workout clothes to dresses. And there

are enough shoes and purses lining the far wall to make your head spin.

I shuffle through the dresses for a few minutes, eventually finding a piece that I think is suitable for a newly single mom to wear out to the club. The black underlayer of the dress is skintight, but it has a layer of scrunchy, glittery golden gauze on top that makes it just a touch less sexy and a bit more beautiful.

I offer it to her. “Put this on.”

“God, this is way too much for a bar night,” protests Gracie.

I pull her up onto her feet. “That’s because The Spot isn’t just a bar, it’s an upscale club. I’ve already looked it up and done some social media stalking. This is exactly the dress that you should wear. Did you get a sitter?”

“I did,” says Gracie. “I just really hope Brody likes her.”

“Tell the sitter to get out Brody’s Big Book of Birds, and it’s going to be fine. He’ll adore anyone that lets him endlessly read about blue jays,” I promise, ushering her into the bathroom. “Come on, we’re not going to let you sit in this house and turn into some big, frumpy mess. You’ve had six weeks to mourn, and now it’s time to get up, get yourself in gear, and get out of the house for a while.”

Gracie vanishes into the bathroom to change without further protest, though I can tell she’s still a bit hesitant to go out. She comes out of the bathroom just a few minutes later, holding her arms out to the side. “What do you think?”

“I think you look perfect.” I place a hand on either side of her cheeks, giving them a playful squeeze, and then drop them down to take hold of hers. “Gracie, your ex is a jackass, and blind, too.”

“He wanted something younger.”

“You’re not even thirty!”

Gracie’s shoulders bounce. “And the nanny was twenty-two.”

“I’ll say this again, David is a jackass, and he was blind, and stupid, and—how long do we have? I mean, can I keep listing his faults?” I ask.

Gracie laughs. Good, that was the whole point of it.

“Look. We all know that this whole mess... It’s on him. He fucked everything up. You didn’t do anything to deserve what he did to you and Brody.”

“I know,” says Gracie. “It just still feels weird, going out and having fun. I don’t feel like I have anything to celebrate.”

“I promise you’re going to feel better after you get out.” I let go of her hands, reaching up to tuck in a strand of her unruly black hair. “Now, how about you let me fix this up?”

“Sounds like a plan, maybe you’ll have better luck than me,” Gracie tells me.

So I lead her into the bathroom to help her finish getting ready, promising that the night is going to be exactly what she

needs. A chance to loosen up, let go, and have some well-deserved fun.

As for me, I'm content to get a tasty drink and act as the designated wingwoman for all my friends for the night.

## Chapter Two

### Conrad

The Spot is supposed to be one of the hottest clubs in the city. It's modern in a way that's almost over-the-top, *almost*, nothing but abstract art on the walls and clean lines everywhere you look. But they've managed to keep it comfortable and inviting.

It wouldn't have been my choice for tonight, but the sound of award-winning drinks and their famous shows sounded good for a solo night out. Being a workaholic tends to put a strain on friendships, especially when your friend circle has the same habits as you.

Slowly, I make my way to the bar and order a Molten Sunset—a ridiculously expensive drink that turns out to be equally delicious. The awards are deserved after all.

“What's on tonight?” I ask the bartender. Despite his efforts, he looks a bit overwhelmed by the crowd tonight.

“A live band,” he says but doesn't remember the name.

That doesn't sound very promising but as soon as I turn my attention back to the empty stage, I no longer care. A blonde woman with a killer body and a sexy smile has my full attention. She's got on a black dress with a red hem, but what's impressive is her posture. There's just something about the way she moves that intrigues me. My eyes fix on her, completely smitten.

She's with her friends but there's also a guy there. Is she with him? Probably not, judging from their relaxed conversation. And it looks like he's eyeing up someone on the other side of the club. And neither of the women are hanging off of her in a way that makes it seem like they're hitched.

I finish my drink and cross the room to get closer to her. Normally, I'd wait until a woman's alone to make a move but I'm not taking any chances here. Plenty of men are surrounding her like hawks already though she makes a point to ignore them.

One of her friends leans in and whispers something in her ear and she shakes her head. Then, the other friend calls her name—Scarlett—in protest but the third one tugs her away. They end up drifting off to the stage area without Scarlett, clearly interested in the upcoming entertainment.

Perfect timing. I sit down next to her, waving the bartender over for another drink.

Scarlett looks at me from the corner of her eyes, mouth twisting up at the edges. "Hey there."



Her voice is almost dismissive, but I know I've got her attention too.

"Hey there, yourself. You're Scarlett, right? I heard your friends call you out as they were leaving." I hold out a hand.

She shakes it, her grip steady. "That puts me at a disadvantage. Who are you?"

"Conrad." I don't offer a last name as it is easily identifiable. There aren't too many people in the city with the last name Branson, and my company, Branson Tech, has been all over the news for the last three weeks.

Besides, the last thing I want is to sleep with someone for clout. Doe-eyed interns that want to rise to the top, investors ready for a deal based off the bedroom, or any other woman who seeks to utilize being seen in public with me, are a huge fucking turnoff. And probably the reason I avoid any form of commitment.

My one-night stands are based purely on chemistry and my stellar pick-up skills, not around the fact that I've got a shit ton of money in the bank.

"Conrad," she repeats and nods. "Well, it's nice to meet you, Conrad. Let me guess, you want to buy me a drink."

"Actually, I was thinking we could go back to my place, and I could mix you one myself," I say, giving her my most charming smile. It's a pretty winning look, if I do say so myself.

Scarlett gives me a sly smile and tilts her head a bit like she's considering it. "Better than this one?" she lifts her glass. There are shards of ice at the bottom of it and a mix of blue, green, and yellow liquids that seem to almost slide over one another.

I nod, my own smile as sly as hers. Scarlett seems much younger than me but that doesn't seem to bother her. We chat for a bit about nothing in particular—she doesn't want to say much about herself—but by the time I make another move, we are completely turned to and turned on by each other. "Unless you prefer to watch the show," I say, though it sounds more like a question.

"I don't know, it's been pretty hyped up." She scans the crowd looking for her friends. She spots them right next to the stage, talking and moving to the music. "Have you seen any of them?" Scarlett motions at the stage.

"No, I heard of The Spot recently and was intrigued to see how entertaining it was." I lean in a bit closer, stopping inches from her face and almost instinctively she does the same, tracing her fingers on my wrist. "But I doubt it will compare to what I have in mind."

"And what might that be?" she asks with a glint in her eyes, biting her lower lip— it takes all my self-control not to show her right here.

"There's only one way to find out."

Scarlett looks like she's into it but only for a moment. Something almost like guilt crosses her face, and she looks

over her shoulder with an abashed kind of sigh. “I can’t.”

“Can’t, or don’t want to?” I ask. She seemed on board till now.

“Can’t. I’m out here for one of my friends.” She gestures over her shoulder toward the black-haired one. “I’m trying to help her get her mind off things.”

“Yeah? What kind of things?” The concern in her voice rings clear and is not a good sign for my plans.

“Her husband just ran off with the nanny,” says Scarlett, with a shake of her head. Her blonde hair is worn in a sharp, angled bob. The cut frames her face well and her smoky eye shadow makes her gaze seem that much sharper. There’s something about the look of her—it draws me in, enticing me like nip thrown out for a cat, or a fresh piece of steak given to a hungry dog.

I look at her friend again, top to bottom, and say, “Looks to me like she had a dumb ass for a husband.”

Scarlett laughs. “That’s exactly what I said to her earlier today. And probably one hundred times before that. We’ve been trying to get her out of the house since it happened six weeks ago. This is our first successful attempt at trying to distract her.”

“It looks to me like she has plenty of other people around her for a distraction. I think that she could spare you for a few hours,” I hum.

“Sorry,” says Scarlett. “Gracie really needs me right now.” She’s torn by this, but her friend is clearly a priority for her. I can’t help but appreciate that, though there’s a part of me that wants to keep arguing.

My lips purse. It’s a big part of me, actually. Scarlett’s the most beautiful woman that I’ve seen in—fuck, maybe that I’ve ever seen! The thought of just letting her pass me by like this is a bit gutting.

As much as I want to avoid sharing personal information with my hookups, Scarlett is worth an exception. I pull a pen from the pocket of my black leather jacket and grab the white, circular napkin from under my drink. I jot my number down on it and then I slide it over to her.

“Here,” I tell her. “When you decide that you want to have some fun, give me a call. And I’ll treat you to that drink.”

Scarlett glances at the napkin. “Alright, maybe I’ll do that.”

I pick up my glass, tilting it toward her, and then get up and leave. As I step away from the bar, I see that her friends swarm her. I can’t hear what they’re saying over the bass of the band that just started, but I make sure to pick a seat that gives me a good view.

Gracie, the one whose husband ran off with the nanny, is shaking a finger at Scarlett like she’s scolding her. The corner of my mouth twists up. I see the guy pick up the napkin with my number and offering it to Scarlett before pulling it away and tucking it into his own shirt pocket; even without hearing them, I can imagine the joke.

*If you don't want it, I'll give it to someone that does.*

Scarlett's cheeks are red. It's a good look on her. And I like the way that she holds herself. Even in her embarrassment at being fussed over, there's something stern about her gaze, almost disapproving, as though she's normally exempt from being the one that gets teased.

It must work out in my favor because Scarlett finally stands up, tossing her hands up into the air. She looks around, spots me, and makes her way toward me. When she gets close enough, I ask, "Did you lose my number already?"

"You're in luck," says Scarlett, placing a hand on the top of the table and leaning over it. Her breasts press against the tight bodice of her dress, barely contained by the black fabric. Her skin has a jaw-dropping tan, as if she just stepped off a Hawaiian tropics commercial set, but I can tell it's natural.

"Am I?" I question.

Scarlett nods. "You are. Gracie says she's got plenty of company tonight."

"Does that mean you don't need to wait and call me later?" I smile at her, taking another sip from my drink. The liquid is cold, but it leaves a rush of heat in its wake. Standing up, I reach out and stroke my fingers over the curve of her jaw.

"It means I'm calling you now," Scarlett tells me. Her mouth twitches up into a playful smirk. "Ring, ring. Are you —" There it is, a slight faltering, a little bit of nerves. "Still available?"

Clearly, this isn't something she does very often. But that just makes it more thrilling for me to know that I've managed to convince her to step outside of her comfort zone. To know that she just can't resist me.

Consider my ego stroked.

My fingers run down, over the curve of her neck, and then pull away. "We should take my car."

"I'll drive myself," says Scarlett. She leans forward, giving me a kiss. It's not shy, but there's something lacking confidence in it, too. It just reasserts the fact that this isn't something she does very often. "That way, I can leave when I want."

Scarlett plucks the pen back out of my pocket and slides another circular napkin toward me. "Put your address down here, and I'll follow you."

"Alright," I relent, brushing off that inexplicable desire to show off my car to her. I've never wanted to impress somebody so badly.

Instead, I jot down the address and then give it to her, standing up and leading her out of The Spot.

Over her shoulder, she turns and gives her friends one last wave. There's a wolf whistle in response and the other three wave as we head out of the club.

It's creeping close to ten at night, and the stars are out in full force. The Spot has a massive, laminated dot-style sign above

the door. No writing, just a single bright yellow circle that serves as its sign.

The pathway wraps around to the side parking lot, where most people have their cars parked. Hers is close to mine as it turns out, so I lead her further than that, around to the back. I drive a nineteen-sixty-one Jaguar E-Type with a pristine engine, the sleek black metal standing out among the silvers and blues of the modern, modular cars. It's considered the most beautiful car ever made, and I couldn't agree more.

I gesture to it. "Are you sure that you don't want to ride with me? We can just get you a driver once you're ready to go. On me, of course."

Scarlett hesitates. Even people who don't know much about cars can tell that my car provides a *special* ride. But then she finds her steel again, shaking her head and gesturing at another car a few feet away. "I drive a pretty sweet white Camry. I'll follow you."

"Suit yourself." Before she has a chance to step away, I curl an arm around her waist and pull her close, crashing our mouths together in a fierce, wanting kiss. Our lips slide together, her lipstick staining my own mouth just a little. My teeth sink into her lower lip, more playful than painful, before I pull away.

She's left breathless. Scarlett stares up at me with wide green eyes, the sharpness of her gaze finally replaced with burning desire.

"Just make sure that you can keep up," I jest.

I get in my car and wait for Scarlett, my eyes glued on her ass as she makes her way to her Camry. As soon as I hear her engine start, I pull out of the parking lot and away from the club, heading toward my place. It's only a ten-minute drive even with bad traffic but knowing that I've got Scarlett to spend the night with, once we get there, makes the ride seem like it's stretching out forever.

All I can think about is the way she smelled, the way that her lips felt against my own, and that damned perfectly golden skin of hers...I'm dying to see that body without any clothes.



## Chapter Three

### Scarlett

His building is nice. *Really* nice. I can see that long before we even pull into the parking garage. It's the tallest on the block, a shiny skyscraper that seems to be completely lined with the glass of windows.

I check myself one more time in the rearview mirror, my excitement trampling any second thoughts I had during the drive. Conrad is quite older than me but he's also a hunk. And I really do need some—even if my friends hadn't scolded me about letting him go, I know I'd have made that phone call sooner or later.

He gets out of his admittedly gorgeous car and comes to meet me, taking my hand and helping me out of my own. Then he leads the way into the building, and over to the elevator. It makes sense a guy like Conrad's got the money for a nice place... But I'm still impressed when he hits the button for the penthouse suite.

Even more so when, the moment that the doors close, he presses me up against the wall of the elevator, our mouths

crashing together in another kiss, this one almost frantic. It takes me a moment to catch up with him—but by then, he’s already pulling back, not wanting the elevator to stop and let someone else in.

I’m left reeling.

Look, business? I can handle. Kids? I’m good with those too. But I’ve spent so much time focusing on my studies and now my career, it’s left me out of the dating scene for a long time.

“Alright,” I tell him, finally finding my tongue. “You’ve got me hooked, Conrad. I think that you’ll do for the night.”

He lets out a laugh, confident and charming. “I’ll do for the night. I like that. Anyone ever told you—” The elevator doors slide open with a hiss. “That you’re funny?”

“A few people.” I step into the hallway with a smirk on my face. It’s just a narrow landing strip, with a long soft gray rug and two doors. One of them is at the very end of the hall, with a FIRE EXIT ONLY sign hung up above it. I’m sure that it must lead up to the roof. The other door clearly belongs to the penthouse suite.

He pulls a key card out of his back pocket and swipes it. The door opens with a soft beep, swinging inwards.

“Tech savvy,” I say. “That’s fun.”

“You could say that I like innovation,” says Conrad. The lights inside his penthouse are motion activated, turning on the

moment he steps into the room. I follow after him, swinging the door shut behind me.

I was right. The suite definitely has a high-tech vibe. There's a smart TV hanging on the wall in the living room, big enough to almost take up the whole thing, and there are surround sound speakers in the corners of the room. There's also a device sitting on a floating corner shelf that looks like some sort of smart home system. It has a B emblazoned on the side, and I instantly recognize the logo: Branson Tech. Only the best. "I can tell. So, does that mean I count as a top-shelf drink?"

"State of the art, baby," jokes Conrad. He unhooks his tie with one thumb, sliding it loose from around his neck and tossing it onto the back of the oversized black leather L-shaped sofa where his leather jacket already rests. "But I'll share a secret with you. The bedroom's even better."

"Is that so?" I look around, taking note of the wall of windows on one side of the living room, dressed in heavy black curtains that are drawn open, and the white plush rug spread out in front of the sofa. "What if I told you I like it out here best?"

"I wouldn't argue with you," admits Conrad. He undoes the top two buttons on his shirt and walks over to join me, planting his hands on my hips and pulling me up against him. "But I might try to convince you."

"Oh, your room is *that* special?" I lean up, kissing him. My lips press to the corner of his mouth, and then the curve of his

strong jaw. Conrad's ash-blond hair is cut short at the sides and longer on the top, but there's just enough mousse in it to keep it out of his face, letting me enjoy those deep blue eyes.

I'm overcome with the urge to tangle my fingers in it—one that I give into quickly. At my touch, he deepens the kiss, our mouths colliding together even more firmly. I can taste the whiskey that had been in his drink earlier, and something else that's so utterly heady, I want to drown in it.

He backs me up until I'm pressed to the wall beside the front door. My head thumps against the bold black and white wallpaper. His hands drop down, tangling into the skirt of my dress and inching it up. Cool air brushes over the outsides of my thighs.

His mouth drops down, pressing to the side of my neck instead. Teeth nip gently at the skin there, and then more firmly. I tilt my head to the side, offering up more of my throat to him. My eyes flutter, and I let out a heavy sort of breath. The exhale shudders out of me. Conrad makes a pleased sound against my skin and then pulls backward, tugging the skirt up higher.

I lift up my arms and help him work my tight-fitting dress off of my body. The black fabric hits the floor with a soft thump, revealing my bra and panties. It's a matching piece, nude fabric with black lace over top of it. I was going for sharp and sexy all at once. Judging by his expression, I've succeeded.

“Fuck,” says Conrad. “You’re something special, aren’t you?”

His mouth is on me again, tongue and tooth, more passionate than before but too brief. He pulls back. “I like to think that I am,” I tell him.

He takes my hand, firmly leading me toward what must be his bedroom.

“It’s not fair that you’ve still got everything on,” I chide him on the way there. I want to see that ass of his. Better yet, I want to see what he’s sporting on the front.

Conrad just laughs and pushes open the bedroom door. Just like the front room, the moment he steps inside the lights click on above us. They also seem to be able to sense the mood, impossible I know, but they set themselves at the perfect dimming level.

The room is done up in monochrome, shades of black, gray, and white, all accented by the golden bed in the center. There’s a huge mirror lining one entire wall, directly opposite the large, four-poster bed with sleek gold posts, and the far wall, same as in the living room, is entirely covered by windows, dressed in the same heavy black curtain that has been drawn open to show off the incredible city view. As if it’s the throne of a king.

But even after I finish looking over the room, my eyes are drawn back to the mirror taking over the wall.

“I see why you wanted to use the bedroom.” I step over there, running my fingers along the smooth surface of the glass. There’s something striking about my own reflection, even more so when Conrad steps up behind me, pressing against my back.

I can feel his denim-covered erection pressing against the curve of my ass. One of his hands settles on my belly. The other reaches down, hooking a single finger into the edge of my panties. “See? I always have the best ideas.”

Slowly, he inches the fabric down my hip, revealing my form in the reflection. Unhurriedly my perfectly groomed pussy is revealed— I’m freshly waxed in the classic bikini style—and I’m completely visible when I spread my legs just a little after I step out of my panties, making my cheeks bright red. There’s something about seeing myself here that just *does* things to me. Like, it goes straight to my center, leaving me slick before he even touches me.

“I knew it,” says Conrad, sounding endlessly pleased with himself. “I knew that this golden tan of yours was natural.”

Turning to face him, I tilt my head back, grabbing onto the front of his shirt and giving it a hard pull. “If you want the bra to come off, you had better start losing clothes. I’m not going to be the only one putting on a show.”

“It’s a great show,” offers Conrad, playfully, but he steps backward and undoes the rest of the buttons, sliding the shirt off his shoulders and letting it drop to the floor. My hands go to his belt, tugging it open, letting it slide out from each belt

loop, one after the other. The black leather joins the white fabric on the floor.

My fingers catch on the front of his jeans, sliding over the noticeable bulge. He hisses out through his teeth, body pressing forward into the touch. I like the way that expression looks on him, but I like the idea of *getting* a good look at him even more.

Conrad must be on the same page as me. He pulls my hands away and I think that he's going to make a go for his jeans or my bra, but instead, he reaches out and picks me up. I squeal, startled, as he spins me around and drops me, back flat, onto his bed. One leg kicks out instinctively.

“Jerk!” I shout at him playfully.

Conrad undoes the front of his jeans, shoving them off his hips along with his boxers. “Am I?”

I push myself up onto my arms, propped into an upright position. With the wall of mirrors behind him, I'm able to see not only his bare front, but his bare ass, too. God, he looks good. My mouth is watering as I spread my legs a little bit without thinking about it.

“Yeah,” I tell him. “You are. Tossing me around like that.”

“I think you liked it,” teases Conrad, moving to stand just at the foot of the bed. He curls one big, strong hand around my ankle, tugging me a little closer to the edge of the mattress. “I think you *like* that I can toss you around like that.”

I do.

I like it a lot.

But there's no way in hell that I'm going to admit it.

Instead, I try to go for cocky, tilting my head back and telling him, "Looks to me like it doesn't matter. I've still got my bra on and you're... definitely all out of clothes. It's a great look on you, by the way. Really makes you seem like a big shot."

Conrad braces his hands against the foot of the mattress, looking me over head to toe. The way his expression twists into something hungry *does* something to me. Makes my whole body twist up with anticipation. If he fucks me the same way that he looks at me, then tonight is going to be more than worth my time.

"There's the thing, honey." The way Conrad says that last word, it's like something sweetly dismissive. Like he's putting me in my place, and my place is in this bed, with him. "I like you with the bra on. I think that's a good look for you."

He crawls up onto the mattress with me, until he's on top of me and between my legs, kissing me again so hard that it makes my lips feel almost bruised. The tang of whiskey has already been kissed away, leaving just Conrad's own natural flavor behind. I like that even more than the hot burn of the drink, though.

I tilt my head to the side. "Fuck me senseless, and I'm certain I can show you an even better look," I say into his ear.



“You promise?” A playful nip to the side of the neck. And then a second one, a little less playful.

I shift beneath him, spreading my legs around him, lewdly wide. “Yeah, Conrad.” I tangle a hand in his hair again. “I promise.”

The look in his eyes—fuck, it’s enough to drive a girl wild.

## Chapter Four

### Conrad

There's something about Scarlett that's just absolutely perfect. The way she looks, the sound of her voice, the things that she says. It all drives me wild. I'm eager to fuck her, just like she's requested, but I'm not a dick about it. I fetch the condom from the bedside table, rolling the rubber on my already rock-hard cock.

Using two fingers, I stretch her wet pussy open, pressing deep inside of her. Then a third. Her brows crease, the breath getting punched out of her. She's still propped up onto her forearms, but her head drops backward, hanging between her sharp shoulder blades.

It's gorgeous, the way that her tan skin is blushing beneath my touch. I lean down and kiss her outer thigh, then pull my hand away and slide higher up, so I can kiss her on the mouth instead.

"Come on," she says, baiting me. "I don't want to wait here all night."

“Tut tut, you can’t rush perfection, honey,” I tease and kiss her again, dropping a hand down and taking hold of the base of my own shaft, guiding it toward her, the head of my cock pressing against her opening.

“I’m impatient,” pants Scarlett. “Sue me—ah!”

Her words cut off into a squeal as I push into her, rolling my hips hard. I get half in on the first drive, the tight heat around my dick is enough to pull the breath from my lungs. I pause, but only for a moment. I want to knock the smugness out of her, plunging myself into her all the way, fully hilding inside of her.

Groaning, my forehead drops down on the mattress, beside her. Hands grab at my shoulders and my back, nails scraping bluntly over my skin, raising goose bumps in their wake.

“Shit! Conrad! Do—do that again,” she manages to breathe out.

My mouth twists up at the edges into a haggard smile, pleased with myself for the stunning impression I’ve made so far. Then I do as I’m requested, pulling myself back and pressing back in again at full speed, rocking into her.

The rhythm that I set is hard and fast, fucking into her with as much force as I can. The sound of our skin slapping together fills the room each time that I roll my hips, driving deeper into her.

A leg curls around my hip, pulling me closer. Fingers tangle in my hair, pulling, and sending sparks of pain over my scalp.

But that just adds to the pleasure, really, the way that it races down the back of my neck, and into my spine.

My body jerks, and I thrust into her even harder. One of my hands grabs onto her hip, hefting her up, pulling her closer to me. I want this to be a night that she'll never forget. I'm never going to forget her. The look on her face, brows pinched down and mouth parted in absolute bliss. The way that the curve of her cleavage is glistening, visible over the top of her lacy bra. The smooth pane of her stomach when I rock backward onto my knees, using my grip on her hips to keep us connected.

She plants one foot on the mattress at my side and keeps the other hooked around my waist. Her back arches in this position, and I'm able to watch as I slide into her. The way that her pink pussy lips part around my cock, the slight indentation that appears in her lower belly every time that I press into her.

One hand drops down, my thumb pressing to her clit. And that's all that it takes for Scarlett to spill around me, her body convulsing in orgasmic bliss. She grabs onto the bed sheets, shouting out my name as she cums.

And I watch, growing still inside of her but continuing to thumb over that little bundle of nerves. It grows slicker and slicker beneath my touch.

When she comes down from her high, breathing hard, I finally pull out of her. I'm quick to tug off the condom, the rubber getting tossed on the side of the floor.

Exhausted and breathless, Scarlett warns me, "Don't you dare think about putting that back in me without a condom."

“I’m not,” I tell her, though I’ll be honest, the thought of spilling my load inside of her is tempting. She’d look good, with my cum dripping out of her.

I’m more polite than that, though. I just take hold of my cock with one hand, dragging my palm over my shaft, up over the wet head, gathering my fluids and smearing them back over my skin. It barely takes any time at all before I hit my peak.

The orgasm sweeps through me. Strips of cum land on her smooth belly, an errant strand of white manages to get up to her bra. I pull backward, breathless myself, and drop down onto the bed myself.

For a long moment, we both just stay like that, basking in the afterglow as it rocks through us. Warm and welcoming, the silence is comfortable and not stiff.

Scarlett is the first one up, rolling over to the edge of the bed and throwing her legs onto the floor. She stretches as she stands, the muscles in her back rolling under her skin, and then she heads over to the mirror wall and grabs her panties.

“God, Gracie was right,” says Scarlett. “I really needed that.” She flashes me a smile over her shoulder. “You’re really good.”

“And hungry.” The words just slip out. I’m not actually hungry, but I don’t like the thought of her leaving just yet. I want her to stay a little bit longer. Standing up myself, I grab my boxers from where I dropped them earlier.

I'll do a lot but cooking with my dick out isn't something I'm keen on.

She gives me an odd look. "Really?"

"Come on, let me feed you before you leave." I vanish into the bathroom long enough to fetch a washcloth for her. She takes it gratefully and after a moment, she relents and follows me into the living room.

The lights click on above us when we enter the hall, and again when we step into the kitchen. The blue LED attached to the top of the stove, which is hooked up to the main house's smart system, blinks on.

"Betty," I say. "Preheat the oven to three fifty."

"Yes, Conrad," answers the feminine AI voice. The oven turns on.

"Creepy," says Scarlett. She grabs her dress from the living room, pulling it on before coming to join me. "Totally creepy."

"I don't know. I like her. It makes things easier around her. You eat eggs?" I pull open the fridge, grabbing out a carton of eggs, a jug of milk, and a bag of shredded sharp cheddar cheese.

"You realize that I lost your number, right? And I don't plan on getting it a second time," says Scarlett.

I laugh. "I know. But seriously, I brought you here. The least I can do after a fuck like that is feed you."

“Alright.” Scarlett sits down on the edge of the white marble countertop. “Eggs, but then I’m leaving. I’m not in the market for a relationship.”

I nod, grabbing a pan and the butter and trying to ignore my own disappointment. If any other one-night stand said those words, I’d be relieved—most women cling on to me even harder once they realize I’m wealthy. But not Scarlett. Which makes the thought of never seeing her again sting even more.

After the butter melts, I crack six eggs into it and snatch the spatula off the back of the counter. “Is that just because of your friend’s husband taking off with the nanny?”

“It’s more of a career thing,” says Scarlett. “I’m planning on building myself up before I let anyone else into my life. My mother didn’t get a chance to do that, you know? She ended up having kids young, and she wasn’t able to actually do what she wanted.”

“What was that?” I question. This makes me admire her even more. Scarlett is strong and independent, and willing to put in the work to achieve what she wants.

I add the cheese to the mixture, making sure to continue stirring. Eggs aren’t anywhere near as easy to make as people like to believe. It’s easy to overcook them, and it’s even easier to undercook them. Especially once you add cheese to them.

“She wanted to be a painter,” says Scarlett. “Professionally, I mean. She still does it as a hobby, but that’s about it. I just don’t want that to happen to me. I want to know that I’ve

given myself a solid footing in my career before I get serious about anyone, let alone adding children to the mix.”

Her tone is calm as she says this, but I can sense there’s a bit more to her mother’s story. Perhaps growing up she felt that restriction too.

“Having your priorities straight is the only way to move forward with your goals. Good for you,” I say, even though those priorities are a barrier to any chance I have for a second date—if I can call it that.

I grab the eggs and split them into two plates, then carry them over to the table. Then, I grab us each a glass of orange juice and set them by our plates.

When I sit down and take a bite Scarlett tilts her head to the side. “Really? Good for me? That’s all you’re going to give me?”

