



ONE *Bossy*
DARE

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NICOLE SNOW

ONE BOSSY DARE

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

NICOLE SNOW

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ABOUT THE BOOK

It was one little dare with razor-sharp teeth—*work for him*.
Yes, he's a fire-breathing grump and gazillionaire bachelor.
Yes, I just gave him an ego check he'll never forget.
Yes, he's still offering me the job dreams are made of.

But Cole Lancaster is the stuff of bossy nightmares.
Too handsome for real life. Big Coffee kingpin. Guarded papa bear.
His precious daughter is the only reason he ever stops grumping for five seconds.
I'm sure I can deal with his scowls and cutting glances for one huge payday.

Only, sometimes your best assumptions are dead wrong.
Like the business trip to paradise that shows me a different Cole.
A man with a beating heart and a billion-dollar smile.
A master of soul-stealing kisses.
A mess of secrets that leave me reeling.

I wish my taste in men didn't match my coffee.
Strong, steamy, and unspeakably complicated.
When I took the job, I didn't know the risks.
What if one crazy dare means falling in love?

SHUT THE CUP UP (ELIZA)



Some people imagine their life has a soundtrack.

A background score of meaningful songs to pulse and highlight and push along every drama that touches their lives.

Not me. My life has always had a *smell* trailing it like sweet perfume, and I wouldn't trade it for the world.

I never get down to business until I'm adrift in coffee-scented heaven.

"Thanks for letting me in early, Wayne. It's easier to focus before you're officially open." I brush a thick strand of dark hair out of my eye.

"Anytime, Eliza. I'm a sucker for good company." Wayne slides a steaming cup of Wired Cup's latest brew across the counter, picks up a dish towel, and swipes it across the gleaming espresso machine.

It's a comforting, familiar routine I've watched a hundred times.

Bringing the cup to my mouth, I slowly take a sip. This isn't just chasing a caffeine high. Ever since I had my grandmother's stovetop insta-coffee, this is my waking ritual.

"Dark roast." I take another small sip, smacking my lips. "...with notes of cacao?"

"Close! It's a Sumatran roast," he tells me, scratching his thick beard.

"Heated at one eighty?"

He gives me a derisive look. *Obviously, lady, what kind of newbie punk do you think I am?* He doesn't even have to say it for me to hear him thinking out loud.

When it comes to coffee, it takes one to know one.

I narrow my eyes at him anyway.

“Oh, you’re serious? Yes, all our drinks in this class are heated at one eighty. Company policy.”

“That’s what I thought. This is just...well, better than the usual. I can taste the layers. It’s pretty decent—” I pause, giving him an exaggerated shrug. “For a chain, anyway.”

Wayne throws his head back and barks a laugh.

“Coffee snob. I knew I kept you around for some reason.”

I smile. “I’m not. You know how open-minded I am. Good brews are like fingerprints—they give a time, a place, a memory. You never know where you’ll find yourself until that next cup. Magic.”

“Shit, lady, don’t put me on a pedestal. I’m no coffee wizard, just a guy making a living.” He starts organizing tall bottles of flavored syrups on the back counter.

When Wayne looks back at me, there’s a grimace on his face.

“It’s like the evening crew never even works,” he mutters. “If you want magic, you won’t find it in this crapsack. Maybe try Sweeter Grind. Their coffee slaps and I hear those big-ass cinnamon rolls they’ve got are to die for.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Dude. You’re not supposed to be pimping the competition.”

“Eh, they don’t pay me enough not to. But listen, I can’t talk as much as I’d like today. I have this meeting soon with management. I’m probably gonna get a second asshole ripped in my skin if I don’t get this place in shipshape. Evening crew *always* makes us look bad.”

I nod politely and take another long pull from my perfectly decent brew.

I understand.

What you’re seeing is what Wired Cup has done best for decades—good, easy, reliable coffee without any frills or hipster wackiness. It’s entrenched as the second strongest coffee chain in Seattle for a reason.

The people are a lot like the coffee, too.

Wayne, for instance. He’s a good barista—always remembers my coffee order and graciously gives me this quiet space to think and breathe and experiment—but he takes his job seriously. He’s almost like a battle-hardened soldier who’s numb to the daily grind.

I’d better leave him be. Grabbing the hot cup with one hand and my purse with the other, I slink over to a table against the wall where I’ll be out of the way.

My handbag swings off my elbow, big enough to command its own zip code, banging my hip with every step. As soon as I sit, I let it tumble to the floor and pull out a notebook and pen, along with a small mason jar that holds the goods.

I know.

It isn't polite to bring other drinks into a place like this—not even beverages I made.

Good thing Wayne doesn't care.

And Wired Cup is just corporate enough not to make any moral muscles twitch.

I discreetly open the mason jar holding my latest blend for research and take a long, thoughtful sip of the dark, potent liquid inside.

Hello, flavor town.

Population: me.

I'm legit proud of how my fire-roasted coffee tastes smoother than velvet, and it's about a hundred times stronger than the Wired Cup offering. Smoky, loud, and intense enough to make my toes scrunch up in my shoes.

God.

I'm either way too addicted to playing coffee chemist or in desperate need of getting laid.

My eyes fall to the Wired Cup brew again. Their new featured flavor is definitely good, for a chain. But there's still something too generic about it.

I pull out a water bottle to clear my palate and then sip from the paper cup for comparison.

Yep. Hints of cacao, faint as a whisper.

That's the big difference between this new "featured flavor" and their usual drip. The cacao is nice and smooth for a dark roast, playing at being mocha-lite. But you'd better believe the average person still needs two cups of this to get through a morning. I'm sure I'd need four.

It gives me an idea, though...

S'mores coffee.

If I combined my latest creation with just the right sweetness, it could actually work.

I've been working on this campfire brew for months, ever since a guy in a homeless camp introduced me to the original version. It gives the beans a unique buzz no chain like Wired Cup could ever replicate if they ever even worked up the appetite for risk.

What if a little cacao is the missing ingredient I need to make this a mouth-gasm?

I smile. A few cacao beans added to the campfire blend, plus caramelized sugar and vanilla. Pair it with a cookie from a Belgian chocolatier to stand in for a graham cracker.

Hell. Yes.

My muse is on *fire* today. Even if the coffee doesn't work—and let's face it, some of my concoctions are pretty out-there—it won't be hard to find tasters in this town with Belgian cookies attached.

I take a hefty swig from the mason jar, trying not to moan.

So good.

It tastes like a summer camping trip with old-school coffee brewed by a couple of hot lumberjacks in flannel. As a s'mores coffee, it could be devastatingly awesome.

I just need to work on the name.

S'mor'offee?

Meh, it's a work in progress.

But it *is* a summer morning. A peaceful one.

I don't have any deadlines staring me in the face, so I'm not desperate for caffeine to be functional. And the Wired Cup brew is still warm. I go to the condiment bar, drop in sugar and cream, and sit down to savor the warm coffee with a few add-ins to change the taste.

It's not Eliza Angelo campfire good, but it's nice enough.

I start jotting down notes in my worn black leather journal that holds the last three years of my coffee recipes. Someday, my pretties will live for a bigger audience than yours truly and a gaggle of tasters.

On virtual assistant pay, it'll be a hot minute before I can fund my own shop.

But when I do, I'll have my drinks and baked goods paired up and ready to go.

"God, Dad. It's so early and I'm already bored." A new, squeaky voice drifts through the cafe. It sounds too much like *Gossip Girl* to be Wayne.

"Destiny, sit," a man replies gruffly.

I look up from my notebook. The whole vibe in the store has shifted.

Now there's a tension so thick it could curdle the air. A whole pack of suits are standing in front of Wayne's counter, clustered together like wolves.

What the hell?

Oh, he *did* mention a meeting with management and his morning helpers aren't here yet, which is a little strange. But I sort of imagined the usual middle-aged, soccer-mom-type manager from the franchise.

Not pure Wall Street. Though I wonder about the kid I heard and why's she tagging along with this school of corporate sharks?

I quickly scan the room.

A teenage girl in a black dress wanders through the tables, empty except for mine. She flops down in a seat at the table across from me with a book—probably because the other chairs are still upside down on their tables. The place isn't technically open yet.

Interesting.

The gaggle of execs form a neat line in front of the counter. They stare down at everything like they're after world domination rather than cornering coffee markets.

My thriller brain screams mafia shakedown or CIA sting.

Wayne slides a cup across the counter with a forced smile I've never seen on his face.

A tall man with sandy-brown hair seems like the leader of the pack.

He reaches for the drink, flanked by a man on one side and a woman on the other. They both step away like it's taboo to share the same breathing space with the kingpin.

Here we go. It's Godfather time. *I'm gonna make you an offer you can't refuse...*

His navy-blue jacket strains with packed muscle as he lifts the cup. For the briefest second, his eyes catch mine.

Oof.

Air stalls in my lungs.

I melt into my chair.

Forget the old, saggy middle-manager type who could stand to lose fifty pounds. This guy is younger and infinitely better looking than Marlon Brando, even if his gaze could challenge an actual mafia don.

Sculpted face. Aquiline nose. Eyes stolen from the crisp blue sky.

They hide whatever he's really thinking about the weird girl ducking down in the corner, startled and desperately trying not to blush.

I mean, he's *not* my type—do I have a type?

He's a human bulldozer stuffed into an expensive suit.

A Franken-hottie machine who looks like he was brought to life by some

mad scientist with lofty dreams of crafting the perfect destroyer of ladybits.

For a second, I wish *I* was that dark-blue jacket hugging the contours of those wound, chorded muscles. But only for a second.

That scowl he's wearing could scare the paint off the walls.

He's still giving the whole store the evil eye as his mouth disappears behind the cup in one brutally long sip ending in a displeased groan.

And his manners aren't any kinder a second later when he yanks the plastic lid off the cup, points at the brew, and says, "You call this a featured roast?"

Oh, God.

My heart stalls.

He sounds like a flipping prosecutor charging Wayne with running over a baby. I'm instantly angry and worried for my friend.

He'll probably have a horsehead in his bed tonight thanks to this asshole.

Not fair.

The teenager across from me lowers her book, meets my eyes, and bites her bottom lip to keep from—laughing? Wincing? I'm not sure.

The pained grin she tries to hide shows her dimples.

"Don't worry. He's in a good mood today," she whispers.

Holy hell.

If this is a good mood, what's he like with a bad one?

He's rocking the hot villain vibe, at least, but other than that, all I get from him is a modern prick playing at being Ozymandias.

"Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

My friend and former roomie, Dakota, would be laughing her little poet head off. I just wish I had coffee strong enough to resurrect Percy Shelley and put this guy in his place.

Godfather isn't the right description with the crap falling out of his mouth. *Grumpfather* feels more accurate.

I'm surprised he bothers tasting the coffee again.

His posse of suits stare in absolute awe—or is it terror? A couple young-looking intern types behind him shift their weight nervously.

Ugh.

There goes my peaceful morning.

I glance at my notebook again, teething my bottom lip and trying like hell to mind my own business.

I should just finish picking apart this coffee and slip out the back door, leaving Wayne to his fate. He's a proud guy and we're coffee shop besties, but not close friends. He wouldn't want me fighting his battles like an overprotective sister.

At least he's holding his ground against Crankyface. He has the patience of a monk, really, hidden behind this subtle, eerily calm smile that just looks *tired* more than anything else. He clears his throat, waiting for the inevitable death by insult.

Grumpfather sighs and pounds the cup back on the counter. "It's passable. Barely. It's just not what we're looking for going forward. It's remarkably ordinary at best."

I swallow hard, averting my eyes when Wayne glances over.

It's basically impossible to concentrate on these notes when his boss sounds as outrageous as he looks.

Also, I'm no fan of rudeness, but this guy is going the extra mile to piss me off.

It's a chain shop. What does he expect? A handcrafted slow brew pulled from a small batch of hand-roasted beans?

"Ordinary, my ass," I whisper under my breath, rolling my eyes.

I forget that the girl is still in earshot until I hear her muffled snicker.

"Well, yeah. You're right, Mr. Lancaster, but—" Wayne pauses. "I can do better. I'm excited for the new drinks, wherever you're taking us."

His delivery is so deliciously numb I try not to laugh.

Come to think of it, Wired Cup is where I got my first cup of coffee when I first moved to Seattle. Wayne made it. Coffee shops have more staff turnovers than burger joints sometimes, but Wayne has been here every day for years slinging coffee with a friendly joke or a kind ear, rain or shine or—well, more rain because this is Seattle.

If there was ever a reliable barista grunt, it's him.

He does *not* deserve what he's getting.

Just who the hell does this jackass think he is? By the looks of it, he sits in some office and stares at a screen all day. He wouldn't know the first thing about making good coffee if it splashed him in his stupidly handsome, growly, grump-face.

He grabs the cup again and sniffs it before passing it to the woman beside him. "Katelyn, have R & D dig up their files on this drink. I want to see what else they were doing in development, if they ever pinged on anything to spice

it up.”

Oh, lovely.

So he’s one of *those* guys. All corporate paperwork and prone to getting pissy when reality won’t conform to models on a screen.

Or maybe he’s just some district manager douchebag.

I’ve known plenty in my odd jobs over the years. I’ve *dated* them.

They think they poop diamonds, and that gives them the right to order around the underlings.

It makes me a little sick. It also reminds me why I’ll never take a job answering to any sanctimonious jerkwad ever again. They’re too delusional for life.

In the grand scheme of things, what’s a district manager of a second-rate coffee company?

He can’t hear me thinking out loud, though.

He just slurps the coffee again and says, “Goddammit. If our summer depends on *this*, the Mermaid will eat us alive.”

No joke. The big green mermaid is an international chain.

Wired Cup still owns its slice of the West Coast coffee pie, mostly because the Pacific Northwest doesn’t worship international chains.

“For the record, I followed the exact recipe,” Wayne says, showing some grit.

I smile across the space at him.

That’s the style, buddy. Throw it right back.

“Did you?” Grumpfather frowns.

“Like I said, I can do better,” Wayne starts. “If you want me to throw together a new one with the customizations we like in the shop, I’ll just—”

“To hell with your customizations.” Asshat doesn’t even let him finish. “You’re one barista in one store in Seattle. The Sumatra roast itself is the backbone, and you can’t improve on boring, no matter how well you craft drinks. This bean has already been bulk shipped as far as Boise. I doubt it would taste much better anywhere else. Shit is still shit.”

Yikes! The coffee isn’t that bad.

Squeaky teenager makes a sad hissing sound and shakes her head, flipping her long dirty-blond hair over her face to hide. She drops her book on the table and pulls a phone from her stylish pink purse.

I take that as a cue to grab my own bag and stand.

We’re done here.

There's no way I can focus with this drama flying around, but before I head out, I march up to Coffee Lucifer himself.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" I wait until blue-eyed death sees me. "What the hell is your problem?"

Wayne's jaw drops.

I smile at him. *Don't worry, buddy. I've got your back.*

Grumpfather cocks his head, staring down at me like he wishes I'd drop through the floor.

"Depends. Who the hell's asking?"

I snort. "I'd like to ask you the same question. I'm just wondering what kind of rich ass-clown gets off on starting his mornings by verbally torturing a barista?"

"The kind who owns the place," he bites off.

"Oh. Right, right, right." I laugh harshly. This guy thinks he's something else, doesn't he? Talk about exaggerating your title.

Like the owner of the entire Wired Cup franchise—a multi-billion-dollar corporation—shows up in random stores just to grump at people making minimum wage plus tips.

No way.

I'm sure Mr. CEO has flawlessly pressed espresso served on silver platters, all while lying poolside at some exotic villa, somewhere far, far away from here.

"Are you finished? You don't have to self-insert into business that's not yours," he growls.

Somehow, it feels like he grows another inch, towering over me higher with every snappy remark.

"And you don't have to be a huge jackoff to this barista. The coffee's *fine*. It always is when Wayne's at the helm. He's easily the best guy here," I say matter-of-factly.

He stares through me.

"I have nothing to prove to you—whoever the hell you are," he mutters.

I hold up my paper cup.

"Look. I just had a cup of the same new drink you did. The coffee's fine. There's nothing wrong with it. For a big chain, it's pretty dang good. Now, I'm sorry the coffee isn't up to your high and mighty tastes, but don't those come from *your* recipes?"

His glare hardens, so venomous I have to clear my throat to keep

breathing.

“All I’m saying is, you don’t have to scapegoat. Why take it out on the person grinding away to sell your product while he deals with rude customers and scalding hot liquid all day?”

Grumpfather is so not impressed with my feedback.

His eyes never flinch.

The fact that the man could win a staring contest with an owl hints that I should probably shut up and go.

Guess there’s just no reasoning with some people.

Too bad I’m not done.

“Also, I kinda doubt you’d know a good cup of coffee if the beans pelted you in the face.” I fold my arms, stretching on my toes to reach closer to his eye level.

“You already nailed it. Everything that’s wrong,” he says slowly.

“I—what? I’m not sure what you’re—”

But the way his face lights up cuts me off mid-sentence.

When the Grumpfather smirks, he looks like a god.

“‘The coffee’s fine.’ ‘There’s nothing wrong with it.’ ‘For a big chain.’” He throws my words back at me with an icy calmness that sends shivers up my back before he continues. “Very astute observations for someone with no filter. Sales are slumping with the younger crowd. ‘The coffee’s fine’ won’t cut it in a few more years. Nobody under thirty wants to be caught dead with a drink from a big chain in Seattle and Portland. They’re I-G-ing cozy little shops.”

“I-G-ing?” I repeat.

The teenager behind him laughs. “He means Instagramming, but it’s stupid, right? No one in their twenties Instagrams much anymore.”

“Dess, enough,” he snaps.

“Wow. I apologize, mister. Looks like I had you all wrong,” I say softly, my blood heating.

He gives me a questioning look.

“I thought you were just a suit having a bad morning. But you don’t stop at chewing out Wayne. You just have to yell at a kid because she’s right, huh? Oh, and by the way, I’m under thirty and I biked across town just for my big chain featured drip this morning. You’re welcome.”

He flashes the girl an annoyed look. “Everyone’s on Instagram. The metrics don’t lie. If our sales are ever improving, the product has to lead the

way.”

My turn. “While you’re stuck on improvements, can we talk about your attitude?”

His lips part, and he stares at me, speechless.

Burn.

“Usually, my 'attitude' saves me from taking hideous advice from strangers who feel a burning need to interject themselves into private business.” He scoffs. “Just this once, though, I’ll give you a chance to enlighten me. Where does everyone hang out online?”

“TikTok,” the girl—Dess—and I say at the same time.

Grumpfather glares at me.

In one second, he’s gone from angry demigod to warrior. He turns his head and glances at Wayne before looking back at me.

“The clock app? Why am I not surprised you share a fifteen-year-old’s taste in social media?” He shakes his head.

I roll my eyes right out of my head.

“Someone has to. Just like somebody needs to give you an attitude check. It sounds like everybody else lets you go stomping, snarling at problems. And I haven’t heard a single solution since you started your spiel.”

Uh-oh.

He stares Wayne down again, his nostrils flaring. “I hope she’s not an employee, and if she isn’t—why is she here? This store was supposed to be closed for our meeting.”

Wayne turns beet-red and hangs his head.

“I, uh...may have forgotten to lock up again when I came in this morning. I meant to, of course, but once the doors are open, habit kicked in.” He scratches the back of his neck loudly. “If it helps, Eliza’s a friend. One of our best customers. I didn’t think it would hurt for her to have her coffee here. Uh, don’t fire me?” Wayne throws a nervous look around the room, tugging at the end of his gnarled beard.

Grump-zilla looks me over like he’s examining some squished animal his limo just ran over. “Hmph. Your 'friend' might be right about the attitude adjustment needed at our stores.”

Wait, what?

I didn’t say the *stores* needed an attitude adjustment.

I said *he* did, but now might not be the best time to point that out.

Because Wayne? He looks like a hardboiled egg dyed pink. And ruining

his entire week isn't what I'm after. I wanted to *help* him—not get him fired.

“—there needs to be more respect for the rules, for starters,” the Grumpfather says when my ears ping back on the conversation.

The kid behind us mutters something, but I can't make out what.

I almost regret jumping in and hate that it's too late to bow out.

I can salvage this, though.

“Excuse me, but Wayne is a gem. He's the reason this store stays open and keeps half the neighborhood coming back. He's like a coffee superhero. Don't tell me you're going to lay the hammer down on your best barista? If you want to boost business, this is the worst way to do it.”

The stuck-up suit presses his lips together. “I've met feral raccoons less frustrating than you.”

I fake a startled gasp, slapping my hand over my mouth. “Oh! Did they bite you, too? Because I have urges.”

He squints in confusion, then lets out a hefty sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You're annoying as hell.”

“Cool. You're Mr. Arrogant.”

He shakes his head slowly. “I should give you a lifetime ban from every store.”

My heart skips a beat. I don't know whether to laugh or worry or smack this Neanderthal across the face.

“Go ahead. Right after you do, I'll hop on the Tok and review your ‘perfectly fine big chain’ coffee. I'll be sure to mention why I'm banned. You want to see big numbers on social media? Just wait for *that* drama.”

His lip curls, baring a hint of polished white teeth as I inch closer, breathing in his ear.

My entire body bristles.

I want to believe it's just hot rage as I brush his shoulder—but damn him, those biceps are ripped.

“Are you fucking done yet?” he whispers back.

“No. While we're waiting for TikTok to blow up, I'll call corporate for good measure. Someone needs to tell the powers that be that some little pencil-dicked district monster goes around impersonating the owner and harassing customers and senior employees. How does that sound?”

For the girl's sake, I try to keep it down.

Apparently, it doesn't work.

A couple shaky gasps spill out of the crowd around us.

He raises one eyebrow. He's either disgustingly amused or about to shove me to the floor.

Also, he has the bluest eyes God ever made. *Annoying.*

I wish those eyes weren't attached to a throat with a tone that's condescending enough to curl my hair when he says, "When you do that, you'll talk to Katelyn Storm, my lovely assistant. She handles my incoming calls to corporate. She will tell you that pencil-dicked monster signs his papers with an instrument bigger than an oak branch. Because I'm the owner."

Eep. I swear, it's just the anger that's making me blush redder than poor Wayne.

"You can cut the crap. No way do I believe a CEO of a company this large just walks through into some downtown store. You're a bad liar."

For a moment, he stares at me. I'm just waiting for laser beams to shoot out of his eyes.

"You really don't believe me, lady?" His voice is a rumbling storm.

"Lady? Is that how you talk to your customers? I thought the northwest was more progressive."

"Huh?"

"You don't even know me," I throw back.

"Yeah, and I wish we'd never met," he whispers with a cutting glance. "You're right about why chains fail—we don't know our customer. Where are you from?"

"San Diego, originally. I came here a few years ago."

"That would explain it. Seattleites aren't so in-your-face."

I stare at him, trying to decipher what sounds like a backhanded insult.

A couple of other baristas just trailing in for the morning rush appear behind the counter. They stand around Wayne awkwardly, their eyes flicking to the corporate sharks, wondering what they've walked into.

Whatever. I don't have time to worry about them.

I need to deal with this jerk and scam. We've both got better things to do than carry on a grudge match in a coffee shop.

"So you're saying it's totally cool to harass customers? That's not the Seattle I know." My lip juts out as I hit him with my best resting bitch-face.

"When the customer decides to involve herself in corporate matters she knows nothing about—"

"Oh. Okay. Because you don't plaster your stores with signs welcoming

feedback.” I turn and gesture to one on the opposite wall. It has a smiley face with lightning bolts for eyes and says, *Share the Spark! Review us today.*

The kingpin stares like he’s trying to decide just how much he’ll have to pay some hitman to chuck me into the Puget Sound.

I’m in this far, so why stop now?

“What? No nasty comeback?” I snap. “Do you have a PhD in coffee chemistry from the U of Ego to go with your area manager role?”

“Eliza—” Wayne clears his throat loudly.

“I’m not a damn manager.” Suit cuts him off. “If you were listening, you’d know I own this chain. I halfway grew up on a coffee farm. So yes, I know more about coffee than some dramatic SoCal girl who grew up lounging around on Carbon Beach and training her mouth to choke on conflicts with strangers.”

Holy shit.

My jaw drops before I reel it in and set my mouth so tight my teeth hurt.

He didn’t.

But he did.

He also made one big fat mistake that’s going to cost him dearly.

“Eliza—” Wayne warns with a choppy wave.

I put up a hand to quiet him. It’s all right. I’ve got this.

Wayne doesn’t need to fight my battles with this rattlesnake of a man who shouldn’t even be in charge of dusting the place.

“Okay, *chain owner*, if that’s truly what you are,” I say slowly. “I get it. No need to rub it in. You were so busy mastering coffee that you didn’t learn geography, right? Because San Diego is over a hundred and twenty miles from Carbon Beach, genius.”

A collective gasp fills the room, starting with entourage and spreading behind the counter.

One of the young girls on Wayne’s crew bolts, covering her mouth to hold in terrified laughs before she flies out the back exit.

The shop goes dead silent.

All except for the teenager in the corner letting out slow, strained laughter through her fingers.

“Eliza!” Wayne’s eyes are bulging now. His barrel of a chest rises and falls in shallow breaths behind his apron.

Oops. I’ve crossed the line where I’m doing more harm than good.

The Grumpfather clears his throat like he’s been chewing broken glass,

drawing my attention back to him.

“Okay, okay.” I hold my hands up defensively. “That came out a little harsh. I’ve submitted my feedback, so if you don’t mind I’ll just—”

“You’re going to rue *ever* having this conversation with me, I think, when you finally learn the truth,” he rumbles, his brows pulled low like storm clouds.

Hey, at least I tried.

I let out a hissing sigh.

“You want the truth?” I ask quietly. “I’m guessing not, but apparently everyone who works here is way too scared to say it. I don’t have anything to lose except Wired Cup access for life. So, here it is—you, sir, could sink in a pool of perfectly pressed dark roast and not know you were drowning in good coffee. This—” I hold up the cup again. “This serves its purpose, and I know my coffee—”

“And what do you think its purpose is?” he clips.

“It makes Wired Cup what it’s supposed to be.”

He tosses his head impatiently, as if to say, *spit it the fuck out*.

“Familiar. Comfortable. Easy,” I say. “It’s a decent brew of a decent bean that’s easily accessible to busy and decent middle-class people.”

He exhales sharply. “Forgive me if I don’t find a college kid calling my family’s legacy ‘decent’ until the word loses its meaning high praise.”

I don’t bother telling him to drop the act again. That ship has sailed.

“I’m not a college kid.”

“And I, apparently, am not the owner of this business.”

“Eliza...” Wayne sounds defeated, like a man begging for his life after he’s already been crushed up in a wreck.

Ouch. Now I remember why we’re doing this as I look at him.

He gives me a miserable look and says, “Sorry. I should have spoken up sooner. Allow me to introduce you to Mr. Cole Lancaster, the owner of Wired Cup Incorporated—and our CEO.”

Every eye in the room sticks to me.

I wonder if they can hear the floor crumbling under me.

“CEO? *Him?*” I hiss, pursing my lips.

Wayne nods heavily.

“Chief Executive Officer,” Lancaster says. Like I don’t know what it stands for.

My eyes follow his voice and land on his atrociously grumpy face again.

Only, this time, he holds out a business card with the Wired Cup logo on it—an elegant-looking coffee cup plugged into an outlet.

I don't take it. I just read.

Underneath it, plain as day, are the words COLE LANCASTER—CEO.

Before he even speaks, I realize with some horror why I've heard the name Lancaster before. When you're so obsessed with coffee you've read the Wikipedia entry for every major brand, certain names stick. The Lancasters are basically caffeinated royalty.

I'm sure he can hear my gulp.

"If you're any bit the expert you claim to be, I trust you've heard of us. My father was the CEO before me. My family founded this company long before it was ever called Wired Cup."

The woman who stands beside him covers her face with one hand. I can't tell if she's trying to hide mortified laughter or disappear.

It doesn't work. All the other suits burst into laughter at the way she looks.

Umm—well—crap.

Way to screw things up, I think to myself, already dreading what happens if the monster in the suit retaliates by taking it out on Wayne.

Poor Wayne has a sick mother, too. He's told me about her a dozen times. He *needs* this job to take care of her.

Yeah, I think I hate myself.

The adrenaline rush from telling this jerk off is infinitely more effective than anything coffee has ever done for me. But knowing I've made things worse for someone else turns it into a sickly jitter.

I really, really hope Wayne doesn't get fired over my outburst.

I stare at his judge, jury, and executioner. Lancaster's clenched jaw and the crease in his forehead only seem to make his features stronger, more defined.

Does that mean more vengeful, too?

And his body—his wall of *angry* muscle—tenses the way I imagine men must when they're stepping onto a battlefield.

Gah, I'm so stupid.

I can barely face this guy now that the consequences are too real.

I don't know how I can say anything else, but I gather the courage. Even as my face burns ghost pepper hot.

"I should, um—I should get out of here." My voice is so weak. "Please

don't go firing anyone, Mr. Lancaster. This was all me. Heck, your staff deserves a huge raise for making Wired Cup what it is."

And certainly for dealing with you, I don't say.

The suits are still either laughing or staring in abject horror.

Lancaster whips around, throwing an acid glance over his shoulder. "Enough. She said she was leaving. Party's over."

They sober up fast.

He made them quit laughing. But why?

That's almost a decent thing to do, getting a handle on a social situation gone pure train wreck. Nothing about this man seems decent, and why should he be decent to me? I just ambushed him at his business and accused him of lying.

Confusion swirling, I start moving.

"I hope there will be no unhinged rants about Wired Cup online later today?" Lancaster calls after me.

God.

Why haven't I left already?

It's the only way to end this conversation and maybe mitigate the carnage. I've made a big enough fool of myself already.

What would I even say online?

I'm about to shake my head when I realize this is my chance. I stop, slowly facing him again as I straighten my back and square my shoulders.

"We'll see. As long as no one's fired...no rant."

"You're negotiating, now?" The way he chuckles drips disgust. "You have no power here, Mystery Mouth."

"Yeah, well, that's the deal. Keep your house clean and so will I," I say, biting my cheek so I don't sass him harder.

He nods. "Any chance I could convince you to stay the hell out of my stores while I'm at it?"

I shrug. My oversized purse bangs my hip.

"I drink at least six cups of coffee a day. When I'm not home to make myself more, I pop into whatever café is closest. I'm not sure I'll promise to never visit another Wired Cup again—not unless you ban me."

"Perish the thought, Miss Mouth. I'll gladly keep taking your money."

Apparently, he can play the stupid nickname game too, I guess.

I can't decide why that riles me up so much as I nod briskly and head for the door.

“Have a good day,” he calls as I lunge outside. I swear, he sounds almost triumphant.

At least a cool breeze soothes my searing skin.

God, Eliza.

How stupid can you be?

Stupid enough to almost get Wayne fired.

But I held back just enough to stop that. *I think.*

I hope I did, or he’ll definitely be hearing from me again by viral video on clock app.

If it didn’t mean Wayne’s livelihood on the chopping block, I almost wish he’d give me a good reason to go nuclear on TikTok.

Coffee royalty or not, Prince Lancaster needs a class in manners.

BADGER BREW (COLE)

What the ever-living fuck just happened?

I survey the room, wondering if Miss Insanity will take the notion to come back to get the last word. My team stands around in a haze, trying to hide their grins and smart-assed whispers.

Destiny stares at me like the adorable pain in the ass she is, still perched in her chair, clasping her phone with both hands. When our eyes meet, she doesn't even try to stop laughing.

"Holy crap, Dad. You got *told*."

"Were you livestreaming?" I snap, hoping like hell I'm not about to be internet famous.

"Unfortunately, no."

"Unfortunately," I echo, raising my brows.

My daughter gives me a sheepish smile and then returns to her screen gazing.

"Mr. Lancaster...I'm majorly sorry about that."

I turn, glancing over the counter.

The barista with a beard thicker than the hipster frames sliding down his nose has his hands raised in surrender. I think one of them might be trembling.

"I'm sorry, again. She gets a tad overprotective. Eliza has coffee in her blood, man. It's easy to forget she's just another customer. If you're worried, I don't think she'll make her complaints public or anything. She's not a big social media type. She's just—"

"A total badass!" I look over to find my daughter standing with her hands

on her hips. Destiny laughs shamelessly. “She’s a honey badger. You remember that old meme? She sank her teeth in and didn’t let go. Honey badger don’t care!”

“Is there a point to this besides your own amusement?” I ask with a snort. Shit. Only fifteen years old and I’d swear she changed from a sweet little girl into this sassy creature I barely recognize overnight.

“Yeah! Dad, there must be a hundred different ways you can walk into a store, sample drinks like a sane person, and give some honest criticism without acting like a giant raging di—”

“Watch your mouth, young lady. What do you know about raging dicks, anyhow?”

She bites her lips. “Umm—nothing. Just that you’re one.”

Behind me, one of the marketing interns snickers. He shuts up the second my gaze lands on him before I shift it to my daughter.

“Consequence, Dess. Pick one.”

For a second, she looks startled before she glares at me. “Lighten up. It’s just a joke. I’m fifteen.”

“What’s your consequence, Dess? Should I decide?” I say gently, approaching her.

She looks at the phone she’s holding and back at me with a heavy sigh. “Guess I’ll be staying home tonight and reading...”

“Good call, baby girl.”

Honestly, it’s not much punishment. The girl lives, eats, and breathes books, but a night in will keep her out of any other trouble.

She scowls at me and returns to her seat.

Giving my tie a quick pull, I turn back to face the barista—Wayne, I think. “Your friend had a point, even if she delivered her feedback with the grace of a wolverine.”

“Honey badger,” Destiny coughs from the corner.

I ignore her.

“It’s my fault, Mr. Lancaster. I’ll be sure to lock up next time before any confidential business—assuming you don’t fire me today,” he adds nervously.

I hold in a laugh.

“Relax. I’m not firing anyone. It’s no one’s fault but hers that she’s a walking hand grenade. More importantly, like I said, she had a point.”

“She did?” He blinks at me.