My shoulders bounce. “I think you’re intriguing, Scarlett. I would see you again if the option was there. But I can respect that you’re not looking for a relationship right now. I knew that when I brought you home.”

“Did bringing me home make you want to date me? Am I really that good of a fuck?” Scarlett can’t keep the laughter out of her voice when she asks that.

“You’re really that good of a fuck,” I tell her. A smile spreads across my face. I’ve smiled more around Scarlett than I have in a long time. That realization just makes me more bitter that this is going to be nothing more than a one-night



stand. “And you’ve got a nice smile, too.” I pause, then add on, just for good measure, “Great tits and an even better drive. What more can you want in a woman?”

Scarlett laughs. “You know, I don’t think most guys see it that way. So many of you still want the woman to stay at home and raise the babies.”

“I’m not most guys,” I tell her. “I like knowing that my woman can take care of herself.”

“Is that so?” Scarlett asks, amused. Her fork scrapes over the side of the plate, gathering up a scoop of cheesy, scrambled eggs. “I would have pegged you for being mister macho man. Especially with that mirror.”

“I like to be in charge,” I say. “Don’t get me wrong. But I like knowing that I don’t need to babysit, too.”

The conversation continues while we eat, but I know that it’s going to end eventually. When it does, I put the dishes into the dishwasher and move to lead her over to the front door. Before Scarlett leaves, I kiss her one last time, wanting to make sure that she never forgets about me. I know that I’m never going to forget about her.

“It was nice,” says Scarlett.

“Good luck with your career,” I tell her, opening the door for her and holding it. She flashes me a smile and then heads for the elevator, stepping into the cube and vanishing from sight.

Fuck.

What a girl!

## Chapter Five

### Scarlett

“Ready for the first day at work?” Gracie leans back on her chair, stretching her arms above her head. She decided to take the day off for today so that it will be easier for Brody. He’s got used to spending most of his day with me and she wants to make the transition with the babysitter smoother—although there were no issues that day we went to the club and the few others she’s had to look after him.

I sigh at that memory. My decision not to see Conrad again is final—just a night with him was enough to keep me distracted for days and I can’t let my mind wander off to la la land right now. But that doesn’t mean I don’t—

“Hey, are you there?” Gracie waves her hand in the air.

“I am. And I’m ready for work too. I just can’t believe I landed this job,” I say, not wanting to share my thoughts with Gracie again. She’ll only tell me off for not trying to see him again. And the part about my job is true.

Branson Tech is exactly the kind of company that I've always wanted to work at. In fact, I dreamed of working here since I got out of college, but I waited a little while before applying for a job just to make sure that Gracie was going to be okay.

They make high-tech software packages for sound studios, and apparently have their hands in smart home packages for the mega-wealthy too, like in Conrad. They also just made a deal with Kissy Milton, one of the highest-ranking pop musicians of the year.

“I guess I'm having a bit of first-day jitters.”

“Scarlett, you were made for it,” she reassures me. “I'll take a few days to get to know everyone and get into a productive rhythm, but you'll shine like you always do. I mean, you've already skipped the intern phase.”

That's true. I had been expecting to be brought in as an intern or some kind of low-level grunt. Instead, my degree and my stellar interview skills landed me a job on the marketing team for product management, specifically for the department that has to deal with the new releases.

We keep talking about my job until we're both done with our breakfast.

“What time is Cheryl coming? I ask.

“In about an hour. If today goes well too, I'll set up a schedule for her.”

“Cheryl is a sweet girl who absolutely loves Brody,” it’s my turn to assure her. She’s studying to become a park ranger, which means that she actually does know a lot about birds, and she’s not just pretending to be interested for the sake of the kid.

Gracie smiles, finally showing some positivity about the whole situation.

I leave for work and end up arriving at my office almost half an hour early. Still, it’s not enough time to do all the things I need to do.

There’s a whole different story between advertising a product that’s just about to be dropped on the market, and a product that’s been out on the market for a while, which means that the moment I sat at my desk, I was greeted with a tower-tall stack of papers ready to topple over at any moment.

There’s a huge amount that needs to be learned and those are filled with information on the current products that are in varying stages of development, as well as with information on our current clients, and the clients that we’re trying to get in with, and even a few of the clients that we’ve blacklisted. That includes a particularly aggressive rock star called Red Death, and another company that’s been rumored to strip tech that it purchases and recode it to sell as their own products.

And I’m expected to memorize all of it. Even better, I’m expected to memorize all of it quickly enough that I can be of use on the current releases, as well as add insight to the meetings that are hosted once a week.

I know that if I can make it through the first week, I'll be able to come out on top. I know that I'll be able to make a name for myself.

But right now, I'm still struggling with a serious case of the first-day jitters and trying to figure out how to manage them. I've definitely been thrown to the wolves. And I'm worried that I'm not going to make a good enough impression on everyone but... Well, that's what the break room is for, right?

I've been keeping a close watch on the clock. I'm really looking forward to getting away from the desk long enough to clear my head and calm my nerves. And try to find a work buddy so that I can gain some more insight into the company.

There's already someone in the room when I finally get there. A woman named Vivian. She's tall and slender, with full lips and a curvy figure. Her pale-yellow blouse is partially hidden underneath a black suit jacket, paired with a nice black skirt.

I've seen her in the office a few times today. I'm still working on figuring out what everyone's role is, but I know that a lot of people in our team defer to her. She's not an official team leader, but everyone seems to look up to her on a less official basis.

She has a tuna salad on the table in front of her. Vivian looks up at me when I step into the room, flashing me a smile. "Hey. Did you bring something, or are you waiting on an order?"

“I brought something.” I open up the fridge in the corner of the room. The break room is nice. Like, really nice. There is a counter lining one wall, with a pod-style coffee maker on it, a SodaStream with different flavor options, a basket full of protein bars and other packaged snacks, another basket full of fresh fruit, a microwave, and a fridge loaded with community drinks. The other side of the room has a long wooden table pressed to the wall, several chairs along the side of it, and there’s a water cooler in the corner of the room.

I grab the grilled chicken dish that I picked up from the store on the way to work and slide it into the microwave. Everything in the building is made from high-tech bits of technology. I’m coming to learn most of it has been produced by a sister company to Branson Tech, the same one that has a hand in making smart home devices and features.

I’m not sure that I would want that kind of technology in my home. I’ve heard about how beneficial it can be, but I’ve also heard that a single blown fuse in the microwave could bring down the whole house, if you have it hooked up wrong.

The microwave beeps, and I bring my dish over to the table, taking a seat next to her. I give Vivian a friendly smile. “Have you been with the company for long?”

“In a manner of speaking,” says Vivian. She makes a wave with her fork. “I started out as one of the initial investors.”

“Oh, really? Wow, you must have seen something special in it. I guess it paid off, huh?” Branson Tech is huge. And it’s

expected to triple in size over the course of the next five years, too.

Vivian nods. “I’ll be honest, my father helped me pick the company, but I’ve learned a lot since I started working here. I don’t need someone else to pick for me now. It was a good learning experience.”

I nod, letting her talk.

Vivian continues, “And I’m ready to actually move up in this place. I just need to nail a few more big commissions, and then—” She snaps her fingers together, long manicured fingernails clicking when she does. “I’m golden.”

“Well, isn’t the meeting today for something big?” I ask.

Vivian nods. “It’s big enough that the CEO is going to be there.”

I swallow hard, trying to fight my nerves. Meeting the CEO of the company on my very first day? That’s got to be a new record for causing the stress levels to shoot straight up. “Have you met him before?”

Vivian stabs a cherry tomato and uses it to gesture at me. “A few times. He’s really hot.” A pause. “Don’t tell anyone I said that, okay?” She smiles at me. “I just can’t help it. You know how some guys just ooze sex appeal?”

I laugh.

Vivian insists, “Hey, seriously! When we get into the meeting, you’re going to totally get what I mean. This guy is



something else. He's smart, and handsome, and totally loaded."

She laughs, but I figure that she must be pretty loaded too if she could make an investment in a company like this. I don't have that kind of money. I'm not poor by any means but I have enough student loans to drown in, and a fair bit of debt accumulated from a car wreck that I was in when I was younger.

My plan is to use my position here on the marketing team to try and get all of that squared away, and then get myself a nice house somewhere in the city, preferably within walking distance of work, so I can spend less time dealing with traffic in the evenings.

We sit and chat for a little bit, mostly about the other members of the marketing team. Vivian is a huge gossip, and she has a little bit to say about everyone. I know this means that she's likely saying something about me, too, or at least that she's going to later on but—honestly, it's just really nice to have a friend in the office.

Plus, it gives me a chance to get the down low on who's dating who, who's feuding with who, and who's actually going to do their share of the work when we get put on projects with each other.

Vivian's break ends before mine, and she promises to keep a seat open for me at the meeting later.

What follows is the most excruciating two hours of my career, as I wait for what is going to be one of the biggest

meetings a girl could partake in on her first day at work. The walk to the meeting room on the sixth floor seems to take an eternity. I let myself in, knowing that it hasn't started yet.

It has one wall made up entirely of windows, letting in ample natural light, and the view looks out over the city and onto the main city street beneath us. A quick glance at the large table in the center of the room reveals that Vivian did, indeed, save me a seat. Even better, it's at the very end of the table, which means there's no one on my right side. I hurry over to claim the empty seat.

"Did you have a hard time getting up here?" Vivian asks. "I got lost, my first time."

I shake my head. "No, but I had a hell of a time convincing myself that I wasn't going to look like a total fool coming in here."

"You look fine." Vivian smiles at me. "It's because the boss is here, right?"

I scan the crowd. "He's not here yet, right?"

Vivian shakes her head. "Not yet. He's pretty bad about getting to meetings on time. I guess that's just one of the perks of being in charge of everything, right? Knowing your employees will wait on you."

"So, do we just sit around and wait for him?" I ask.

"Honestly, someone's probably going to get tired of sitting around eventually and we'll get started, then give him a catch-up when he shows up. That's how it normally goes, at least."

There is a fair bit of sitting around after that, but eventually, a pale, sweaty-looking man stands up and clears his throat. Vivian leans over and whispers, “That’s Eddie Tellis. He’s the leader of the marketing team on the other floor. We’re doing a combo hit for this product.”

Eddie clears his throat. “Alright. I think it’s probably best if we just get started now. We’ll go around, state where each department is at in their progress, and just... Go from there.”

Everyone starts talking about what they’re working on, which marketing programs they’ve started looking into, what they think the best course of action is going to be with this new product— some sort of editing program. I’ll be honest, I don’t understand a lot of the tech that the company itself makes yet but I have a strong head for marketing, and that’s what I plan on showing everyone. Vivian ends up being called on to announce where our department is at, but because I’m new, I’m supposed to stand up and give a quick introduction, too.

I’ve only just stood up when the door opens—and in walks mister CEO himself.

Fuck.

## Chapter Six

### Conrad

My one-night stand is in the meeting room. Well, this is interesting. For days I'd been looking for her, but with only a name to go from, my search had been futile.

Scarlett was standing still as a statue the moment I walked in, and I can't stop looking at her ever since.

She's got on a professional pantsuit and the same smoky eye shadow as the day we met. It's only by the graces that we're both professionals and we're able to get through the meeting without an issue. Still, as soon as the meeting is over, I nod at her. "Would you stay for a moment?"

Vivian leans forward, laughing, and whispers something to Scarlett. Then she gets up and leaves the room. Soon, it's just the two of us in the office. Scarlett stands up, stepping around the edge of the table and over to me. She holds out her hand. "Wright."

I take it, giving it a shake. "Branson."

“I figured that much out already,” says Scarlett. The corners of her mouth twist up at the edges. “This isn’t going to be an issue, is it?”

“It doesn’t need to be anything,” I tell her. She’s gorgeous, and I want her. There’s a part of me that thinks this must be fate. That we were supposed to meet again. There’s an undeniable connection between us. I’ve never had that experience with any other women I’ve brought home.

But she told me that night that she wants to focus on her career, and despite my initial search for her, I’ve always been hesitant about mixing business and pleasure.

“That sounds like you’re not sold on the idea.”

“It would be easy to change my mind,” I admit to her. “You’re a stunning woman, Scarlett Wright. I wouldn’t mind getting to know you more.”

“That’s not going to happen,” says Scarlett, taking a step backward. “I don’t want this to affect my job here. I would not have applied if I had known *you* were the CEO, but your company has been at the top of my list for a while now.”

“I try not to advertise that to my one-time dates. It gets people interested for the wrong reasons,” I say.

“Then you understand why I’m not looking to *get* interested in you,” Scarlett insists but there’s a shakiness to her voice. “I won’t let a one-night stand get in the way of my career.”

“I admired that about you when we spoke over eggs.” I make my way over to the door. “You were so focused. It’s

impressive.”

“Give me a week,” Scarlett promises with a smile. “And I’ll give you something to really be impressed with.”

She turns and leaves. I watch her go, my gaze settled firmly on her incredible ass. Fuck, it’s just my luck that the best woman I’ve ever met is working for me, right? I might have pushed harder to try and get her to give me a second go if she didn’t.

As it stands, I let the week pass us by without too much interference though I don’t waste any opportunity to be close to her. I want to see if Scarlett actually knows her stuff when it comes to marketing. Sometimes, people think that they can coast through the position, thinking that our large marketing team will absorb their laziness without showing it. Newbies have also come in thinking that the marketing teams don’t have much on their plate.

But that’s not true.

Every business is run, by and large, by the marketing team. Products are dead in the water if they don’t get promoted correctly, to the right people, at the right time, in the right way. And the only people I want involved in my company are the ones who actually give a shit about their job.

So, at the end of the first week, I seek her out.

“I hope the lack of pictures in here isn’t a sign that you aren’t planning on staying?” I ask, leaning an arm against the side of the cubicle entrance.

These past few days, Scarlett has proved that she doesn't just pull her weight. She goes out of her way to take control of situations; she leads as often as possible. And she's good at it. I think she's a natural talent and I'm glad that she's on board.

She looks up at me, frowning a little bit. "Why wouldn't I be staying?"

Everyone in the marketing team has their own cubicle in the main office, though right now everyone's gone.

"I don't know. Most people have put a bit of themselves into their workstation by now." I step into the cubicle, picking up one of the pens laying on her desk. "And it doesn't even look like you've brought a coffee cup."

Scarlett tells me with her eyebrows raised, "That's just because I'm not ready to mix my personal life with work. I'm pretty sure that we've had this conversation before, Mr. Branson." She stands up, grabbing a manila envelope off the back of the desk and handing it to me with a grin. "Plus, I've been way too focused on the actual job to even consider the decor. Here. I was going to drop this off in your office today, anyway."

"Is this the outline for the Blichton job?"

"No," she says, sarcastically. "It's a rock."

I laugh. Pretty, smart, and funny, too. God damn, what doesn't she have?

"I'll look it over in the morning. I was just about to head out. How about I walk with you?" I offer.

Scarlett looks me up and down. For a moment, I think that she's going to turn me down but then she laughs, a little breathless, and says, "It's your company, Conrad. I don't think I could tell you no, even if I *didn't* want to walk with you."

"Sounds to me like you *do* want to walk with me," I tell her, stepping out of the way. The folder gets tucked under my arm, and I let her step out of the stark cubicle. We make our way toward the long hallway together, the elevator at the end of it. I push the button and we settle in to wait. It only takes about five seconds before the doors slide open and we step inside.

This time, Scarlett's hand snaps out before mine can, and she presses the button for the lobby floor. "I'll be honest, I'm surprised."

"By the elevator? Well, you see, it's because not everyone can use stairs," I tell her. "An amazing invention, don't you think?"

"Mhm. Smart ass." She rolls her eyes. The lights blink as we drop down lower through the shaft. "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"I don't know what you mean, then," I say, moving a bit closer to her, her perfume filling my nostrils.

"I'm honestly surprised that you were willing to respect that I didn't want to pursue anything with you," Scarlett says, both impressed and a bit annoyed.

"You made your feelings clear, Ms. Wright," I say. There are only two floors left. "You don't want anything, and I can



respect that.”

“Most people in your position wouldn’t respect that. They would either try to get in bed again or fire me if I wasn’t interested,” Scarlett says.

“I’m not most people,” I tell her. The elevator jerks. The doors open, letting us out into the lobby. There’s a large desk at one end of it, with a woman sitting behind it. Estelle is almost seventy, and she’s been with the company for thirty years. Her hair is pure white and she’s small, so she doesn’t look like much, but I know that she can handle any problem that shows up.

“I’ve started to notice that.” Scarlett sounds pleased. She looks me over, and I know what she sees. I’m handsome. Successful. Not a raging douchebag like most people in my position. I’ve got a lot going for me.

And now she knows that.

“Stick around longer,” I tell her, nodding toward Estelle and then heading for the front doors. “You’ll notice a lot more about me.”

She stays hot on my heels. It makes my exit from the building a little bit less impressive, but I can’t honestly complain about spending more time with her. I thought about it a lot this week. I want her. She’s gorgeous. She’s smart.

Scarlett Wright is a catch like no one else I’ve ever met before.

But there's a reason I leave my last name out of conversations when I'm meeting a woman— in the past plenty of them have tried to use me for both my money and the clout my name can bring. I've even had interns try to work their way into my bed, hoping it might give them the opportunity to skip over the grunt starter position. While I don't think that's what Scarlett is looking for... I can't help but be a little bit wary.

We part ways in the parking lot, and I head to my motorcycle, a black and chrome Harley. It's one of my favorite things that I've ever purchased. I'm not a motorcycle buff by any means, but this baby—she's something special.

I put my hand on the side of the chassis and look over my shoulder, seeking out Scarlett. She's already gotten into her own car, and I can't see her too well... But I think that she's got a smile on her face when she backs out of the parking lot.

Scarlett... She's something too.

I don't know why I'm so attached to her, but I am. It's like we've got this spark, this rope wrapped between us, that just keeps pulling tighter and tighter. I get onto the bike, jamming the key into the engine. A smile curls over my face as I realize something.

Interns have tried to sleep with me, but Scarlett, she's gone out of her way to do the opposite. She doesn't want me for my money. Not now, and not that night at my house.

I've never been around a woman who would turn me down after she finds out who I am. After she knew what kind of

money I was worth. And this just makes me want her more. Maybe I'll have to rethink my stance on not having office flings.

Either way, I'll definitely be spending a lot of time thinking about Scarlett.

## Chapter Seven

### Scarlett

It's almost nine and the floor is completely empty. I can't stay here much longer and I'm definitely not pulling another all-nighter at home. I check my screen one last time before saving the file and hitting send. Conrad will see the email in the morning and, hopefully, within the next few days, we'll know if we got the job.

Even though I am keeping a distance from him—and he does the same—he's in my mind the entire time, a sweet but torturing distraction. And when you add to my desire to succeed at my job the need to impress him, you get the mess I'm in tonight.

But it's all worth it. The Blichton job is a success.

I can't help but beam when Conrad calls us into the meeting room two days later and tells everyone. I'm not expecting him to keep going, adding on, "We wouldn't have been able to make this deal if we didn't have our newest team member with us. Scarlett Wright came up with the idea, and she deserves some recognition for that."

A hefty round of applause ripples through the table. My cheeks burn, but I refuse to duck my head or look too abashed by it. Vivian is sitting next to me. She gives me a little elbow in the side, saying, “Someone got called out by the boss. Lucky bitch!”

It’s a whisper, so quiet I barely hear it.

The clapping stops when Conrad speaks again. “This is a big deal. Not only have we completely secured this deal, but it looks like they’re going to be working with our company for a long time. And because of that, I want to thank you all. We would not be where we are without the hard work of people like you. I want to ensure that you know exactly how grateful I am. So next weekend, we’re going to be celebrating here, together.”

Vivian leans over to me again, her voice still in that harsh, low whisper. “He does this sometimes. The company parties here are almost better than the pay. He really knows how to treat his employees right.”

What’s up with her today? Vivian might be a lot of things, but she’s never spoken to me like this.

“I know that some people have plans for this Saturday, so we’re going to do it the next one. Come in around five, and I’ll make sure that all of your hard work pays off,” says Conrad, with a smile. The meeting continues the way it usually does, with Conrad giving a rundown on the stats and then segueing into the projects that we’re going to need to work on next.

There are about seven new clients that we've managed to book and from what I can tell, three of them have only been picked up because the Blichton project was secured. I can't help but feel a note of pride in regard to that, and I'm quick to volunteer for the leading role on one of the other projects, my hand snapping up into the air.

"I can handle that one, sir," I tell him, my voice clear and determined.

Conrad looks over at me, his eyes glinting. "Alright. I think you're going to be a good match for it. Have Sandy and Joanne help you with it. Vivian, I want you on the West Records, and the new synthesizer project that they're trying to get funded. You know your way around the jackass in charge better than anyone else. I don't trust them to not try and pull a fast one on us again."

Vivian gives a heavy sigh. "Great. Because everyone looks forward to dealing with Jackson."

"Sorry," says Conrad, not sounding the least bit sorry. "I don't know anyone else that can deal with it. Jackson likes you."

"Jackson's a pervert," says Vivian.

Conrad sighs. "He pays well, and you don't have to do anything more than email him—" he says but seems to change his mind. "Actually, Stefan, take this one over."

Vivian gives a heavy sigh of relief but doesn't say anything. The rest of the jobs are passed out, and then the meeting is

called to an end. I find myself at home before too long.

The next week passes in a blur. I mean, I aced all of my classes for a reason. Being a focused student has given me a leg up on being able to handle my work and the new project is not harder than the Blichton job. In fact, it might even be easier. They need a slightly modified piece of technology marketed to a very specific company, and I just need to convince them to make the upgrade.

\*\*\*

I check myself in the mirror for much longer than I'd ever admit, but it's important to look good at the party tonight. Everyone will be there, and I want to show that—

Oh, who am I kidding? There's only one person I want to impress.

“So much for keeping my eyes on the goal,” I whisper as I go down the stairs and into the kitchen.

Gracie is standing at the center of the room, flour on the front of her shirt, her hands, and in her hair. “You look stunning, Scarlett,” she says with a grin.

“And you look like the kitchen blew up on you.”

“I'm trying to bake.”

“I've literally never seen you bake anything before.” It definitely looks like the place has erupted. There's flour on the counters and cake batter on the wall. “What's with this sudden change?”

“Brody has a big party at school this week,” says Gracie, trying to wipe some of it off her face. “They’re celebrating the school turning one hundred. Everyone’s supposed to bring something, and Brody told everyone that he would bring cake.”

“Why don’t you just buy one?” I ask.

“I don’t know. With his dad gone, I just felt like maybe he deserved something a little more special,” she says. “Something homemade. It’s not going very well but... I guess that’s why I gave myself all weekend to practice.” Gracie gestures at the ruined, burned, sunken cake that’s on the counter already. “What about you? Ready to celebrate your success?”

“What do you think?” I ask and twirl around my deep maroon dress. It’s sexy but not overly revealing.

“I think you are not going there to just celebrate the project.”

“I told you, I’m not going to—”

“Yeah, you spend hours every day telling me, or yourself, that.” Gracie sits on a chair and looks up at my annoyed expression. “But perhaps it’s time to approach this a bit differently. Because all you do is exhaust yourself both with work and your thoughts.”

She’s right, I’m not going to deny it. But I’m not going to admit it either.



“I need to go,” I tell her, and she knows not to pressure me right now.

Soon enough, I’m at the office, and everyone is piling into the office building for the company party which has clearly been catered by the finest—I would expect nothing less. There are two large tables both spilling over with what look to be delicious appetizer options.

The real stars of the night, though, are the drinks. There’s punch and sparkling cider for people who don’t drink, but the caterers have also brought in a full bar selection, from a variety of cocktail options to wine and beer.

Vivian is wearing a black dress that’s way tighter and way skimpier than I would ever wear to a corporate party. I want people to respect me, not just have a hard-on for me.

“There you are!” Vivian waves me over. She hands me a drink once I get to her, which I’m grateful for. Her behavior hasn’t changed much since the success of my project but she’s still the person I’m closest to here. “Did you see Conrad? He’s over there.”

I look in the direction that she gestures, and spot Conrad easily enough. He’s speaking with someone from a floor above us. Conrad’s white button-up shirt has the top three buttons undone and fits his body in ways that are impossible to ignore. I down my drink.

“God,” I say, without thinking. The moment that the word slips out from my lips, my cheeks go bright red. I press a hand to my mouth, and I say, “Forget I said that.”

But Vivian's smile tells me she's *never* going to forget it. "It's okay, Scarlett. I'm right there with you. I've been trying to get in bed with him for years."

My head snaps toward her. For some reason, instead of filling me with that kind of giddy girl-talk vibe, it just makes me instantly irritated, even jealous. I've known that she found him sexy from day one but hearing her say it like this creates all kinds of images in my mind. "What?"

"Oh, sure," says Vivian, taking a sip of her margarita as I get myself another drink. "I mean, look at him. I'm positive that most of the people here have thought about trying to get in bed with him."

I take a sip to stop myself from saying something that I'm going to regret later on.

She continues, "You know, I started out as an investor. I've told you that before, haven't I?"

"A few times," I say. I wouldn't normally be so dismissive toward someone that I have to work with long-term.

Vivian just laughs though, not taking it to heart. She either doesn't care or just doesn't notice the tone that I used. "Don't get me wrong! I'm not looking to sleep my way to the top. It really isn't like that. I just think—you know, if he was going to sleep with someone in the company, it would be with someone that wasn't hand-picked to work for the company."

"You think he's more likely to sleep with an investor than someone that was hired the traditional way," I clarify.

Vivian nods. “Exactly.” And then, sounding like she’s lamenting this, “But he’s never been interested.”

It’s not nice, but I can’t help asking, “Are you sure that he’s just never been interested in you?”

“Look at me,” says Vivian. “Do you think I’m the kind of woman that a guy isn’t interested in?”

Despite her comment, I think that Vivian doesn’t have much confidence in herself and that translates to her job. She’s not bad at it but seems to lack initiative—she doesn’t try hard and mostly seems bored. That’s why she uses the money she invested to keep her place in the business. And I think that Conrad is the kind of guy who likes his women to be sure of themselves.

I just hum into my drink instead. My gaze drifts back toward Conrad. He’s moved on from the man that he’d been talking with and is instead standing between two women. I don’t recognize either of them but... fuck, I’m tired of this.

Conrad was a great lay. And I do like him more than I want to admit. There’s a small part of me that also wants to prove to Vivian that we’re different, too. I didn’t need to buy my way into the company, and I don’t need to tiptoe around Conrad, either.

I give Vivian my drink back. “Hold this for me.”

Then I turn and, much to her surprise, head straight over to where Conrad’s standing. I tap him on the shoulder. He looks at me and smiles. “Scarlett. If it’s not the woman of the hour!”

The blonde that he's speaking with turns her attention to me. "This is the woman that came up with the killer Blichton idea?"

"This is her." Conrad puts his arm around my shoulders and pulls me toward him. "Scarlett, meet Cassie LaBlanc, and Melissa Monroe."

"Hi," says the blonde, Cassie. "I'm in Human Resources."

"She's the *head* of HR," says Conrad. "Any issue you have, you take it to her. Cassie will handle it."

"That's great to know and I don't mean to be rude," I say, nodding at the both of them. "But I have an issue that only you can handle right now, Conrad. Can we speak outside?"

Conrad's expression brightens, just a little. "Right now?"

"Yes," I insist. "Sorry, Cassie, Melissa. I wouldn't steal him away from the party if it wasn't important."

"You're fine," says Cassie. She waves off my concerns. "We'll finish talking shop later, Conrad."

Melissa says, "Or we could all stop talking shop, and just enjoy the fact that we're not working tonight."

Conrad seems pleased with me pulling him away. He nods his head and lets me lead him from the group and then toward the door that leads into the hallway. I can feel Vivian watching me, her eyes boring holes into my back.

She doesn't say anything, and I don't turn to look at her, but I can still feel her *staring* at me. It would be unsettling if it

wasn't exactly what I wanted out of the situation.

Am I going to regret doing this later?

Maybe.

But right now, all I can think about is the fact that I'm *better* than Vivian. He wants me. Only me.

## Chapter Eight

### Conrad

“What’s going on?” I ask once we are in the hallway.

Scarlett laughs. “I’ll be honest, I was just proving a point to someone. Sorry.”

My eyebrows raise. “You were proving a point to someone.”

“Mhm.” Scarlett seems amused with herself. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

She looks gorgeous tonight. Her dress hugs her curves, and though her supple tits are nearly covered, my gaze still drifts down to settle on her cleavage. “Does it still seem like a good idea?”

“Partially.” She tilts her head back, smiling at me. “Should it not?”

“I think—” I take a step forward and close the already small distance between us. “That you should see your idea through to the end.”

Scarlett doesn't step back. "And who says this isn't already as far as I wanted to take it?"