I nod. “Our brand is reliable, unfussy fuel for every professional on the go. It’s been like that for four generations of Lancasters, even as the brand name changed. But with the way the market keeps evolving, that won’t cut it in another ten years. We need something fresh and exciting. And before anyone suggests it, no, we’re not branching into sugar-lick fruit drinks and tea lattes like half a dozen other major chains that will remain nameless.”

“Hey, is this the Badger Lady’s brew?” Destiny calls from behind me. When I glance at her, she’s holding up a mason jar of dark mystery liquid.

The barista nods.

I double-check his name tag. Wayne it is.

My eyes fall on Dess as she pulls the lid off the glass jar and sniffs.

“What are you doing?” I call.

Only, by the time I get the words out, she’s lifting it and pressing it to her lips.

Shit. Surely she’s not going to—

The way her mouth opens tells me she is.

“Destiny, don’t you—”

Too late.

She’s damn near chugging the stuff before I can say another word.

She rocks back on her heels, coughing and wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

My heart leaps up my throat.

Shit, *shit*.

She looks like she’s about to fall over. Every parent’s nightmare involving their kid and strange substances whips through my head.

Fuck.

What if it was motor oil?

Some sort of aged cognac?

A tobacco spit jar?

Why in God’s name does my daughter have to sample a strange jar left behind by a caustic stranger who gnawed my ear off? Who does that?

Apparently, the kind of kid I raise.

“Are you okay?” I move to Destiny in several huge strides. “Dess?”

I already have my hand on my phone, ready to dial 9-1-1.

When she looks up, she’s grinning. “Dad, this is crazy. Taste it. It’s like a mule kick to the mouth.”

Is that supposed to be inviting?

I frown.

“I mean, a cup of this stuff would probably keep me up the entire week of finals.” She cocks her head. “I wonder if she has more... I *want* it.”

My eyes narrow. She sounds like a junkie looking for her next fix of—what the hell was in that jar? Liquid cocaine?

“Destiny Lancaster. Didn’t we watch Snow White enough times when you were little for you to know not to eat or drink anything left behind by strange people? For all you know, she could’ve been a witch.” Psycho chick certainly had the witchy temperament.

Her drink is pungent, though. I can smell it from here.

Destiny swirls the liquid like she’s hypnotized.

“How do you feel? Should I take you to urgent care?” I ask.

“No, no. I’m fine, Dad. Really.”

“Give me your phone,” I say, already reaching out.

“What? Why? That’s not *fair!*” Her voice becomes shrill and whiny on the last word.

Someone has to put the fear of God into her—or at least a few hours without texting and Snapchat—but first I pick up the unholy grail and take a swig.

My employees stare at me like I’ve just flipped my lid.

Hell, maybe I have.

It’s stronger than a triple ristretto shot and nearly causes a coughing fit. I choke it down, slowly realizing it’s some sort of hell-coffee.

Dammit, that’s intense. And I spent five years of my life on the black sludge the US Navy calls coffee.

Once my tongue recovers from the initial shock, I’m plunged into this unexpected universe of flavors.

It’s smoky. Powerful. Toasted. Nutty.

Fucking good.

“Tastes like a campfire,” I say slowly.

“A little. It’s something, all right,” Destiny admits. It might be the first time we’ve agreed on anything for a month.

Behind me, Wayne laughs.

“Probably her latest brew. Uh, we’ve offered Eliza a job here several times. Aside from a brief stint last year where she worked a few part-time shifts, she won’t stay on. She spends most of her time experimenting with home-brewed coffee and pastries. She’s special that way. I’m not sure what

that one is. She lets me sample them a lot, but I didn't have time today."

"What does she do?" I ask, hating that this strange woman has a death grip on my attention, even with her absence.

"I don't know, actually. She's always said long shifts would cut into her brewing time."

I take another stiff drink of black heaven.

Fuck me, this is it.

This is so much like the newness I've been looking for.

It slaps me across the face.

I need to know what this is right now.

I need to study it, refine it, and if I'm lucky, package it in a Wired Cup logo. Every shop in our five-state region will want to serve this.

We've found Gen Z's drink. A bold alternative to the sugar licks masquerading as energy drinks for college kids everywhere.

My almost college-aged brat said she only needs one cup to make it through finals week—and I don't think she was exaggerating much if this stuff is as caffeinated as it tastes.

I look at my team, wondering why I pay these people to stand around and gawk at me.

"Get moving, people. Katelyn, take Destiny to the car, please."

"What? You're throwing me out just when it's getting interesting?" Dess protests. "Dad, you wouldn't even know the mule kick drink existed without me! But sure, send me away like a five-year-old while you hash out how to sell this stuff for a bajillion dollars."

I close my eyes and count to ten, tapping a hand lightly against my thigh.

"Someday, my dear, I hope you have twins and they're both just like you at this age."

"Come on, Dessy. Let's go find you a new phone case online to replace the cracked one," Katelyn Storm tells her. Nice save from my ever-reliable executive assistant. "I've got your dad's credit card."

"Well...okay!" Just like that, Destiny happily skips out the door.

Unlike me, Katelyn can speak her language.

I'm aware I have my hands full, but sometimes I think that's a flimsy excuse. The reality is I have no idea how to handle a teenage girl.

I look at Wayne. "My apologies for that scene—and the other one this morning."

He shrugs. "Hey, kids come in here every day. It's nothing. They usually

pour the cinnamon and sugar out on the tables for me to clean up whenever they're not hogging tables and taking selfies. This was entertaining."

I appreciate his bluntness. At least it was entertaining for someone.

"I'd like to give you a bonus, Wayne," I tell him.

"Bonus—for what, sir?" He stiffens, fully at attention.

"Consider it a referral fee for bringing this insane, potentially coffee-smart lady to my attention. I just need you to find her and have a conversation that's a tad more civilized than my shouting match. Can you help with that?"

Wayne laughs. "If I tell her you offered me a bonus, she'll bite. But I ain't sure she'll be happy about it."

"Make it happen." With a satisfied nod, I follow my entourage out the door.



IN THE BACK of the limo, Destiny taps on her phone, furiously moving both thumbs back and forth like she's playing an old Gameboy.

I almost hate that I gave it back to her, softie that I am.

"You'd better not be posting anything involving that monster brew. That's highly privileged corporate information now."

She looks up and rolls her eyes. They're a blue shade slightly lighter than mine.

"Dad, secret coffee isn't nearly cool enough for my people. And after wasting all this time job shadowing you for this stupid essay, I've learned a few things."

"Yeah?" I'm almost afraid to ask. "Enlighten me."

"You have no PR skills, for one. I really hope you're leaving that to someone else in marketing or there's not going to be a company for me to inherit—"

I turn my head so she doesn't see me laugh.

"Also, you should probably try brewing coffee for snotty rich guys before you freak out on baristas. That guy with the beard was almost pale—"

"Are you sure? Last I checked, you're a snotty rich guy's daughter," I throw back.

More eye-rolling. An impudent huff.

She glances out the window, trying so hard not to look like she's rattled by her old man getting under her skin.

Everyone should have a teenager in their lives.

"I try pretty hard not to act like it, you know," she finally says.

I stare. I'm not sure what I think about that.

"And Dad, I wasn't done—unless you find Badger Lady and somehow trick her into giving you her recipe, there are no patents or whatever for any monster coffee. I'm not stupid."

Isn't that the problem sometimes?

I hide a smile behind my hand as I scratch at my trimmed scruff.

It's not easy handling a smart fifteen-year-old with a whip for a tongue.

Something about the way the sun filters in through the window catches her profile, the light flitting around her like glitter. My smile disappears.

Just an illusion.

But fuck, for a second it could be Aster sitting there, staring back at me. She's only missing her mother's jade-green eyes.

When my late wife died, Destiny looked like a tall American Girl doll. Today, she looks too much like a ghost.

A walking stack of unresolved questions.

I stare at the mason jar still in my hand, watching the dark liquid swirl. Even when the sunlight hits it, this stuff is pitch-black.

Yeah, if I'd had my head in the game, I'd already have an interview set up with that headstrong, fearless face behind the witch's brew.

I wouldn't have taken her shit if I'd had my wits.

We'll blame it on the ample figure I hate that I noticed.

The curves for days.

The prettiest amber-brown eyes sparking with anger like melting caramel.

I certainly wouldn't be waiting around for some bearded gnome at one of my shops to hook me up with an interview.

Twenty minutes later, Tom, my driver, pulls up to Wired Cup Headquarters and opens the back door. Destiny climbs out first and rushes off before I can move.

He helps my executive assistant out of the car, and I follow.

Katelyn Storm glances at the mason jar I'm holding. "Want me to take that off your hands? I can drop it off in research now so they can analyze it."

"Technically, my young hothead is right. This isn't technically corporate property—*not yet*—even if it was negligently left behind by its owner in her

hit-and-run raid on my pride. I won't open a legal can of worms over some coffee. Let's track down that girl. We'll have her friend at the store bridge the communication gap."

She stares at me blankly. "You're serious, Mr. Lancaster? I thought you took care of making the connection? Isn't that why you sent me outside with Destiny?"

I wish. I was too damn riled up by that pixie and her mouth to handle it properly.

If there's one thing I despise, it's turning into a mess in front of my daughter.

How the hell did I let some twenty-something brunette chick get to me, anyhow?

"The barista said he'd put us in touch," I tell her. "Why complicate anything?"

Kate grins at me. She's about ten years my senior, but she's been with this company and my family for so long, she knows me better than I know myself at times.

"Miss Opinion really left an impression on you, huh?"

I'm not taking her bait.

I toss her an ice-cold stare.

She clears her throat. "So, if I manage to track down your new frenemy, what's the chance she's worth the trouble?"

What the hell does she mean?

"I'm not passing up this coffee. If that little fire-breather wants to sell me something I can patent or hash out a new product in our lab, she's worth a few smartass remarks." I hold the jar up and shake the remaining liquid inside.

"Yeah? And what if she brings that attitude into the office?"

I frown. "It can't be worse than anything I've dealt with before. Feisty is practically the only kind of young woman I deal with."

She gives me a knowing smile. "But this isn't a teenage girl. She's a grown woman. You won't just be able to yank her iPhone away if she mouths off."

"Yeah? Watch me." I enjoy the startled look she flings back. Let her wonder whether or not I'm joking. "Speaking of teenagers, I hope you can keep Destiny out of trouble this afternoon?"

"Trouble? She's only a rebel punk for you." Katelyn laughs. "Isn't she

still a four point oh brainiac? You've done a fine job with her, all things considered. I was always shocked you didn't crack and bring in more nannies to help."

"Mostly because no nanny could ever handle her," I lie, hating the real reason. "Don't think I wasn't tempted."

My assistant holds up a hand and giggles softly.

"She's one smart nut off the tree," I admit. "Sometimes, she's almost *too smart*—and constantly glued to a device that invites trouble." I shake my head, raking an annoyed hand through my hair. "I won't gripe about kids and their phones. It's pointless. Still, I wonder. What hell would I have raised if I'd had one at her age?"

"Thank God we'll never find out." She gives me a reassuring look. "Don't worry. I'll keep her in line like always."

It's her mom tone that sets me at ease. The same tone I've heard her use with her own kids for years.

I chuckle to myself. Destiny's in for it now.

Katelyn Storm lives up to her name. When she flips into mom mode, nobody gets by with anything.

Somehow, I think the joke's on me, though.

Destiny was raised by a sailor, and I know I'm the reason she's got a mouth like one. With my career, my stress, and my flaws, the harshness bleeds out.

I can hardly blame my daughter sometimes for hurling my own caustic words back at me—if only she didn't do it in a voice that sounds more like my dead wife's with every passing month.

But if wishes came true, I wouldn't feel that hard knot in my gut whenever Aster's face flashes in my mind.

I know I should just count my blessings and shut the hell up.

She's a great kid—solid grades, harmless friends, no police visits yet. I've only got a few more years with her before she's off to college.

Dess doesn't know where she's going to school yet, but I doubt it'll be anywhere near here. And honestly, I'll endorse that decision with minimal grumbling.

My baby girl needs distance to work out her life—as long as I'm still a phone call away to bail her out for the times any missteps trip her up.

Hell, maybe distance is what I need, too.

That girl is the glue that's held my world together for fifteen goddamned

years.

She's the reason I still wake up and stomp into this office.

Once she's gone, I'll be staring down a chasm.

If I'm being honest, I *need* this new spin on old drinks for more than the next quarter's profits.

Hell, I'm desperate for a new line of beverages. Fresh tricks to refine. Wired Cup has survived generations of market changes for a reason. We've always adapted.

We've laid down roots in the northwest for good reason. Not just branding and quality, but because my great-grandfather swore he wouldn't compromise the integrity of our product.

We're not sitting ducks, waiting to be knocked out by the competition. Though without something new, something bold and electrifying, we're facing the worst kind of death by boredom.

I won't let that happen.

Once I've had time to catch up on emails for an hour, I head for Kate's office. I find Destiny sprawled out on the floor, playing with her phone.

She sees me standing in the doorway and smiles up at me. "I threw together three aesthetic music videos this afternoon. You still like Johnny Cash, Dad?"

"Without question, and I suppose that's a good skill to have." Then I remember she's here to shadow and square my shoulders. "Aren't you supposed to be working? Or at least taking notes about the work everyone else is doing?"

"Eh, yeah, it's just..." She lays a hand over her face, groaning softly. "Coffee's so boring."

"You let her play on her phone ever since we got back?" I look at Kate, who's hunched over her laptop.

She doesn't raise her head. "Keep her out of trouble, you said. She's not knocking over any liquor stores, right?"

I hold in a sigh.

"Have you started tracking down wolverine chick yet?" I ask.

"Honey badger. Get it right," Destiny mutters.

"What was her name again?" Katelyn asks.

"I don't remember. Call the store and find out."

"Huh? I thought you chased us out so you could creep her info." Destiny's eyes never leave her screen.

“Regardless, I’d like to run a proper background check before she gets here. We can’t hire a bank robber or Peeping Thomasina, no matter how good her coffee concoctions might be.”

“Yeah, right!” Destiny lowers her phone and gives me a disbelieving look. “Um, stalker-ish much?”

“Yes. Also, I want a proposal ready before she arrives. We can seal the deal and won’t have to worry about her working for any competitors,” I say, brushing off my daughter’s complaints about my methods. “She’s also less likely to stall negotiations if we hit her with a number on the spot. Make it a fair, generous offer. Dess, I’ll show you how we do hiring proposals once Katelyn has her researched.”

My daughter looks like I just pushed a rancid lemon wedge into her mouth.

“Is this what you do all day? Guzzle coffee and spy on people?”

“When you put it that way, I really do deserve a break at home. More decaf and less snark,” I tell her, looking at Kate. “Have HR ready. I’ll sign off on everything, but we’ve got to move fast. I don’t want to risk blowing this.”

“Yeet,” Destiny says.

“What?” I ask.

Kate finally looks up from her laptop over her glasses. “That’s young-speak for cool. My kids say it all the time.”

“Bah, I’m lucky I haven’t heard it before.” I wonder how the copywriters ever keep up with trends in slang.

“You hear that, Dessy? You’re the expert here in talking young,” Katelyn says with a wry smile. “Since your dear old dad has me running after espresso machine suppliers who shortchanged us last month, I don’t have time to go on a honey badger hunt. So, you’ve got your first task.”

Destiny pops up from the floor. “You want me to call?”

“Yeah, the shop on Seventh Street.”

“You’ve managed to cure her bonelessness, Katelyn. Miraculous.” I snort as I look at Dess. “Why can’t you pop up like that when I tell you to get moving?”

“You’re a drill sergeant. Duh.”

“I was a lieutenant. Sergeants are noncommissioned,” I mutter.

“So, you admit you’re a drill sergeant?”

“Wrong. I outranked your average RDC and you know nothing about the

US Navy.”

“Whatevs. I know it made you a total hardass for life,” she whispers under her breath—still loud enough to hear—as she rolls her eyes.

While Destiny dials the store, I head back to my office.

I’m perched in my tall leather chair before I realize I’m still holding the damn mason jar.

We’ll track down its owner soon enough. I try to focus on reports, but my eyes keep catching on that small glass container.

Even if I had this sample reverse engineered, I can’t use it right now. Plus, it’s too delicious to waste.

I do what any sane person would.

Bottom’s up.

My office door pops open and Destiny bounces in.

Perfect timing.

Naturally, she catches me drinking from the mason jar and shakes her head with a loud click of her tongue. “Really, Dad? You’re drinking your own research?”

I give her my best mackerel-eyed stare. “She’ll be here soon enough and we’ll have a fresh sample we can actually use. Why waste this one?”

“Okay. I think you just have a thing for coffee made by people you hate.” She pauses. When I don’t even crack a smile at her silly comment, she sighs. “Her name’s Eliza Angelo. She’s not on LinkedIn or Facebook, so I had to do some digging. You’re welcome.”

“Everyone’s on Facebooger for reasons I will never understand.”

Destiny shakes her head again.

“Nope. Everyone *old* uses it, you mean. Not her. She’s listed as a virtual assistant on Instagram and Upwork, which means basically nothing. The HR lady said that depending on who her clients are, that could mean she’s struggling to get by—or it could mean she rakes in six figures.”

“That’s solid digging, little bee. Though not terribly helpful in getting a proper salary proposal together for HR,” I say gently.

She stares at me like she can’t believe I paid her an honest compliment.

“Kate and I researched it. VAs typically pull in thirty to seventy thousand dollars a year with the high earners being outliers. Kate thinks we should put two proposals together—one for an average VA and a backup if you think she’s an outlier.”

I stare at my daughter.

“Very thoughtful. Thanks, now I can retire.”

“Dad!” She stomps her foot. “It was mostly Kate’s idea, so give her a raise. I’m just the messenger. She says she’s already working on the proposals for you.”

A smile pulls at my lips.

Most kids would take credit and try to use it to gain some reward. Somehow, I still have a selfless, honest daughter behind the brat.

I just need a reminder sometimes.

“I have the best assistant,” I say, turning to the mini fridge behind my desk for a water.

Destiny grins. “Yeah, you do. You don’t even know how many of my friends have asked if you need help. The older juniors and seniors would kill to have a summer job with you—like literally go all Jane the Ripper. They all think you’re fire and it’s *gross*.”

I’m swallowing water from the bottle I just opened when she says it. I’m lucky I don’t spray mineral water from an Icelandic glacier all over the goddamned place like a human sprinkler.

“We’re in luck. I’m not in the market for a girl half my age who’s going to hit on me even if Mrs. Storm resigns tomorrow. Tell them I’m nobody’s fantasy.” I cough into my hand again, trying like hell not to stare awkwardly. “Also, that’s a subject we’ll never bring up again.”

“Jeez, Dad...”

“How’s shadowing? Not the sleeping pill you imagined?”

She squeezes her eyes shut and grimaces, scrunching her small face.

“Daddy, I love you, but I stand by what I said. Your job is boring AF.”

“And I know what that stands for, Dess. You’ll be grounded AF if you keep that up.” She flinches before I carry on. “Still, I suppose you’re right. Boring or not, someone needs to run this joint after I step aside, and you’re an only child.”

“Not my fault! You should’ve gotten remarried and had more kids. It’s not like you were short on ladies lining up for dates.” She makes a yuck face.

Technically, she’s right.

That’s why I humor her with a lopsided smile, ignoring the fact that I was busy with a little girl and a massive family legacy company. Not to mention a lifetime of fucking damage from the hell that ended my marriage prematurely.

“See? You’re turning green.” I point at her. “If I ever dated long enough

to give you a little brother or sister, the kissing would traumatize you for life.”

“Ugh, I’d get over it. Can’t be worse than talking about contracts and hiring proposals for as long as I live, right?” She gives me a sour look.

“There comes a point in your life when it’s not so boring anymore.”

She stares at me like I’ve sprouted a second head.

“Umm—no. Shoot me now?”

“Nah, but I’ll help you take the edge off, and since you’re too young to drink...” I spin around to the mini fridge again, fetching a can of root beer I know she loves and two cold glasses. While I pour the sodas, I look at her. “If you seriously don’t want to waste your life on contracts, what do you want to do for a living, Destiny?”

I’m genuinely curious.

She was thirteen the last time I asked that question. She told me she wanted to run a petting zoo on a superyacht to Antarctica—if only she could stand the water.

“Eh, I don’t know. Maybe I could be a YouTuber or big influencer for fashion or something?”

My grip tightens on my root beer as I take a swig.

“You’d better start liking the coffee biz. There’s no way I’m letting you show off skimpy dresses for strangers. Don’t care how old you are.”

“Oh, Dad.” She huffs a breath loudly. “That’s another reason you should’ve had a bigger family. Even with, um, everything that happened when I was a kid—I’d be an *excellent* babysitter. And you’d finally have someone else to throw crap at instead of piling it on me.”

She may be right, but we need our funny moments.

God help her if she thinks I’m about to stop anytime soon.

I just hope I haven’t bitten off too much with that brown-eyed hellion who seems to hold the key to our next big innovation—and possibly my own madness.

BREW-TIFUL IDEA (ELIZA)

The next day, I load up a couple canisters full of my latest roast and head over to the homeless camp in the park just a few blocks from my apartment.

I promised Wyatt—the original genius behind the campfire brew I’ve refined—and his girlfriend Meadow that I’d help pass out breakfast today. It’s also an awesome chance to test my latest efforts with a sample audience.

When I get there, they have a table set up, piled high with donuts and breakfast sandwiches. I unload my canisters, disposable cups, and rating cards on the table before I turn to Wyatt.

“Here, try this. I need your thoughts,” I tell him.

With a big grin showing through his now nicely trimmed beard, he fills a paper cup with the velvety black liquid. I watch him hold it up, sniff, and throw back the drink—right before he covers his mouth and coughs.

“Shit, that’s hot. Think I burned my idiot tongue. Not sure my tastebuds are much use now—”

Meadow laughs and elbows him gently. “It’s coffee! What did you expect?”

“Not third-degree mouth burns,” he grumbles.

I smile. “I hardly ever brew past one eighty-five. It’s too easy for the coffee blooms to go wrong and start messing with the flavor.”

He squints at me, blowing on the coffee and taking another sip. “The temp’s that important?”

“Totally. The more original oils left intact, the better...”

“It’s good stuff. You took my pig iron idea and turned it into gold,” he

says with a wink that makes Meadow roll her eyes. “What’s the new spin on this one? You named it yet?”

I grin. “I’m tentatively calling it West Coast Day Trip. I used avocado wood to roast the beans—”

“Right. Because of the oil.” Wyatt smiles, stroking his beard while Meadow leans on his shoulder.

God, it’s so good to see him well again.

It seems like only yesterday when he was laid up in the hospital at death’s door, and if it wasn’t for the asshole who married my bestie—I shudder to think what would’ve happened to him next.

“It’s a super slow roast,” I say. “I spent half the night working on it. I threw in a few watermelon seeds with the beans on a whim for some extra depth.”

“Ah, that’s why it’s sweeter than your usual brew,” Meadow chimes in after stealing a sip from his cup. “Wow, you’ve got a brain for this.”

“I just wanted the West Coast in a cup. With every sip, you’re experiencing SoCal, moving up the Pacific highway, all the way through Oregon and Washington.”

“Wow,” Meadow whispers again.

I grab her a fresh cup, but she stops me before I can pour very much coffee.

“Take more,” I urge.

“Oh, no. There are so many people here. It’s easier for me to get good coffee anytime. They can’t.”

She’s such a sweetheart. And still so terrified of wasting anything after living a hard life on the streets. I take her cup and top it off generously.

When I look up, there’s a familiar balding head with a beard wilder than Wyatt’s. I wave frantically.

Wayne locks up his bike on the rack nearby and jogs over.

“Eliza, how are you?” he asks. Thankfully with a smile and not a hint of anything that screams *you cost me my freaking job*.

“Good,” I say, a little shyly.

I want to ask about yesterday so badly.

Like, how much hell did I leave in his lap? But I’m not sure how to approach it. He’s not pissed, anyway. Hopefully that’s a good sign.

But with the crowd moving in, we’ll have to catch up later.

Several people from the camp wander up to the table in a slow, shuffling

line. Meadow offers baked goods and sandwiches while I pour coffee.

I pick up a rating card and a pen, passing them over.

“Hi, thanks for coming. Would you mind letting me know how you like the coffee?”

“Sure, hon, but I bet it’s tasty.” A woman takes the cup, card, and pen.

I smile at her. “If there’s anything at all you don’t like about it—any way it could use improvement—don’t hold back. Please. I can always do better next time.”

She gives me a toothless grin. “Oh, honey, no. You always do just fine by us.”

“Yeah, but I have to do better than fine if I’m ever going to convince someone to pay me for it, right?” I’m feeling a twinge of *déjà vu*. My mind flips back to the conversation with Cole Asshat Lancaster yesterday—a butting of heads I’ve been trying and failing to keep out of my mind.

Out of the corner of my eye, Wayne stiffens like he can’t believe what I just said.

Frick.

Maybe I did do some real damage yesterday.

She pats me on the shoulder. “People will pay you for it, doll. Waking up with this beats any old alarm clock.”

I give her a friendly smile, but seeing how genuine she is makes me sad. She’s old enough to be my grandma.

Where are her own grandkids and why do they let her live on the street? I wonder. This is the hard part of coming here twice a month.

She leaves with her drink and a small stack of donuts. I serve the next person, going through my spiel about the rating card.

I know.

Some people might ask why I bother scrounging up feedback from homeless people, who should just be happy with whatever they can get. But the truth is, their opinions are just as valid as anyone’s.

Maybe more so.

The homeless are honest. When you have nothing material left to lose, why hold back?

Wayne moves closer as the line churns on, offering me a hand with filling cups. Is it just my imagination, or is he still pretty stiff and nervous?

Once our first cluster moves on and there’s a break, I turn to him and ask, “So, how’re you holding up? That jerk of a suit didn’t fire you, right?”

I hold my breath.

If he did, it's a thousand percent my fault.

"Nah...not exactly," Wayne says cryptically, smiling when I give him a confused look. "Actually, the big boss was impressed with your coffee, Eliza."

Huh? What's he talking about?

"My coffee?"

Wayne nods again.

"What on earth are you—oh, crap." It suddenly hits me so hard I rock back. "Yikes. I forgot my mason jar of home brew there, didn't I?"

Wayne's lips turn up slightly in a sheepish grin. "Hey, it could happen to anyone after the shit he threw at you."

"Ugh, don't tell me. Mr. Gold Dick himself stooped down and deigned to—to what? *Try it?*" The idea of that corporate maniac with his priceless suit and eyes like pure blue sorcery drinking my campfire roast freaks me out. I'm not sure why.

Maybe because it's too intimate.

Right now, that drink is for me, a few select friends, and helps warm a few desperate bellies at a place like this. Definitely not intended for overdressed pricks who go off on coffee like they've had their own mother insulted in the worst way.

It's a campfire roast and it's supposed to be fun. I can't believe the Grumpfather even knows the concept.

Wayne chuckles, shaking his head.

"Exactly. The kid dove in and took the first swig, but he wasn't far behind her. Honestly, it seems like he wants to offer you—I don't know—an opportunity with your brew? To buy it? A job? I'm not sure. He just wants to talk to you first."

There goes my head. Spinning.

"What? Why, Wayne? Why would he just up and offer me a job? Especially after I gave him an attitude check for the ages. He seemed pissed about that."

"In fairness, he had it coming. Maybe he appreciates being called out?" Wayne suggests.

The laugh that tears out of me hurts.

There's no earthly way a walking ego like Cole Lancaster enjoys the bruises I left on his pride.

I have to stop for a few more people coming to our table. I hook them up with breakfast and try not to faint in the meantime.

Once they're gone, Wayne sighs and says, "Okay, E. I gotta be honest. He chatted me up after you left and I promised him you'd get in touch. I hate putting you on the spot, but he offered me a bonus—"

I stare at him.

He holds his hands up.

"Like I said. I don't *want* to twist your arm. I know you don't do corporate. It's just—well, mom, you know—her insurance wouldn't even cover the last round of diabetic stuff. We're strapped for cash and I need the money, so I'm asking—begging—if there's any chance you'd just hear him out? I'd be grateful as hell if you did."

My heart plunges into my belly.

I'm stunned and annoyed at myself for feeling frustrated when Wayne's giving me those big puppy dog eyes. How can I be pissed at a man who's just trying to do right by his sick mother?

"Wayne, it's cool, but I have to be honest...I'm not keen on doing anything for that jackass."

"Yeah, I knew you'd say that, but I had to mention it anyway. After yesterday, I didn't think there was a snowball's chance in hell you'd ever work for Wired Cup. But I figured you might be willing to talk to him, see what he wants."

My mind races in the silence between us.

"You thought right. I wouldn't work for that dude if he was offering a whole coffee farm."

"I think he owns one in Hawaii somewhere. So they say." Wayne shrugs, wearing a strained smile. "You're better off on your own for sure. Any of the local shops in this city would be happy to have you, and they'd probably pay more. Wired Cup is about as corporate as it gets after the national chains."

"You know my problem with taking odd jobs...remember the backup shifts I picked up for you? Too much of that cuts into my brew time. That's why I've settled for the VA work. It's flexible and different enough from what I like to do at home. It doesn't wear my creativity down to a nub. Then again, I'll have to find something else soon. This was a mediocre month for freelancing and Seattle isn't getting any cheaper."

He smiles knowingly.

"Just stay true to your dream. You've got a thousand people here who

want to open their own shops, but most of 'em give up and leave the industry for good. I only know one lady who actually opened a successful café. She was fifty before she could do it. Scalding yourself day in and day out for tips and dealing with rude assholes is the best way to get burned out."

I laugh. "Well, I'm scalding myself for *free* right now. A little cash would be an upgrade."

"But you're actually roasting and brewing. Making *real* joe. I grind beans and toss them in a machine. It's not the same. Hell, you know I won't sneeze at that bonus, but it's not the only reason I brought it up. I thought you might be interested."

I sigh. "How big is the carrot he's holding?"

"Ten thousand bucks. Paid after you start, from what I understand," he says.

Damn. That's *months* of income for Wayne and a lot less stress from medical bills. I feel my conscience twitch, stabbing my heart with a little pitchfork.

"So it's a job? I *do* have to work for him?" I'm almost afraid to ask.

He shrugs roughly.

"What if I just start and quit the next day?"

Wayne scratches his beard. "He didn't go too deep in the weeds. But it's Lancaster. I'd check the fine print for sure. It's really not a big deal, though. You don't have to do this for me if it's too much. I've always managed."

He has, but his uneven smile tells me he's also approaching his wit's end.

This. Sucks.

I want to help Wayne, and I need the money too. It's the kind of no-brainer that just has to come with a horrible catch.

I sigh so hard it rattles my bones. "I came to Seattle to follow my dreams. Not have them dashed by corporate America—"

"I know."

"But if he likes my brew that much...do you think it could open some doors?" I swallow. Freelancing as a VA is feast or famine and not reliable, even if it saves me from creative brain drain.

"It could. I'm sure having whatever he wants on your resume can't hurt. My dealings with Cole Lancaster have pretty much been limited to two or three odd inspections like you saw yesterday. He doesn't do small talk. Still, working for him means skills and money. No question."

He definitely isn't making this easier.

I feel like I'm being morally ripped in half.

"What would you do?" I ask quietly.

"Me? Shit, I don't know." He laughs loudly. "I'm not the most unbiased person to be asking for advice, either. I've got ten thousand smackers on the line."

I laugh. "True."

"But," he says, "'It can't be worse than your freelancing, right? It's a steady check or maybe a massive buyout. If you try it out and don't like it, you can walk away."

"Did Lancaster name a number?"

He shakes his head. "He didn't. You want his card? He left it for me to pass on."

"I'll take it, but I'm not sure I'm going to do this, Wayne. Sorry. I just can't make any big promises."

"I wouldn't expect it, Eliza. You're a wildcat and you rock it. Don't let anybody cage you in." He hands me Lancaster's business card. "Here you go. Just in case."

"Listen, if I don't do it, I'm giving you free coffee and baked goods for the rest of your life," I tell him.

"Sweet. I win either way." But the way his smile thins tells me that money would do infinitely more good than my consolation prize.

"You do, and you deserve it since you work for a raging dick."

"His daughter went off on him after you left. First you tore him to shreds, then the teenager did. It was amusing." Wayne sniffs.

"The girl at the table? That was his daughter?" I ask, a little shocked.

When he nods, I have to smile.

I hate that I'm curious.

But I love the thought of Mr. High and Mighty CEO being brought low by a mouth he can't just walk away from.



I SIT on the deck of Dakota's sprawling home, overlooking the Puget Sound. "I just hope one day I can be a tenth as successful as you. Oh, and have a cute little baby or two."

The little bundle of joy squirms in her arms. The way Dakota smiles

down at the munchkin says her world is now complete and unbreakable.

They named the baby girl Evermore, and even if it sounded weird at first, now it's kinda fitting.

Dakota looks up and laughs. "I mean, I can only take *half* the credit for this masterpiece." She waves her hand at the kidlet snuggled in her blanket. "And Linc had this place before we even met."

"No," I say sharply.

"No what?"

"Lady, you're a bestselling poet, a top-notch copywriter, and a badass mom. Do *not* sell yourself short in front of me." I wag a finger.

"Um, my bestselling poetry collection has sold like fifty thousand dollars this past year—and that's a lot for poetry."

"You're not in it for the money." I smile, ignoring the obvious fact that money will never be a problem again when she's married to a billionaire. "Also, you're still one of the most successful poets in America. Congratulations. You made Edgar Allan proud."

"Once a Poe, always a Poe, I guess. Even with the name changing to Burns." She nods firmly. "Thanks for the confidence boost. And I think you should just reframe the way you view success. There's something to be said for living life on your own terms. Nobody does that better than you, Eliza."

"Really?"

She nods. "Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"What brought you to Seattle, anyway? I mean, way back when you could've just stayed warm in San Diego sipping iced lattes."

I pull my knees to my chest and hug them close.

"It always seemed like my destination. I stomped around five states, did a summer working in Heart's Edge at this cool little shop called The Nest, and then...hello, Seattle. I dunno. So many chains started here. Indie stores are still the beating heart of the coffee culture. It just feels natural." I need to know what she thinks. "Speaking of chains, I, uh, may have a chance with one."