"The fact that you keep staring at me, for one," I tell her. My hand settles on her hip, and I lead her toward the door on the other side of the hall. "The fact that your career is the only thing stopping you from sleeping with me again is another."

"I'm not concerned about my career." Scarlett says, her voice firm. "I've already shown you that I know what I'm doing."

"You have. You're an incredible asset to my company." Another step. The hallway is empty. I reach around behind her and open the door, pushing it inwards. "Which means that there's nothing stopping you from sleeping with me again."

Scarlett lets me walk her into the room, another office with a long rectangular table running through the center. The moment that we step inside, the lights flash on. She challenges, "Maybe I'm just not that into you."

"You are." With one leg, I kick the door shut behind us.

Scarlett leans forward, pressing our chests together, so she can reach around me and lock it. "Maybe I am."

I put both my hands on her hips, and she starts walking backward in earnest. Leaning forward, I crash our mouths together in a fierce, passionate kiss. It's more tongue than anything else. I can taste the lime from her drinks on the back of her teeth and feel her breath over my own skin in the few moments that we pull apart.

Her thighs bump against the table and my hands drop down, grabbing onto the skirt of her dress and rucking it up, over her hips. Scarlett's panties are black, with a simple little bow on the side. Her eyes flash with a fire so hot, it feels like it's burning me from the inside out.

"Fuck," I tell her, kissing her again. My mouth presses to the curve of her jaw and then her neck. A hand comes up to my chest and shoves.

"Watch the teeth," warns Scarlett. "I don't want to wear eighty pounds of cover-up into work tomorrow because you like to bite."

"I like a lot of things," I tell her. My fingers hook into the waistband of her panties, shoving them down her hips. Scarlett steps out of them, kicking them off and to the side. "Biting's just one of them."

"Get creative," says Scarlett. "Pick something—ah!"

She yelps when I grab hold of her and spin her around, planting a hand in between her shoulder blades and bending her down against the table. I leave my hand there, chiding her lightly, "Mind the noise, Miss Wright. You wouldn't want anyone else to come in here, would you?"

"Prick," Scarlett grumbles, as she spreads her legs so it's easier for me to slip my second hand between them.

"Fuck." The word shudders out between my teeth. "You're so damn wet already. Have you been thinking about me during the whole party?"



I can't see the expression on her face, but I can feel the way that her body clenches around my finger. I press in knuckle deep and then add a second one. The sound of her pussy being finger fucked seems obscenely loud in the otherwise totally silent office.

“What happened to being quiet?” she says, breathless. “Maybe you should spend less time talking about it, and more time fucking me.”

“Ask nicely,” I tell her. My fingers go still but I don't pull my hand away from her. She tries to roll her hips against my hand, but it doesn't get her anything.

Scarlett whines. “I'm not going to do that.”

“Oh come on honey—” I give a lazy thrust with my fingers. “Want to make sure that we're on the same page. You didn't want to sleep with me before, and now you want me to fuck you?”

Another lazy thrust upwards. My fingertips stroke over her inner walls, just once. Scarlett makes a sound that's half desperate and then relents, “Yes, yes, I want you to fuck me, Conrad!”

“I think I can manage that.” I press a kiss between her shoulder blades and then pull my hand away. Pussy-slick fingers undo the front of my belt and then slide down the zipper. I only push my pants down far enough to get my dick free.

She makes to straighten up, but I press her back down on the table, clucking my tongue. I leave one hand there, on her shoulders. The other one curls around the base of my shaft. I line up and then press inside, groaning lowly at the tight wet heat that engulfs me.

Scarlett makes a soft sound and then tilts her head to the side, muffling her mouth against her own forearm. It's a shame I can't see her expression. There's a reason why I like the mirror in my bedroom so much.

It's not enough to distract me for long, though. I sink into the hilt and then, without pause, pull back almost to the tip. I set a brutal pace from the very start, pounding into her pretty little pussy. She spreads her legs lewdly, and her hips jerk against the edge of the table each time I thrust into her.

"You take me so well," I pant, taking hold of her hips with my free hand. My fingers are still slightly damp from her slick when I dig them into her supple hips. "It drives me *insane*, Scarlett. All I can do is think—ah, shit—think about you."

She bites down on her arm. There's drool on her skin. Her moans are muffled enough so that no one walking past the office door is going to hear them, but I can still make them out. It's faint, buried under the slapping of our skin, the wet sound that she makes every time I drive up into her.

It's true.

Scarlett is the only thing that's been on my mind for three weeks. I keep thinking about how she looked beneath me that first night we met. I keep thinking about how I've never met

someone as confident and determined as her. She worked her way under my skin and made a home there. And maybe it's the beer talking, or just the pleasure curling heat under my skin, but all I can think is that I want to do the same thing to her, consume her mind.

My hand slides up, pressing against the back of her neck instead of her shoulder. I adjust myself, leaning more fully against her back. It means that I can't thrust as hard, but it lets me press deeper, grinding myself into her without having to pull away. There's sweat dripping down the back of my neck, over my shoulders. My eyes close, mouth pulling into a thin line.

Scarlett isn't the only one that needs to be quiet. I'm biting my own tongue to try and keep my grunts down to a minimum. When the orgasm builds up in me, I bite my tongue so hard that I taste copper.

It doesn't even cross my mind to pull out of her, or the fact that I'm not using a condom, either. All I can focus on is getting as close to Scarlett as possible. I want her to *feel* me inside of her.

And she *does*.

I roll my hips through my orgasm, fucking my cum up into her, and then pull out while I'm still half-hard and panting. My hands slide down over her body until I've got two fingers inside of her, and a third on her clit. Scarlett is still bent over the table, but now she's got a hand clamped over her mouth, trying to stifle her moans.

My cum clings to my fingers as I thrust them up into her, rolling her clit with my thumb. The feeling is intense, even when it's just my fingers inside of her. I start with two and then circle a third one around her entrance, pressing it up and into her cunt after a moment. Her body parts easily around the intrusion and it only takes a few moments before it goes tight, every muscle inside of her contracting as she trembles with orgasmic bliss.

I pull my hand away, leaning down and kissing the small of her back. Then I pull up my boxers and my pants, hooking my belt again. Her panties are still on the floor. I grab them and use them to clean up my hand, and then to wipe between her legs.

“Fuck,” she pants.

“I think we just finished that, actually,” I tell her. The panties are stained with our cum. I look at them a moment and then stuff them into the back pocket of my slacks.

She rolls over, smiling at me. Scarlett's always pretty but she just looks even better now, freshly fucked and red-faced. “Give those back.”

“I think you're going to have to come and get them,” I tell her, taking a step toward the door. “Unless you're going back to the party without your panties.”

“Is that the game you're playing now?” Scarlett sounds more amused than anything else. She takes a moment to gather herself, and then she stands up and tugs down the skirt of her dress. It's long enough to cover her ass, but her hair is a

disaster and there's always a certain look that clings to a woman that just got fucked.

Anyone who looks at Scarlett is going to know that I was inside of her.

*Good.*

"I'm not playing any games," I say. "I'm going to call my driver and head home." I take a step toward the door. "Are you going to join me?"

Scarlett hesitates for a moment, like she honestly has to think it over. Business minded, even now. But in the end, she just can't move past me, same as I can't move past her.

"Alright," she says. She gives me half a smile while she bites her bottom lip. It's a damn sexy look on her. And then with a wink she says, "I might as well. Your company party's proven to be pretty lame."

"My company party is great," I say with a huff of laughter, turning and heading for the door. I flick the lock open and step back into the hall. "The one at my house just happens to be better."

"We'll see about that," says Scarlett, following me out. "You've set your standard pretty high. You'll have to work hard to beat it."

I smile. "Trust me, honey. It won't feel like work at all."

## Chapter Nine

### Scarlett

His skyrise suite is just as beautiful as it was the first time, though I'll be honest, I'm not really paying much attention to the building this time around. I'm more interested in the fact that he's been rubbing the inside of my thigh the whole way out here, and the fact that I can feel his cum dried on the inside of my legs.

The moment that we're in the suite, he's got me pressed to the wall again. My arms are thrown around his neck, one leg curling around his left calf. "Come on," I goad him. "Are you going to one-up yourself, or what?"

"Maybe I want to hear you ask to be fucked again," Conrad says.

I reach up and grab a fistful of his thick, blond hair with one hand. "That's not going to happen again, mister. I don't like begging."

"Oh, honey, that wasn't begging," Conrad says, half laughing as he leans against me. "If I really wanted you to beg,

you would know. I just wanted to hear you ask for it real sweetly.”

“You already did,” I say, with a laugh. “And you’re not going to hear it again.”

It looks like he has to think about that for a moment, but eventually, he relents and goes back to kissing me again, our mouths crashing together and then gentling. His lips move against mine in a way that’s almost soft, my lips tingling from the force of his teeth having sunk into them a moment before.

I’m half expecting to end up in his bedroom again. Or maybe on the couch or bent over the counter. I’m not expecting him to lift me up by the hips and the thighs, pushing me up against the wall. A sound is startled out of me, but it’s swallowed up pretty well by his mouth still pressed against my own. I’m still not wearing any panties. The position has my legs spread wide around his hips, crossing over the small of his back. My arms loop around his shoulders on instinct, to steady myself.

With one hand, he undoes his belt and lets his slacks drop down onto the floor. I dig my hands even harder against his back and his shoulders, steadying myself while he pulls his cock free. He briefly shifts around, moving to press his dick against me, and then he’s shifting to drive up *into* me.

It’s such a sudden stretch that it has me shouting. The air is practically punched out of my lungs. My fingernails dig into the back of his neck. “Fuck!”

“That’s the idea,” says Conrad, with a laugh. “I’m going to give you another night that you’ll never forget.”

“You’re already impossible to forget,” I tell him, the words softer than I mean for them to be. There’s a moment of stillness, like he’s trying to figure out exactly what I’m saying, and then he’s kissing me again, tongue in my mouth, trying to taste every part of me.

And I’m happy to give it to him.

He’s not moving, except to kiss me. And there’s no way for me to get enough leverage to roll my hips. I realize, after a moment, that he’s managed to trick me. I’m in a position where the only way to get him to fuck me... is to ask.

“Prick!” I shout, but the word is chased with a laugh. My head thumps against the wall behind me.

Conrad asks, so sweetly, “Is something wrong?”

“You’re awful,” I pant, trying again to goad him into moving. It doesn’t work. The man’s determined to stay perfectly still until I actually ask.

Frustration rushes through me. It’s too much.

I give in painfully fast, “Fine, you win!”

“I win?”

“Yes, fuck me, Conrad,” I say, tightening my grip on him. “Come on, fuck me hard.”

I can practically feel the way that Conrad’s smile curls through him. His mouth presses against the curve of my



jawbone, and then he finally, finally starts to move. He rolls his hips, slow at first, like he's trying to find his tempo. He presses me against the wall, using it to hold me still.

When he finds his rhythm, it's like a bolt of electricity jerks through me. I'm tender from already taking him once tonight, but the little prickles of pain only heighten the experience. A part of me hopes that this never ends—and the rest of me is already waiting for him to cum inside of me again, so I can feel that blissful heat and overbearing pleasure.

\*\*\*

I don't go home until the next day. It's almost a struggle not to walk with a bit of a limp. The small of my back is sore and my thighs are stiff. It's a good thing that I don't have to be back at work until tomorrow.

There's no sign of Brody when I step inside. He must be out with the sitter. "Gracie?"

Nope. She must be at work.

At least that helps eliminate a bit of the walk of shame. I hurry upstairs, grabbing some comfy pajamas from my bedroom and then head for the shower. I turn the water on as hot as I can stand it, letting it crash over my back and loosen the knotted muscles.

I stay in there until there's no hot water left and then I leisurely dry off, the soft towel feeling so gentle on my skin. I put on my pajamas and make my way back downstairs and collapse onto the couch, turning on the TV.

I'm still there when Gracie comes home three hours later, several bags of groceries in hand. She puts them up and then joins me on the couch. "You had fun last night, huh? You really slept in. Brody and I were doing our best to be quiet for you this morning."

"Well, I wasn't here, actually," I say with a wince. "I think I made a big mistake last night," I tell Gracie.

Gracie winces too. "You didn't go home with Conrad again, did you?"

I sigh, tilting my head backward. "A huge mistake."

"Scarlett!" Gracie gasps. "I thought that you were against sleeping with *anyone* at work!"

"I am!" My hands press against my face. "I don't know what's going on with me. I wasn't even subtle about it. I practically told Vivian that's what I was planning to do."

"Isn't she the gossip?" Gracie asks.

I groan.

Gracie winces again. "I'm going to take that as a yes."

"This is awful."

"It sounds to me like you didn't think it was awful last night. Scarlett, if you like the guy so much, why not try and actually *be* with him?" Gracie asks.

"Because—" I say, but then I find myself faltering for an actual answer. Another groan, and my hands drop down into my lap. "I'm trying to be laser-focused on work right now."

“Well, it sounds like he’s what you’re really focused on.”

That’s true. I’ve got a serious case of brain rot right now. Conrad’s wormed his way into my thoughts, and nothing I do can shake them free.

Gracie continues, “Maybe you should try and see what happens if you pursue something with him. Weren’t you just saying a few days ago how comfortable you were at work? I don’t think that they’re going to drop you.”

“I don’t either,” I admit. “But I know what everyone’s going to think. A pretty young woman sleeping with the older boss? Every job I’m given, people are going to brush off as a—a fuck pass.”

“No one says fuck pass,” corrects Gracie.

The look I shoot her is nothing shy of sour. “You know what I mean.” I shift, pulling my legs up onto the couch with me and turning to face her more fully. “I’m being serious with all of this, Gracie. I shouldn’t have gone home with him last night. By Monday, everyone at the office is going to be talking about it.”

“Look, Scarlett. You can’t—” Gracie pauses, purses her lips together, and then starts over. “Everyone knows that my husband ran off with the nanny. Everyone.”

I wince a little bit.

Gracie pushes on, explaining, “And they know that I’m raising Brody on my own now. And we both know Mark can’t keep his mouth shut. He has told everyone he knows, and

they've told all their friends, and by the time it gets back around to me, the story they're all telling is totally different from what actually happened."

"I know."

"That's not going to stop me from hanging out with my friends." Gracie says, "I had to think really hard about it, about how much I cared what other people think of me. And at the end of the day, I decided that I would rather just focus on what *I* think of me. And I know that my husband ran off with the nanny because he's a prick."

"He is," I agree. "He's an asshole. Only a real scumbag would pull something like that on their family."

Divorce in itself is one thing; it happens all the time. It's really sad, but families can still mend and blend okay after. But running off with the nanny, just leaving, when you've got a kid—and a young kid, too—is a totally different ball game. I've got no space in my heart for cheaters or dead-beat dads.

Gracie continues, "And you're going to get better jobs and bigger deals at the company, because you're a valuable employee, and good at what you do. Not because you banged the boss. You need to be able to stand strong in knowing that."

That just makes me groan and sink back down onto the couch, like I've gone boneless. I wasn't actually expecting her to totally solve my problems, but it would have been nice if she had something more helpful to say. "It matters to me a lot! I care what other people think of me."

“Maybe you shouldn’t.” Gracie pats me on the knee. “Or maybe you should just care about what *you* want more. And from where I’m sitting, you care about this guy a lot. I mean, you don’t sleep around. But you’ve gone home with him twice.”

Three times, if you count the office. I keep that little factoid to myself, though.

“That’s not like you.” Gracie stands up. “I’m getting a shower, and you’re going to order a pizza. And just—think about it, okay?”

“Okay,” I tell her, though I really want to do the opposite. I want to figure out how to just totally shut my brain off completely, not keep thinking about this. I watch Gracie go upstairs and out of sight and then grab my phone, calling in our usual pizza order.

Within twenty minutes our pizza is sitting in front of us. And I just feel stuck down to the couch with nothing but the TV, my own thoughts and lots of cheese. Gracie’s right, and I know it. My position in the company is secure, so the only thing that could be put at risk by sleeping with Conrad, or pursuing a more serious relationship with him, is my reputation.

People are going to talk. I’m just not sure that I want to hand them the material to talk about. They should at least have to *work* at finding something to gossip over, right?

I’m so frustrated over the whole thing. It’s all that I can think about the whole day—whether I’m going to say

something to Conrad about it tomorrow, or not. And in the end, I decide that what I want to do right now is just... focus on my work.

That's the best thing to do. Right?

## Chapter Ten

### Conrad

I don't hear from Scarlett on Sunday. By Monday, I've decided that I'll let her figure out where we're going from here. Honestly, I want her.

I want her to be mine. Someone that I can date, and hold, and fuck, and love. But I respect that she's so strong-willed about things, and so determined to keep work and personal life separate. Maybe not very *successful* with it, but totally determined about it.

So, Monday morning, I give her a genuine smile and a nod when we pass in the hallway, and then head upstairs into my own office. If she wants to speak with me about Saturday night, she knows where to find me. That's actually why I'm so keen on letting in the person knocking on my door twenty minutes later. I'm expecting it to be Scarlett.

It's not.

I can't quite keep the disappointment out of my voice when I say, "Oh, Vivian. I wasn't expecting you today. Did you need

something?”

“I know you weren’t,” says Vivian. She closes the door behind her. The top button of her black silky blouse has been undone. The flap is parted just enough that I can catch sight of her black, super lacy bra. She’s showing off more cleavage than I would like in the office, but I opt not to say anything this time.

Vivian walks over to my desk, leaning against it. Her palms press to the surface of the wood, the position showing off even more of her cleavage, her breasts barely contained by her bra and the shirt gaping so much that I can now see straight into it.

“So, what do you need?” I ask.

“Maybe I just wanted to see you,” says Vivian.

I frown at her. “You realize we’re at work, don’t you?”

“I know. But that didn’t stop you the other night, did it?” Vivian asks.

Irritation sweeps through me. I’m not stupid. She’s clearly talking about when I swept Scarlett into the conference room at the party. It wasn’t the best decision I’ve ever made. I normally keep a pretty firm rule about *not* sleeping with my employees, and I’m even more strict about not letting *anyone* mess around in the actual office building. I once caught an intern sleeping with Randy, from the tech team, in one of the computer labs. They were both let go. The company really only supports relationships at work if they’re legit and they’ve been reported to HR.



If we don't run a tight ship in that regard, things could quickly get out of hand. I don't want to have to deal with people from lower positions feeling like they are manipulated into sex by the higher-ups. I just... had a few beers too many. And being around Scarlett makes me stupid and impulsive.

I tell her, "You're right, it didn't." And then, "But it's not any of your business, Vivian. You should put more attention on your projects, and less attention on what your coworkers are doing."

"It's not Scarlett that I'm concerned with, it's you," says Vivian. She leans forward again, giving me a flirty smile. It's pretty obvious that she's going to be trouble on a long-term basis. The thing is, Vivian's been flirting with me since she was hired. I've just never been interested in her like that. She's pretty, but she's just not my type. The past rejections should have made that clear.

"Considering I'm your boss," I tell her firmly. "You shouldn't be concerned with that either."

Her smile falters, just a little bit. She straightens but she doesn't pull away from the desk entirely. "Why not?"

Does she really think that because I fucked one of my employees, I'll do the same with anyone else?

"Vivian, what I choose to do isn't any of your business. Scarlett and I are both consenting adults," I tell her. "And you *work* here. You don't get to police what the other employees are doing."

She's not even a true employee. Not in my eyes, at least. Vivian bought her position, literally. She invested enough money when the company was just getting going which helped her to land a job in the marketing department. Plus, her father is influential, so you could say her being here is all politics. But that was when the company was a fledgling, now it's a beast.

Vivian happens to be pretty decent at dealing with some of the more frustrating people that we have to speak with on a semi-regular basis, so she's been able to keep squeaking by. And she's not terrible at the aspects of her job, but I have other people I prefer making the team leaders when it's possible. Scarlett, she's a natural, too. She's the kind of woman that can handle any job people throw at her. She actually understands how the marketing world works, and how to twist it to her advantage by using more than just her pretty looks.

“What are you doing here, Vivian?” I ask.

“I think it's pretty obvious what I'm doing here,” she tells me. She rolls her shoulder until the fabric of her shirt slides down just a little bit, revealing a flash of skin. “And it's obvious that you don't have a problem with it, either.”

“You think I'm going to sleep with you... Because of what happened between me and Scarlett?” I question, trying to understand where she might be coming from. I can't decide whether I should be offended by the implication that I'm willing to sleep around with anyone that has a pair of tits or

feel complimented by the fact that she's this determined to get me to fuck her.

Vivian stands up all of a sudden. She's the one looking offended now. "Why wouldn't you want to?"

"Vivian, you should go," I tell her. "I'm going to be gracious about this whole deal. You leave now, and I'll just pretend that you weren't in here at all. This never happened."

Vivian stands there for a moment, her mouth moving like she can't comprehend why I would be tossing her out. Is it really that hard to tell? I have a real interest in Scarlett, and it's not just physical.

You can easily settle a physical craving with a one-night stand picked up from the bar. But you can't settle an emotional interest that way. I want every part of Scarlett. And while I'm willing to wait and let her take the lead on things for now, I can't say I'll be able to be patient for long. Letting others take the lead is not my style. At some point, I'll have to tell her exactly what I think about her; that she's the sexiest woman I've ever encountered and that I want her to be all mine.

For now, though, I just need to get Vivian out of my office without it turning into a huge ordeal.

"I mean it," I tell her. "You need to leave. I'll pretend this didn't happen, and we'll just go back to working with each other, professionally, the same way that we always have."

Vivian's so angry, her cheeks turn bright red and her lower lip juts out. She breathes out hard through her nose. I really

think that she's going to argue with me for a moment but then she turns on one foot and heads to the door. She rips it open and nearly walks straight into Melissa, who takes a quick step backward.

"Sorry," Melissa says.

Vivian ignores her and storms out of the room, vanishing from sight.

Melissa watches her go and then steps into the office. She doesn't bother closing the door behind her, just walking over to sit a stack of papers down on the side of my desk. "What's wrong with her?"

I wave my hand, dismissing the question. I don't want this to become the hot topic at the office for the day. And I have something important that I still need to do today, too. "Who knows? Seems to just be having a shit day."

"Well, her day can't be worse than yours." Melissa taps the stack of papers. "All of these need to be signed."

I wince. "You're going to break my hand, Melissa!"

Melissa is part of the legal department. She would kill me if she knew what I'm planning to do the moment that the office is empty again. "That's just how this goes, Branson. Get used to it, because I have about three more stacks that size that I'm going to need signed and back in my hand by the end of the week."

"This is why no one likes Mondays," I complain. "The cat in the comics is right."

“One,” says Melissa. “His name is *Garfield*. Don’t act like you’ve never read a Sunday comic strip. And two, he hates Mondays because he’s a cat, and Monday is when his owner leaves the house for work after a weekend home.” She taps the stack of papers again. “You hate it because you have to sign forms. Very different.”

We chit-chat about the forms themselves for a moment, and then Melissa heads out. The door swings shut behind her, and the office is finally empty. I wait a few minutes just to make sure that no one’s going to come barging in a third time. I might be the boss, but I could seriously get in trouble if anyone else realizes what I’m about to do.

Even the CEO of a company has rules to follow, although they are few and far between. Normally, I play by those rules. But this? This is a very specific situation. This is for Scarlett, to make sure that there are no traces of anything that might hurt her reputation in the future.

So I sit there, idly tapping my fingers against the top of the desk, and I wait. Two minutes. Three minutes. Four. Five. No one else comes in. No one rings me on the phone, either.

I hit the buzzer, telling the intern on the other line, “Hold my calls for the next hour. If it’s an emergency, patch it through to Roger.”

I don’t want to have to stop in the middle of this. I’ve got to be quick about it, and I’ve got to be efficient. My intern dutifully agrees, and then I’m off the phone and starting work.

I sign into my computer and pull up one of the security feeds. It's a code that I shouldn't technically have but—well, when you're the boss, you can get backdoors into anything. This backdoor happens to be really for fun, very useful too, but more than anything, fun. To make sure all of my bases are covered.

It takes a few minutes to log into the feed from the security cameras that are scattered around the office building, and a few minutes longer to locate the right one. And to get the right time slot pulled up.

The office on the seventh floor. There we are. I'm pressing Scarlett against the table and sliding a hand between her legs. I still can't see her expression. Again, that's a shame.

Fuck, this makes me want to get Scarlett in front of my bedroom mirror where I can see it all.

The footage quality is almost too good. You can see us crystal clear... But I'd expect nothing less given we're a high-tech company.

The last thing I want is some pervert to go scanning through old films and catch sight of this. And heaven forbid we needed to hand over film for some kind of a legal matter, and this little show pops up. So I watch it for a moment, and then I hit the button to hard delete the file.

A loading bar appears. It ticks through slowly. Ten percent. Forty percent. One hundred percent. The file is deleted.

There's a small part of me that regrets it. But the rest of me is more interested in whether or not I'll be able to convince Scarlett to make a *real* tape with me in the future. Something that we can watch together.

It's a stupid thought, but I can't help rolling it around in my mind over and over again. I just can't stop thinking about her. Maybe I *will* get a chance to put her in front of the mirror still.

Maybe I'll be able to take her out to dinner sometime and give her a *real* night on the town. Doted on from start to finish — so long as the finish happens to be in my bedroom in front of my mirror, and she asks me oh so sweetly.

She's really starting to get to me. *Fuck*. Scrubbing at my face, I pull the stack of papers over and grab a pen. If nothing else, the monotony of signing so many sheets of paper should at least help me get my mind off Scarlett, if only for a little while.

## Chapter Eleven

### Scarlett

It's been almost seven weeks since I last went home with Conrad. And considering I've basically always got the man on my brain, I'd say I've done a good job at keeping business and pleasure separate.

Things at work have not changed much, either. Vivian is still a bit cold, and I do get a couple side glances, but it seems that my little carelessness that night has not spread much. At least, I hope so. That would ruin everything. In fact, I don't want to think about it at all right now.

For the last ten days, I've found myself in this position almost every morning. In fact, this is the third time this morning that I'm curled around the porcelain throne, heaving my guts out into the toilet.

There's sweat running down from my temples, making my eyes burn. I struggle through blinking it away, wiping the spittle and bile off my face with a rag that Gracie has just passed me. "Come on, you can't keep telling me I'm wrong. I've been in your shoes, Scarlett."



“I’m not pregnant,” I say. My voice is hoarse and rough from vomiting. I wipe at my face and then rise to my feet, stepping over to the sink and rinsing my mouth out with Listerine. I swish and spit twice.

Gracie stays in the doorway to the bathroom. She’s still wearing her pajamas. “Come on, Scarlett. You should at least get a test. I’ve had morning sickness before. You’re going through some classic denial girl. I did the same thing when I realized that I might have—”

“Gracie, I *can’t* be pregnant,” I insist, finally shutting off the water after giving my face a cool splash. I grab a towel, dry off and then turn to look at her. “Conrad is the only guy that I’ve slept with in ages. I can’t have gotten myself knocked up with my boss’s kid.”

“I mean, technically, you can.” Gracie chimes. “You can totally have gotten yourself knocked up by him. And not wanting to have a kid doesn’t mean that your body isn’t going to *give* you a kid. Scarlett, think about it. The timing matches up. And everything else matches up, too. You need to at least check. You’re going to drive yourself crazy if you just refuse to even consider it.”

She’s right.

I know that she’s right.

But the thought of having let myself get knocked up is pretty terrifying. My whole career is based around not having kids, and especially not having kids with my boss. “I’ve got to

get to work.” I hurry through getting dressed and getting out of the house.

Gracie’s comment haunts me the whole day, though. I can’t help thinking about it. Pregnant. Pregnant. Pregnant. Is she right? Is it really morning sickness? I can’t bring myself to admit it. But I’m not stupid enough to think that she’s totally wrong. The moment that I’m off work, I head for the nearest pharmacy, grabbing a pregnancy test. I’ll pee on the stick right when I get home.

The nerves get to me, though. I figure that I already have to pee, right? So I just head into the pharmacy bathroom right after the cashier gives me my receipt. I open the test kit right then and there in the tiny stall. Now that the thought of potential pregnancy has consumed me, I can’t wait any longer. After I pee on the stick, and just a little on my hand, I wait for the most excruciating five minutes of my life.

I keep telling myself that Gracie’s wrong, I’m not pregnant. This can’t be the end of my career. I’m not going to lose everything that I’ve worked toward. But even if I am pregnant... I can make it work, right?

And yet... I put off looking at the test. I check my social media, look through every email that’s popped up, and even seriously debate just dropping the stupid little stick in my purse and leaving without looking at it.

But one, that’s gross. It’s gross. I don’t want to carry this pee stick around with me. And for two, I’ve never been the kind of woman to put off things that I’m afraid of. I like to

push through things and tackle them head-on. This won't be any different.

So I look.