"At what?" Her eyebrows lift as the baby squirms in her arms. "Seriously? You mean getting your coffee into an actual chain café?"

"Well..."

"Holy crap, that's wild! Not like you'd ever go for that—it's too corporate for you, right? But how'd that happen?"

I try not to grimace.

“It was pretty random. I was working on my latest version of Wyatt’s campfire brew and took it to Wired Cup for the barista to try while I studied the flavor profile of their new lineup—”

“Is it good?”

I give her the side-eye. “Definitely not sweet enough for you, you fiend.”

Her laughter makes the baby wave her little arms.

“You know I’m right. Your dark poet soul loves candied coffee with enough vanilla to rival potpourri. Anyway, this posse of suits comes in, and their ringleader—who looked like some mafia guy—starts talking trash to my friend Wayne about how the coffee is barely passable...turns out, he was the CEO.”

I fill Dakota in on the rest of the madness.

When I’m finished she blinks at me, holding the baby close to her chest. “What a riot. I feel like I’m still missing something, though...”

“You are. The jackass drank the coffee I left behind. He liked it so much he offered Wayne a nice fat bonus if I just swallow my pride and come to work for him.”

Dakota awkward laughs so hard she snorts. “*Yeesh!* Okay, now you have to do this—if nothing else, to make it up to poor Wayne.”

“Shut up,” I groan.

Her laughter fades, and she straightens up. “At least call. Talk to them, Eliza. You never know where a corporate gig might lead.”

I rake her with a knowing glance.

Easy for her to say, considering her stint in Corporate America landed her Grump Charming and a life beyond her wildest dreams.

“It still feels wrong. Giving in to a desk job isn’t why I came here. It’s the anti-dream.”

“Maybe, but it’s not forever, right? And if he liked your original brew, I bet you can negotiate. You won’t be tied to a desk or stuck in a store grinding out eight-hour shifts brewing glorified instant coffees. You’ll be the brains behind the scenes—and you’ll make him *pay* out the butt for your smarts.”

“But I *want* to be in a coffee shop, Dakota. A little one, with my name on it. Remember Liza’s Love?”

“Oh, you’ll have your precious shop one day. I’d bet my boobs on it. But scoping out the business side from that high up might help in the long run. When I worked at Haughty But Nice, it sure as hell wasn’t poetry. It was just

a cushy, high-paying copy job. I learned a lot from the experience and it landed me enough money to support my poetry gig—”

“It helps when the boss falls madly in love with you, huh?” I smile as she gives me the stink eye. “I can’t count on cupid to help me out here.”

Not that I’d flipping want him to.

Not with blue-eyed Lucifer.

I’d rather take an actual arrow to the eye than suffer Cole Lancaster getting smitten with me—or, God forbid, the reverse.

Dakota slumps down with the baby, still laughing. “You never know. Linc and I didn’t exactly get along when we first met. We almost had a crime scene over cinnamon rolls. How’s the godfather CEO on the McHottie scale?”

I bite my lip.

Yeah, I can’t *dare* mention how hot the Grumpfather is.

I’m not Dakota and this is *not* a quirky rom-com.

I won’t land a billionaire husband from the office, and if I ever did, it wouldn’t be Lancaster in a trillion years.

I don’t care that he’s a loaded and arrogant and—no. Not calling him hot again.

Not even in my own head.

I wouldn’t date him for anything.

If we’re the last two people alive after the apocalypse, we’re not repopulating this rock. We’re handing the world over to insects and wishing them good luck.

Even his name—*his freaking name*—tastes like a pretentious mouthful.

I’m trying so hard not to flush when I shrug.

“Nothing to write home about. He’s no Burns, that’s for sure.”

“Too bad. It’s less complicated that way. Make the call. You can do it here. I’ll listen in for moral support,” Dakota offers.

I shake my head fiercely.

“We’re debating what it would be like to sell your soul to Big Coffee, but the truth is, until you’ve talked to him, you don’t even know if that’s an option,” she whispers.

I scrunch my nose up, waving a hand.

“Nope. He wouldn’t offer Wayne a bonus that big if he wasn’t set on hiring me for whatever dirty work he has in mind.” I try like hell to ignore the innuendo in that statement.

Right on cue, the baby wails for attention.

Dakota gently rocks her, making a few cooing noises before she says, “Right. So call. You don’t have anything to lose. Normal job interviews involve rejection, and you don’t even have that to worry about here. You’re holding all the cards.”

“But what do I have to gain?”

“So much! First, money. Second, a chance to have your coffee all over a chunk of America. Third—money?”

She makes a powerful argument.

“But I don’t want to have my coffee all over America if it’s not really mine! It’s not like they’ll name it Liza’s Blend or anything. I still want my cozy little shop where people come in to check out what’s on special for the day, where the drinks are handcrafted and memorable, and I know people by name because they visit every day.”

“That’s sweet. I get it. But decent pay means decent capital for your store. Plus, you might learn things from a corporate office that make running your own place easier.”

“We don’t know if it pays well. Wayne’s worked for the loser for years and he’s still making a few bucks above minimum wage plus tips.”

“If he offered Wayne a ten-thousand-dollar referral bonus, trust me, he plans to pay you well to retain you. Trust me. You’ll have whatever you want. Turn down his first offer and ask for ten percent more—no, make it twenty! You have the high ground.”

I smile painfully. “Are you crazy? Is it the sleep deprivation from the baby bean? He’d probably pick me up and chuck me out for insulting his ‘generosity.’”

I stick my tongue out.

With a frustrated sound, she walks to the sliding glass door behind the deck and opens it, sticks her head inside, and yells, “Hey, Linc! Come here.”

He’s outside in seconds. His big arms go around her, pulling her into an adoring look on his face that used to be almost as grumpy as Lancaster’s.

Wow.

“Uh, are you guys okay?” I venture.

“Never better,” she says.

As I watch them, I realize having a nice hot slice of man might not be half-bad. Someday.

But I’ll settle for my café first.

Is it too much to ask the universe to deliver a lickable husband who's just as crazy about coffee as I am and wants to open a little shop where we can live our dreams?

Back in reality, no guy has ever looked at me remotely like Lincoln gazes at his wife. He's so lost in her it's almost indecent.

I mean, someone *tried* once.

Someone who lied brutally well.

Whatever. There's a reason I stick to coffee over dating.

Dakota pulls away from her husband and gazes at him with moony eyes, until she remembers I'm still here.

"Oh. Linc, tell Eliza what you told me about corporate interview negotiations."

Lincoln meets my eyes, this hulking bear of a man who always looks intimidating, even when his intentions are pure. "Hey, Eliza. Didn't see you there."

Yeah, no wonder.

If Dakota wasn't one of my best friends, I'd be revolted by their lovesick show, but instead, I just grin.

"Okay, corporate negotiations..." he says, pondering for a moment. "If a CEO is taking time out of their day to meet with you, you can always get more than they offer. Always ten percent, sometimes twenty."

"Cool. I had no idea," I say.

He nods thoughtfully. "By the time you're meeting the CEO, you have the job. It's a given. Someone would have weeded you out long before then, otherwise." His face glows when he looks back at Dakota and she passes him the baby. "Am I done? Evermore has a hankering for Paw Patrol and so do I."

"Oh, fine!" Dakota beams at him.

He leans in and kisses her again before retreating inside their mansion with the munchkin.

"When you two are together, it's intense. Like, a little *scary* intense. I'm afraid of getting trapped inside your bubble," I tease.

She just shrugs happily and sits on the outdoor couch. "Are you going to do it then?"

"The interview?"

She nods.

I groan. "I think I have to, now. Who knows when I'll get an opportunity like this again? I'm almost short on rent. It's not like I can turn down the

cash.”

“Do you need a loan?” Her eyes glow with concern.

“And have you hate me because it’ll be the year 2100 before I pay it back? No thanks.”

“Eliza, I know you. You don’t like this sort of thing, but I could just give you the money. The only reason I didn’t offer is because you haven’t liked me asking in the past.”

“Thanks, but I’ve got this. I’m just going to have to make the Grumpfather an offer he can’t refuse.”

“That’s the spirit. Go interview, get the job, and then call me ASAP. We’ll figure out how much you need to save to be out of there and running Liza’s Love in six months to a year.”

I hold back a frown. She makes it sound too easy. But if Dakota could do it when she started in a similar spot to where I’m at now...

I can’t say never.

“When I get my own place, will you write cutesy quotes for my cups?”

“Yes, and a full poem for the large size,” she promises.

We both laugh.

Fine. Decision made.

I’ll chisel off a piece of my soul for Wired Cup Inc. and later—who knows *how much* later—after I’ve made a clean break, I can catch up on penance.

For now, I just need all the prayers before I lock horns with that snorting bull in a suit again.

DOUBLE SHOT OF DARE (COLE)



“Cole? Goddamn, it’s been a century and a half. Can you hear me, boss?” Troy’s tanned face fills my screen, his large sunglasses pulled low over his eyes and a messy smile hanging on his lips.

My Chief Operations Officer looks like he’s just rubbing it.

If only I could’ve handled sourcing overseas and let him take the Seattle role with its dreary weather. Then I’d be the one hanging out on beaches with a perpetual golden tan, and *he* could stay chained to a desk while rain washes out his windows.

Never mind the accident and the stew of bad memories.

There’s a lot of travel with his role. Jetting around the Pacific and South America wouldn’t have been any way for Destiny to grow up, especially after Aster died.

“I can hear you,” I say, hating that I still go tense when I hear his voice.

I used to love hearing from this man.

About as much as I enjoyed his friendship.

Now, his very existence stirs up this sick dread inside me, and I’m not sure why.

Maybe it’s the sun. The pristine beach behind him with its lapping waves in the background. The too-bright tropical drink in his hand, that neon-pink POG juice—pineapple, orange, and guava—and probably spiked with a splash of rum even when he’s on the clock.

Maybe it’s just the familiarity of those things. What should be a happy, carefree scene for anyone normal.

For me, it’s another reminder. Another swift descent into hell when I

remember—

No. Don't fucking go there.

Troy clears his throat. I've been staring at him like a manikin for too long.

A notebook flicks across the screen as he moves it from his left hand to his right. He leans forward, laser focused and quiet.

"So, the report..." he starts, flipping a few pages. "As I'm sure you saw, Sumatra Farms has upped production. We'll hit three hundred thousand pounds this month—a new record and a *damn good* one, if I do say so myself—and we should only increase from there into peak growing season. I think by next quarter, we'll be clearing over half a million pounds a month, easy. Do you want us to make a move on the land opportunities I reported last quarter, too? If we get those up and running, we could triple production next year."

I don't know why I'm frowning. Production has never been a major problem. Neither are our perfectly average beans harvested in bulk from sun-kissed island farms.

I'm getting antsy about that brew I tasted.

I need it.

I need *her*.

Technically, Wired Cup needs her, and I'm hopeful at least one of our bulk beans will fit for her magic.

"Cole? Everything okay?" Troy taps on his screen.

"Huh?" I blink at him.

"Do we need more acreage to boost production?"

"Whatever you think," I say quickly. "That's why I pay you the big bucks, isn't it?" I force a smile, pretending we're still old friends and not two awkward people pulled apart.

"Sure, sure." His low chuckle is also forced. "Are you with me today, bossman? You seem distracted."

Guilty as charged. And even if it's been years since I had a real talk with Troy Clement, he still sees right through me.

"There's been a development," I say slowly. "I'm following up on an interesting lead for a new line of drinks to brighten up the brand. If this works, our fall flavors will be quite unlike anything we've previously brought to market."

"Interesting." Troy goes quiet for a second, his wide smile fading under

the high tropical sun. “Can I ask why?”

“It’s a reset,” I tell him. “A gamble, if you will, on making our customers fall in love with our coffee again.”

“Uh, did something happen with sales I don’t know about? Are we in trouble? Am I ramping up production too much?” He reaches up and pulls down his shades, revealing eyes that gleam like silver mercury.

“No,” I throw back, my gut churning.

Why does he sound so panicked?

Like this isn’t the first time he’s questioning what the hell I’m doing?

“Sorry, Cole, but man, I guess I’m just not following...” He manages a strained smile. “If it’s not the market forcing our hand, then why change a sure thing? Aren’t we the best at what we do?”

I lean back in my chair, steeping my fingers.

“What is it you think we do so well? This isn’t a trick question.”

Still, he hesitates.

“Serve up reliable cups of joe, of course,” he says finally. “Give the people a taste they can always count on.”

“And that’s the problem I’m addressing. Our drinks are almost *too* reliable, and it’s been that way since my father’s days. We’ve been coasting for more than a decade, always focusing on new ways to sell the same product. We’re leaving money on the table and the younger demographic behind. We’ve scaled up, certainly, but this company hasn’t taken a major risk for thirty years.”

He stares through me, clearly questioning my sanity without coming out and saying it.

“Troy, you went to business school. I’m sure I don’t have to explain to you that the bigger the risk, the better the reward.”

He nods and opens his mouth sluggishly like he wants to choose his words very carefully.

I’m realizing I’m not done, though.

“As the chief executive officer of this organization, I don’t expect blind faith. I do, however, need your trust. In time, I’ll elaborate my thoughts for senior leadership,” I say, my eyes searching his over the screen.

He offers up what looks like a genuine smile.

“Nice. You got this, boss. Have I ever doubted you in all the years I’ve been your main man away from the mainland?” He grins like I just laughed at his phrasing. I didn’t. “Anyway, if you’ve got your heart set on this new

experiment, I'm behind it a hundred percent. Change is the only constant, Cole."

Fuck, I hate hearing that from him, even if he's absolutely right and trying to be reassuring.

The statement curdles my stomach.

There's no good reason for it to be that way, but dammit, it is.

Apparently, I'll never be over it in my own head.

No matter how pleasant, how smart, or how reassuring he tries to be, it can't change the past.

Nothing can.

I'm still staring at the only senior officer who was on that trip that upended my life.

"I just wanted to give you a heads-up before anyone else, Troy. Production is critical and you've always been too loyal to be left out of the loop. I'll check in at the first chance, once I know how this new line might require changes in logistics and sourcing. For now, I'm signing off for another meeting. Keep me updated. If we need to Zoom again, schedule it through Katelyn."

He logs off with a smile before I can end it.

I make a note to remind Kate I won't be available for Zoom calls anytime soon.

Damn him, he's right, though.

Change is a constant, and a fucking terrible one.

Once, there was a time when Troy was my best friend, back before I had to man up and focus on work and parenting without letting a personal apocalypse consume me.

Once, we were inseparable. Just two guys with easy laughs and mile-high dreams of making this tired old company something new and glamorous and special. But two things happened when Aster told me she was pregnant—first I saw my whole life flash before my eyes. Then I decided to own it and grow up.

Troy never did. Not even after he witnessed the freight train that came crashing through my life.

The last time we talked like friends, he was a guest in my Kona house. And I had no idea that my family was about to be pulverized forever.



Ten Years Ago

DESTINY LOOKS SO adorable in her little sundress.

She's cradling a large doll in her arms, the weight of it bouncing wildly in her chubby arms.

"*Shh! Shhhhhh!*" She rocks it back and forth like a baby that's barely bigger than her. "I love you," she whispers and kisses its head.

"Hey, baby girl. That's my line." I scoop my daughter up from the floor with a giggle falling out of her and hold her to my chest. "I love you more."

"Daddy!" she squeals as I show her no doll will ever compare to my love for her.

I kiss her on the head the same way she kissed the doll.

She giggles again.

"Jesus, Cole. Don't get her so worked up. She's been bouncing off the walls all day." Aster rolls over on the couch, practically boneless, her head half-buried under the pillow.

Ever since we came to Kona, my wife has had Dess to look after twenty-four seven. The last nanny—the one we hired expressly for the Kona trip—only stayed for two weeks, which boggles my mind.

How many nannies would give up a free trip to Hawaii?

Evidently the kind who aren't resistant to being chewed out by my wife.

It's the depression talking, I know. I've had years to develop a thick skin when she goes off on her moody tirades.

The drugs and therapists and natural remedies we've spent a small fortune on have helped, but nothing totally cures her storms when they strike.

I've learned how to let them roll off my shoulders.

Regrettably, the nannies haven't.

Thankfully, she's never turned that attitude on our daughter. I just hate that it robs Aster away from key moments when she could be enjoying our little girl, her laughter and play and sweetness.

Dess cuddles up to me, a perfectly content bundle.

How can anyone be annoyed by this? My baby girl seemed calm the whole day, but I had to take several meetings. Maybe Aster saw something I missed in her sensitive state, or maybe—

A knock at the door interrupts my thoughts. I go answer it with Destiny perched on my hip.

“Hey, Troy. Come on in.”

He’s damn near sunburned, looking like a college kid roughing it with his red skin and overgrown beard. His pearly white teeth beam at me as he walks in with a bulging duffel bag thrown over his shoulder.

“Thanks a million for letting me crash here, man. Beats the hell out of huffing it back to the sardine box room on the coffee farm.”

“No problem. Your tub flooded, you said? Christ.” I shake my head. “The hotel’s usually a decent stay. Make sure you let HR know when you get home so they can start scouting new places to send my employees when we make these trips. We could use a backup. I know how tight it gets in the peak season. Still, I don’t want my people having to deal with that after a long flight. It’s nothing to have you staying here with us, but of course I can’t open our place to everybody.”