Two pink lines stare up at me.

It's positive. I'm having a baby. I'll be a mother.

The very thought sends a wave of nausea again, all my fears and worries and insecurities trying to get to the surface.

"Calm down, Scarlett," I tell myself. Panic never helps.

First, I need to get home. And there I can break down in peace. With shaky fingers, I call Gracie who meets me at the house with an expensive bar of chocolate and a bottle of non-alcoholic sparkling cider. I groan at the sight of it. "God, I can't drink anymore. I hadn't even thought about that."

"Come on," says Gracie. "I'm sure that there's a lot you haven't thought about."

She takes me into the living room, where two tall glasses are already sitting. Brody's on the floor playing with a coloring book and some crayons, a juice box sitting on the floor beside him. Gracie pours us each a glass of the cider, the flavor less than appealing.

She gives me a pat on the shoulder. "You need to see someone about it."

"What do you mean?"

"A doctor, hun. You need to figure out what you're dealing with, how far along you are, and all that," says Gracie. "I put it

off when I first found out about Brody, and the doctor gave me an earful about it. You need to make calls ASAP.”

I groan, flopping backward against the couch. I’ll handle things better in the morning. For the moment, I’m content to be as childish as I want to be over this whole situation.

Gracie just nods, as though she totally understands it. “I know that everyone talks up Dr. Bane, but I hated him. There’s a new doctor that’s just opened up a practice. His name’s Cyrus Riggs. I’m really happy with him. I think you should go there.”

“Cyrus.”

“Cyrus Riggs. Here, look him up.” Gracie grabs my phone and does the search for me, passing it over and letting me look over the reviews for his practice. They’re pretty good, and they all say that the guy is great at his job. “Isn’t it weird, having a male doctor for this sort of thing?”

Gracie shrugs. “I think that he’s a great guy. You should at least check him out. I can even come with you.”

I don’t commit to it right then, but the next morning I have Gracie helping me make an appointment.

\*\*\*

Three days later, I’m walking into the practice and getting settled in. The paperwork passes in a blur.

Dr. Riggs is a tall man, with a kind face and warm hands. He goes over the procedure with me in detail and since it’s so

early in the pregnancy he wants to do a transvaginal ultrasound. He says he'll get a better read on everything that way.

Dr. Riggs is gentle, and the lube is warm, but still, when the wand goes in, I hiss through my teeth. Cyrus gives me an apologetic look. "You doing okay?"

Gracie sits next to me, clutching at my hand. I'm suddenly more nervous about this one point in time than I have ever been about anything else in my life. My free hand presses to my chest. "Yes, I'm okay." I'm going to be anyway.

"Okay," says Cyrus. "Are you ready to see what we've got?"

I take a deep breath as Gracie gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. I nod. The wand is pressed firmly up against my cervix, the sensation jarring. The static on the screen is hard to make out at first, but soon the image from the ultrasound comes into better focus.

Warmth spreads through me. I always thought that people overexaggerated a bit when they said that the moment they first saw their kid, they were instantly in love. But that's really what happens. The moment that I see that static image on the screen, I know that this child is meant to be mine.

Except...

"Is something wrong with it?" I ask, nervousness in my voice. "It shouldn't be that big, right?"

“Scarlett,” breathes Gracie, having pieced it together before I did.

Dr. Riggs gets there first. “Nothing’s wrong, Scarlett. You have a healthy baby right here.” The wand slides around slightly and then settles elsewhere. “And right over here, you have another healthy baby.”

I freeze. “What?”

“You’re going to have twins,” says Dr. Riggs. “They both look healthy, but I want to see you in here on a regular schedule. Especially since it’s a multiple pregnancy. They’ll set up your regular follow-ups at the front desk on your way out.”

I go silent. Gracie steps up. It’s like we’ve switched places. I moved in to help her out and now she’s doing the same thing, helping me out now that I’m in a mess of my own. I’m more grateful for it than she will *ever* know— I can just sit here, marveling over having twins, and let Gracie handle the rest. It’s not until we’re out in the car that the world really seems to catch up with me.

“Okay, how are you holding up?” Gracie asks.

I give a nervous laugh. “I’m still here.”

“Here’s better than being in the middle of a ditch,” Gracie says, but the joke falls flat. “Okay, look. I know. This is a slap in the face, right? But you need to take a deep breath, and deal with the elephant in the room.”

“And what’s that?” I’m seriously not thinking straight and I’m having a hard time trying to figure out where my head is supposed to be.

Gracie gives me a look that’s way too sympathetic for my liking. “It’s the fact that you didn’t make those babies all on your own, and you need to figure out what you’re going to do about Conrad.”

I stare at her. It’s like my brain is running on a lag. I’m still hung up on the fact that I’m about to have twins. Not just one baby but two of them. Unplanned, but already loved.

She says, her voice softer, “You need to figure out how you’re going to tell him.”

“Oh. Well, that’s easy,” I say, looking down at my belly. I’m not showing yet, but I know that I will soon enough. “I’m not going to tell him.”

“Not at all? What if he wants to help?” Gracie asks. “You know, Brody’s a handful, and he’s just one kid, and not—well, an infant. Scarlett, raising a child on your own is really hard, let alone raising two children. You need to consider telling Conrad sooner rather than later.”

“I’m not going to have him treat me differently at work, just because I got knocked up. That’s not going to happen, alright? And he’s not the only one I’m worried about, if word gets around, so will everyone else. The office I work at, this whole business—”

“I know that it’s super competitive,” says Gracie. She is a veterinarian at a small practice, and everyone is super friendly with each other. Not at all like the line of work I’m in. “But he *might* surprise you. You liked the guy enough to go home with him, Scarlett.”

“I know, I know. Conrad’s a good guy,” I say. “And I know that he would do the right thing. I’m just not sure that I *want* him to do the right thing. I haven’t decided yet. Just for now, I’m not going to say anything, maybe when I start showing, I’ll change my mind but...”

“But right now, you don’t need to think about it,” says Gracie and she adds, “That makes sense.”

“Right.” I nod, just once. “Right now, I just need... I just need to figure out what I think about it, before trying to figure out what he thinks about it, too. And when I’m ready... I’ll go from there.”

I can tell that Gracie doesn’t totally approve of me keeping it secret but at the end of the day, it’s my decision and mine alone. At least I know that she’ll respect it.

My gaze drifts back down to my belly. Right now I need to get used to the fact that I’m about to be a mother of two.



## Chapter Twelve

### Conrad

I don't normally bother employees in the break room, but I've been making an exception for Scarlett. She doesn't want a real relationship right now and I can respect that, but I can't help flirting with her, either. She's in there with Vivian right now.

They are sitting close to each other, but I can tell they are tense. Not sure if this is the best place to announce the news, but maybe this will also pass a message to Vivian. She's turned into a real pain in the ass, and I think that she's the one who's spreading foul rumors about Scarlett through the office. I don't have the proof of it just yet, but someone's been passing along the rumor that Scarlett's trying to sleep her way to the top.

Not true, and not something that I'm interested in entertaining.

I slide into the room, bracing a hand on the back of Scarlett's neck, just briefly, as I pass her by. "There you are. Hope you don't mind me bothering you while you're eating,

Scarlett. I've got a tight turnaround on when the confirmation needs to be sent in for this new job."

Scarlett tilts her head back and smiles at me. The corners of her eyes crinkle up just a little bit. "I think you're just looking for reasons to come in here and bother me."

I guess I'm not the only one who can't stop flirting.

"She's right," says Vivian. "You never used to come down here like this."

"Times change," I tell them, without missing a beat. I try my best to ignore Vivian.

I don't sit down, instead perching on the side of the table. "Alright, so, here's where we're at. I've got the Birxbon Production team waiting for a call back."

"Birxbon Production," says Scarlett, wide-eyed. "As in, the people who run the agency for—"

"Little Big, The Hot Tamales, and Jessica Larange," I finish. "Yeah, that's them."

"Little Big's on a fast track to his third platinum," says Vivian. "And the production value of that kind of deal..."

She trails off but I nod. "This is a really huge deal. It's not every day we get a contract this big. Smaller companies, a pop star here and there. But this could be the biggest deal we get all year."

"That's crazy," says Scarlett. I don't think that she understands what I'm hinting at yet.

I lean forward, telling her, “It’s going to require some overtime and some late nights. They want this marketing plan made up fast. But I wanted to know if you would be willing to do that. Put in the extra time for it.”

Vivian stares. I can practically feel the way that she’s seething. Here’s the thing: she’s the senior member of the team. But she’s also nowhere near as good at her job as Scarlett, and her sour attitude is really rubbing me the wrong way. I don’t want to support someone that’s going to encourage people to turn to gossip and put divisions in the team.

If she wants big jobs, then she has to act like a team player.

Scarlett nods at me with no hesitation. “I can put in as much time as needed.”

“She hasn’t even been working here four full months,” protests Vivian.

Scarlett looks at her friend, frowning a little bit. Clearly, she had been expecting Vivian to be happy for her, and not act like this. It’s just another reason why I haven’t gone with Vivian, though. She might be a senior on the marketing team, but she just doesn’t have the personality that’s needed for this role.

“I’m well aware of how long she’s been working here,” I tell her, pulling away from the table. I give Vivian a stern, disapproving look, and then turn back to Scarlett. “I’ll let them know that we can sign onto it then. Keep an eye on your email, I’ll send you the documents needed within the hour.”

I give her one last smile and step out of the room, to go seal the deal of the year. Sort of seal it. I've still got to wait for Scarlett to actually do the job and get it approved, but I'm pretty confident in her ability to pull that off.

Before long, I've sent out the email and finished the rest of the day's work. I leave an hour late, one of the last people out of the office. I'm surprised to find that Scarlett's still in the parking lot when I get there. She's sitting on the hood of her Camry, looking miserable.

"What's going on?" I walk over to her.

Scarlett sighs. "I've got a flat. AAA won't be here for another hour."

I look at the tire. It's definitely not taking the car anywhere. A smile crosses my face. "You want a lift?"

She narrows her eyes. "Not to your suite."

"Not to my suite," I assure her. "It's a totally friendly lift home. That's all."

Scarlett leans forward, glancing at my motorcycle. "Can you even give me one on that?"

"Come on," I tell her. "I'll get you home in half the time."

Leading her over to my bike, I grab the helmet and pass it to her. She slides it on, not protesting. A shame I don't keep a spare on me, but it's a good look for her. It adds an edge to her beauty, her blonde bob just long enough to swoop out from the black helmet.

I flip up the kickstand and sit down. She climbs, a little awkwardly, onto the back of it. “Hold on tight.”

Her arms wrap around my middle, her chest pressing against my back, like a warm line along the curve of my spine. I can feel her heartbeat against my back. “Now what?” Scarlett asks.

“Just lean when I lean,” I tell her. “It will be really smooth. So, where do you live?”

She gives me the address. I type it into my phone’s GPS and then slip it into the attachment on the front of the bike. A singular wireless earbud is pressed into my left ear, so I can hear the directions even through the crash of the wind once we get moving.

“Are you sure it’s not too far?” Scarlett asks.

“You kidding? Any excuse for a longer ride is a good one. I was supposed to go out on a ride through the country last weekend, but—”

“You had that emergency meeting,” says Scarlett. “I remember hearing about it.”

“Right.” I nod. My hands settle on the handles. “And there’s been—a few other weekends before that. It’s just been a while.”

Riding my motorcycle has always been a highlight. There is not much I like doing more. My car might be my pride, but this is my freedom. The adrenaline of being on a bike—the way that it feels to hit up a long country road, out in the

middle of nowhere, with nothing around, no stop signs to interrupt the flow. That's one of the best feelings in the world.

At least, I used to think it was.

“Alright, I'm glad to be your excuse for a slightly longer drive,” Scarlett says, earnestly.

I glance at her over my shoulder and admit, “You're my excuse for a lot of things.” And then before she can ask after that, I tell her, “Come on, hold tight.”

Once her grip is tightened, I rev the engine and rip out of the parking lot. Her grip goes iron-tight, and she shouts at the sudden jerk forward, plastering herself against me. It's a good feeling, having Scarlett touching me again; having her up against me. I love it. I love the way she feels, sharing the thrill of the ride with me.

Scarlett loosens up after we've been driving for a little bit. I can tell that she's having a good time, too. It's hard not to. With the summer sun beating down on us and the wind crashing over our bodies, all of our worries seem to fade away.

It's just a damn shame that the drive isn't longer. The red lights are a pain in the ass, too. I would much rather go on a straight path. Eventually, we get to her house, and I stop on the side of the road, throwing down the kickstand.

It takes a moment for Scarlett to get off the bike. I can see that her roommate—Gracie—is peeking out through the window, observing us. Scarlett takes off the helmet and offers it to me, and I tuck it under one arm.

“Thanks,” says Scarlett. “I’ll make sure to get the car out of the lot tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m happy to pick you up in the morning if you need me to.” I offer, hoping she’ll accept.

She doesn’t.

“As much as I would love to, I’ll just have Gracie drop me there when AAA is done to pick it up.”

“As much as you would love to, huh?” I ask, unable to keep the teasing tone from my words.

Scarlett laughs. “What can I say? I’ve been bitten by the motorcycle bug. I can see why you like it so much.”

“We can go some time,” I tell her. “My next drive out to the country, I’ll pick you up.”

“Yeah? That’s a promise, Conrad?” Scarlett questions, smiling at me.

“Cross my heart.” Jokingly, I trace my fingers in front of my chest. “And hope to die.”

Scarlett leans forward, bracing one hand on my shoulder as she does. “You going to teach me how to drive it?”

“If you want,” I tell her. I’ve never *taught* someone else to drive before, but I’m not going to pass up on any chance to feel her pressed up against me again. Besides, I’ll just be the nice little back seat driver for her, and keep an arm around her waist and...

Yeah, I totally will teach her to drive a motorcycle.

Scarlett is clearly thinking the same thing if the look on her face is anything to go by. “I do.”

“Then yes,” I tell her, honestly. I put as much emphasis on the word *yes* as I can, trying to make sure that she understands what I’m trying to convey. “Whatever you want, I’ll give it to you.”

I mean it, too. There’s nothing that I wouldn’t give to Scarlett, especially if it convinced her to take a chance on me. Even after all this time, she’s the only girl on my mind, deep under my skin, clinging there tight as can be. I don’t think that I’ll ever be able to stop wanting her.

Scarlett jerks backward abruptly, her cheeks a faint pink. I wonder what is going through her head right now. I guess I’ll never know because she quickly tells me that she’ll see me at work tomorrow, and then hurries into the house. Gracie stays in the window a moment longer before an abashed look crosses her face and the curtain drops back into place.

I imagine that Scarlett caught her red-handed when she stepped inside and scolded the woman for it. I don’t mind the audience. I’ve always gotten a thrill out of putting on a show for other people.

Well aware that other people might still be watching me, even though I can’t see Gracie or Scarlett through the window anymore, I take my time putting on the helmet, no rush at all. The engine of the bike is revved again, and then I’m taking off down the street, heading home.



It would be better if the place wasn't sitting empty, but at least I have the alluring thought of taking a country drive with Scarlett— hopefully in the near future —to keep me warm at night.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Scarlett

“Alright,” says Mark, once we’ve all shown up at Del Luna’s for dinner. “You’ve been weird all week. What’s going on, Scarlett?”

I let out a heavy sigh, bracing a hand against my cheek and resting my elbow against the top of the table. “Nothing.”

Gracie, smoothly, says, “She’s having issues with someone at work.”

Jamie frowns. “Is everything okay?”

I’m relieved for the outing, but I haven’t told my friends that I’m pregnant yet. Only Gracie knows so far—and Dr. Riggs, but he doesn’t really count. “I don’t know. Do you all remember me telling you about Vivian?”

Taylor nods. “The senior that you’ve been having lunch with.”

“She’s the one that bought in,” says Gracie, with as much distaste in her voice as she can manage. It’s the same way that

she talks about her ex-husband, which clearly catches the others by surprise.

I nod though. “Yeah, that’s her. I don’t know. She’s done a complete one-eighty with how she talks to me. She’s—”

“Turned into a total bitch,” interrupts Gracie.

Jamie snorts.

Gracie looks a little embarrassed. “Sorry, I couldn’t help myself. It’s true, though. She’s turned into an absolute bitch.”

I shrug one shoulder up in a bounce. “Gracie’s right. If she does speak to me, it’s super short and forced. And I’m positive that she’s the one who’s spreading all those rumors about me around the office.”

Vivian has no right to be mad at me about Conrad or the projects—I got both because I was good enough—but I can’t help but berate myself for setting all this in motion. If I hadn’t left with Conrad in an obvious attempt to spite her that night at the party, things might have been different now. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised she’s using her gossip skills against me.

“The ones about you sleeping with everyone?” Mark asks.

Jamie corrects, “Just with the boss.”

Taylor frowns. “Didn’t you actually do that, though?”

“Not the point,” says Gracie, snappishly. She’s my biggest defender. Always has been, always will be.

I tell them, “Gracie’s right. The point is, she’s telling everyone that I’ve only done it because I’m trying to get a

promotion. I can't have everyone thinking that I'm sleeping my way to the top. And she *is* being a bitch. Avoiding her at every turn would be my preference, but I can't. So now each time we have to talk it's painfully awkward."

Jamie and Taylor respond in unison, "What a bitch!" then the two girls look at each other knowingly. "Jinx, you owe me a cocktail." Taylor giggles to Jamie then turns to me, "That sounds like a yes to my question, though." Jamie nudges her before I respond.

The waiter comes over, to take everyone's orders. Mark says, "Hamburger, loaded, please. Double bacon, and extra pickles."

"Extra pickles," snickers Jamie. "I'm just going to take the barbecue chicken, on a wrap."

The waiter nods and jots it down, then gestures at Taylor. "The appetizer platter, and a Caesar salad."

Gracie orders the California grilled chicken flatbread as I look over the menu. What I want is something greasy and salty. It turns out that pregnancy cravings are real, and also super, super hard to pass on. I have to physically make myself pass up on anything that has fried in the title, instead opting for the three mushroom flatbread special, and a cranberry walnut salad on the side.

"And your drinks?" The waiter asks.

It's a frenzied order of cocktails, for all of them. When it gets to me, I realize that there's a blatant flaw in my plan. This

sad pregnant lady can't drink. Sure, my doctor said one drink every now and then would be acceptable, but with the mood I'm in, I know it will be way too hard to stop with just one drink. So it's none for me.

But I always get cocktails with these guys when we come here. It's a biweekly meet-up that we've been doing since I moved in with Gracie, a way to try and keep our friend group more in touch with each other. And up until recently we could never get Gracie to agree to a night out on the town, but a simple dinner with friends was an easier sell. Going non-alcoholic now, it's going to be a big red flag that's something up.

I debate very briefly on getting a cocktail anyway and just not drinking it but let's be real. If there's a cocktail in front of me, I'm going to down it. So I make the adult decision and I tell him, "Soda water, please, with a lime."

The waiter nods and leaves. All eyes turn to me. The silence only lasts for a moment. Then Mark asks, "What's with the soda water?"

I was right, they're instantly suspicious. I try to handle things dismissively, shrugging one shoulder and then saying, "I just felt like something different."

Jamie is staring at me. "You never get soda water."

"I know," I say sarcastically. "That's the whole point of something different. It's getting something that I don't usually get."

But they're all just looking at me. Our food comes out before the interrogation can go too far, but it doesn't matter. The whole time that we're eating and listening to Gracie talk about some of the animals that have come through her work this last week, Mark is staring straight at me.

His gaze doesn't make me uneasy. We're friends, you know? But I can tell that the guy has already figured it out.

When the waiter comes by, Mark gets himself a second cocktail. And then he says, "Come on, Scarlett. You had your fun. Have something to drink with us." It seems he's relishing in my discomfort.

I shake my head from side to side. "I'm good with my soda water."

"You tried something new," he insists, using overexaggerated air quotes. "Have some fun tonight. I thought we could hit up the bar for a drink when we leave here too."

"That sounds like fun," agrees Taylor.

I frown a little bit. "Don't be a prick, Mark."

"I'm not being a prick," says Mark with a cheeky grin.

The waiter looks conflicted and uncomfortable. Gracie releases him from our table. "It's okay, just his drink, and another for me."

The waiter is quick to take off to get the two drinks.

"You're pregnant," Mark says just like that. He's always been blunt and a bit of a busybody, but still. This crosses a

line, even for him. I scowl.

Jamie gasps. “Oh my god. Mark, I think you’re right! Scarlett, is he right?”

Gracie looks at me, a sympathetic look crossing her face. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. I wanted to keep this as quiet and contained as I could, for as long as I possibly could. It’s just too much to deal with, having other people know about it. I sure as hell didn’t want to tell everyone tonight, just because I ordered a soda water instead of a cocktail.

But the cat is clearly out of the bag now. I give a heavy sigh, and I say, “Yeah, he’s right. He’s a prick for just shouting it out like that, but he’s not wrong.”

Jamie says, “God, that’s — wow!”

“Wow’s right,” says Taylor. “Is it with, you know, your boss? Connor?”

“Conrad,” I correct.

“Conrad,” agrees Taylor. “Him.”

“Yeah. It’s Conrad’s.” A long pause. I bide my time by taking a long sip from the soda water and fiddling with the lime on the rim. “They’re Conrad’s.”

Jamie goes wide eyed. “They? As in, you’re having more than one?”

“I’m having twins,” I admit.

“We’ve already got her in at a doctor. Everything is going fine so far.” Gracie says.

“What’s Conrad got to say about it?” Taylor asks.

I purse my lips together. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Taylor frowns. “As in, he’s not interested or something else?”

“I haven’t told him yet.” I take another sip of my soda water. The lime is tart on the back of my tongue. I still want something greasy and salty to eat. I should have gotten the fried chicken wrap, or at least the fries. “And before you ask, I’m not planning on telling him.”

“You can’t keep it secret,” says Mark. I’m surprised by how aghast he actually sounds. While Gracie was slightly disappointed by the situation, she had mostly just left me be. There’s a strange fire in Mark’s eyes when he says that though. I can tell that he’s not going to let me off the hook any time soon.

“I can, actually. And so far, I have,” I tell him, with a frown. “I’ve got a lot of good reasons for it, too. Did you hear what I said about Vivian? She’s already got everyone thinking that I’m only getting these big jobs because I’ve slept with Conrad. Everyone’s going to have a fit if I admit to getting knocked up by him. They’ll think it’s—I don’t know, manipulation or something.”

“Scarlett, it’s ridiculous to let what other people think influence this decision,” says Mark.



Jamie points out, “Oh, you never fall victim to that, Mark?” He’s definitely been known to be a little over the top in his attempts to impress people.

Mark shoots Jamie a sour look. Then he turns back to me. “Seriously, though. You know what I mean. Just because a couple of people are gossip whores, you’re going to skip out on even letting this guy know that he’s going to be a father? Even if you tell him later, you’re withholding the pregnancy experience from him and making it harder on yourself. Conrad would want to see his babies grow, even while they are in you.”

Oh. That’s what the problem is. A light bulb quickly goes on in my mind. Mark was raised just by his mother. I don’t think that he’s ever met his father—it’s always been one of those sensitive subjects. I can see how this is affecting him, and I get it.

He’s probably thinking how he didn’t have the chance to get to know his father. That he doesn’t even know the guy’s name, so he can’t try and reconnect with him as an adult, either. And how he doesn’t want that to happen to my kids.

I don’t either. But... I don’t want this to spiral into something that ruins the start of a really good career for me, either.

My lips purse. I tap my bright blue painted nails against the side of the glass that I’ve been sipping from.

“That’s not the only reason,” I say. “I don’t know if I want to be in a relationship with him. He’s my boss, and we have a

considerable age gap.” I try to think of more reasons because these two don’t really cut it. I can quit my job if needed and I don’t care he’s older.

“She’s totally over the moon about him,” corrects Gracie.

I shoot her a betrayed look. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” says Gracie. “You literally spend all of your time talking about him. Honey, he’s the only thing on your mind.”

“Because he’s the father of her twins,” insists Mark, a little frustrated.

I feel overwhelmed. Like, they both have good points. I really am pretty smitten with Conrad. I love talking with him, and I can’t stop thinking about our next motorcycle ride, or him teaching me how to drive the bike. It won’t be anytime soon, but the allure of it... I’m hooked.

I’m hooked on him.

And the more that I think about it, the more I’m concerned about raising these two kids on my own. I’m great with Brody, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to be good at raising twins. The thought is more than a little nerve-wracking.

Mark says, “Look, you’re going to do what you want at the end of the day, but I really, really think that you should tell the guy. At least give him a chance to decide if he’s going to be a good guy or a deadbeat.”

“I don’t know,” I say, uncertainly.

Mark can tell that he's getting to me. He insists, "You're right. You don't. I don't know this Conrad guy, but he could turn out to be a really good father. And I think that you should give him a chance to try and step up. And you should probably tell him soon, before you start to look like you've shoved a beach ball up your dress."

"Maybe," I say. And then, "I'm done talking about this, okay?"

"Fine, fine," relents Mark. The subject is swiftly changed to something a little bit less dire, but I can't actually stop thinking about it.

I need to decide if keeping this to myself any longer is the right move or not. Do I really want Vivian to bully me into staying away from Conrad?

Not at all.

But... I'll have to make this decision on my own. And Mark is right. I need to make up my mind one way or another.

And I need to make it up, fast.

## Chapter Fourteen

### Conrad

“There you are,” says Vivian. She all but trips over her feet to get out of her chair before I round through the office and away from the marketing team’s cubicles. “I was hoping that you would pass from here.”

“You were?” I ask. “Nothing bad, I hope. Is the Brown job hitting a dead end?”

“No,” says Vivian. She all but saunters over to me, putting a hand on the front of my chest. There’s something uncomfortably flirtatious about the touch. “It’s fine, but it’s gotten a bit boring. Don’t you think that it’s about time you gave me a different, larger, profile to work with?”

“You’ve been on the Brown jobs for years, Vivian. No one else knows what they want on their orders better than you do. It would be stupid to pull you off their jobs,” I tell her.

She slides her hand over, pressing it against the side of my arm instead. Vivian takes a step forward, getting way more into my personal space than I’m comfortable with. “I know but

that's the thing. I was put on their jobs when I first started because they're simple pieces. You should just give it to someone who's newer to the company."

"I don't want to give it to someone else, Vivian. You do a good job with them. Everyone has a role in this company." I say, carefully picking her wrist up and pushing it off my shoulder. I step around her and continue to the hall toward my office, where I nod at my intern and head for my desk.

I'm surprised that Vivian is bold enough to follow me. She doesn't think to close the door behind her, though. This time, she moves in front of me, standing between me and my desk, right up in my personal space. I frown at her, holding my ground. "Vivian, you need to get a grip," I make sure that it's firm.

She falters. There's distress on her face. "Conrad," she starts.

I don't have any interest in letting her finish. "You've been with the company for years, and that's the only reason that I've been willing to let so much of this slide. But I'm sick of the shit that you're pulling."

"Why?" Vivian insists, sounding frustrated. "I come onto you, and I'm clear with what I'll give you, I'm bold, and it gets me nothing, but Scarlett does, and it gets her the hottest job of the year? That's bullshit, Conrad."

The mention of Scarlett has me shutting the whole conversation down. My voice turning to steel, I tell Vivian, "First of all, just because *some* people need to use other means

to achieve something, it doesn't mean that everyone does. Second, I hand out the projects based on each person's skills. I wouldn't have created a billion-dollar company by doing favors, and the few times I've done them—" I move my arm in the air, barely stopping myself from pointing at Vivian and telling her exactly what I think of her right now. "Get back to work and do the job you are capable of doing."

"Conrad," she starts.

"Now," I tell her, firmly. "Get out of my office and back to work, Vivian."

She stares at me for a moment longer, looking absolutely betrayed. And then I realize that she's not the only one who is staring at me. Scarlett herself is standing in the doorway to the office, just behind me. She looks stunned at the way that this has played out.

Did she come in here expecting me to be taking Vivian up on her, less than subtle, advances?

Vivian huffs, shooting me one last nasty, yet uncertain look, and then turns on her heel. She falters a bit when she sees that Scarlett is in the doorway, but that just makes her expression turn even more bitter. She storms past Scarlett and vanishes from sight.

I let out a heavy breath and rock backward, running a hand through my hair and pushing it out of my face. "Scarlett, tell me that there's not a problem with the project you're heading."

“No, there’s not,” says Scarlett. She hesitates for a moment and then she admits, “I saw the two of you in the office.”

Shaking my head, I say, “She never used to be so blatantly desperate. I don’t know what’s gotten into her.” And then, “Actually, I do. She’s jealous. She wants the work you’re getting but she doesn’t want to do the work.”

“Are you—” Scarlett pauses, her lips drawing into a thin line. She doesn’t finish her sentence, but she doesn’t need to. I can tell what she’s thinking has been going on.

I’m quick to shut that down, too. “That didn’t happen. It’s never happened. It’s never going to happen.”

“Why?” Scarlett asks.

I laugh. “Haven’t I already made it clear to you? I like you, Scarlett. I *want* you. I’m not interested in hooking up with anyone.”

“You only met me because you wanted a hook-up.”

“Sure. But then you changed something in me. I don’t want to be with anyone but you now,” I tell her, taking a step forward. Reaching out, I brush the tips of my fingers over her cheek and sweep a blonde lock of hair backward, out of her face. It has gotten a little bit longer since we first met, but it still maintains the sharp, angled bob style.

I tuck a few more strands of it behind one of her ears and she swallows hard. I’m close enough that I can see it makes her throat bob up and down. I can hear the shudder of her breath. Her bright green eyes are piercing into me.

“I don’t mind waiting,” I tell her.

Scarlett says, “And if you can’t actually win me over?”

“I’m confident that I can convince you how serious I am about you,” I tell her, tilting my head back. I’m taking a page of Vivian’s book, stepping way closer than is professionally accepted. But I just can’t help it. She has an allure to her that’s impossible for me to ignore.

I’ve never been around someone like Scarlett before. Someone who had practically cast a spell on me. I don’t believe in magic, but I believe in fate. And it was destiny that we would meet.

We’re meant to be together. I can tell.

She knows it too. Scarlett is looking at me with a heat in her eyes that makes that much clear. She’s trying to keep it to herself, but she’s doing a shit job at it.

“I want to talk to you,” says Scarlett, softly. There’s a little bit of a tremble to her words. “I want to talk to you after work.”

“Why after work?”

“I don’t want to be interrupted.”

“We can talk now, I’ll handle it.” I take a moment to close the door and then close the blinds on the office windows. This won’t help with the rumors, but I honestly don’t give a fuck right now. After that, I press the button on the intercom and I tell my intern, “Do me a favor, put a hold on my calls for the next hour, will you? I have to handle a few things.”



And then, just to make sure that I don't get anything slipped past, I take out my phone and silence it as well. Then I nod at Scarlett.

"Alright," I say. "We can talk. No one is going to interrupt us."

Scarlett flounders for a moment, clearly not having expected me to just put a huge halt on absolutely everything to give her my undivided attention. I nod at her again though, gesturing that it's safe for her to proceed with what she has to say.

"Come on, tell me what's going on."

It has to be something big.

Scarlett's never come in and asked to speak with me like this before. I think that there's got to be something pretty serious going on. I want to know if it's got something to do with the gossip storm that's been brewing in the office, or if this is something more personal.

Scarlett lets out a heavy breath, clearly steeling herself. "It's about us."

More personal, then.

I step backward, so I'm half leaning against my desk. Arms crossed over the front of my chest, I nod. "Is there an us?"

Scarlett makes a face. "Honestly, I don't know. My career is important to me, Conrad. I'm already struggling because of... Because of my own decisions. I don't regret going home with you, but everyone here is talking about it. They're talking about *my* career, not yours."

“I’ve heard the gossip,” I tell her. “I’m trying to get that under control. You shouldn’t have to deal with that.”

“I’m not here to talk about the gossip,” Scarlett tells me. “I’m just bringing it up so that you understand why I’ve been so hesitant to have this conversation with you. If they’re talking so much because we got a little tipsy at a party, what do you think they’re going to say if I start dating you?”

I stay silent. It’s pretty clear that she’s not looking for my input just yet. First, she needs to get this off her chest.

But I’ve got to be honest... I’m getting a little nervous. It sounds to me like she’s gearing up to tell me that there can never be a relationship. And I don’t want to have to back down completely. I’m hooked on her.

Scarlett thinks things over for a long moment and then she says, “I don’t want to date you.”

My breath catches in my throat. It feels like the rug has just been pulled out from under me.

“I don’t want that to be the final nail in the coffin of my career, so I wasn’t going to say anything but...” Scarlett trails off for a moment. Her hand moves to settle on her belly, pressing against the silky-looking fabric of her black blouse.

I’ve never seen Scarlett look nervous before. I’ve seen her in all kinds of moods; flirty, passionate, angry, silly, and my favorite, blissed out. But right now, she has an expression I’ve never seen on her face before. She’s staring at me with her

lower lip jutting out and her shoulders bowed, starting to curl in on herself. It's a display that I don't like on her.

In fact, I hate it.

Part of what drew me to Scarlett was her fire. She isn't afraid to push back, even against a guy like me. She takes hold of life, and she drives it the way *she* wants it to go in.

I hate that something has stolen that fire from her.

"Scarlett, what's wrong?" I ask. My arms uncross. I step over to her, taking hold of one of her hands. I give it what I hope is a reassuring squeeze, my mouth curling up at the edges into a smile. "Just let me know what's going on, alright? Whatever the issue, I can help you handle it."

"I don't know if I want your help handling it," admits Scarlett. "But I thought about it the last few weeks, and I've decided that... You should still know. Especially if you've been honest about... About how much you care about me."

"I've been honest with you," I promise her. It's true. I've never lied to Scarlett about anything. That's just not the kind of guy I am. I've never even kept a bad comment from a client from her, though we've only had one minor complaint early on. "I've never once lied to you, Scarlett."

Her expression doesn't soften. To my surprise, she actually withdraws her hand from mine and takes a step backward, like she needs the space to be able to get the words out. Even though my first instinct is to grab onto her and pull her in for a tight hug, I fight against it and let her go.

After all, she's the kind of woman that doesn't want to be smothered. She wants to push, and I'm going to let her. Despite my instincts.

Scarlett breathes in. Then she breathes out heavily. And then, finally on her exhale, she admits, "Conrad. I'm going to have twins. And they're yours."

## Chapter Fifteen

### Scarlett

“Twins?” Conrad’s voice cracks.

I brace myself for him to say something negative, but instead, he rushes toward me, and he wraps his arms around me, pulling me in for a tight hug. I can’t help but relax against him after a moment, melting into the heat of his touch.

“Twins,” I tell him. There’s no apology. I’m worried about how things will turn out, but I will never be sorry for our night of passion. And I’ve already grown fond of the idea of being a working mom.

“God,” breathes Conrad. “That’s... amazing!”

I startle backward. “What?”

Conrad has the biggest smile on his face. His blue eyes look wild with happiness. I’ve never seen anyone smile like that before. His hands settle on my waist. Suddenly, I’m in the air, being spun around. I squeal, finding myself dropped down onto the edge of his desk. I hardly know what’s happened before our mouths are joined together in a passionate kiss.

I've missed the feel of his lips on mine, I didn't realize how much until now. Swept up in the moment, I throw my arms around his shoulders and lean hard against him. My lips part, and he's quick to swipe his tongue over my teeth, tasting the mint gum that I had been chewing earlier in the day, feeling the glossy slick of my pink shimmering lip gloss.

When he pulls away, we're both breathless and my face is bright red with embarrassment.

"Twins," says Conrad again, like he can't get past the fact.

"Yeah. It took me a while to get used to the idea, too," I tell him. "But... they're both healthy."

"Do you know what they are?" Conrad asks, eagerly. "Their gender, I mean."

"Not yet, it's a little too early to tell," I explain. "I've already started dreaming up names though," I add without thinking.

Conrad asks, "You're going to let me help with that, aren't you?" When I don't say anything, the first glint of concern crosses his face. "Scarlett, come on. You have to let me help. I want to be part of their lives. I've always... I've always wanted a family."

"What, you want me to believe that you're some kind of secret family man?"

"Yes! I didn't have siblings growing up," says Conrad. "I wasn't close with my parents, not really. I've *always* wanted a

family of my own, a wife, someone that I could... I could change that with.”

His hands settle on my sides. They slip up under the silky black fabric of my blouse. His touch is hot, almost electric. His piercing blue eyes draw me in just as quickly as they always have. It’s so easy to get lost when I’m with Conrad. He’s hot, and he’s smart, and he always knows exactly the right thing to say.

Conrad keeps going, “I want to take care of them. I want to take care of you. And I know what you said before that you don’t think you want to be in a relationship with me. But that’s okay, Scarlett. We don’t have to be dating for you to let me into your life, for you to let me be part of *their* life.”

It’s sweet. Sweet enough that my eyes are threatening to brim with tears. It’s just the pregnancy hormones. I’m not normally this emotional or this close to crying. Conrad’s just being so sweet about it, and I can tell that he means it, too. That he honestly wants to be part of this, even if I won’t agree to actually date him.

It’s too much to deal with. Trying to make him stop being so — so *sweet* about it, I lurch forward and catch him in another kiss. Then my hands drop down, and I start working open his belt. That shuts Conrad up quickly enough, his mouth closing with such force that I can hear his teeth audibly snapping together.

The zipper comes down, the button slipping out of its slot. And then my hand is shoving into the front of his slacks,

palming his erection through the thin fabric of his boxers. Conrad hisses. “God, you’re a fucking trip.”

“I’m a lot of things,” I tell him.

Conrad presses a hand to my side. The other shoves fully up under my shirt, over the slightly grown curve of my belly, and then up, to palm my tits through my bra. He can feel the firmness of my nipple through the fabric and grinds the pad of his thumb down against it.

My breath comes out in a hiss. I keep going, rubbing him until I can feel a damp spot growing on the front of his boxers from his pre cum. Then I slide my hand down into the slit at the front of the cotton, pressing to the warmth of his shaft, fingers curling around the hot flesh.

I tell him, “I don’t know what I’m going to do. I need you to respect that.”

“Listen, babe, with your hand on my cock, I’ll do just about anything you want,” jokes Conrad, and it makes me laugh, just a little bit.

I catch hold of myself quickly though, stifling the laugh. My hand slides up, knuckles against cotton, my thumb pressing to the underside of the head of his dick. I swipe it over the top, gathering slick, and spread it back down over his shaft. The clothes prevent me from reaching down further and giving his balls a fondle, but this will do. I’m pretty great when it comes to hand jobs.



There's a flush on his cheeks. He's starting to breathe harder, heavy exhales through his nose. We have to be quiet since we're in his office, and he's got an intern sitting just outside. He's better at being quiet than I am though.

Conrad sinks his teeth down into his lower lip, brows furrowing. I redouble my efforts, tracing over a thick vein on the side of his shaft, palming over the top of it. I can feel the way that his cock is twitching against my hand, his fingers cup even tighter against my breast, not fondling it anymore so much as he's just holding onto it, nails digging in so hard that I can feel them through my bra, and his hips jerk up, into my touch until there's cum on my palm, hot and wet. He gives a groan that's choked and low as he struggles to stifle it.

I twist my hand down once more, smearing his own cum against him, and he grabs my hand, stopping my motions, breathless, too sensitive to continue being touched.

"There." I pull my hand out of his slacks and lift it up to my mouth, dragging my tongue over my own skin. His cum is bitter and salty. Conrad watches me from sharp, hooded eyes.

Slightly shaky hands hook his pants up and slide the belt back into place. And then he's kissing my mouth again, tasting his own spend in my mouth. One of Conrad's hands drops down, running over my thigh. It slides to my knee and then back up, rucking the fabric of my pale-yellow skirt up over my skin.

Then his hand is between my legs, fingers pressing against the damp spot in my panties. They press hard, forcing the

fabric up into me. I gasp and then tilt my head back when his palm presses against my clit, grinding down hard. The fabric means that he can only shallowly fuck his fingers into me, just the tips of them, up, up, up, but the whole time, he's grinding his palm against my clit and back to fondling my tit with his other hand.

"Conrad," I start, but I'm so hot under the collar that I can't finish the sentence. Gonna blame pregnancy hormones again for already being right there, teetering on the edge of orgasm. He's barely touched me, and I already feel like I'm about to explode.

The pressure under my skin is immense. It builds and builds in the pit of my belly, a wave that's about to crash down.

"Stop teasing me," I finally manage to get out, shoving at his chest with one hand.

"You're cute when you're huffy," Conrad tells me, but he finally pulls the crotch of my panties to the side and touches bare skin. It's like a live wire to my heart. Fingers finally slide over the length of my slit. His pointer slides into me, up to the second knuckle, fucking me softly, slowly. And then a second finger joins the first.

I'm so wet and ready that his fingers slide in with ease. My own palms move to brace against the desk behind me. He leans forward, moving with me, so we're still in each other's personal space. Conrad mouths at the side of my neck, tongue swiping over my skin. Sweat drips down the center of my dress, between my breasts.

His palm grinds against my clit again, his voice in my ear, hot and heavy, “Go on, baby, why don’t you cum for me? That’s right. Cum for me, Scarlett.”

It’s ridiculous but hearing him say that is more than enough to push me over the edge. I melt into his hand, my body quivers as all my tension is momentarily released.

Conrad kisses me through the orgasm and then when he pulls his hand away... He holds it up to my mouth to lick, same as I did with my *own* hand. And I do. I lick my own orgasm from his fingers, sucking on them with a bob of my head, sliding the flat of my tongue over each digit in the process.

“That doesn’t actually change anything,” I tell him when he pulls his hand away.

“I think it does,” says Conrad.

“Oh yeah? And what do you think it changed?”

“Let me help,” says Conrad, rather than answering me. “Move in with me, Scarlett.”

Shit. I’ve only made him more hopeful that I’m going to change my mind about dating him. Licking at my lips just gets me another taste of our spend. I grab a tissue out of the box on his desk, wiping my hands off first, and then cleaning up between my legs.

Pulling my panties back on, I slide off the desk. My black high heels click loudly against the tile when I stand up.

“I’m being serious,” says Conrad. “It doesn’t have to mean anything. We don’t need to be *together*. You’ve seen how large my place is. There’s enough room for you to have the spare bedroom, and we can change the office into a nursery for the twins. I just want to make sure that the three of you are taken care of. That you never have to worry.”

I’m hesitant. The fact that I just let Conrad get me off in the office again, proves that I make bad decisions around him. But I also hate the idea of trying to raise my twins at Gracie’s. I’m supposed to be helping her get her life better, not adding two crying infants into an already tense household.

I don’t want to do that to Brody, either. The kid’s going through enough without suddenly having to play ‘big brother’.

And honestly... I don’t want to be alone, either. I don’t get scared often, but motherhood is making me nervous. I love that I’m going to have twins but knowing that I could have Conrad’s support is a comfort.

It’s more than just a comfort.

It’s downright a full-on relief.

“I’ll think about it,” I tell him, but I really mean, *alright*. Judging by the sun-bright grin he gives me, he knows exactly what I mean. Conrad has always seen right through my bullshit.

And when he leans in to kiss me again, he whispers against my lips, “Thank you for trusting me.”

It’s the final nail in the coffin. I’m taken with him.

## Chapter Sixteen

### Conrad

It's surprisingly easy to get used to having another person around although it's probably just because I'm obsessed with Scarlett. And her move into my, now our, penthouse was very low-stress. She had few things at Gracie's but still, I insisted we hire a moving company, and they had the job done within half a day. I gave her the spare bedroom, which is done up in greens and blacks, silver accenting the furniture to add a bit of pop to it, and made sure that she knows the suite is *hers* just as much as it's mine.

I can tell that she doesn't really believe what I'm saying; that I want to be there for her and the twins, regardless of her not wanting this to be a *real* relationship. Trying to prove to her that I'm not lying, the very first thing that I do is start packing up my home office.

The files are put into boxes, most of them designated to go back to work. If we're going to have infants in the house soon, I'll need to spend more time with them, and less time pouring

over papers at home anyway. Plus, we are going to need this room for the babies.

I'm still in the process of doing this when Scarlett appears in the doorway. Her baby bump is more noticeable now, pushing against the front of her silky blue top. The skirt that she's wearing is loose and flowing and her sharp blonde hair is resting at her shoulders. With the light of the hallway in the background, she looks almost angelic.

"Conrad?" Scarlett asks.

I fold down the top of the box and use a black sharpie to label it; OFFICE 4 BRYAN. "Everything good?"

"What are your plans for tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is—" I pull out my phone and open my calendar. Everything, and I mean *everything*, gets put on my calendar.

"Tomorrow is my appointment," says Scarlett, before I even get a chance to figure out what my calendar has on it. "I'm getting a 3D ultrasound, to check on the babies."

"Then I don't have anything going on tomorrow," I tell her, putting my phone back in my pocket. I don't want to just assume that she wants me to go along, but I can't keep the flash of hope off my face, either.

Scarlett looks undecided for a moment. She steps into the room, over to the mostly emptied out desk. "You're really clearing out this room."

“I told you that I would. I’ll have the desk gone by tomorrow. And then you can start getting whatever you want for the twins,” I tell her. “I can only imagine that you are ready to start shopping for them, but if you need any help with that —” I pause. “I mean, I don’t know anything about that sort of thing, but I’ll be happy to look with you. And we can also have my designer come in.”

“We have plenty of time before the twins get here,” says Scarlett, with a shake of her head. The tips of her manicured nails run over the top of the desk. “I can’t be focused on getting their nursery together just yet. I’m too busy with work right now.”

“Do you want less to do? My designer is incredible, and she could take over the nursery completely.”

Scarlett frowns at me, turning and shaking her head. “I don’t need you to give me less work. And that goes for home and work.” One arm covers the slight bulge of her belly. “Even with this going on.”

I nod at her. “Sorry. Don’t take my offer the wrong way. I know you can manage it all, Scarlett. But you don’t have to. Just remember that. Especially at home. We can afford all the help we desire. And I want to dote over you, I want to make sure you’ve got everything you need. Everything the babies need. Anything for you, babe.”

For us.

I keep that part to myself.

I should have known that she wouldn't want me to offer her anything like a nursery designer yet, but still. There's only so much that I can give to her, especially when she's holding me at the very edge of her reach.

She looks at me and says, "I know what I said before, when I agreed to move in here, about keeping things out of the romance zone. But I've been thinking about tomorrow, a lot. And I'm nervous about what's going to happen with—you know, when they show me the twins."

"You think that something's wrong with the babies?"

"No," says Scarlett, with a shake of her head. "I don't. Not really. Not rationally. But is it even possible to be confident going to an appointment like this? Everyone online talks about knowing innately when something's wrong with the babies but..."

She's rambling a little, clearly nervous. I just listen and nod, allowing her to continue. And she does, explaining, "The thought of going to the appointment on my own is too nerve-racking. So I wanted to know if you wanted to come with me."

"Yes." I don't even need to think about it, no hesitation before I agree. I get that she's anxious about the whole thing, but I don't want her to doubt my feelings about her and the babies for even a second. "Of course I'll go with you. I would be honored to go with you."

"Honored, huh? That's a pretty hefty word to be throwing around," she says with a lightened smile.



“It might be, but it’s a true one. I know what you’re thinking about *us*, that you don’t want—” I gesture between her and myself. “Something here. But Scarlett, I’ll do whatever you need. Whatever you want. And I would love to see their ultrasound with you tomorrow.”

Scarlett looks at me from the corner of her dazzling green eyes, mouth twisted up at the corners into a hesitant kind of smile. “Alright. The appointment’s at nine. I need to be there half an hour early, for paperwork.”

And that’s what we do.

We get to the doctor’s office early and it doesn’t take long for Scarlett to get through her ultrasound paperwork and checked in. It’s a smaller clinic, but the waiting room is nice, and Scarlett seems at ease.

“You’ve seen this doctor before?” I ask, typing the man’s name into the search function on my phone.

She nods at me. “Gracie recommended him to me.”

“And you like him?” The results come back with nothing but positive reviews. The guy might be new to this clinic, but he’s not new to having his own practice. He had been located out in Texas before coming out here.

Scarlett nods. “I do. He knows what he’s doing, and he seems to genuinely care about me and the twins.”

“Twins. I don’t think that I’m ever going to get past that. You’re having *twins*.” The word comes out almost reverent. She’s pregnant with twins. My kids. I’m getting the big family

I've always wanted—something good, something better than what I grew up with.

In my wildest dreams, I'd never thought that it was going to come about like this, though.

“Tell me about it,” says Scarlett. “I wasn't looking to have kids right now at all. I wanted to make sure that I had my career settled first.”

“Are you upset about it? The babies, I mean. Having them right now.”

Scarlett shakes her head. A sweet smile softens her features, and she looks down at her own belly, her eyes warm with the light that only a mother's expression can hold. “No. I thought that I would. But... I'm happy to have them.”

“That's good.”

She hums. Her gaze turns to me, and she asks, “Did you mean it? What you said before, when you told me that you wanted to be here with them, all the way through. It's new right now. Is it going to wear off when it's not new? Are you going to change your mind? We're not married. We're not even together.”

“That doesn't matter,” I say, with a shake of my head. I reach out and take hold of her hand, bringing it over to my mouth so that I can press a kiss on her knuckles. “It doesn't matter, not really. I want you to know that. Like, to really know that I mean it when I say that there's nothing I wouldn't do to stay here with you. I want to be part of this, all the way

to the end. They are my kids. And you are their mother.” And I love you. But I don’t say that part out loud.

Scarlett doesn’t have much to say to that, but mostly because it’s her time to be called into the ultrasound room. We go in together, and I stand off to the side while a nurse runs through the initial testing. She takes Scarlett’s blood pressure, her weight, her height, and she monitors Scarlett’s heart, tests her reflexes, and listens to her lungs as she breathes in and out.

The whole time, there’s something twisting in my chest. A nervousness that makes me want to breathe deeply in and then back out. My palms are sweating. I’m overly aware of the fact that this is also a test on Scarlett’s end of me. She’s letting me be here with her, but it’s not a free pass into her life. It’s not a free pass into the lives of my kids, either.

So I keep my trap shut, even when Dr. Riggs comes in and starts talking to Scarlett. He’s polite and introduces himself to me, but I’m here for moral support, and to get a look at the twins on the 3D ultrasound, not to get nosey with the doctor. So I sit quietly. If the doctor thinks that it’s weird I’m sitting here but not talking, he doesn’t mention it.

Honestly, he’s probably seen a lot of odder couples show up in his practice.

Being quiet doesn’t mean that I’m not listening, though. It sounds like everything is going well enough. And then comes the final moment, the moment when the ultrasound begins.

I reach out, taking hold of Scarlett’s hand. Her touch is warm and hesitant. Only for a moment, though. Soon she’s

gripping me tight, holding onto my hand like it's a lifeline as the gel is applied to her belly and the doctor runs the wand over her smooth skin.

The images on the monitor are static for a moment, and then they clear up. I can make out that there's something in them. Just shapes at first. But then, something firm and easy to identify. There is the baby's head. Its body. Its tiny little legs. There is the second one, curled beside the first.

My heart skips a beat.

"Oh," I say, without actually meaning to say anything at all. "That's amazing."

The doctor smiles at me, but Scarlett's smile is even bigger. It's enough to blind a man, all warmth and honest hope. Tears of joy start streaming down her cheeks.

"We can't see the sexes yet," the doctor says.

"It doesn't matter," Scarlett says without hesitation and locks eyes with me.

You shouldn't be able to fall in love with an image like that. They're just golden-hued blobs on a screen. But I've fallen in love with them anyway, head over heels. Totally adoring those two little babies, hardly even a part of this world yet.

And it doesn't matter what they are.

I'm a father.

## Chapter Seventeen

### Scarlett

I have a problem.

Okay, I've got a lot of problems. The fact that I'm always starving is the biggest one right now. I'm in the break room again, standing there, waiting for the meal I've brought from home to finish warming up in the microwave. It's got ten seconds left, but they feel like the longest ten seconds of my entire life.

"Eating again?" Vivian asks, stepping into the room.

She makes me jump. I wasn't expecting someone else to come in. The microwave beeps and I pull it open, sliding the heated container onto a plate and carrying it over to the table. "What can I say, I'm hungry."

Vivian has changed for the worse over the last few weeks. I don't know what I've personally done *to* her, besides kick ass at my job, but it seems like she's completely soured on me. I get the vibe that she thinks I ruined her chances with Conrad. Though the truth is, she never had a chance with him. She

doesn't talk to me through the day for the most part anymore, unless it's something like this, when she's being almost antagonistic about everything. It's fine though, I'd rather not talk to her if she's just going to be miserable.

She walks over, bracing a hand against the top of the table. Vivian leans forward slightly, her blouse too low cut for work. But she's been doing that a lot more lately, too, coming in like she's got something to flaunt.

"I know what happened," says Vivian.

I frown at her a little bit, looking down at my ready meal. "If you mean that I got hungry, so I took my break early, then you're right. You do know what's happening."

"Don't play coy with me," Vivian insists. "I've known since the office party. The only reason that you went home with Conrad is because you wanted to start getting these jobs. The big ones that he's been giving you all month."

"That's not true, for one," I say, cutting into my chicken parm. "And for another, my personal life isn't any of your business. I don't know what your problem is with me, Vivian, but it needs to stop. I've done nothing but my job since I got here."

"Not true."

"Alright, fine. I'll humor you. What do you THINK I've been doing?"

Vivian straightens up, but only a little bit. "You're sleeping with the boss because it gets you better jobs. Rumor is, he's

about to ask you to take on the Prima Jones job. They need some major marketing magic for their upcoming deal. And he wants you to do it.”

“Good for me?” I’m not sure if Prima Jones is really that big of a deal. It’s a good company, but it’s not the best. Vivian’s only hang-up is the fact that it’s frequent work with a client that pays out the ass for top quality.

“No,” says Vivian. “Because you don’t actually deserve it.”

“Excuse me?”

“You don’t, and we all know it. You go home with him every night, Scarlett. We’re not blind here at the office.” Vivian is the queen of gossip. If someone’s seen something, then Vivian’s heard about it. I haven’t been trying to keep things under wraps by any means, but it still rubs me the wrong way that I’m the hot talk of the office.

“I’m glad that you don’t need glasses,” I tell her, because handling this with a dismissive air seems like the best option. If I let Vivian know that she’s getting under my skin, then she’s never going to stop.

“But that’s not all, is it?” Vivian hums. “Did you know that my sister is a receptionist at a doctor’s office? She mentioned that she saw my boss at the clinic where she works earlier this week.”

My heart skips a beat, stomach twisting up. My mouth waters but I swallow back the immediate wave of nausea.

Suddenly, the smell of the marinara sauce over the chicken is too much for me to handle. I don't want to eat this.

Vivian continues, "Not that I really needed to talk with her to confirm what I already knew. The extra lunches. The loose shirts. The way that you're getting the best jobs in the market, despite being the newest person here."

"Get to the point, Vivian," I say, irritated now,

"You got knocked up by the boss," says Vivian.

My mouth pulls into a thin line. "What's your problem?"

"My problem is the fact that I've been here longer than you, Scarlett. I'm the one that should be getting the high-profile jobs, not some little hotshot that had barely finished college before she showed up," Vivian snaps. "You don't have any reason to be getting these jobs, outside of the fact that you're spreading your legs for him every chance you get."

That's a step too far. I jerk up onto my feet and tell her, "You need to shut up. Now. I don't know who you think you're talking to with a mouth like that, but it sure as hell isn't me."

"You're the one doing it," says Vivian, unimpressed by the way that I look at her. She's too cocky for her own good. Just because she was one of the original investors in the company, Vivian thinks that she gets a free pass on everything.

Vivian bought her way into this company. But she's never been able to understand that buying your way into something doesn't actually get you to the top. It doesn't get you much of



anything, actually. And it sure doesn't get you any respect, and the kind of jobs that my hard work, fast thinking, and smart marketing skills have managed to do.

I'm good at my job.

I'm damned good at it.

And *that's* why I'm getting these jobs.

But Vivian doesn't see it that way. She's looking at me like I'm a cockroach that's managed to crawl into the company. She doesn't think that I'm supposed to be getting any of this work.

"What's the point of this?" I ask. "Of you coming in here and acting like you've got some kind of weight to throw around."

"The point," says Vivian, "Is that you're going to fuck up the Prima Jones job."

"Yeah, that's not going to happen. I haven't fumbled on any of my work so far," I tell her. Grabbing up the container, I snap the lid back onto it and move to shove it into the fridge. "I've managed to ace my way through every job that I've been given so far. There's no way that I'm going to mess up this one."

"You don't understand me. I don't think that you're going to make a *mistake* with this. I'm telling you that you're going to fuck it up on *purpose*, or I'm going to let the whole office know that you've fucked your way to the top. Popping out kids, just to get a job with a fancy little title. No one's going to take you seriously, ever again." Vivian says.

She's right.

If people start thinking that I got knocked up just for a better position, then I'm going to be the laughingstock of the company. The jobs will keep coming in, sure. Conrad won't stop with that. But no one else is going to take me or my work seriously. They're all going to look at me and see someone that was so desperate for a position, they would even get pregnant.

Gossip spreads like fire through a dusty, dried-up forest. It's one of the things that has always given Vivian enough power to keep others leery around her. She makes the calls, because she's been with the company since the start, and because she knows everyone's business and how to use it to her advantage.