He smiles knowingly. “I get it. I’m lucky you like me and you’re not just signing my checks.”

“Yeah, even if I still can’t figure out why,” I joke, slapping him on the back.

He winces. I realize I hit his sunburned shoulders and mutter an apology.

Aster shuffles up to the door. A rarity when she’s been trying all day to nap.

She never greets me at the door, even at home.

“Oh, hi, Troy.”

His eyes land on my wife. He greets her with the same almost goofy grin.

“Whoa. Aster, you look *lovely* tonight—” His eyes flick to me. “Doesn’t she, Cole? Lucky, lucky man.”

I offer her a respectful grin.

“She always does. No surprise.” I appreciate the hint. Things have been rougher than usual with Aster lately, and Troy was always more of a ladies’ man than me. Never shy about reminding a girl she’s beautiful, even if he knows full well she’s off limits.

“You know, I could use something for the headache. I’ll go make us some drinks,” Aster says matter-of-factly, giving me the first smile I’ve seen on her face all day.

“Let me give you a hand. Last time in Maui, the place I stayed had this swim-up bar with a cool twist on mai tais,” Troy says.

“You guys go ahead. I’ll keep the kiddo occupied.” I back away, letting him set his stuff down and head into the kitchen.

Aster looks at me and smiles over her shoulder as she follows him. “Thank you, Cole. I appreciate it.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. If it’s too hard on you, we can look for another nanny when we get back home,” I tell her.

“Sure.” She disappears into the kitchen to make drinks with Troy.

I slump down on the living room floor and play dolls with Dess, working through my range of bad, exaggerated cartoon voices and accents that make her laugh.

They’re gone longer than I expect, but Aster comes back holding a hefty silver tray of cocktails. There’s also a little mocktail with pineapple juice for Destiny in a sippy cup.

Dess grins and bounces up at the chance to be a “big girl.”

Her mom hands her the cup.

She wraps both her little hands around it—she tries, anyway—but the goblet slips out of her hand and splatters against the marble floor.

“Oh my God!” Aster screams, the pleasant look on her face gone in a red-faced flash. She looks at me with narrowed eyes. “Do you see? Now do you *see* why we can’t have another nanny quit on us?”

“Mama, I’m sorry!” Destiny bursts into tears.

“Aster, it was just an accident,” I say tightly. “Kids spill things all the time. Let me get it.”

I start moving toward the storage closet. I can still feel my wife glaring like it’s all my fault.

Fuck. These are the times when it’s hard to remember she’s sick, and not just being an asshole for the sake of assholery.

“Yeah, well, it’s easy for you to say when you’re not stuck at home every day with one walking accident after the next. I *wish* I had your company to manage,” Aster mutters.

Destiny wails louder, her little voice trembling. “P-pwease d-don’t be mad, Mommy. P-pretty pwese?”

Troy, lifesaver that he is, emerges from the kitchen with a roll of paper towels. I reach to tear off a handful and he bends down next to me, helping clean the mess.

“Hey, don’t worry about it, Cole. I’ve got this. It’s the least I can do,” he says with a wink.

We're head-to-head, blotting up the liquid and buffing the floor.

Once it's gone, I lift Dess in my arms, squeezing her gently so she knows it's not her fault.

I try like hell not to feel embarrassed.

Mostly, I feel horrible about Troy walking into our shitty family dynamic. There's a guest in my house cleaning up an accident made by my kid, all while her mom goes ballistic over nothing.

This isn't Troy's mess.

He shouldn't have to clean it up.

Still, I know he's just trying to play peacemaker, the good friend, because the women in my life are such high-maintenance. Though only one little lady does it gracefully.

Shit.

When we get back to the mainland, I've got to get Aster another nanny who can handle Aster's moods—even if I have to pay through the nose to put up with the rudeness. In her condition, my wife can't handle running after a small child all day. Deep down, I know she loves Dess just as much as I do.

I'm going to recommend a new round of counseling, too. There's a new psychiatrist from Phoenix who supposedly works miracles with light therapy and behavioral conditioning. If I have to fly him in for Aster once a week, so be it.

All kids spill things. They shouldn't have to worry about their parents hating them when mommy can't control her outbursts.

I won't give up, no matter how many messes I get to clean up.

Even if our entire marriage was almost predestined and arranged by family ties, I want to believe I can love her.

I can fall back in love with Aster, somehow.

If only so I can be the father and husband and shepherd my family deserves.



Present

THAT WAS THE LAST TIME.

The last argument.

The last time believing I could ever patch the holes in my family.

There wasn't a chance to get Dess a rock-solid nanny and there was no counseling when we got back to Seattle. Aster didn't make it that far.

Fuck, my head is throbbing.

I rip open my desk drawer and fumble around for the Tylenol bottle, tossing a couple pills down my gullet.

I know better than to let these memories wash over me, especially when they're triggered so easily by an old face I should've been prepared for.

They always leave me with a drumming headache. I go to the coffee machine on my sideboard, pop in a Wired Cup capsule, and pour two espresso shots to chase the painkillers.

The combination might not be optimal, but right now it's strong coffee or a proper drink.

Because Troy Clement is absolutely right, no matter what bad memories he dredges up.

Change is the only constant. Ever.

The change I need next is a bold new coffee that makes Wired Cup a brand people talk about again. I want people who have never stepped foot in our stores screeching about the campfire coffee on social media. I want my great grandpa's legacy reborn.

My team just needs to figure out how to make it happen.

I pick up the office phone and call Katelyn.

"Hey, Mr. Lancaster. What do you need?" she answers, cheerful as ever.

"Have we landed an interview with our new friend yet?"

"She can't come in before seven p.m."

My brows lift. "Why so late?"

"Ah, that. I couldn't get an answer out of her. She just said that if you wanted to see her, that's the only time she has available." There's a heavy pause on Kate's end. "Are you *sure* you want to do this?"

"Tell her I'll see her at seven. Today. Thank you." I slam the phone back in its cradle with my eyes flicking to the red-and-white pill bottle again.

I just wonder how big my headache will be by the time I'm done with this strange, infuriatingly gorgeous woman and the pile of absolute bullshit she seems determined to shovel into my life.



A LITTLE AFTER SIX, Kate comes strolling into my office.

The click of her heels doesn't feel like a mallet against my skull. The headache is better.

"Are you sure you don't want me or someone from HR to stick around?" she asks.

"Not necessary. I can handle a simple interview. I don't need either of you working so late to accommodate this little cactus. Go home to your family," I say.

"Mr. Lancaster—" She hesitates.

Damn. What am I in trouble for now?

"...it's just highly unusual to conduct an interview so informally this late. I worry her motives might be less than pure. If you don't have someone sitting in, it's going to be difficult to protect you."

"Protect me from what?" I cock my head.

"Erm—well—your very blunt tongue. What if you set her off like you did at the store?"

I throw back my head and laugh.

"Katelyn, please. I've handled a thousand interviews in my day. I can handle this night owl who wants to pluck out my tongue, too, but I appreciate your concern."

"Badger." She clears her throat. "Um, that's the animal Destiny gave her, right?"

I sigh. "I don't care what her spirit animal is. I just want to get this over with."

"Sounds like a hint someone should stay. Just to keep you on your toes, y'know?" She flashes a strained smile.

"I don't need a damn babysitter. I've got this."

"Sorry. If you insist—"

"I do." I throw her a heavy look. "For the last time, go home. Feed your kids and husband."

"Where's Destiny? You're usually not here this late. Has she eaten yet?"

I hold back a smile.

Annoying or not, I remember why I have the best staff when Kate Storm cares this much about my daughter.

I'm not sure Destiny and I ever would've come through Aster's demise as

well as we have without my team.

“I told her it’s pizza night with her friends. Thanks, though,” I say.

“I gotcha, boss. Okay, I’m out. Good luck!”

I have exactly two minutes to brace for that siren with her honey-sweet eyes and a spear for a tongue.

Then Eliza sails into my office wearing mildly faded jeans and a flannel button-down shirt. She looks like she just stepped off a shift at a wood mill.

Nice interview-wear. You look like a Pearl Jam fan circa 1990, I think bitterly.

Still, the fact that I agreed to speak with her this late tells her I’m willing to make certain accommodations if she can work her coffee magic.

I haven’t said a word, raking her with a silent, assessing look.

I’m braced for her attitude today.

Only, she’s so quiet today.

Her jaw drops slightly as her eyes move from my wall of windows to the aged wood molding above it. She inhales deeply and smiles like she doesn’t want to rip out my throat.

Are we making progress?

Her eyes scan up and down, flicking to the window wall and back to me again. “At least you look the part.”

“Pardon?” I snap.

“You know...stuck-up prince in his ivory tower, so above us mortals.” Her eyes move just above my head.

Hell. She’s found my grandfather’s trophies—a ghost from his time in this seat that I never had the heart to take down—even if I’m not particularly fond of his big game trophies.

“...is that real ivory? Holy hell. Don’t tell me you’re a poacher on top of everything else?”

Everything else? What did I do besides bark shit at her in the store?

Damn, I knew this wouldn’t be easy.

I’ve only known this woman for ten minutes while she berated me in my own coffee shop, and this joke of an interview isn’t starting off much better.

I try to soften my glare, nearly biting my tongue off.

“My late grandfather’s touch. They were mounted to the wall almost sixty years ago and never removed. Times were different then. Rest assured, chasing exotic animals isn’t my thing. I’ve donated millions to zoos and wildlife sanctuaries.” I don’t even know why I offer up that last part.

“Sixty years, huh?”

Yeah. I stare through her.

She thinks she’s an untouchable coffee badass, all because she roasted a decent brew?

This place oozes history across generations.

“I suspect you already know Wired Cup started with my great-great-grandfather, Winslow Lancaster, back when it was Noble Bean. We’ve been in this city for almost a hundred years—”

“Wow. Did gramps have a trophy wife to go along with his dead animals? I guess you had to come from somewhere...”

The mouth on her.

My eyes snap to her plush lips, far too aware of how tightly they purse when she looks at me.

Oh, hell. I shouldn’t be so hard, but my body isn’t used to such lip or having it come from a spitfire who looks like this.

The things I could do to shut her up in another time and place...

“For the record, the first endangered species didn’t come out until 1967 —”

“Yeah, good excuse,” she interrupts. “I hunt puppy dogs and string their teeth since they’re not endangered.”

Looks like I didn’t need my executive assistant or someone from HR to stay. I should have had someone from security sit in on the off chance she’s serious. This chick seems more psychotic by the second.

“Really? I suppose that explains the weekly missing dog posters I see tacked up in my shops then,” I tell her, pulling at my tie.

Her face falls.

“I was joking. *Prick*,” she adds under her breath.

“No need to make my dead grandfather part of your comedy routine. He’s been gone for twelve years.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize—”

“What? That stuck-up princes have feelings and families?” I drum my fingers against my desk.

She’s quiet for a few heady seconds, and I wonder if she’s about to get up and walk out.

“Yeah, that. I guess.” She pauses and looks down before meeting me with those big brown eyes again. “Sorry, can we try again?”

Can we?

At least she's honest and able to apply brakes to that attitude.

"Yes. If you'll start by telling me where you learned to make coffee like that concentrate you left in my store."

She folds her arms and leans forward.

"I could tell you, but...that's kind of my ace in the hole, isn't it? The whole reason you invited me in? I'm not sure why I should give up my source so easily..."

I swallow my frustration. My eyes are locked on hers and that smug little half smile.

"Do you know how job interviews typically work, Miss Angelo? I ask questions, and you answer. Preferably with ten times less snark."

She nods slowly. "Yeah, but I've never had an interview with a man who stole my intellectual property before we even agreed to meet."

Stole? Has she talked to an IP attorney?

"I'm not asserting any claim to ownership, even if your drink was negligently left on my property. I never cross certain ethical lines, whether you choose to believe me or not. You'll be fairly compensated—generously compensated, in fact—for any IP we agree to license or buy outright from you."

She looks at me for a tense second and then bursts into a fit of laughter.

"*What now?*" I bite off.

"You should have seen the look on your face. You were all—" She forms her mouth into an "oh" and presses a palm to each cheek. "You looked like the kid from *Home Alone*."

Badger witch.

"Are you done with playground insults? Hell, I called you in to let you know I'm not holding our personal tiff against you—quite the contrary."

"It wasn't personal," she throws back.

I blink at her. "What the hell would you call it then?"

She rolls her eyes and gives me a tired look. "I was annoyed at the way you treated an employee. If you want me to work for you, Lancaster, that rocky start isn't personal. It's a harbinger of things to come."

I glare at her, trying to understand.

She sighs. "If you always talk to hardworking baristas like that, then you'll talk to me the same way. But I'm not Wayne. I don't have a sick mother whose meds I desperately need to cover, so I won't put up with any crap. If I hate it here, I'm gone. I'd rather wind up homeless than deal with a

boss. No big deal when I already hang out there anyway.”

My brain tingles with questions like the pinprick pain after taking a blow to the face.

“Breathe, Miss Angelo. I’m no boss, so you can relax. Not most of the time, anyway,” I growl.

Her eyes go to the ceiling like she’s holding in more crap.

“Prove it.”

“My employees are like family. Ask any of them. You don’t even know me,” I say, though I’m already feeling like what she called me. *Boss*.

And did she say that guy’s working to pay for his mom’s medicine? What kind of short-fused jackass am I, making him fear for his job?

Of course, I didn’t really do anything, though.

The coffee sucked and I told him. I also made it clear that it wasn’t his fault.

She shrugs. “Family? Wow, you’re serious, aren’t you? I’ve never had a cup of coffee with ‘family’ who berated me for it being as exciting as iced water.”

I frown.

“You probably also don’t pay your family an average of eighteen dollars an hour to make your coffee. Wayne was never singled out—and again, his job is perfectly secure. When my own daughter has room for improvement, I point it out. Doesn’t mean I don’t care about her. It just means she can do better—and so can this company.”

“That makes a little sense. Still, I’m not sure I want to be contractually obligated to *do better* and answer to your attitude. So, you might want to consider that before this goes any further...”

The way she leans forward presses that flannel against her chest.

It’s pure hell keeping my gaze bolted to the challenge in her eyes, and not skipping down to her tits.

“You realize I’m the boss, right?” I ask quietly.

“You realize I haven’t signed anything?”

Touché.

Maybe I should just buy the existing recipe for a soul-crushing sum and send her on her merry way. She’s a firecracker, and the one I already have in my life still has to draw the line because I put a roof over her head.

Steepling my fingers, I try to cough up one last ounce of patience to deal with this woman without another screaming match. “Do you have other

coffees like that drink I found?”

“Like what?”

“Like the campfire scorched brew,” I say.

“Oh, I have tons of recipes. They’re all filed away for when I come back to them later or finally have a reason to put them to good use. What are you looking for?” she asks, caution in her tone.

Fuck. The way she hints at a litany of flavors means I do need her in my lab.

“A new taste to put the spark back in Wired Cup, Miss Angelo,” I say sharply, not giving a damn whether she finds the pun cheesy or not. “That’s why you’re here today. If you’re formally hired, your friend will get the bonus he was promised, and you’ll get an additional sign-on bonus as well, for starters.”

She shrugs. “Eh, you can give mine to Wayne. *If* I take the job, that is, but I’m not convinced yet that working for you would be worth it.”

My hand balls into a fist.

How is it this girl struts in here and bothers to pretend she cares about this interview when money clearly doesn’t move her?

“Why are you so intent on helping Mr. Wayne? Is he your boyfriend?” And why do I suddenly get this jealous inkling in my blood? This urge to send Wayne packing to an Oregon store with his mother’s needs taken care of? Somewhere far away from Badger girl?

“He’s my friend. He critiques my coffee. Also, he needs it more than I do.”

“Critique? I thought you didn’t need to *do better*?” I bite off.

“Well, his feedback is a lot different from yours. He knows coffee about as well as I do,” she says matter-of-factly.

I roll my eyes, a habit I must have picked up from Destiny.

“We own a significant chunk of the finest volcanic soil for growing coffee across seven different countries. Why do you keep saying I don’t know my bean?” I demand, leaning forward.

“Because. There was nothing wrong with the cup Wayne made that you had such a problem with.”

“I told you, it wasn’t his fault. It also wasn’t anything to write home about,” I snarl.

“I mean...the people who pop into Wired Cup for a pickup order aren’t looking to rave about their handcrafted coffee, right? They just need a fresh

cup to stay awake.”

Again, she puts our whole brand into words I wish weren't accurate.

“And I'm hoping you can help change that.”

“I *can*,” she says flippantly. “But do I want to?”

I glare, hating that I like her confidence.

“My coffee would shake up your brand. But I haven't said I'll let it. And there's one more thing you should know if you think you want me to work for you...” She trails off.

“What's that? Don't leave me in suspense.”

“I've thought it over and I'm just not fit to work in an office. I'm too stir-crazy. I can't handle being hunched over spreadsheets in a cubicle, even if you pay me in solid gold.”

“You're a VA. Isn't it the same kind of work?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “How did you know that?”

“Destiny looked you up online to help me prepare for the interview. I also had my executive assistant pull your background.”

“Whatever. Well, VAs do that work, but for me, it's only temporary and always remote. And part-time. I have a short attention span for screens. If it isn't coffee, I'm easily bored.” She looks away and sighs before meeting my eyes again. “To you, I'm sure that's a huge flaw. To me, it's *normal*.”

I lean back in my chair, swiveling away slightly as I catch the tiny hint of worry that creases her face the longer I'm silent.

“So it's a problem—” she starts, but I cut her off.

“You don't need to worry about that here, Miss Angelo. You'll be getting your hands dirty exclusively in the lab.”

“Lab?” she echoes.

“The research and development department is in the basement of this very building. They have a state-of-the-art laboratory set up, complete with a mock storefront to see how practical roasts are for the retail shops.”

She gasps.

Goddamn. Why does that sound have my fingers grasping the edge of my desk, shocked by how sexual it seems in my ears?

“Wait. You want me to work in an actual lab, trying out new brews all day, and...you'll pay me for that?” Her voice goes low, quiet, suspicious.

I relax, swiveling to face her again.

Now that I've got her attention...

“A hundred and twenty-five thousand to start. Based on your experience,

you'd qualify for a little more than our average senior development technician," I say.

The amber shimmer in her eyes when they catch the light annoys me, the dreams flaring in those wide, soulful eyes. I can't peel my gaze off her, dammit.

She mouths the number to herself again, her eyes going wide.

"Very funny. Now what's the catch?" she asks.

"Catch?" I repeat.

"This is too good to be true. There's always some awful fine print, isn't there?"

"It's not that good, and there's no hidden risk, I assure you." I pause, staring at her seriously, enjoying this talk with a human being rather than a walking attitude. "You make damn good coffee, Eliza Angelo. My company *needs* damn good coffee. Putting you in a cubicle would be a disservice to us both. If you can refine what was in that mason jar for commercial use, you'll have ample leeway to experiment to your heart's content. This company will even consider acquiring distinct brews from you at an additional licensing fee to compensate you for your talent."

She leans back in her chair with a loud breath. Her shoulders relax for the first time since she walked in.

"Wow. I'll admit that it *sounds* like a dream come true. Maybe I should quit calling you a spoiled prince?" There's that damnably sarcastic grin of hers again.

"That would be wise," I whisper.

"But you *were* Prince Jerkwad to Wayne."

"The not-boyfriend you keep mentioning every other sentence?" I tease, then instantly regret it.

"If only you weren't coffee shop Satan." A second later, she stuffs her hand over her mouth. "Sorry, I didn't mean to say that. Not out loud."

I snort.

"With everything else you've said, that's the last thing you should apologize for. I'll let it slide this time—if you tell me what the hell it is you want."

She looks down with a rolling shrug.

"Well. You're offering me something I've never even dreamed of. I didn't think such a job—basically doing my hobby, for pay—even existed. The other shoe has to drop sometime."

“You’re right,” I snap off, loving the startled flicker in her eyes. “Here’s that shoe coming down on you like a bug—you’ll be reporting directly to me. I’ll expect weekly updates.”

For a second, she’s frozen in abject horror.

I wonder if I’ve pushed my luck too far when she slumps back. It’s like part of her soul left her body in that sigh.

“I can’t do it,” she whispers, standing up abruptly and heading for the door.

“You can!” I growl after her.

Her hand is on the door handle when she turns to look at me.

“Why? Why should I sell myself out for *you*?” she hisses.

“Because I dare you, Miss Angelo.” I step forward, rounding my desk. I don’t stop moving until we’re barely an inch apart and I’m leering down at her. “I dare you to step outside your comfort zone, for once. You’re not a risk taker. You’re a creature of habit, and it’s a goddamned shame that you let that hold you back from your full worth.”

The anger on her face fades as she swallows loudly.

For the briefest second, my senses roam her. I devour her shape, her scent, and that soft mahogany glow in her eyes that’s so magnetic I have to work to keep my gaze there. If she were any closer, my teeth would be buried in that soft pink bottom lip she juts out, severe and conflicted.

Doesn’t she understand just how fucking hard this is for me, too?

“Swallow for me,” I growl, quickly adding, “Swallow your damn pride, I mean. And I assure you, I’ll do the same, Miss Angelo. Work with me for even a few months. Share your gift. Get paid handsomely.”

I want so badly to reach out—to touch her—but I fuse my hands into my pockets.

Her face reddens. She looks at me with something like humility.

I’ve never seen anyone nod so slowly.

Hell, I half expect her to lunge at me and slap me across the face—*here’s your deal*—but instead, she lifts her chin and says, “Two.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Two hundred thousand dollars. I consider that fair compensation for putting up with—well, *you*, Cole Lancaster.”

Maybe she’s right. My sudden smile certainly makes me feel like the fucking devil.

“Done, Miss Angelo.”

Without a startled double take, she looks at me in grim silence.
I like the way this girl operates.
I also enjoy the way my name rolls off her barbed tongue.
Why do I get the terrible feeling that a sick part of me won't mind being
scratched raw by her words a few more times?

GOOD MORNING CUP (ELIZA)



My head might spin right off.
I'm panicked at what I just agreed to.

A dare? A flipping *dare*?

On the one hand, this *is* a dream come true. On the other, Boss McGrumpyface is going to be an absolute donkey and a half to work for.

My stomach lurches like a frappe in the blender.

I can't pass this up. Dakota would smack me silly if I did, and so would Wayne.

Worse, Lancaster's words *resonated*. Without even knowing me, he read my mind.

It's just a little sacrifice, isn't it?

And a chance to prove myself to this cocky fart wrapped in a suit.

If I just work in R & D for a year, I can do anything I want to after that...

Not to mention, it would be nice to make rent for once without dipping into listing old clothes on Poshmark. I'm running out of things to sell.

"I trust we have a deal?" he asks, undeterred by the awkward lump in my throat that's stolen my voice.

Ugh. I still can't believe I'm actually doing this.

"So you *want* me to work for you? For real?"

The longer he studies me, the faster my brave face crumbles.

"I thought that was clear?" he whispers, motioning me to sit back down.

I watch him sit up in his seat, a proud peacock of a man.

He writes something on a piece of paper and slides it across his desk. I glance at the number he's crossed out and rewritten with his initials next to it.

It's a contract.

For two-hundred thousand freaking dollars.

All for something I've been doing for free ever since I was old enough to drive.

Yeah, I need the smelling salts and a nice long nap. Or at least a primer on how people handle winning jackpots.

"I might, um, need a minute to think about this...just to be totally sure."

A line forms in his forehead. Those dark-brown brows pull down in confusion. "You make more than that as a part-time assistant, Miss Angelo?"

"It's not the money," I whisper. "It's a mammoth decision."

"True. I'd offer you dinner to help you talk it out, but we have a strict HR policy against fraternization outside the office this late and in these circumstances."

Oh, God.

Why does that hot look in his eyes say he wishes that policy were different?

Why do my toes scrunch up in my shoes?

"There's one more thing. It's not the compensation package." I blank out. It's hard to ask with a straight face while my cheeks burn, especially because when he's not talking he's kind of delicious.

If he weren't a total buffalo dick who wasn't a breath away from being my boss, maybe I'd take him up on that imaginary dinner someday.

The sly smile etched on his face doesn't help.

"What else do you want? Spit it out, Miss Angelo. I have to get home sometime tonight."

Rude. But in fairness, I am holding him up.

"Wayne deserves an apology when he gets that bonus. And you should thank him for keeping that store running. Lord knows it'd be in much worse shape without him," I rush out.

For a second, he's dead silent.

"Let me get this straight. You'll walk away from two hundred big if I don't have a heart-to-heart with a random barista?" His eyes lance through me.

I smile and nod and try not to laugh hysterically at my own insanity.

"Why?" he spits.

"Remember how I told you earlier that if you talk to him like that, you'll talk to me like that?"

“I didn’t talk to him like *anything*. The coffee sucked and it had everything to do with the recipe—not his technique, which seems unimpeachable.” Lancaster tilts his chair back, pinching the bridge of his nose like he’s finally had enough. “At the risk of you flipping me off and running out the door—this is a ludicrous condition.”

Stay strong.

It certainly feels like lifting weights to plaster on a neutral smile.

“To you,” I throw back. “To me, it’s important. I might make a bad batch of coffee through no fault of my own. I mean, it’s pretty natural when you’re experimenting. But even if it’s not the beans or the equipment or the recipe, everybody has a bad day sometimes. Everybody human.”

His eyes glaze over, shiny arctic blue when they’re angry.

“For the last time, the bland drink wasn’t his fault. What’s the point of this?”

If he had a tail, it’d be slapping the ground in frustration.

I stare, never softening my ghost of a smile. “Because, Mr. Lancaster. If we’re crystal clear now, then we won’t need to talk this out later when one of us has a bad day. No condescension. No talking down. No bossypants.”

“Bossypants?” He glares at me. “I’ll apologize to the damn barista if you’ll sign the contract. Anything else?”

Holy hell.

...I never expected him to agree.

I shake my head, which suddenly feels ten pounds lighter.

He looks down at the neatly clipped paper packet on his desk. “Will you sign the contract now? I’ll have it over to my legal team by morning.”

“Not just yet.” I point to the phone on his desk and give him a sad look. “I’m pretty sure Wayne is working right now...”

“Right now-right now? You’re serious? You want me to call so you can witness my humiliation?”

“How else would I know?” I ask softly.

“Wouldn’t Not Boyfriend tell you?” His death stare threatens to light my hair on fire.

“He’s *not* my boyfriend.” I’m thoroughly annoyed at how hard I deny it. “We’re busy people. Unless I pop into the store, I only really see him when I’m ordering coffee or serving breakfast at the homeless camp. Since I’ll be developing coffee, I might as well just get my morning coffee here too, don’t you think?”

That bulging, powerful fist on his desk tightens.

“Angelo, we haven’t even spent an hour together and I already don’t like you. It normally takes a few encounters for me to despise people.”

“Oh, good. I was worried it was just me. The feeling’s mutual.”

With a frustrated rumble, he rips up the phone and stabs at the buttons, dialing the number before he sets it down again. “Store’s closed. Wrong timing.”

“Oh! Well, lucky for you, I have his number in my contacts somewhere. Give me a sec...” I reach for my phone and pull up Wayne’s number, then pass it across the desk.

Lancaster glares at me as he punches the CALL button hard enough to crack my screen.

“Careful! You owe me a new phone if that comes back damaged...”

His eyes could flay me alive.

“Is this Wayne from the Seventh Street store?” he asks.

I try not to explode laughing. He sounds like a naughty kid being forced to apologize to the neighbor for leaving dog poop in their yard.

“This is Cole Lancaster. Listen, I wanted to apologize just in case my critiques of the new beverage line were overly harsh during the recent inspection.” He goes quiet, listening intently. “Yes. Right. Good. I’m certainly glad to hear there are no hard feelings...”

By the time he mutters a few more awkward words, I almost feel bad for enjoying how much he squirms.

Lancaster ends the call and chucks the phone back at me. “Sign the damn contract. Now. I’ll expect you here at six a.m. sharp tomorrow morning.”

“Okay. I need a pen.” I can barely get the words out between the laughter trying to claw its way up my throat.

He practically throws a fat, expensive-looking fountain pen with his initials engraved in shiny platinum at me.

I slash my name across the paper without pointing out his obscene taste in pens.

I suppose I’m feeling generous.

“FYI, I do my best brewing at nine,” I tell him, twisting in my seat.

“You’ll learn to do it at six.” His glare knifes through me. “See you then, Miss Angelo. Welcome the hell aboard.”

Woof. Why do I get the feeling he won’t be much friendlier no matter how bright and early I show up?

“See ya soon, boss.” I snicker as I slide the contract over, lift my purse, and walk out the door.



YESTERDAY, WHEN HE SAID “LAB,” I honestly thought it was just a fancy name for a back-room roastery.

But this place is shock and awe from the second I step inside.

Imagine a fancy CDC lab and NASA unit having a baby dedicated to inventing addictive beverages. It’s stainless steel and sleek machinery perched on marble everything as far as the eye can see.

Every contraption a master roaster could ever want in their wildest fever dreams. There’s high-tech equipment for weighing, measuring, temp testing, chemical analysis, and more.

My two-thousand-dollar coffee equipment at home feels like Stone Age technology.

With gear like this, I *know* I can make better coffee—and maybe a cure for cancer while we’re at it.

A middle-aged woman not much taller than me with short curly hair appears at my side. “You must be Eliza. Hello.”

I smile. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“Gina Walker. I’m the head of research and development.” She holds out her hand.

I shake her hand. “Awesome to meet you.”

“Likewise. It’s not every day a fresh face handpicked by Mr. Lancaster personally shows up to join us. I’m here to help you settle in. Let me show you to your desk.” She leads me to a cubicle. “We don’t spend a lot of time at our desks, but you have a computer and drawers. It’s good to check your emails whenever you can. Sometimes you’ll be testing all day, and that’s fine. Just log it as you come in and out.” She picks up a clipboard full of lab sheets. “These go to the testing stations with you, so you can record everything. It’s important to log each step, ingredient, and device used. If we don’t record it, we can’t repeat it, and we certainly can’t rely on our overworked brains to remember.”

Harsh, but sensible. I nod.

I’ve definitely had my memory hole days where I brewed up the perfect

drink and then couldn't replicate it to save my life.

Even if everything here is beyond futuristic, I'm always down for improving my technique.

"Everything happens here," Gina continues. "Roasting. Mixing. Brewing. Literally everything. There's a place to record observations at the bottom as well. These sheets need to be scanned in daily to keep us current on what works and what doesn't. But if you're still working late, it's no big deal as long as they're all in the system by Friday."

I put my purse in my drawer and grab my clipboard. Maybe too eagerly.

Gina smiles. "Excited to get started, huh?"

"You have no idea. At the risk of sounding like a huge dork, coffee is my *life*."

"You're in good company then." She laughs. "Let me show you where the beans are..."

We walk back to the lab area, where there are huge floor-to-ceiling storage compartments with hermetically sealed covers. They're all brimming to the top with various beans listed from lightest roast to darkest. Notes about their chemical composition and origins are on the labels, too.

Gawking, I lift one of the covers and inhale the freshest scent I've ever smelled because it's so good.

For a second, I wonder if I got flattened by a bus the day I walked out of that store after colliding with Lancaster. Because I'm in heaven.

Gina hands me a small container full of freshly roasted Sumatran beans.

"Mr. Lancaster said you made some unusually delicious coffee in a mason jar. He requested we start with that, if it's okay with you."

"I'm happy to show you, but I brewed it over a campfire. Any idea how we would replicate that in the lab?"

"Interesting." She taps her chin, thinking. "We'll fire up a grill for starters. If you need to, you can put the kettle directly on the flame. What kind of wood do you need?"

I grin.

There are long days and happy days in life.

Miraculously, this is about to be both.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Gina stops by and finds me stirring the pot.

“Smells intense! Is it ready for a taste test?” she whispers, adjusting her glasses.

“I think so.” I ladle a cup for myself and take a cautious sip. I smile as the brew nips at my tongue. “Yep, ready!”

I ladle out a second cup for Gina.

She takes a tiny sip at first and then a bigger one.

“...is that a hint of bourbon? This is amazing.”

“No actual bourbon, but it does have notes like something that came out of an aged barrel.” I grin proudly while she sucks down the rest of her drink.

Only a few hours on the clock and I’m already feeling accomplished.

That’s a rare thing for sure. Of course, if we spent all day drinking our samples, we’d be so wired we wouldn’t be able to function.

But clearly, she can’t help herself with this one. I can tell she’s giddy before the caffeine even gets into her system.

I expect her to ask for another cup, but instead she says, “I’m going to call the lab techs over. Everyone should taste this stuff. Be right back.” She takes a couple of steps and looks back over her shoulder. “Awesome first day, Eliza.”

Be still, my heart.

A few minutes later, Gina returns with half a dozen people. I serve them each a cup, and they all compliment my coffee with surprising sincerity.

“Would you be offended if I use cream and sugar? It has a complex flavor, but it’s very strong,” one woman asks.

“No. Fix it however you like. You’re the one drinking it.”

“Thanks! I’m Chrissy, by the way.”

“Eliza,” I say.

“We all know who you are. I’m Ryan,” another tech says. He slurps his coffee and gives a fast thumbs-up. “This is bussin. Don’t think I’ve ever had fire-brewed coffee before.”

I’m flipping blushing.

“I know. The first time I tasted the difference, I was shocked. I’m thinking I’ll call it s’mor’ofee or something.” I smile awkwardly. “Or maybe I’d better leave that part to marketing.”

Chrissy laughs. “Oh, like s’mores coffee? I love it.”

“Hm, one problem. How do you think you’ll replicate this in a store without safety issues? Having the flame seems pretty key.” Ryan asks.

I freeze. It's an honestly good question.

"We could make a concentrate. Though nothing beats the taste when it's piping hot," I say, racking my brain for options.

"Liquid concentrate or powder?" Gina asks, peering at me over her glasses.

"Uh, I've only ever done liquid." I sip my coffee slowly. "Honestly, I don't know how to make a powder concentrate..."