"I'm not going to do that," I tell her, trying to sound firm. "No way in hell." The truth is, my heart is pounding so hard in my chest, it feels like it's about to break straight through my sternum. I've got a lump in my throat the size of a fist, and my nausea is about to hit record highs.

I'm determined not to puke in front of Vivian, though. I've got my dignity left, even if Vivian seems to have the power.

"You have a day to think about it. Conrad's going to come by this evening and give you the job. And you're going to mess it up so badly that he's got no choice but to give it to someone else. Me." Vivian says.

"What makes you think that he's going to give it to you? There are other people in our department. And they're more qualified for this than you are," I point out. "Even if I did

agree to drop the job on purpose, there's no reason that he would give it to you over someone else."

"You don't need to worry about that part," says Vivian. "I have it handled. All you need to do is make sure that the Prima Jones case... Goes to someone other than you."

And then she turns and steps out of the room, with a flip of her hand, like she's shooing away the roach, purposefully designed to break me down and leave me shaken. The door thumps shut behind her. For a moment, I'm just standing there, staring at the closed door. Then the nausea swoops up, and I rush over to the garbage bin, grabbing onto the sides of it as I heave. I might have only taken one bite of the chicken, but I had a pickle sandwich earlier in the day for a snack.

The pregnancy cravings have been hitting me hard all week and right now, they're really biting me in the ass. The pickles might have been absolutely divine on the way down, but they're vile on the way up. I heave a few times, and then spit twice into the trash can, wiping my mouth off with one hand and then bee lining for the restroom.

I know that there are separate stalls for a reason, but after doing a quick check to make sure that no one's inside in any of the stalls, I go back to the main door and flip the lock, so no one can come in. My hands are shaking.

The sink is my first stop. Splashing cold water on my face and washing the bile off my hands helps me feel more put together in a big way. I swish and rinse my mouth a few times too, trying to calm my racing heart.

The fluorescent bathroom lights make my face look splotchy when I stare at my reflection. The mirror image stares back at me, more unkempt than I've ever wanted the people at my job to see me.

"Come on," I say, firmly. My fingers press even more at the edge of the sink. I lean into it, trying to convince myself that I still have control over the situation. "Pull yourself together, Scarlett. She's a pompous little shit. And she doesn't have anything on you because you haven't done anything wrong."

That's true. I haven't done anything wrong. There's nothing in the company bylaws that forbids workplace relationships. I know. The moment that I realized I had gotten knocked up, I checked. And then, when I realized that I was really starting to fall in love with Conrad, I checked it a second time.

Just to be sure.

We just have to let HR know, which technically we haven't done *yet*.

The only thing that's on the line here is my reputation. But that's going to be ruined if I drop the Prima Jones case, too. In fact, that would prove the rumors were true.

My frown deepens. I try to come up with a good, solid way to solve the problem but at the moment, my mind is hitting a complete blank. It's like someone hit the mute button on my brain.

Not helpful.

Or... Maybe it is.

I don't have an answer for this problem right now, and Conrad hasn't even come to give me the Prima Jones job yet. That means for a little bit, I need to try and put the encounter with Vivian out of my mind, and just focus on my actual job instead of hiding in the bathroom like I'm back in high school.

So I take one last deep breath, try to compose myself a little more, and then I get back to work, doing my best to focus.

## Chapter Eighteen

### Conrad

When we get home after work, I take hold of Scarlett's hands and lead her into the first bathroom. It's a large room.

One wall is lined with mirrors, aimed at the tub, which is a jetted clawfoot, and on the side, there's a marble-topped counter. I have a second bathroom attached to the master bedroom with a standing shower on a stone floor, but I don't think it's fitting for the occasion.

"What are you doing?" Scarlett asks.

"You've been stressed all day," I tell her. "I didn't realize that the Prima Jones job was going to make you so nervous. We've worked with this client before, I know you can handle it." And then, before she can get defensive, "But I get that there's a lot going on right now. I thought that you could use a romantic evening. A hot soak."

"Romantic," she says, dryly.

"I know, I know. There's not supposed to be any romance between us. But you see how that's actually impossible on my

end, right? I've been obsessed with you since the day that we met, Scarlett. You don't have to return the sentiment. You just have to let me make you feel better tonight." I flip on the tap and let the water start heating up.

While it spills into the tub, I fetch the towels and a bottle of rose-scented oil to spill into the water. "And if I don't want you to do that? Maybe I feel fine," she says.

"You were playing with your hair on the way back home," I tell her. "You only do that when you're nervous."

"I—how do you know that?"

"I pay attention. In love with you, remember? Borderline obsessed." I test the water. It's plenty hot now, so I jam the plug into the drain and let it start filling up. Once the whole bottom has been covered, I add in a few splashes of the oil. The fragrance spreads into the air quickly.

She doesn't say anything, as she watches me work. The tub needs to finish filling up. I step over to her, placing my hands on her side, and I kiss her, pleased when she returns it eagerly. My hands slide under the fabric of her blouse, bunching it up over her belly and her sides, and then helping to pull it off over her head.

I toss the shirt aside for now, and then slip my hands into the band of her skirt, pushing it down her hips. She steps out of the white fabric and lets me discard that, too. The tub is mostly filled up. I turn to cut off the water and Scarlett gets out of her heels.

When I turn around, she's unhooking the back of her bra and lets it fall away, standing just in her panties.

"Fuck, I never get tired of that," I tell her. "You get more beautiful each day."

She rolls her eyes at me, but the smile on her face betrays that she liked hearing it. "You're just trying to sweet talk me."

"I don't need to sweet talk you." I rest my hands on her sides again, pulling her close. My hand slides down, around to the back of her ass. I cup it firmly through the thin fabric of her panties, looking into her green eyes.

And that's when I realize I need to say something. There is no use in hiding it.

"Scarlett, I love you."

She rolls her eyes again. "You said that already. Is it the only line that you've got?"

My hand pulls away from her ass, and I move to take hold of her hand instead. I clutch it between both of my palms. "I'm not using it as a line, Scarlett. I would never do that. I'm being serious. I'm in love with you. And I want you to know that. Whatever decision you make in regard to us—Wait, wait, wait! Why are you crying?"

"I'm not!" Scarlett pulls her hand away from me, wiping at her eyes with both hands, trying to clear the tears away before they have a chance to fall down her cheeks. "I'm not crying."

"You are! Fuck, I didn't mean to make you cry," I tell her. My hands fly up into the air, as though it was my touch that



might have made her cry. “I’m sorry!”

“Stop!” She waves a hand at me. “Just stop! You didn’t do anything. I’m telling you that you didn’t do anything. This doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“It feels like it has a lot to do with me.”

“Well, it doesn’t.”

“Scarlett—”

The tears are coming faster now. Scarlett turns away from me and heads to the bathroom counter. Cold water rushes out of the tap, and she splashes it onto her face a few times.

Hesitantly, I press a hand against her side, palm to bare skin. “Scarlett, tell me what’s going on. Come on, why are you crying?”

“It’s just—it’s just work.”

“Work? Like, the jobs that you’ve been getting?”

Scarlett shakes her head. “No. It’s not about the Prima Jones job, not really. It’s about something else.”

“Tell me.”

“I need to handle my own problems. I’m not normally such an emotional mess. God, it’s the fucking hormones! It’s this pregnancy and everything else,” says Scarlett. She turns so that she’s leaning against the counter, the small of her back resting against it. “I would normally just— I would just deal with it.”

“You don’t need to deal with it on your own.” I step close, right into her personal space. One hand brushes over her cheek, and that’s all it takes.

Scarlett admits that Vivian is threatening to tell everyone. “That I’m pregnant. And it’s yours.”

“Is there something wrong with that?” I ask.

“She says that’s the only reason I’ve gotten the big jobs. Because I’ve spread my legs for you. I can’t have other people think that I’m only getting these cases because I fuck you,” Scarlett says.

My heart aches at seeing her so upset. Scarlett is the kind of woman that doesn’t open up about her emotions, her feelings—for them to just come spilling out like this...She must be feeling *really* out for this to happen.

“I’ll take care of it,” I promise her.

“I’m sorry. I should deal with it myself.” She sniffs.

I wipe the tears away and then kiss her, the corner of her eye, the cheek, the curve of her mouth. “You don’t have to. I’ll handle it.”

And I’ll handle this moment, too.

I plaster her in kisses, and work my way down her neck, and then her chest. I kiss her collarbone, and the slope of her tits, and I keep working my way lower, until I’m pressing my mouth on her rounding belly. She’s about three months into the pregnancy now. My knees hit the floor. My fingers slide into the band of her panties.

I tug them down, over her thighs, her knees, letting her step out of them, one leg at a time. And then she's completely bare before me, and I've got my hands on her hips, on the curves. Bringing my palms to her inner thighs, I spread her legs a little bit, so there's room for me to press myself between them.

My lips and tongue settle over her slit. She lets out a breath, almost like a laugh. "I don't know what you think—"

"Hush," I tell her. "I'm giving you a romantic night. Let me take care of your worries here, and then tomorrow, I'll take care of your worries at work."

Her hand settles on my shoulder, and her fingers dance over the fabric of my maroon shirt. They clench there, twisting into it. "You're unfair."

"How am I unfair?" I lick over her pussy again. Then my lips tease her clit, and I give a suck so firm that it hollows out my cheeks.

Scarlett gives a low, beautiful scream. Her other hand grabs onto the back of my neck, nails biting against my skin. My tongue swipes over her again and then delves between her lower lips. She makes a sound, her words cut off for a moment. Finally, she finds her tongue, and she says, "I can't stand this. I'm not used to letting—letting someone else handle things. I'm supposed to do it on my—oh, God, just like that."

I pull my face away. But first, my tongue swipes over my lower lip, gathering her essence and pulling it into my mouth. I press a finger up into her, and then press a second one, too.

She lets out another keening sound, moaning, grabbing onto me tighter.

“You don’t need to handle everything on your own. Let me help. Let me take care of you. I want to make you mine, baby,” I tell her, the words falling from my tongue with a heavy tone. “I want to make you fucking mine.”

I don’t give her time to speak, working her over both with my tongue and my fingers now. They press up into her, stroking her inner walls. Wet and warm, her body pulses around me. My palm grinds against her clit, a third finger pressing into her, working her over as fast as I can.

The sound is wet and loud, noisy, and I love it almost as much as I love the soft, keening sounds that she’s making. The way that her breath is catching in her throat. The wetness that she’s creating in my palm.

I want her to know that whatever is going on at work, I can handle it. I’ll bring down the hammer without a second thought. Scarlett is the most amazing thing that I’ve ever known, the most amazing person. And I need her to understand that she can be successful without holding me at arm’s length. That if we keep each other close and guard each other’s backs, we can get further than we ever could on our own.

But more than anything...

“I want to make you cum,” I tell her. “Come on, baby. Cum for me. I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

The words come easily to me. And they do something to her, an expression of pure bliss settling over her features.

My fingers press up into her as far as I can get them, as fast as I can make them. And then she's spasming around my digits, a new warmth washes over my hand. But a warmth spreads inside of me too. Her thighs are trembling.

I pull my hand away from her, and then stand up, grabbing her and guiding her over to the tub. The water has cooled slightly to the perfect temperature, and I'm able to lead her into it without any protest on her end. She's turned absolutely boneless. And I love the way that this expression looks on her, the way her eyelids are slightly dropped, the way that there's no tension left in her shoulders.

She's totally relaxed. And I want to make sure that she stays like this for as long as possible, as often as possible.

And more than anything, I want to keep her here, happy, with me, forever.

## Chapter Nineteen

### Scarlett

“Be careful, Brody,” shouts Gracie, watching as her son runs off toward the jungle gym. The park isn’t too far away from their house and is a frequent stop for them.

“I don’t think that boy knows how to be careful,” I say.

“I know. He’s always into something. Last time we came out here, I had to have a talk with him about how high he could swing if no one was around. He was trying to flip it all the way around in a loop,” says Gracie. “You’re going to have your hands full with two, Scarlett.”

I press a hand on my belly. “I already have my hands full.”

“Not because of them, right? I mean, they’re okay?” Gracie asks, with a nod toward my belly.

I nod back at her. “It’s not the twins. They’re fine. Brody’s going to have two very healthy buddies to run around with before we know it. It’s work. It’s all the issues with Vivian. She’s gotten worse.”

I do a quick rundown of everything that's happened lately, not just at work, but also with Conrad. Then I let out a heavy sigh, swinging one arm over the back of the bench and tilting my head to stare up at the sky. The sun beats down on me, warming my skin. It's a gorgeous day out.

Perfect for a trip to the park.

Even better for telling your best friend all your troubles.

I shake my head at the end of my story and then wave a hand to try and clear it away. "It's fine, it's fine. I'll figure out how to get it all sorted out. I'm not trying to commandeer the conversation. Let me hear about John."

"John?" Gracie's cheeks go pink. "We went to dinner once."

"You went to dinner once, and you had coffee twice. That counts as three dates, and you've known John for how long now?" I push. John used to be Gracie and her ex's gardener.

Gracie looks away, off in Brody's direction. "Does it count when he was working for us before? We didn't talk too much then. I mean he's always been gorgeous. But my eyes never wandered from David."

"He stopped working for you years ago," I point out. "This hasn't had anything to do with work since Brody was, what, two?"

"One," corrects Gracie. "Brody was one, and then we stopped paying for someone to work in the garden because David turned into a cheap skate. I tried to keep up on the yard

for a while, but it just didn't work out too well. John was so disappointed when he saw what happened to it."

"Has he started up on it?"

"Yes. You need to come over and see it. It looks amazing. He no longer does the grunt of the physical work though. He owns the company now and has a crew. Shame, it would be fun to watch him sweat in my front yard." Gracie smiles at me and giggles, and there's something about the way that she looks that just... It just does something to me. It makes something knot up tighter in my chest and then it's undone in a rush of heat.

It floods my skin, making my own cheeks feel a little red. "You know, I can't remember the last time that I saw you look this happy. It's like you're a totally different person."

"I feel like a different person," admits Gracie. "I feel like everything has just pulled me back into a better place. I'm happy, and Brody is happy, too. He and John really get along with each other. I mean, John is an outdoor man who loves animals and birds, what more could Brody want?" A pause, then she asks, "Do you think that Conrad's going to be great with kids, too?"

"I think that— we're talking about you," I try to protest.

Gracie insists, "No, no, I want to know about you. You're the one that's having a hard time right now. I'm in a good place. Like you said, I'm happy right now. And so is Brody. But you... Man, that sounds like a lot. You shouldn't have to



deal with so much while you're also trying to deal with pregnancy and impending motherhood.”

“To be fair, I don't really have to deal with the kids just yet. They're still well contained and—”

“I was pregnant, honey,” says Gracie, patiently. “I remember what it was like. The hormones are enough to make you feel absolutely insane at times.”

“I think that I've cried more the last few months than I've ever cried in my life,” I admit, softly. “I don't even feel like myself. Last night, I fucking bawled my eyes out in front of Conrad. It was so embarrassing.”

“He's going to have a lot of sights that are embarrassing once the kids show up. You didn't answer my question. Do you think that he's going to be good with them?” Gracie asks. She sounds honestly curious.

I pause and then I smile. My gaze returns to my belly, and so does my hand, pressing against the growing baby bump that I'm sporting. “I think that he's going to be amazing with the kids, Gracie. I've never seen Conrad look so soft. I mean, he's a tough guy. A big hotshot. I like that about him. I like that he's always...”

“Top dog?”

“Yeah.”

“I'm glad that things have worked out on that front.” Gracie stops to check on Brody. He's on the slides. When he realizes that his mother's looking at him, he gives a wave, and she

waves back. “I think that you two will be really happy. And living with him seems to be going great in your fancy high rise.” She smiles and gives me a nudge with her shoulder before continuing, “Now we just have to figure out this shit with Vivian.”

I want to protest and say that I only moved in with him for the kids, but we both know that’s a lie. I moved in with Conrad because I’ve probably been in love with him since our first night together. The man’s gotten under my skin and is all wrapped up inside of my bones. I’ve never wanted to be around someone like this.

“I don’t know what to do about Vivian,” I tell her, finally. “This is a big hurdle. And whatever I choose to do, the outcome is going to affect my future in this industry. And everything with Conrad, too.”

Gracie thinks about it for a moment, and then she finally says, “I know what it’s like being pregnant. Everything suddenly feels more difficult. Even the things that once came naturally to you.”

“God, yes. This shouldn’t be an issue. But it feels like I’ve got my work on one hand, and I’ve got my family life on the other,” I explain. “And in the middle of it, we’ve got this erupting volcano with Vivian, trying to burn the connecting bridge. I should have just told her to fuck off in the break room that day, but I went and threw up instead!”

“You know what?” Gracie says. “I’ve never known you to take shit from anyone before. And you shouldn’t take it now.

You said that Conrad told you he would handle it?”

I nod.

Gracie asks, “Do you want him to handle it?”

“Of course not,” I say, with a laugh. “Of course I don’t want him to handle it. I don’t want some big knight in shining armor to come sweeping in here and save me. I’ve never needed someone to save me before. The fact that I’m going to have kids, that shouldn’t change that, right?”

“It shouldn’t,” agrees Gracie. “Honey, if you want to handle it on your own, then you should do that. Tell Conrad that you appreciate having him as a support system, but it’s important to you that this problem gets solved... The way that you want to solve it.”

“You’re right.” I breathe out. “I feel like such a mess. I don’t know why I needed you to tell me that.”

“Because you’re human,” says Gracie. “Come on. Let’s go wrangle Brody up and get going.”

“But we haven’t been here long, are you sure?” I know Brody usually plays for a couple hours at the park.

“I’m sure,” says Gracie. “I think that what we all need is to go get some ice cream instead.”

My mouth is watering. “I could go for ice cream. God, why does that sound so amazing? I hate sweets.”

Gracie stands up. “Mhm. Been there, done that. You need to stop forgetting that at least on some level, I know what you’re

going through.” She waves and raises her voice. “Brody! Come on, Brody! We’re going to get ice cream!”

“Ice cream!” Brody shouts. He takes the slide at a run, bouncing down instead of sliding, and tumbling off onto the red mulch. It doesn’t so much as make the boy pause before he’s on his feet again and heading toward us, running as fast as his short little legs can carry him. “Can I get strawberry?”

“I thought that you liked chocolate best?” Gracie asks.

Brody nods. “I do, but I think Auntie Scarlett’s gonna have a boy, and a girl, and that means she’s gonna like strawberry.”

“Because it’s pink?” I ask, amused.

Brody gives me a funny look. “Cause this girl in my class, Dora, she says that every girl likes berries, and that they’re girl-fruits. Cause they’re just like girls.”

A part of me is curious why a berry is just like a girl, but I know that I will never get a straight answer out of this. Brody has a kid brain, and so do his classmates. The best thing to do is just nod along like it makes an ounce of sense.

Gracie takes hold of her son’s hand, leading him toward the sidewalk. “Alright, if you want strawberry, then you can get strawberry. How about I get a chocolate and then if you don’t like the strawberry, you can have some of it.”

“Okay,” says Brody, with a nod of his head. “What are you gonna get, Auntie Scarlett? What do you eat when you have two babies in you?”

I laugh and pretend to take the question very seriously. What kind of ice cream flavor would a pair of twins like best? We exit the park and hit the stretch of sidewalk. The car is parked nearby, but there's a little ice cream shop just down the road, within walking distance. We went there often when I first came to the city, back when I was living with Gracie. Brody loves ice cream, so when we were trying to distract him, we did a lot of ice cream trips.

Eventually, I settle on the flavor. "I think that I'm going to get cookie dough. That's something a pair of twins would like."

Brody thinks about it for a moment and then nods. "That's a good choice. I think they're going to like cookie dough, cause it's not just ice cream, it's cookies too. So it's two desserts and there are two of them."

Gracie is struggling to hold in her laugh. "Brody's right. That's a good choice."

We get our ice cream and sit to eat it on a nearby bench before we walk back to the car. Despite the added sugar, it's a lot of back and forth walking for a little guy, and Brody had been running around on that playground like an absolute crazy man. The outing has wiped him out, and before long, he's asleep in the backseat and we're heading back to Gracie's for a bit. The whole drive there, I can't stop thinking about what Gracie said earlier. The fact that I've never let anyone walk over me before, and I don't know that this is when I want that to start.

In fact, I know that it's not.

My whole life, I've been determined to make sure that everyone knew I was going to be able to handle myself. That I was capable. I was intelligent. I could be the top woman at any company.

My resolve has been found, and my decision made. I'm definitely glad to know that I can rely on Conrad when shit hits the fan, but I want to handle Vivian on my own.

And tomorrow, I'm going to do just that.

## Chapter Twenty

### Conrad

Work is a mess on Monday mornings. It always is. The calls have piled up over the weekend, the emails all have a RETURN BACK, URGENT label on them, and everywhere that I turn, people need something from me. There have already been three people that showed up at my office door with extra work that needs to be done, more calls, more texts, more, more, more.

I let out a groan and click on the next file. It's a smaller job, and I quickly take care of it, sending it off to the right department, and then sending out a response. The stack seems endless. And I am tired. My coffee hasn't done shit to wake me up this morning either.

People like to think that being the CEO of a company absolves you from having to do any actual work, but the fact is, I've got a lot that still needs to be handled despite all my teams.

In fact, I've got one more thing that needs to be handled this Monday, more than any other.

Vivian made Scarlett cry.

She was *crying*.

I've never seen her look like that before, so gutted and worried. I know how important it is to Scarlett that she maintains a professional and well put together appearance at work. Her reputation is one of the most important things to her, second only to her family...*lucky me*. And Vivian is threatening to use one against the other.

The very thought of it is enough to make me grind my teeth together so hard, they ache. I know better than to just march out there and solve the problem the way that I wanted to, but still... It's tempting.

If I could just go see Vivian right now and bark out an order, telling her that she had to get the fuck out of my building, of my company, of everyone else's personal business... And if I could make her apologize to Scarlett first, too... There's a lot that I want to do. A part of me regrets ever letting Vivian into the business.

She was good at the start. Her father had given her the funds to help invest, and that investment had been a huge boon to the company. Vivian had tried to earn her way at the start, too. She didn't have a big head then. She didn't want people to think that she had only been hired because of the money put into the company.

But the longer that Vivian had worked with us, the more she had slacked off. She grew stagnant, comfortable in the fact that



she wasn't going to be fired over anything. Comfortable in the fact that she was going to be allowed to just coast through.

And I had let her.

That coasting had seemed harmless at the time. Now though, I realize that it has gone to her head along the way, and she is using her make-believe power against Scarlett. The thought leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. I need to be smart about this.

I should have come into the office with a game plan, but I had honestly spent so much time over the weekend just trying to cheer Scarlett up and getting distracted by her great ass and her charming smile that I hadn't given the *how* of the situation any real thought.

Now, I need to figure something out by— I check the emails that I have waiting for me still and try to figure out how long it's going to take me to get through them. Right after lunch will be the biggest empty block of time that I have today.

So I have until then to figure out how I am going to approach the problem.

Groaning, I flip through another email, fingers flying over the keyboard as I bang out another response. There's a knock on the office door. I have to resist the urge to ignore it and just keep responding to the emails, but instead, I take a deep breath. "Come on, door's open."

It swings inward. Rather than another job that needs to be handled, Scarlett steps into the room in all her gorgeous glory.

My day is instantly improved by the sight of her. “Scarlett!”

It’s funny how your life can become so intrinsically wrapped around another person. I never would have thought that I could be so utterly in love with a woman before, but now... Well, I don’t know what I would do without her.

She closes the door behind her. “Hey. Do you have a minute?”

“I’ve got all the time in the world for you,” I tell her, earnestly.

“Mhm. You say that all the time, and do you know what it accomplishes?” Scarlett asks, stepping over to the desk. She plants one hand on top of it. “It gets us late for work. Like we were this morning.”

“It was just ten minutes, and it doesn’t matter, because I’m the boss,” I assure her.

“You’ve got to stop making me need to shower twice in the mornings.”

“Did you come in here just to scold me over giving you a good time before work?” I question. We’d laid in bed for too long and then she finally got up to take a shower but once she came out, she was wet, and curvy, and I just couldn’t help myself. I took her up against the mirror wall in the bedroom, just the way we like it. She came on my cock, and I came on her ass—and, yeah, then she had to go get in the shower again.

Oops. That was a mistake on my end, but whatever. I give her a crooked smile. “You liked it as much as I did.”

Scarlett rolls her eyes. She walks around the edge of the desk and then sits down on it, just in front of me. She presses a hand against my bicep, giving it a squeeze. “I didn’t come up here to talk to you about that.”

I nod. “I knew that you hadn’t. What’s going on?”

“It’s about Vivian,” Scarlett says.

My heart sinks straight down to my feet. “God damn it! I was going to deal with her after lunch today. I should have made it the first thing that I did. I just wasn’t expecting her to be bold enough to make another move so soon. Shit.”

“Vivian hasn’t done anything today,” says Scarlett, with a shake of her head. “I know that you said that you were going to deal with it. That’s what I wanted to talk with you about.”

“Alright,” I say. “I’m not totally following here. What part of the situation are we talking about?”

Scarlett slides her hand over my arm, moving it up to my neck, and then giving my ear lobe a sexy little rub. She’s trying to distract me. I can tell. Even worse, it’s almost working.

At least until she says, “I kept going back and forth with this all night but— I want to deal with her on my own.”

Then my focus snaps straight back to the situation, and I brush her hand away from my ear. “No way. That’s not going to happen. Vivian already thinks that she can throw her weight around and get you to buckle under it. I’m not going to have you go head-to-head with her. I’ll stop what I’m doing, and I’ll

go handle it now. That way you don't have to keep worrying about it."

Scarlett frowns. She crosses her arms over her chest, fingers curling against her own elbows. "I said that I'll handle it. I'm going to deal with the situation as soon as I'm done here. I just wanted to come and give you the courtesy of a heads-up first."

"Scarlett," I insist. "I don't want you to do this. Let me deal with Vivian. She's my employee and that means that it's my job to handle it."

"And I'm the mother of your children," says Scarlett, sharply. Shit, that feels good to hear her say. "Which means when I tell you to do something, you need to respect what I'm saying."

"I respect what you're saying." I take a deep breath, trying to pull the situation back into my control. Despite how good things are between us right now, I'm well aware that how I respond to this situation will alter the way things are going between us. For the worse, or the better... That remains to be seen. That's why I've got to play my cards right.

I have to *say* the right thing. I have to *do* the right thing. Or whatever relationship we've steadily been building between us is going to go crashing straight down the shitter.

"I know that you don't like it when other people are in charge, but I have to work with the people in this company. That means they need to know that I'm not just going to run to my boyfriend every time there's a problem and expect you to fix it," she says.

Okay, forget not being distracted.

I am *instantly* off topic.

“Did you just call me your boyfriend?”

Scarlett opens her mouth as though she’s about to protest, and then closes it again. The very corner of her mouth curls up at the edges. “Yeah, I did. And you don’t want me to take the b-word back right after I’ve dropped it, do you?”

“Fuck no,” I say, without thinking. “No, I don’t want you to take it back. You know that I trust you, right? And I think that it’s hot as hell that you’re so determined to not take anyone’s shit. I just don’t want this to go badly.”

Scarlett leans forward and presses a kiss to my cheek before standing up. She brushes a few strands of blonde hair behind her ear and then gives me a look that’s absolutely smoldering. “How about this? If it goes badly, you can come in and play hero and clean up the mess. And if it doesn’t go badly, we’ll celebrate tonight. Together.”

“Celebrate, huh?” I stand up too, reaching out and pressing a hand to her shoulder, then up to her neck. I lean in and kiss her, our lips sliding over each other. Her lip balm makes it smooth and glossy, leaving the faint taste of mint on my own. When I pull back, I ask her, “And exactly how do you plan on doing that?”

She side-eyes the desk. “Maybe we’ll find another way to use this office of yours. Or maybe I’ll let you pick how we celebrate.”

“I’ll pick,” I say, quickly. I take hold of her and walk her over to the door. It’s so fucking tempting to just pin her against it and kiss her senseless. I want to celebrate right now. I want to handle the Vivian issue on my own, too.

But it’s clear that Scarlett wants to take her own swing at Vivian first, and I know that nothing I say is going to prevent that from happening. So I give her one more kiss and then I let her leave. The office door closes behind her.

I slump against the wall, letting the side of my head thump there too. I hope that I haven’t just made the wrong choice. I worry about Scarlett. I know that she’s a capable, strong-willed woman. But still, it’s hard for me to let go and just let her do this on her own.

I make my way back to my desk, dropping down into the chair. The emails are brought back up, but the thought of dealing with the Monday madness is suddenly way less enticing. I would rather be doing literally anything else.

At least Scarlett’s given me something nice to think about. If things go well — and I’m sure that they will — then I’ve got a celebration waiting for me at the end of the day.

## Chapter Twenty-One

### Scarlett

I've never been to the fourth-floor offices that house Human Resources before. Cassie LaBlanc seems surprised that today is breaking that streak. She sits up a little straighter behind her desk, giving me a smile.

“I would say that it was nice to see you again,” says Cassie, “But I don't think anyone is ever happy to make a visit to my office. Come on, have a seat. Why don't you tell me what's going on?”

I sit down in the chair on the other side of her desk. The place is decorated with calming colors and soft touches in an attempt to make the employees feel a bit more at ease when they come to report problems. It's clear HR wants people to know this is a safe place to air your grievances.

The flowers on the desk are a nice touch too. The bright yellow petals help make the room welcoming. “I mean, it *is* good to see you again. I just wish that it was under better circumstances. I need to talk with you about a problem that I've been having.”

“I’m all ears,” says Cassie. She gets up, stepping around the edge of her desk and going over to the office door. The door clicks shut. The blinds are lowered. Her smile is soft when she turns to me again. “Just to make sure that things stay between us.”

I nod and wait for her to sit back down, more relieved by her words than I was expecting. I take a deep breath to settle my nerves, reminding myself of what Gracie had said. I’ve never let anyone push me around before, and I’ve never let anyone swoop and save me. I’m not about to change that now.

“I know that there aren’t any policies about not dating in the office,” I start.

Cassie nods. “We’re all adults here. So long as everyone’s consenting in it, romantic involvement with a co-worker is totally fine. It’s just best to report it to HR. Someone hasn’t told you the opposite, have they?”

I shake my head. “It’s not really that simple.” A pause. “I’ve been seeing Conrad for a few months now. So I guess this is me officially reporting that.”

Cassie nods, trying to keep her expression schooled. I can tell that she’s surprised but trying not to show it. Conrad is the kind of guy that everyone’s thought about getting with at least once; the sort of man that makes you want to sink your teeth into him.

Strong and powerful, rich and handsome — funny and a good cook too, though I know not many other people are



aware of those facts. There's a little thrill in the realization that I know things about him that a lot of other people don't.

"Alright," says Cassie. "There's nothing that says you can't be with him. And I'll make an official note about it."

I let my hand drift down to my belly. I've definitely started showing. But my work wardrobe has shifted to mostly loose-fitting billowy blouses, to help hide the growing baby bump. No one has had the gall to comment on my recent weight gain outside of Vivian.

"I'm pregnant," I tell her. "We're going to be having twins."

"Oh my goodness, Scarlett, congratulations," Cassie gushes, no hesitation in her voice. She sounds like she's truly happy for me, which brings a smile to my face. It's nice to know that not everyone is looking at this the same way that Vivian is. As though it's their golden ticket to a better job.

"Thank you. I had been hoping everyone would be willing to see it that way," I explain, "But it hasn't worked out like that. I have an issue with Vivian."

"Vivian... From marketing?" Cassie turns to her computer, fingers flying over the keyboard as she brings the personnel file up.

"Yes. She seems to think she can use this by spreading rumors, lies." I give her a brief rundown on what's been going on with Vivian, and how she's trying to ruin my reputation by taking my pregnancy and turning it against me.

Cassie listens to me with a serious look on her face, nodding her head along as I spill the details. When I finish explaining the situation to her, she says, “That’s a pretty serious accusation. And it’s not that I don’t believe you — I do. But I need to look into this a little bit myself before I take any actions. You understand that, right?”

“Of course I do,” I tell her. “I appreciate you looking into it.”

Cassie promises that it’s her top priority and I leave knowing that she means it. The rest of the workday is a blur, uneventful save for when I catch Conrad passing through the marketing section of the office just so he can catch a glimpse of me.

It makes me feel important.

It makes me feel even more important when I get back to the penthouse suite, and I find that there are several large boxes waiting for me. I had briefly stopped at Gracie’s on the way here, meaning Conrad’s already in the kitchen, making us dinner.

“Conrad?” I ask, stepping around one of the larger boxes. “What is this?”

Conrad’s got an apron pulled on over his work shirt. The moment he sees me, he crosses the room and pulls me in for a fiercely passionate kiss. “That is a gift,” he says.

“A gift, huh? Well, I like it! And what’s in the boxes?” I tease, even though I know he didn’t mean the kiss was the gift.

Conrad laughs. “That’s a gift for the babies.”

“For the babies, huh?” I lean my hand against his chest for a moment and then turn toward the boxes. There’s a pair of scissors on the coffee table, so I grab them and get to work, slicing through the heavy-duty packing tape that’s keeping everything shut tight.

Conrad vanishes back into the kitchen to make sure that nothing burns. I open the first box, a changing table, for the nursery. Warmth swells in my chest. Conrad is a businessman through and through. He’s done everything he can to ensure that his business is run correctly and has turned it into something wildly successful.

For him to give his office to the twins—it was a big sign that he really wanted to be involved. And it was one of the reasons that made me decide to move forward with a more sincere relationship with him.

It was a huge decision on my end, admitting that I wanted him to be involved with every aspect of these babies. We both realized it meant that he would also be allowed to get closer to me. It’s a decision I’m grateful to have made.

I’ve got a feeling that the rest of the boxes must contain items of the same sort. And I’m correct. There are expensive baby care supplies in all of them, from a starter stockpile on diapers and baby wipes, to baby seats for the car.

And then in the smallest box is a set of keys with a picture of a blacked-out Range Rover. “What is this?” I pull the keys out and take a better look at the photo that is clearly from a

dealership. “It’s first-class safety for our babies, and I don’t want to hear a word about it,” Conrad quips as he leans on the kitchen counter with a dish rag swung over his shoulder. “It’s down in the parking garage waiting for you. Besides, we needed a bigger ride to get those car seats in. They obviously aren’t going in my Jaguar and your Camry is ready for retirement.”

The grand gesture is a little overwhelming because no one has ever taken care of me the way that Conrad does, but it’s not surprising. This is just Conrad. I step over to him and give him a big hug. Nothing sexual, it’s just full of love and appreciation for the man.

He takes my hand, and we drift into the nursery. It’s plain white at the moment—a popular trend right now—but we both decided that wasn’t right for kids. Adults can live in a neutral color scheme if they want, but I think that kids should be surrounded by as many colors as physically possible. They should get to live inside of the rainbow, so their imagination can bloom. We’ve already discussed that we don’t want a classic pink or blue theme either.

“I’ve had several color swatches taped to the walls. What do you think?” he asks.

One wall has various shades of yellow, ranging from baby pastel to a warm buttercup hue, and the other has various shades of purple starting with a light lavender, and another wall has the palest of orange hues scattered on it. It looks

almost like a sunset. I know that he means to pick one color or another, but I can't help but love that idea.

“They are all wonderful. Like a room filled with the sky.” Just for my twins. My hands settle on my belly and a warm smile settles on my face. I never imagined that things would turn out this way when I met Conrad, and I certainly didn't imagine that they would turn out this way when I realized I was pregnant.

But I love it all the same.

“All then?” he asks, and I nod. His arms wrap around me in a sweet embrace, and I feel my body relax even more.

There's something about this evening that makes me confident I've made the right choice. And I'm happy it's just about us. I feel amazing about how things went when I told Cassie about Vivian, but I'll save that conversation for tomorrow.

This family moment is too sweet.

I might not have said it out loud yet, but there's no doubt in my mind that I've fallen head over heels for Conrad. And sooner or later, I'll stop making him wait and I'll tell him exactly that.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### Conrad

Getting the nursery set up is taking longer than I imagined it would. The changing table arrived yesterday, but we still need to get the cribs picked out. I find myself sitting at work scrolling through a blog that compares the various cribs with each other instead of answering emails.

It's a bad habit, but I figure that so long as it's not one I do all the time... Well, an expecting father gets a pass. Still, the moment that there's a knock on the door, I click into a work-related tab. Not because I can't do exactly what I want, more because it's a little embarrassing.

"Come in."

"Hey, Conrad." It's Cassie. She's got a frown on her face. By the way that she comes in and closes the door, I can tell that this is a serious matter and not just a standard work chat. "Can I sit down?"

"Of course. What's going on?" I gesture toward the chair and then turn the monitor so it's angled more fully away from

me, to show that I'm paying close attention to her.

She takes her seat and then tells me, "Scarlett came into my office yesterday, to make a formal complaint against one of the other employees here. She mentioned that the two of you are seeing each other romantically. Before I proceeded with anything, I wanted to see if these claims were accurate."

"They are. We've been dating for a while now," I tell her. I want to tell Cassie that we're expecting, too, but I don't want to take that from Scarlett if she hasn't started sharing it with other people. "And I know that the complaint was against Vivian, right?"

"Yes, it was. Considering that the claims are about — a reputation, for lack of a better word," Cassie starts.

I interrupt her to say, "I don't like the idea of an employee trying to blackmail someone. I realize that Scarlett came forward because she knows that I've got her back on this, but if it's not handled correctly, then Vivian might get the idea that she can do this with other people, too. I don't want that sort of attitude in my office."

Cassie nods. "I know. It's never a good idea to keep a bad seed around. They'll just grow into something twice as poisonous down the road."

"Pull it," I tell her.

Cassie pauses. She opens her mouth, thinks better of what she had been going to say, and then simply clarifies, "You want me to fire her?"

“Yes,” I say, no hesitation in the answer. “I won’t let something like this be handled with just a slap on the wrist. Sure she was an initial investor, but she’s let that get to her head. I want things dealt with, and I want them dealt with swiftly. There’s no reason to drag out an investigation in this. I’ll stand behind what Scarlett said.”

Cassie’s lips purse for a moment, and then she nods and stands up. “Alright. That was the only thing that I came in here for. Oh, and to congratulate you. I’m glad you’ve found a nice girl with a strong head on her shoulders. You deserve that. You two will make wonderful parents.”

“Thank you, Cassie,” I say with a smile before she can head toward the door. I’m a bit surprised she knows about the babies. But then again, why should I be, Scarlett got ahead of the game by telling HR right away. “And whatever Scarlett’s told you about us, please keep it to yourself. We’re not hiding anything, but I don’t think that she’s ready for it to be the hot talk of the office, any more than it already is.”

“I think that she’s more ready for that than you think,” says Cassie, with a little laugh. Before I can ask what that’s supposed to mean, she turns and leaves the room, letting the door click shut behind her. There is silence for a moment after that, and I sit, drumming my fingers against the top of the desk while I sort my thoughts.

I had been leery about letting Scarlett handle this on her own. What can I say? I want to take care of her. I want to



make sure that if a problem comes up, it doesn't come up a second time. But I'm proud of her.

I'm still going to keep a close eye on what happens next with Vivian. There's no doubt that she's going to try and squirrel her way out of it, or at least bring Scarlett down with her. If Cassie doesn't handle the situation to my satisfaction, then I'll just have to get involved and handle it myself.

And if that happens... Vivian's not just going to be out of a job. I'll make sure that she never gets work in this industry again.

A ping draws my attention back to the computer. I'm still logged into my email. It's highly tempting to just leave it be and go back to looking at cribs, but I resist the urge. I didn't get this far in life by taking shortcuts or being distracted, after all.

So even though it's the last thing that I want to be doing right now, I still bring up my email. God, there are a lot of them that still haven't been looked at. I clicked through a few of them, forwarding them off to other departments, for the appropriate people to handle as I try to get things in order.

This is why I don't normally let myself slide with work.

It is always three times as hard to get started, to regain focus, in the middle of the day compared to the morning. I give a sigh, breathing out hard through my nose. I come across several emails from the marketing department. Harry needs an extension, but it wasn't his fault; the client wanted a complete

revamp of the project, using information that they had ‘forgotten’ to send earlier.

I make a note to keep an eye on this client. If they pull this stunt on a second job, then I will blacklist the name and turn down work from them. This shit is a tactic for free work way more often than it is an actual forgotten file.

After handling a few more of the marketing teams’ messages, including some that require my approval or dismissal of files and projects, I realize that one of them was from Scarlett’s email address. Damn, I have it bad for her. Just the sight is enough to bring a smile to my face.

Never before have I been this into someone. It isn’t just an attraction. I have truly fallen in love with the woman. And what I want, perhaps more than anything else, is to make sure that she knows it.

Clicking on the file brings me to a message explaining what has been done on the current project so far. This is the job that Vivian had been desperately trying to get Scarlett to drop, the Prima Jones project. Rather than fuck it up on purpose, Scarlett seems to have taken the initiative, doubling down on the workload and getting it sent to me a full week early.

“Damn, she’s good,” I mutter to myself, pulling up the attachments and looking them over. There isn’t so much as a single glint of a bad decision to be found. I had known that Scarlett wasn’t going to let Vivian bulldog her out into the streets, but it is still a relief to have solid proof of that decision in my hands.

The most frustrating part of this situation is that Vivian could have been a great employee. If she had actually applied herself instead of coasting on her status and then trying to use slimy tricks to get somewhere, then she might have ended up as a valuable part of the team.

As it is, Scarlett has managed to outshine her in every way. From the very first day that Scarlett showed up at this office, I knew that she was going to bring something good to the team. A fire that we had been missing. And she has never proven me wrong. The company has managed to land a lot of high-paying clients since she joined our team.

After going over the documents, I approve them and transfer them to the finalizing department to mail them back to the client. Then I send an email back to Scarlett that simply says: Awesome job, keep an eye out for Cassie today, she's heading your way.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### Scarlett

Cassie shows up at my desk only minutes after the email from Conrad arrives. She isn't smiling, but she doesn't look pissed either. "Alright, Scarlett. I'm getting ready to go speak with Vivian. I thought it might be best for you to come with me in case anything needs to be clarified."

"Yes, of course." I close up the project that I've been working on and then make to follow her. Everyone on our marketing team works on the same floor, but we all have separate cubicles. While I've continued to keep mine pretty stark, I have recently brought in a couple of pictures. And last week I came to work to find a stunning antique tiffany desk lamp in my cubicle with a ridiculously mushy love note attached to it from Conrad. But I know my minimalist style is not the case for most people.

Vivian's cubicle has photographs of her dog on the wall, and her father, and she's brought in her own chair, one with better back support. That's something that I need to consider too, especially since these twins are growing fast and starting to

kill my back. Even now, there's a dull ache in my lower spine, and a tightness that runs through my shoulders. I know that's just going to keep getting worse too. Keeping good posture for these little monsters is work, even while I'm sitting.

Cassie steps into Vivian's cubicle first, lifting her knuckles and rapping them against the wall. "Vivian. Do you have a moment?"

Vivian looks up, startled at the sight of us. She sees Cassie first and just looks confused, but when she catches sight of me, her mouth curls into a dark sneer. "What is this about?"

Cassie looks around. The bad thing about working in cubicles is that there is no door to close, and people are always going to hear what's happening inside of them. A few of the team members have been able to get noise-canceling headphones approved for that very reason, but I've never bothered.

There's something about knowing what's going on in the office, hearing the buzz, that helps me stay on top of my shit. That was something that I figured out back in college; learning isn't just in the books; it also comes from paying close attention to what's going on around you.

I should have figured out a long time ago that Vivian wasn't my friend. Right from the start. Gossips never make good companions. But I had been enamored with the job, busy dealing with Conrad and the twins, and I would just let it slip past me when she would make her occasional jabs. It took me

far too long to realize that she was the type to use blackmail to get her way.

Just because she didn't like that I'm the one Conrad chose in the end.

"I think you know what this is about," says Cassie. "Why don't we make this as painless and quiet as possible? You should collect your things, and we can speak elsewhere."

"How about you tell me what she's doing in my cubicle?" Vivian says, instead. "Better yet, *you* can both go elsewhere. I've got a tight deadline that I'm working under."

"You don't need to worry about the deadline," says Cassie. She's trying to be professional about this and not make a scene. I'm tempted to get involved, but I would rather have people respect me, not think that I've just come by to mock Vivian.

She turns back to Cassie again, and her mouth twists into an even deeper frown. "Either tell me what this is about or leave me be so I can get my work done. Not everyone in this place gets a free pass with their jobs."

That barb is obviously aimed at me. I make to say something, but Cassie reaches out and puts a hand on my shoulder, fingers pressing against me very briefly. It's a clear sign that she wants me to just let her handle it.

If I had a higher rank, I might argue. As it is, I bite my tongue and step back, letting her handle it the way that she deems fit. Honestly, it's less about that and I know it. Cassie's

going to do things by the books. As the head of HR, she has literally no wiggle room to let personal interests or opinions color her work.

She's paid the big bucks to handle every issue professionally and do everything line by line.

So I'm surprised when she looks at Vivian and instead of insisting that they go talk in her office, or even just somewhere more private, she simply says, "Vivian, I'm afraid that Branson Tech is going to have to let you go. You are fired."

Vivian bolts upright so fast that it sends her wheeled office chair skidding across the floor. The back of it smacks into the wall of the cubicle, causing a loud thud. If people hadn't already figured out what Cassie was doing on our floor, they all definitely know now.

"Excuse me?" Vivian demands. "You can't just fire me!"

"I'm sorry, but I've already started the process with paperwork. You'll receive your last check in the mail next week."

Vivian stares at her. "You can't —you can't do this! I haven't done anything wrong!"

"We take harassment very seriously here," Cassie says.

Vivian snaps, "It's not harassment if it's fucking true!"

I bite my tongue so hard that it might bleed. One hand settles on my waist, hip cocking out just slightly. I'm doing my best to look like a proper businesswoman, not surprised by how natural the aura and position come to me.

There's something about this that just feels right.

"Vivian," says Cassie. "I don't want to have to ask Gregory to come up here, but I will if you don't start gathering your things."

Gregory is the in-house security guard. He mostly stays down in the lobby, where he loiters near the front desk, drinking free coffee and chatting with Estelle. But that's just because this is generally a pretty nice place to work. Even when people are let go, they're sent off with a severance package to make up for whatever downsizing might have taken place.

That being said, Gregory is also a beast of a guy. He's a former US Marine, and he still wears his dog tags over his security uniform and keeps his hair trimmed in a tight-fitting crew cut. He's the kind of guy who has a tree trunk thick neck and arms that are so large, they barely look like they're being contained by the long sleeves of his uniform. He's sweet enough when you're talking to him in passing, but I have no doubt that he takes his actual job very seriously, on the rare occasion that he actually has something to do.

Vivian must be thinking the exact same thing because her lips pull into a thin, tight line. Her gaze darts between us. There's this split second where I think she might come over and slap me based purely on the hateful expression that she's sporting. But then she snarls something under her breath and grabs her purse, slinging the strap up over her shoulder.



“You can expect to hear from my lawyer by the end of the week,” Vivian snaps, brushing past the both of us and heading toward the elevator. Someone is already standing there, though they wisely decide to let Vivian have the first ride downstairs on her own.

“Don’t worry about any legal ramifications. We’re fully in the right here. There’s nothing that she can do to you or the company,” Cassie says.

My first instinct is to apologize. Leftover childhood thought processes, right? There’s been a mess, and you say you’re sorry. But the adult brain kicks in before I can utter anything of the sort. This whole mess isn’t my fault. I’m not the one that caused the problem here, Vivian is.

There’s nothing that I need to apologize for.

Instead, I thank Cassie. “I’m glad that it’s over. I know that people are going to talk once word gets out.” My hand moves to settle on the curve of my belly. “And I’m ready for that. But the fact that she was trying to use it to blackmail me, to get me to mess up a job...”

I trail off.

Cassie nods. “No, that’s not acceptable. And honestly, neither are any negative office rumors. I think that firing Vivian is going to be a good example to other employees of what happens when you involve yourself in defaming someone’s name. People will recognize we don’t tolerate it here. Still, if you have any more trouble, just let me know.”

“I will.”

A smile spreads over her face. “Or you could tell Conrad.”

I let out a laugh. “I’ll let *you* know. I think that you’re less likely to chew someone’s face off over it.”

“Only sometimes,” Cassie says. She nods at me and then heads off toward the elevator, to head back to her own office. As she walks down the aisle of cubicles, everyone that had been poking their head out to see what was going on abruptly pulls it back in.

They go back to their work, trying to pretend like they hadn’t just been watching as intently as they could manage. It’s almost laughable.

My gaze sweeps over everything that Vivian left up here. Does she just not care about it, or does she really think that she’s going to be let back in tomorrow? I pick up one of the dog photographs, looking at the German Shepherd, and then put it back down, shaking my head.

It’s not my problem, I guess.

Stepping out of Vivian’s cubicle, I start making my way back to my desk — only to catch sight of Conrad on the other side of the hallway. He’s smiling at me. When our eyes meet, he gives a pleased nod of his head, clearly content with how things have gone in regard to Vivian.

I know that he must have spoken to Cassie about this before she came out here. That’s just how the process goes. Did he tell her to fire Vivian? An amused smile curls over my face. Of

course he did. There's no way that Conrad could resist swinging down the hammer and striking the final nail.

And I'm just... Okay with it.

More okay with it than I had been expecting, at least.

It's tempting to go over and talk to him right now, but I know that just because there aren't any heads hanging out in the hallway, that doesn't mean that they aren't all watching and listening to me. I head back to my cubicle instead, sliding into my chair and then pulling up my email. Maybe I'll go grab her chair tomorrow if it's still there. Yep, I deserve it.

I rewrite the message several times, thanking him for the support, and telling him off for getting involved. Eventually, all of those drafts get deleted. The coy one about needing a new chair gets deleted, too. It wouldn't make any sense without the context of having been in Vivian's office.

Instead, I send a message out that simply asks: *Did you like the show?*

And two minutes later I get a response from Conrad that reads: *It was good, but I'm sure you can give me a better one.*

I don't send a response out to him, but we both know how the night will end when we're back home. The knowing is enough, I think.

I'll give him a show that he's never going to forget.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### Conrad

The next few days race by. Vivian does try to get legal involved, but she doesn't have a leg to stand on and her suit is quickly shut down. Gregory escorts her into the office on Friday to collect her stuff, and then he escorts her right back out of the building.

In the meantime, the cribs arrive, and it takes me almost four hours to put together. Whoever designed them thinks that engineers are the only ones having kids, I suppose. I'm not a stupid man, but I've never seen instructions that are more complicated than the ones for that damn crib.

I also do get my show — and it's hot as fuck, watching Scarlett strip down for me in front of the mirror, her hands on her own body, knowing that my hands are going to be tracing the same path later on — and work continues the same as it has been.

That is to say, life is good.

But... Something is missing.

There's a piece that has been forgotten. I know that we're in a relationship now. While we haven't had any sort of a sit-down talk on it, Scarlett has made it very clear that she's rethought her position on being with me.

The guest room has been transformed back into that — and down the line, it might be transformed into a joint home office for us to share. We're sharing the same room now, the same bed. She curls up against my side each night, and I wake up to the sun grazing over her skin each morning.

And just like now, this early Tuesday morning, all I can think about is how I want the whole world to know that she's mine. Rolling over, I press her to the mattress. Her eyes open, a sleepy smile settling over her face as I straddle her, leaning down to kiss her.

She gives a satisfied moan as I plunge my tongue into her mouth. Her hands slide through my hair, and then down the curve of my neck and the spread of my shoulders. When I pull back to catch my breath, she tells me, "We don't have time for this, and you know it."

"We could make time," I say, pressing an open-mouthed kiss to her jaw instead, and then the line of her throat. My tongue runs over her skin, curling up against the soft spot between her shoulder and neck. "I could call and tell him we're running late. I could say that we've had a flat tire."

"I'm not going to be late for my doctor's appointment because you want to mess around," insists Scarlett, even as she

tilts her head to the side and offers up that much more throat for me to lavish attention onto.

And lavish it I do, with my tongue and lips and even my teeth. I know that she's opposed to hickeys on anything that's visible above clothing, so I make sure to not linger in one spot too long. Still, the temptation is there, and it's strong. I press myself against her body, like I might be able to change her mind if I'm just *good* enough at kissing her.

And God damn, I'm good at kissing her.

But Scarlett is the most determined person that I've ever met, and she has a thing about never changing her mind once it's been made up. She runs her fingers over my skin and then gives my shoulder a slight push. "Come on, no. We have to get dressed. We're going to be late."

I give her one last kiss before sliding off the bed. I take a moment to stretch, rolling my shoulders, craning my neck this way, then that. When she sits up, I help Scarlett onto her feet and kiss her again, just as passionately.

Scarlett nips at my lower lip and then ducks away from me, over to the large walk-in closet on the other side of the master bedroom. The door is slid open, revealing where she's moved her clothing in to be hung up on the rods next to mine.

She always dresses nicely, especially at work. Even when we're not at work, her look could still impress anyone. But still, the dress that she comes out wearing is top dollar.

“Whoa,” I tell her. “Trying to impress the doctor into giving us good news about the kids?”

Scarlett rolls her eyes. “This is for after the doctor’s appointment and work. We’re going to get something for dinner on the way home. I expect you can come up with somewhere nice, even last minute?”

“I could cook?” I offer, looking her over. Is it wrong of me to already be thinking about how great it’s going to be to get her out of that dress later tonight? Don’t get me wrong, I love the way that it looks on her. The black fabric hugs her curves, showing off her growing baby bump. Her hair is still unbrushed and her makeup not on, but I think that just adds something to the sheer levels of hotness clinging to her.

Scarlett steps over to me, bracing a hand on my chest and leaning forward, brushing her lips over my own. The touch is brief and fleeting, and she pulls away quickly enough, side stepping around me to head toward the attached master bathroom. Over her shoulder, she calls out, “I’m going to finish getting ready. Make us a reservation somewhere and get dressed.”

“Guess that’s a no to me cooking.” I’m not offended by it, though I am a little put out. And I’ve finally realized exactly why I felt like something was still missing earlier. Scarlett doesn’t have a ring.

We are together, and about to have two little babies, but we aren’t married. I want to change that. The thought has crept into my brain and made a home there.

My plan, when I rolled over to wake her up this morning, was to find out what her absolute favorite meal was. Anything in the whole world. And on the way home from work today, I was going to pick up the groceries to make it. That's when I was going to ask her whether she wanted to get married or not.

Not a true proposal, of course. Just a testing of the waters. Scarlett has made me fight for every part of this relationship, and I doubt that she will make this final, largest leap without me having to do the same thing.

Instead, I put in a call for The Shard, out on East Magnolia, and pull a few strings to make sure that we can get a table tonight. One of the many perks to having a lot of money is that you can make last minute reservations even at places that are almost always eight-months-in-advance exclusive.

Once the table is reserved, I go about getting dressed. I find something nice to try and match Scarlett's style, my deep blue Prada suit will do just fine with a crisp white dress shirt underneath. It feels a little silly to be this dressed up for the doctor and work, but hey, Scarlett's the lead on this one.

Scarlett comes out of the bathroom looking totally put together, beautiful and sharp as always. Her gaze sweeps over me, and I tilt my head to the side, asking her. "Like what you see?"

"I always do," says Scarlett. "Come on, handsome. I don't want to be late."

I drive us to the doctor's office in our new Range Rover with the car seats already installed. I might have done that a



little early, but that's my style, preparedness. It's a smooth drive to what will hopefully be a smooth appointment. And the appointment is just that, smooth. It's just a routine visit to make sure that everything is going the way that it should. The tests and the questions seem to pass quickly, but seeing those babies on screen and hearing their heartbeats will never get old. But soon we're getting ready to sign out and fill out another form for insurance that the front desk has requested. It's insane to me that you have to fill out so much paperwork to have a kid — but at the end of the day, I guess it is a whole new person being brought into the world.

Two new people, in our case.

As we turn in the insurance form the girl at the front desk mentions that she has one more question for us today. She looks at Scarlett and asks, “Do you wish to add the father to the file?”

It's a standard question, though it's a bit awkward because I'm standing right here. Women can say yes. They can say no. They can say that they do know, but the father isn't in the picture — and when that happens, the guy just doesn't have any rights to the kid unless he takes the case to court later on.

Suddenly, there's tension wrapped through my spine and my shoulders. It pushes me up, pulling me into a state of total awareness. I had never thought to ask Scarlett what she was going to do about this. About the legality of it.

But they are my kids too.

I looked toward her, feeling more vulnerable than I have since I was a kid in middle school, no matter how much I tell myself there's no reason to worry. What happens in the coming weeks and months, in the coming years even, hinges on this one moment. This one decision.

My breath catches and twists up in my chest and my throat. I'm clenching my jaw together so tightly that it actually hurts.

She doesn't think about it for more than a second before nodding, reaching out and taking my hand in her own soft one.

"Yes, I do. Conrad Branson," she says, with a small smile on her face. "You can put Conrad Branson down as the father."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

### Scarlett

I'm practically buzzing with anticipation. Everything is falling into place. Work. Love. My relationship with Conrad. He hasn't said much about my decision to put him down as the father on the babies' paperwork, but he's been wearing a silly grin each time I've seen him today, including now as we drive to The Shard.

Work was great today; things have been so smooth without you-know-who here. It's just been so much easier to focus on the tasks at hand without all the stupid drama.

I shoot a text to Gracie as Conrad drives and give her the short rundown on how this morning's appointment went — a standard best friend check in, like I always do — and then tell her about the plan that I have for after dinner tonight. I get back a series of emojis and gifs of people with hearts and stars in their eyes, eventually just muting my phone with a roll of my eyes.

The Shard is a large, glass building. It's the kind of place you need serious money to get into. I never would have

dreamed about coming here to eat three years ago. The waiter greets us on the ground floor, then he rides up the elevator with us to the top floor, where he leads us to a table right next to the glass wall. The view is amazing from here, the city lights dazzle in the glass wall's reflection.

There's a delicate looking crystal and gold wire flower centerpiece at the middle of the table. Wine is offered.

"I'll pass," I say, resting a hand on my belly.

"We'll do something sparkling," says Conrad. "Whatever you have that doesn't contain alcohol."

"Of course," says the waiter. He vanishes to fetch us our drinks while we browse the menu. If everything is going according to plan, and I think it is, then Conrad's sitting there thinking that this dinner is just to celebrate putting his name on the paperwork. He's never going to expect what's coming next.

My purse is hanging off the side of my chair. I have to work hard not to keep looking at it. I have two special surprises in there.

The first course arrives along with freshly baked soda bread and an herb compound butter. There's duck stuffed with apple, lavender, and almond for my main course, and fallow deer with smoked beetroot and juniper for Conrad.

When it comes time for dessert, we both get an apricot souffle, and I find myself almost swept away by the richness

and the freshness of it. The bill is going to be high, but I know that it's worth it.

As our meal starts to wind to an end, with the richness of it still on my tongue, I reach into my purse like I'm trying to fetch my lip balm. Instead, I wrap my fingers around a small black box. With the box tucked carefully in one hand, I step over to where Conrad is still sitting until I'm standing right in front of him.

"Conrad," I tell him. "I know that this isn't how things are normally done, but nothing about our relationship has been conventional so far. So I thought that this would be fitting."

"Thought what would be fitting?" He asks, looking slightly up at me, turning fully to face me.

"When I look at you, I feel protected and loved in a way that I have never felt before." I don't sink down onto my knee, but that's less because of the dress and more because it's increasingly hard to get up from the ground these days. "Like I'm the only thing that matters."

Conrad reaches out and takes hold of my hand. "You are the only thing that matters. I want to grow old with you, Scarlett. I want—"

"Hush," I tell him, smiling. "I'm talking."

He looks amused but falls silent.

I tell him, "The point, Conrad, is that you have made me happier than I ever thought I could be. And I want you to

know that. But more than just knowing it, I want to *tell* you...I want you to make me feel that way *forever*.”

I hand him the black, velvet box. He pops open the top of it, and the look on his face —it’s totally stunned, for a long, solid moment. Then he lets out a bark of laughter. “You won’t believe this, Scarlett, but I was going to ask you the exact same thing when we got home this evening.”

“Really?”

“I was.”

“Do you have a ring?”

“Not yet,” says Conrad. “I wasn’t sure if you’d want to get married.”

“I want to keep my last name,” I tell him with a crooked grin, watching as he pulls the golden band from the box. I reach out and put it on his left ring finger for him. “But I want to be your wife.”

He stands up, arms curling around me, and kisses me. The restaurant is secluded enough that no one is really close enough to watch except the waiter, who offers us a quiet congratulations and a free bottle of sparkling cider.

The waiter fills our glasses. “I have one more surprise for you, mister fiancé,” I say as I pull a white envelope out of my purse. “Today at the doctor’s appointment, I asked Dr. Riggs to write down the babies’ genders so we could be surprised in private.”

“What? When did you pull that off?”

“When you ducked out to pee,” I tell him with a giggle.  
“Well, do we want to know?”

“Yes!”

I wave the envelope in front of me playfully and ask, “Are you sure?”

“Of course I am!” He says eagerly, and continues, “I want to be armed with all the information humanly possible when it comes to these two creatures.”

I slowly tear open the envelope and pull out a single sheet of paper. My breath hitches as I read the words. “A boy,” I say breathlessly, “And a girl.”

Tears start streaming down my face. Conrad stands up and comes over to me and, kneeling by my chair, he pulls me in for another hug. The tears of joy and his tight embrace warm me to my core. “I love you, Scarlett.”

“I love you too, Conrad.”

And I do, I love him so much.

We only have one more drink to celebrate our new engagement and our baby boy and girl before deciding that we would rather spend the rest of the time at home, away from prying eyes and other people.

Conrad drives us, but he keeps reaching over with one hand, stroking his fingers along my arm. He keeps looking at me too, with this possessive glint in his eyes. I’ve just made him mine and allowed him to do the same in return.

I'm honestly expecting us to go straight to the bedroom, but instead, he pulls me out onto the patio that overlooks the city and gets us both a glass of the non-alcoholic champagne that he's taken to keeping on hand.

The glittering expanse of the city stretches out before us. Conrad puts a hand on my waist, looking it over. "I don't think that I ever appreciated this view before. Not until you were part of it."

"Stop being such a sap," I say, lightly, setting my glass down on the railing. "Or I might just start crying again." I turn to face him, pressing my hands against his side and tugging the white dress shirt free from where it's been tucked into his blue slacks.

"A sap? I was going for sentimental," jokes Conrad.

"It was sappy," I insist. "I can't have a sap for a husband. I would have married a tree if I wanted sap."

"Skipping engagement and going straight into marriage talk." Conrad leans forward and kisses me. "I like the way that sounds. You will look great in a white gown, baby."

"I was thinking red. To match my name." I admit.

"Stunning," says Conrad, pressing open-mouthed kisses to the line of my neck. "Absolutely stunning." And then, his hands tug at my waist, trying to pull me backward, into the penthouse once more, "I have been thinking about getting this dress off you all day."

"All day? I think that's an exaggeration."



“It’s not,” Conrad insists as we make it back into the suite. This is more along the lines of the evening I had been expecting. He can’t keep his hands off me, palms sliding around to grab at my ass and mouth pressing to every surface of my bare skin that he can reach.

The balcony doors are left open. Conrad urges me toward the bedroom, kissing me the whole way. The golden band that he’s wearing keeps catching in the lights, which flip on automatically as we step from one room into the next. Every time that I catch sight of that golden glint, my heart skips another beat.

Engaged. Engaged, and going to be married. Parents, too. A boy and a girl.

Conrad has changed my life in ways that I had never thought could be possible. I’m thrilled to be here now, to have him here with me, up against me; to feel his hard-on through the fabric of his slacks every time that we crowd our bodies close together.

My shoulders press up against the wall of mirrors in the master bedroom. Conrad finally manages to grab hold of the zipper on the side of my dress and tugs it down with a metallic hiss. The black fabric slides from my body, revealing my curves and my baby bump in all of its glory.

There’s no hesitation on his end. Conrad’s mouth is on me, his hands working overtime to get the clasp of my bra undone. That joins the pile of fabric on the floor, too.

“Show me how much you want me,” I tell him, and Conrad is quick to answer. He grabs me by the hips, pulling me away from the mirrors and then pushing me toward the bed. I go down onto my hands and my knees, letting him tug my panties down my ass and then off my legs.

Lips press to one of my ass cheeks and then there’s a hand sliding between my legs. I spread them as bidden, making room for him to press a hand against the already wet folds of my pussy. Two fingers press against me, rubbing over my clit and then forcing their way inside.

My whole body shudders in response to the touch, trembling beneath Conrad’s ministrations.

“I’m going to spend all night showing you,” Conrad tells me, his voice a low rumble, deep in his chest, in the back of his throat. “I’m going to make you mine.”

There’s something sharp to that last sentence. It’s a warning just as much as it’s a promise. Conrad’s going to take me, and he’s going to claim me, and he’s going to let the whole world know that I’m his.

Just the thought makes me even more wet. And it confirms this, too: I love him, and I can’t wait for the whole world to know.

## Conrad

I'm home late. It's something that I work hard at avoiding but sometimes these things happen, whether you want it to go that way or not. Pushing the door open, I'm met with the sound of cartoons quietly playing on the giant TV in the living room, and the sight of my two twins, Jenna and Jasper, sitting on the couch, wrapped up in blankets and fast asleep.

The door closes behind me with a soft click. Not wanting to wake them up, I take off my shoes at the door and creep into the kitchen. The nanny, Sarah Parker, is in the kitchen, cleaning up after dinner. She seems happy to see me.

"Mr. Branson. Your wife is in the office. She said that she would be done by eight," says Sarah.

"Thank you, Sarah. You can head out whenever you're done here," I tell her. The woman is a great asset, taking care of the kids whenever Scarlett and I are both at work. It's one of those things that two working parents absolutely need to have on hand.

But we still make sure that we spend as much time with Jenna and Jasper as we possibly can.

Leaving the kitchen, I head toward the office. We converted the guest bedroom into a work room, for the both of us to share, shortly before our wedding three years ago. Now, four years into parenthood and three years into married life, it seems like one of the best ideas we've ever had.

The light is already on, and the door is open. I rap my knuckles against the wall anyway, peeking inside. "Scarlett?"

"You're home." She uses one foot to turn the chair to face me, giving me a smile. Her blonde hair is starting to grow out into a long straight cut now, instead of the sharp, angled style that she wore it in when we first met. It's another gorgeous look on her.

"The Calward job came through at the last minute, and I had to try and work out the details with Terry," I tell her. "You deserved that promotion, but I sure wish we still had someone like you working in marketing. Things went a lot smoother when I didn't have to just pick the best of the worst."

"You're being too hard on them. Terry's pretty good at this. He just needs some more practice."

"I'm not sure we can keep him on long enough for that to happen." I shake my head. "If he can't hit the deadline with this one, I'm going to need to let him go."

Scarlett was promoted to a higher-ranking position in the company last year. She basically helps me run it now and it's

come to feel that without her my ship would sink. At work and at home. I might still be the captain. But she is *everything* else.

I complain to her about the holes in the marketing team a little longer.

“Don’t worry, babe. I’ll host another marketing training with the team next week and try to help straighten them out again. You shouldn’t spend the night stressing about work,” Scarlett tells me.

I counter, “Says the woman still in the office?”

“Touché.” Scarlett turns around and saves the files that she has up on the computer, then logs out of the work account. It’s a quick motion. Once everything is shut down for the night, she stands up and crosses the room, sidling up to me. Her hand settles on my chest, fingers curling slightly in the fabric of my shirt. “I guess this means you’ll have to convince me to leave the office.”

My hands rest on her hips, right at the band of her skirt. Our kids are a handful, but sometimes I can’t help but want to try for another. It’s the thought of being able to spill in her, more than anything else. And knowing that she loves me enough to have another child with me.

One day, I’ll bring it up. For now, I’m content enough to just lean down and kiss her, plastering her mouth with my own. Teeth nip at her lower lip. When Scarlett gasps, I take advantage of the act and delve into her mouth, tasting the tang of coffee and the mint of her lip gloss.

A knock on the wall behind us breaks us apart. Sarah has come very close to seeing worse before, and she doesn't seem bothered by the deepness of our kiss.

"I've taken care of everything, Mr. Branson. I'll be going home for the night—unless you need something else?" Sarah asks.

"We're fine," I tell her.

Scarlett thanks the woman and then Sarah turns. We wait until we hear the front door shut after her, and then Scarlett, laughing, collapses up against my chest. "That's horrible of us. We need to stop doing things where that poor woman has to watch."

"I think that she likes the show," I say. "You know, an exhibitionist—we've got an exhibitionist for a nanny."

Scarlett laughs and swats me on the chest as she pulls away. There's a smile on her face though, and I know that she finds the thought of it funny. "She's just too polite to say anything. And she doesn't want to risk losing her job."

I hum. "If you think so."

It's all in good fun, of course. Sarah has never been anything less than professional and absolutely great with the kids, and we've never *really* been caught with our pants down. Just close to it.

Scarlett steps past me. "Come help me get Jenna and Jasper put to bed. We were waiting for you."

“You just wanted to get a little more work in,” I chide, but I follow after her and we go to the couch together to get the twins collected. Neither of them wakes up all the way, even when we pull them into our arms. Jasper curls his little arms around my neck and rests his chubby cheek on my shoulder.

It makes everything inside of me feel warm, and I think again about wanting a big family, wanting to have more than just the twins. My little boy makes a sound in his sleep, and I shush him, one hand on his shoulders to keep him steady as we walk through the penthouse.

For now, the two kids are still sharing a bedroom. The lights have been set so that they only come on half-bright after a certain time, meaning we’re not blinded as we step into the room.

I set Jasper down on his bed. He finally wakes up enough to let out a sleepy sounding, “Daddy?”

“I’m right here,” I tell him, brushing the blond hair from his face and then leaning down to kiss his forehead. “Go back to sleep, big guy.”

He says something else but it’s too mumbled to make out. Jasper’s already asleep, just like that. When I turn to look, I find that my baby girl is in the same state, and Scarlett is staring at us, this soft look of awe and wonder on her face.

I mouth ‘what’ at her, but she just turns and steps out of the room. I give Jasper and Jenna one last loving look and follow her. The lights fade as we leave, and I pull the door mostly shut. It stays open about three inches, just in case they have a

problem. We have a monitor set up in their room too, but Scarlett likes to be extra safe.

I do too.

When I turn to look at her, Scarlett still has that same look on her face. I ask her, more amused now, “What?”

She steps toward me, placing a hand on my chest. “I was just thinking about something that Gracie asked me when I first found out that I was going to have twins.”

“That was a while ago.”

“It was. But... I don’t know. It came to mind anyway,” she tells me.

“And what was it that she asked you?” I ask her.

A swipe of my fingers and a tuft of long blonde hair is tucked behind one of Scarlett’s ears, her green eyes glimmering at me. She says, smiling, “Gracie asked me if I thought that you were going to be a good father.”

That has me freezing. “Did she?”

“It’s not personal, Conrad. We weren’t even dating then. I had only been living with you for a week or two,” says Scarlett, almost dismissively. “She just wanted to know if I thought that there was a chance we could make this work. If you would want to have kids around.” A pause. “If you would be good with them.”

“What did you tell her?”



“The truth,” says Scarlett. “That I didn’t know... But I thought that you would be. You had already told me that you’d always wanted a big family.”

I nod at her. “And what do you think now? Would you give her the same answer?”

There’s a part of me that’s almost worried about what she might say. That she thinks I work too much. That I can be too strict. But the rest of me knows that the look on her face in the kids’ bedroom was filled with wonder and love, and that I do my best to be the greatest father that I can for Jenna and Jasper.

Scarlett wraps her arms around my waist and rests her head on my shoulder. I’m quick to return the gesture, holding her steady up against the front of me, swaying her slightly as we stand there. Our relationship hasn’t always been easy, but it’s one that I’ve held tight to right from the start.

Scarlett is the only woman that I’ve ever wanted to have in my life, and I know that it’s going to remain that way until the day that I die.

“I would tell her that you’re the best father the twins could have ever asked for,” says Scarlett, softly. There’s such open honesty in her voice, as though it’s a secret that is never meant to leave this room. “And the best husband, too.”

And really, there’s nothing that can be said in response to a statement like that — and nothing I can do but tilt my head down and kiss her.

The End

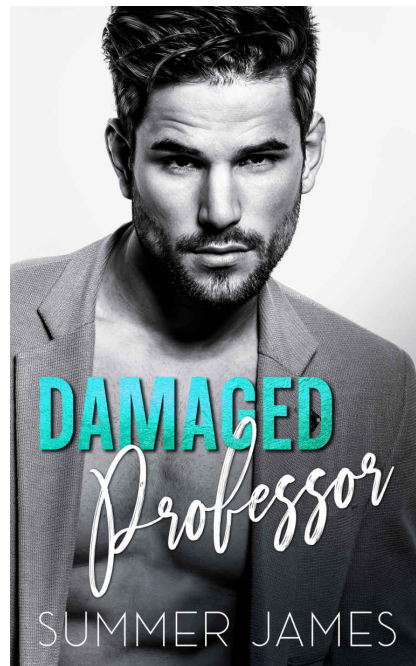
Welcome to Summer James' world of toe-curling contemporary romances.

Summer dishes out fiery stories full of high-stakes drama. You're going to find a lot of chiseled, silver fox billionaires and hard-earned happy endings here.

Summer lives in the rainy Pacific Northwest with her two wild kids and ridiculous cats. Movie nights that include battles for that last piece of popcorn are a theme in her forever cozy home.

Did you like this book?

Then you'll LOVE *Damaged Professor*



**A one-night stand with a hot billionaire...*thrilling.***

**Realizing he's my new professor...*disastrous.***

My heart was left for dead when my fiancé was killed.

But during a toe-curling one-night stand...

Under the chiseled abs of a silver fox...

I *came* back to life.

Until I walked into my first college class...

*Full stop.*

I couldn't believe my eyes.

My one-night stand was right there behind the podium.

BOOM. I could hear my heart plummeting again.

When a bitter student attempts to blackmail us... I fold.

This damaged billionaire's reputation must stay clean.

Sure, he's a famous author and money runs deep in his blood.

But teaching is his fire and tenure could be on the line.

But this stallion of a professor has claimed me.

And he won't take no for an answer.

Despite the risks of getting caught...

Despite the risks of broken hearts...

I will be his.

[Start reading Damaged Professor NOW!](#)

Sneak Peek - Chapter One

## Abby

[Start reading Damaged Professor NOW!](#)

The Howling Monkey is one of those bars that looks like it's been sitting around the city forever. Mostly because it has. This entire stretch of the city has nothing but historical buildings, made with old, red brick and dark wood. It's the kind of thing that's always made me feel at home here.

The music though—that's another story.

But today isn't really for me.

Today is for Nichole.

My gaze sweeps through the dimly lit bar, trying to find her.

The Howling Monkey is quite big for the standards of this city. There might not be any stage for live music, but it's been run by the same family for something like twenty years, and that means people who are going to Princeton tend to spend the majority of their weekends out here.

I take a moment to move around the front bar after getting myself a drink. I check over by the pool table. There's a crowd of drunk college students trying to figure out what to do with the balls, but no Nichole.

I take another sip from my drink and head across the other side of the bar, looking everyone over as I go. It pays off— There she is, over by the jukebox!

“Nichole!” I make my way through the crowded bar. “I was looking for you!”

“Sorry, sorry. My playlist ended. I'm thinking about putting just enough in the machine to last the whole time we're here. I don't want to keep coming over here,” says Nichole.

“Please tell me that you're not going to fill it up with more of those stupid country songs?”

“Okay, first off, it's my birthday. That means I can put on whatever I want, whether you think it's stupid or not.” Nichole holds up the card, clutched between two fingers. “Second of all, I like that country shit.”

“You're not made for Nashville. No one here—” I gesture to the rest of the bar. “Wants to hear that Nashville twang.” I wave around the bar again, trying to get her to pay attention to the people around us.

“I'm sorry, is it your birthday?” Nichole asks, a note of teasing in her words.

“No.” I roll my eyes, exasperated. But come on, are you really going to make that guy—” I point my finger towards the



first guy I see. “Listen to Tim McGraw?”

The guy in question looks nothing like a country fan. He’s probably a good fifteen—maybe more—years older than me. His hair is slicked back, and he’s wearing a white button down. As he moves, I spot a bright red tie looped around his neck, loosened only by a single tug. There’s a black jacket draped over the chair next to him. He’s handsome and—different, not quite fitting this place.

Nichole’s lower lip pushes out. “Abby, you promised that you weren’t going to complain this time. You did miss the party last year, remember?”

She’s right.

I’ve known Nichole since our first year of high school and even though we don’t have many interests in common, something about our friendship has always been strong as iron. My absence these last four years has not changed that. But I did miss out on a lot.

“Fine,” I tell her, holding up my hands. “Fine, you’re right. Put on whatever you want.”

“Thank you,” says Nichole, chipper. She turns and swipes her card through the machine, punching in another twenty minutes worth of music. “Besides, the whole point of coming back was to move on, right?”

“I’ve moved on,” I answer too fast. My ears already ache from the lousy beat. I lean my back on the wall, exhausted already. She moves to the rhythm, the bright pink, feather boa

around her neck, and her long brown hair up in a high ponytail making her look like a wannabe pop star.

“Sitting around your house alone, reading and drinking, is not exactly progress. Enjoy the music. Dance. And look around you, there are plenty— “

“Today is about you.” I don’t want to have that conversation again, not yet. “I promised you a fun night out and that’s what we are going to have, like the old times.”

Nichole looks over my shoulder for a brief moment and then gives me the guiltiest look.

I frown. “What?”

“So, there’s this super cute guy who wants to buy me a drink, and I told him that I would go over and say hi when I was done with the music,” admits Nichole, in a rush. “I just thought that I would give you a heads up.”

My stomach drops. “You’re ditching me?”

“No, no, I’m not ditching you! I’m just going to have a drink.” Nichole grabs my wrist with one hand and uses the other to push my face to the left. “Look. Isn’t he cute?”

Not really. The guy appears to be an upperclassman, he’s wearing a varsity jacket, and is built like a quarterback, which is fine. It is! That’s just not the sort of guy that I’ve ever gone for. Granted, my dating pool experience has been incredibly small. It’s got a grand tally of one. So maybe I’ve just got super specific taste.

Either way, I say, “So, you’re ditching me.”

“Only for a little bit. And as I was saying, there are tons of guys here—”

“I’m not looking for someone to hook up with,” I say, cutting her off firmly. “You know that.”

Nichole drops her hand down onto my shoulder. “So don’t hook up. Go have a drink with someone and, I don’t know, talk about Europe!”

Before I can protest anymore, Nichole leans forward, plants a kiss on my cheek, and then takes off towards the jock who is waiting for her. I’m happy that she found something to do tonight. It is her birthday, after all. It just sucks that she’s basically throwing me to the wolves.

On the one hand, I don’t want to talk with anyone else right now. But on the other, I don’t want to just stand here by the jukebox and look like an idiot. So I toss back the rest of my drink and head over to the counter, waving the bartender over for a refill.

While I wait for the drink to be mixed, I look over at the crowd. It seems that there are only college students in here, which makes sense. But since I want to avoid all of the grabbing hands, I decide to head over to the older guy that I pointed out earlier. He looks over the moment that I slide on the stool.

“Well, I suppose I can’t offer to buy you a drink,” he tells me. “There goes my attempt at a pickup line.”

I tilt the glass at him. “Were you really going to open with that?”

“No,” he says, dryly. “I try not to steal from the college kids. They might not understand the concept of plagiarizing, but I can’t promote it.”

The joke catches me off guard, knocking a laugh out of me. I’m on my second drink at this point, not anywhere near drunk, but after guzzling my first, there’s warmth starting to spread under my skin.

“I’m not in college yet,” I tell him. “I guess that means I can’t use it either.”

“You don’t look that young.” His eyes examine my face.

“I’m not. I’m twenty-four. I guess I’m just a late bloomer,” I tell him, with a shrug. The truth is, I’ve been mourning. I guess that sums it up pretty well. Since I lost James, the whole world has rushed past me while I just stand there. Four years ago, I had everything I could ever dream of. I had found the love of my life and we were traveling around the world, planning to return home and start a new chapter in our life together. College was just the beginning. But he was gone before... He was gone and I was left behind. Literally. It took a long time before I even considered coming back here, yet here I am, starting over. I’m glad for my choice but it does make for awkward conversations.

“Nothing wrong with a late bloomer,” the man says. He holds out his hand. “I’m Dylan.”

“Abby.” I give him a shake in return, pleased with the manners. “You don’t seem like the kind of guy to come out here very often.”

He nods. “I was going to meet my brother for a drink, but he’s—” Dylan glances at his watch. “Forty minutes late and not picking up the phone, so I’m going to assume that he fell asleep.”

I wince. “Ouch.”

“It’s fine. He’s got a lot going on. And if he was here, I wouldn’t be able to sit with you,” says Dylan. He turns a little bit more towards me. The guy is extremely good looking, even though he’s older than me.

I smile, unsure of what to say next. Flirting is not on my skills list. James was my high school sweetheart. We had been together since we were fifteen and he proposed when we were nineteen. My thumb goes to my ring finger, caressing the missing ring.

I may be smiling but that familiar restlessness is washing over me. James always pops into my mind when I meet someone new, the comparison pretty much ending the conversation immediately.

My fiancé was amazing. He was not much taller than me, if at all, and had long blonde hair and light blue eyes. Right now, James would have been the same age as the guy that Nichole is talking to.

Dylan is the exact opposite. He has a great smile, a deep voice, and sexy, dark brown eyes. He's taller than me—I have to look up to him even though we're both sitting—and his muscles tense under his shirt.

I think that's what makes it easier for me to fall into a back-and-forth conversation with him. We don't talk about anything specific. It's the same kind of bar talk that you would expect out of two people that have already had a few drinks—but something about it just makes me happy.

“Finally,” he says as a new song starts playing. Nichole's playlist has come to an end.

I look at my empty glass, seriously considering getting another drink. He moves closer, his hand covering mine. It burns under his touch, but I don't move away.

“I think I'll get another drink,” I whisper. I need that warm relaxation now more than any other time. “Not here,” he says, interrupting my thoughts. “I'm going to get out of here when I finish this beer.”

He tilts the bottle towards me. “Do you want to take off with me?”

The question catches me completely off guard, my mouth popping open. Before I get a chance to gather myself and respond, warm hands press against my bare shoulders.

“Hang on, Mister. The birthday girl has to steal this one!” Nichole chirps.

She pulls me back to the jukebox. “How did you know I needed a save?”

Nichole blinks. “I mean, I’m going to take the compliment, but I actually stole you for a totally selfish reason.” She gives me another one of those guilty smiles. “Danny is heading out to another bar with his friends, and I was going to, you know, go with them? But I didn’t want to just leave you here, so... Do you want me to call you a cab?”

I stare at her. “I knew you were going to ditch me.”

“I mean—birthday exemption?” Nichole asks, doe eyed. “Come on, don’t be mad.”

“I’m not mad.” I look over my shoulder, at where Dylan is sitting. I don’t say anything, just thinking over my options. I’ve decided to come back because I do want to move on with my life.

Maybe...

Maybe there’s more than one way that I need to move on.

“Abby?” Nichole asks.

“It’s fine. Go have fun. I think I’ve already got a ride home,” I tell her.

Nichole’s whole expression lights up, as if I’ve just told her she won a prize. “Oh, Abby! Good for you!”

“Hey, Nichole!” Danny waves from the door. “You coming?”

“I’m coming!” Nichole throws her arms around my shoulders, pulling me in for another hug and a kiss, and then hurrying off with her new friend.

I take a deep breath. If I really want to, I can just call myself a cab. But...

I look over at Dylan again, who’s almost finished his drink.

He’s handsome, and funny, and sweet.

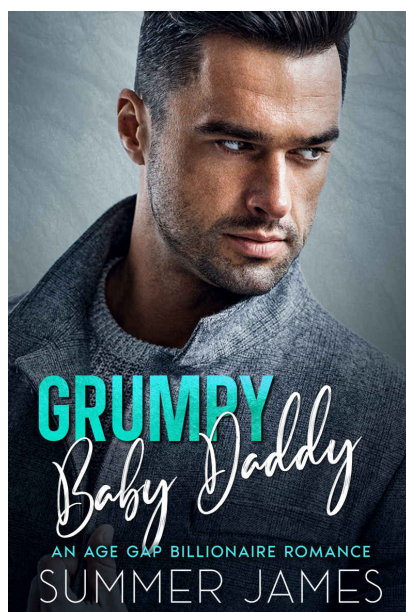
I decide, then and there, that I’m not going to let my past hold me back any longer. James would want me to move on—and I really want to go home with Dylan.

[Start reading \*Damaged Professor\* NOW!](#)

Do you like FREEBIE Romance books?

Sign up for my newsletter and get *Grumpy Baby Daddy* for free!





**In a HOT hurried moment my boss took my V-card...**

**But he left me with something even more precious, a  
baby bump.**

Keeping this baby a secret will be almost impossible.

I'll be stuck with my silver fox boss all summer.

Because I'm his daughter's Nanny.

But my greatest challenge...

Keeping my *feelings* for this grumpy billionaire a secret.  
My hormones are raging since our one-night stand that left  
me pregnant.

I've been crushing hard for years.  
But now I can't contain it. I'm on fire.  
And I think Becket is too.

I **can't** jeopardize my job though.  
I know this damaged daddy and his daughter need me since  
his wife died.

I need to tell Becket that his daughter is going to be a sister  
soon.

But disrupting the peace between them could be disastrous.  
And leave me an unemployed single mom.

So my true greatest challenge...  
Telling this fragile little family that I want to be a part of it.

[Sign Up Now!](#)

Want to see the rest of my books?

[Go Here!](#)