Everyone looks up then. For a second, I think they're stunned silent at my ignorance.

Nope. I'm not that lucky.

A walking coffee curse is moving toward us on long legs stuffed into trousers so expensive they make my skin crawl.

The friendly crowd scatters like birds, clearing a path for Cole Lancaster to come stalking through.

Ugh.

"What are you doing here?" I bite off.

He scoffs. "Last I checked, I owned the place. Including this military-grade coffee lab."

"Oh, boy, here we go." I roll my eyes. "You just can't describe anything without sounding like a Bond villain, huh?"

"Mrs. Walker emailed me, gushing about how good your coffee is. I decided to show up for a personal taste test," he says bluntly.

Gina comes closer to the pot and takes the ladle.

"No. Let Miss Angelo do the honors," he orders, holding up a hand. "No sense in stealing her thunder, after all."

I bite my tongue so hard it'll be sore later.

He closes the space between us, waiting expectantly for me to pour his coffee, his eyebrow raised in that smug godfatherly way.

Definitely supervillain vibes.

And I'd rather brew coffee for every cartoon bad guy ever invented than give Cole damn Lancaster the satisfaction of taking a piping hot cup from my hands.

He's clearly enjoying this, his brow quirked in just the right way that makes him ten times more annoying and somehow more gorgeous—which only makes him even *more* annoying.

Double ugh.

What the hell makes him think I want to waste my time serving him

coffee? I guess being King Dick makes him think everyone should trip over each other for the privilege?

I wish I could serve up a super-concentrate strong enough to choke that look off his face.

For now, I toss a steaming ladle of black liquid into a paper cup and thrust it into his hand. I hope it melts right through the container.

“Enjoy,” I snap.

He winks.

He freaking *winks* at me.

And he takes his sweet, sweet time sipping from the cup, holding the liquid in his mouth so reverently you’d think I just handed him the cure for old age.

Also, I hadn’t noticed how full his lips are around that halo of beard that looks like it would scratch just right.

Not until now.

Like I *needed* to notice that.

He holds the scalding liquid in his mouth, turning it over, ice-cold calm and assessing. The man towers over me, an intimidating beast even when his shields are down mid-sip.

My eyes are stuck to him now—glued to his broad chest and the wild ripples of muscles that become more visible every time he moves, pulling the silk suit tautly against him.

God, I *hate* how attractive he is.

I extra hate how he’s in my space.

I triple hate how his lips move as he rolls his tongue inside his mouth, making me imagine all the awful things that tongue could do besides make my blood pressure skyrocket.

This feels like the longest coffee sampling ever.

Of course it is.

When Lancaster finally swallows, I wonder what year I’m in.

“Divine, Miss Angelo.” His unexpected compliment almost makes the torture worth it. “Though even Prometheus had to bring his gift down from the gods.”

“Come again?”

“Prometheus. A Greek god who—”

“I know Prometheus, professor!” I snap. “What does that have to do with my coffee?”

He chuckles. “How are we mass producing this wonder-brew for the people?”

“Wait. You just had to bring in the Greeks to ask about production?”

“A little mythology reference never hurt—”

“So, instead, you were confusing *and* pretentious? Nice. Also, we were discussing how to mass produce it when you came rolling through,” I tell him.

If I’m hoping to get under his skin, he doesn’t bite.

“What did you come up with?” he asks neutrally.

“We were considering the fire issue,” Gina starts, but the bear in a suit holds up his hand.

“I want to hear it from Miss Angelo, Mrs. Walker. After all, she knows coffee better than me.”

I look at Gina, who seems bewildered, and glare at him for not noticing.

What the actual hell? Why is he such a hardass?

“The team has two thoughts,” I say, careful to credit everyone. “Gina says we could try a powder concentrate—”

“And do you think concentrate would be worth serving to my customers?” Lancaster asks coldly.

“I’ve dealt with concentrates before. They’re not bad, but not always perfect.”

“A shame. I’d rather have perfect,” he snaps.

Wouldn’t we all, Mr. High and Mighty?

“My other idea might be expensive. What if we looked at installing some sort of grill in the stores? Even if it was just a glorified Bunson burner with wood chips, that could do it,” I say, rolling it over in my head as I speak.

“I’ll have to check with the supply team, but there’s no reason it couldn’t work,” Gina adds.

“There’s one,” he says.

“What’s that?” *And more importantly, do you have a better solution?* But I don’t say it out loud.

“I can’t add burners to every store just for a new beverage line,” he says. “It’s impractical.”

“How much is a small grill?” I ask.

Gina pulls out her phone and starts tapping the screen. “They’re not expensive. We can get a good one installed for under three hundred dollars.”

“Per store,” the Grumpfather finishes, scowling.

“Do you trust the drinks or not?” I ask point blank. “Because if they’re truly good, you’ll make that back per store before the first day is over...”

“You’re not factoring in the installation costs. Plus, most of the barista bars don’t have the space. It doesn’t matter, though. One new gourmet product isn’t enough to satisfy my vision.”

“So, what do you want then?” I ask.

“Nothing less than a whole line of these scorched drinks, paired with food. The barbecued coffee shrinks its production cost if it wins us better sell-through of other items. That brings us back to perfection. Every last one of the drinks will have to be perfect to attract new customers.” He inhales sharply like he’s watching it all unfold in his head. “Also, I’d like the updates directly from you, Miss Angelo.”

“Me? Why?”

“This is your baby. Gina may be your immediate manager, but I want you to own it,” he says.

“But Gina gets paid to deal with you. That’s what management is for, right?”

Behind us, a few of the lab techs still standing around snicker.

They’re gone the instant his glare falls on them, though.

Then he turns the evil eye on me, like he wants to say something, but he’s holding back. “You don’t need to fret over the chain of communication. I said I want updates from *you*.”

The way he emphasizes that last word sends a shiver up my spine, like two strong fingers sliding across my skin.

“Don’t you have a meeting to go to? Or something?” I add desperately.

“I’m *in* a meeting.”

Eep. I swallow the lump building in my throat.

“I bet you have more important people than me to talk to, so by all means, feel free. We’ll keep making progress, boss.” I smile sweetly, hoping he’ll believe me.

Nope.

That’s when I realize we’re alone. And he doesn’t waste a single second before he moves closer and brings his lips to my ear.

“Not while I have this new employee whose big brain comes with a bigger mouth. If I don’t get her broken in, she’ll trample my authority. That shit won’t fly.”

Oh, God. Why does my heart feel like a trapped hummingbird?

“I-I feel your pain,” I stammer, trying to pull myself together. “I work for a guy who acts like he’s a mafia kingpin rather than a guy who sells caffeinated drinks. He has a lot of bad habits. He’s rude and annoying and forgets he’s a paper pusher, not a drill sergeant—”

“Watch that mouth, Angelo. Paper pushers don’t make multi-million-dollar decisions every day. Have you been talking to Destiny?”

“Destiny?” I jolt away from him, realizing he was brushing my shoulder. Holy hell, the *heat* he leaves behind...

“Don’t lie for her. Did my daughter put you up to giving me hell?”

I blink. “Umm—are you okay? Why would I be goofing off with your teenage daughter?” I laugh at the absurdity. “When would I even talk to her?”

He shrugs one shoulder, his face back to his default ice-cold mask.

“She called me a drill sergeant the other day.”

“Oh, so I’m not the only one who noticed? Unbelievable.”

He rolls his sky-blue eyes with a low growl vibrating his huge chest.

For a second, I wonder if he’d make the same noise in very different circumstances. The pleasant kind where a woman frustrates him with more than words, where she drops to her knees and opens his pants and reaches in to find out just how big that ego is and—

“The point is I need another scorched drink by the end of this week,” he clips. “Show me you’re worth a senior salary and the two bonuses for the barista,” he says.

“Is that supposed to be intimidating?” If so, challenge accepted.

I fold my arms, staring defiantly at that grump-tastic face of his.

“There’s no way you’ll come up with another scorched drink this good in three days, no matter how talented you are.”

“Another dare? That might’ve worked to lure me in here, but now it’s getting boring.” I laugh bitterly. “Bad news, Grumpfather.”

“What?” He leans forward, his eyes shifting slowly side to side.

He was already too close to me. Now, I can smell him, hints of worn leather and citrus and something almost animalistic.

Lancaster makes it so hard to force him to eat his own words. *Annoying.*

And I hate that I kinda like the way he towers over me.

“Remember how I mentioned recipes—plural—in the interview?” I pause, waiting for him to nod. “I have like twenty pages of drinks like this.”

“Bull. Who keeps a recipe book full of scorched drinks?”

“Your big mouth new hire, apparently.”

“Let it go,” he whispers, pushing closer again, eyeing a few techs moving around us within earshot. “Naturally, I was joking.”

“I could, but y’know—I won’t.”

“I’m ordering you to let it go then.”

I laugh. “Ordering me?”

“As your boss, I’m suggesting in the strongest possible terms that you wipe that conversation from your head.” He glowers at me.

“Or what? You’ll like fire me already?”

“It would be a dreadful loss,” he says, all hot breath in my ear.

Oh, God, I’m tingling.

Tingling from head to toe as I lean into him.

We’re so close now it *hurts*.

We’re almost touching.

“Make the next one a speciality drink,” he says, inhaling slowly like he’s—wait, is he smelling me?

I don’t know how I keep standing.

“*What?*” I mouth silently because I can’t find my voice.

“I need a drink I can charge more for, Miss Angelo, like a mocha or latte. Since you’re bored with beginner challenges, perhaps you’ll find this more to your level.”

Oof. So maybe I was born with a big mouth after all.

“But—”

“Oh, so that’s not in the recipe book, is it?” His thin, arrogant smile could devour me. “Have fun. I’ll be back soon to try my mocha. Or will it be a latte or shaken drink? Surprise me.”

I’ve never wanted to kick another human being so badly.

Especially when his puffed up arrogance only makes him *hotter* in that evil villain way.

“See you then,” I say, forcing it out without a hint of fear.

“Really? You sound so confident?” He looks surprised.

“Everything I’ve ever come up with was in my living room, using secondhand equipment in a space no bigger than a closet. Now I’m in a beautiful lab with the best stuff mega-money can buy and three full days to experiment. There’s no reason I can’t have a new drink by Friday that’s so good you’ll whimper.”

Our eyes connect for what feels like forever.

I watch his muscular throat moving, swallowing, like he’s drinking me in.

Or maybe he's just checking whether or not I have a death wish.

"Make me cry then, Miss Angelo," he throws back.

Then he turns and exits without another glance.

As he leaves, I realize we have an audience again. The lab techs are staring, but no one says anything.

Finally, Gina speaks. "That was—interesting. I see you already have a dynamic with the big boss."

She's too polite.

"Sorry," I say. "I didn't mean to distract anyone."

Slowly, she adjusts her glasses. "...should I go talk him down, or will you really have something by Friday?"

"I'll have something, all right. Trust me." If it sucks, the taste test will just be more fun, I guess. "I just need a little time to hash it out," I add.

I jog back to my cubicle and collapse in my office chair.

Why is it so hard for me to just shut up?

I've never had a good brain-to-mouth filter, but something about this guy makes me extra fluent in sarcasm.

Another screaming sign he's trouble incarnate.

The kind you need to keep a good six feet away from at all times to remain healthy.

Even if he wasn't my off-limits boss, I wouldn't give him the time of day. Not if I had a functioning brain.

Do I still have one?

Sometimes, I wonder.

Eliza, you've been down this road before. You and classy older men swarming with secrets do not mix, my brain reminds me.

Thanks, brain, but I'm not getting lost down memory lane right now. I need a new freaking s'mores drink by Friday.

I can't lose another dare to Cole freaking Lancaster.

His smug victory lap would humiliate me for life.

With his stupid cocky face lodged in my mind, I spend the rest of my first day Googling the ingredients in a dozen different types of marshmallows.

He should've known it the second I took this job.

I won't go down easy.

POUR ME S'MORE (COLE)

With Destiny turning in early for the night, I hunker down in my home office, checking emails and still hounded by thoughts of that insufferable woman.

Somehow, I'm smiling when I notice I have a new lab report from Eliza waiting in my email.

No acid message this time, dripping with sarcasm. Just the summary.

I shouldn't care about these damnable emails anyway. She's just another employee—even if she's an enormously valuable one holding the key to the company's future.

Only, I do.

For some unholy reason, they've become the highlight of my overgrown jungle of an Inbox. Over the last three days she's worked for me, I've started anticipating them like a kid waiting for Christmas morning.

Her lack of any bullshit in the emails surprises me.

She's trying to be all business, buttoned down and boringly polite.

Good for her. For everyone's sake.

But fuck, I just can't be that gracious. Can't resist the urge to rib her a little more.

Consider it justified payback for our last encounter, which undoubtedly gave the lab personnel a month's worth of gossip.

How's my mocha coming along? I hit reply.

Miss Angelo's response comes a minute later. *Peachy. I'm just working out some kinks now.*

I glance at the time. It's after ten o'clock at night and she's still working?

I frown, remembering that the main security force changes over to a skeleton crew at ten. That means nothing but cameras in the attached parking garage.

A hundred unlikely scenarios flash through my head, each more terrible than the last. Does she stay this late because I made it personal?

Damn. Maybe I shouldn't have thrown down the gauntlet in front of half the development team. If only she weren't being such a fiery little smartass...

With a sigh, I pick up my phone and punch her contact.

"Hello?" She sounds surprised she's getting a call this late.

"It's fine if you want to postpone the next tasting until next week. You're a new employee. I don't seriously expect you to strike coffee gold multiple times in one week," I tell her flatly.

"Does that mean you're scared, Mr. Lancaster?" she throws back, a fluttery laugh at the edge of her voice. "What? Are you worried you'll look bad because you told me no one could come up with a second scorched drink in three days?"

The mouth on this girl.

I feel my lip curl with amusement and disgust.

"Hardly, but it's well past standard work hours and you must have pulled a sixteen-hour day. Are you still at the lab?"

"...it's either do it here or carry on with the basic setup I have at home, but we both prefer the high-end stuff. So, yeah."

"Go home, Miss Angelo." My hand slaps my desk.

"Not yet. Busy."

"Obviously, I have high expectations, but I don't expect you to sacrifice sleep. I've never seen anything good come out of my staff when they're worn raw. Get some rest. We'll do the testing next week." I clench my jaw, hoping like hell she listens *just once*.

"Jeez, you say it like you'll come and tuck me in personally."

For a second, I stop breathing.

My brain descends into this terrible hell where I'm hovering over Eliza Angelo like a vampire, stripped bare with nothing but a sheet over her.

Goddamn. Tucking her in would be my last choice in those circumstances.

"Miss Angelo, please—" I start, but she cuts me off.

"You don't understand. I'm having fun. Sometimes I do my best work when it's late and quiet and my mind isn't overloaded like it is during the

day. I brewed like this at home, too.”

Frankly, I don't give a shit if she turns into a genius night owl. I don't want her walking through that garage alone.

“Not the point. You shouldn't be at the office so late. It's unconventional for anyone who's not on the security team.”

“Aren't there cameras everywhere? You don't have to worry about me robbing you, Lancaster.”

I hold in a snort.

“Woman, you're a piece of work. That's the furthest thing from my mind and you know it.”

“Yeah? So, what are you worried about then?” She truly doesn't get it.

Fuck.

“I'm concerned about *you* walking to your car in the dark. Security pares down to a handful of people after ten. You shouldn't be there by yourself, especially leaving the building alone.” I realize how ridiculous I must sound.

“You're in luck. I usually bike or take the bus,” she says.

“That's even worse,” I snarl, pressing my hand into a fist.

“How nice of you to grow a conscience. Unfortunately, my drill sergeant boss wants another scorched drink by the end of the week. Where will I develop it if I'm not here? Oh, and by the way, can I just say that has to be like the worst working name ever? Remember the last time you went to a café and ordered burnt coffee? But, hey, you're the bossman. Who am I to argue with Commander Coffee?”

“Badger Lady, do you ever shut it?”

“No—and did you just call me a badger?” She sounds surprised.

“Not my call. Destiny said you were a honey badger after the incident at the shop on seventh. She said you tore me apart without a care in the world.”

“Smart girl, Captain Coffee. Guess you did one thing right, raising her.”

I can't hold back anymore, chuckling deeply into the phone.

“I'm fifteen years deep, so I suppose I'll keep her. Also, I thought I was Commander Coffee? Did you just promote me?”

“Just changed my mind. You're a pretty big jerkwad sometimes. But you need to come up with something better than 'scorched drinks' for a name.”

“That's what I have Marketing for. They'll pick better names that resonate when we're ready for that stage. In the meantime, I'll come up with the code words in development. I'm still the CEO.”

“Okay, Moby Dick. I have to go.”

“Wasn’t Moby the goddamned whale?” I ask, bewildered.

“You’re right about one thing—it’s too late to discuss literature with you. Now, do you want your new scorched drink or not? I need to do a quick taste test and hope it’s not as burnt as the name says.”

“Miss Angelo, sign off. Go home now. Or else I’ll start restricting lab access for everyone as part of a new security policy.”

She gasps. For a solid ten seconds, she’s silent.

“Why are you so worried? You’re scaring me, Lancaster. I might think you actually do care,” she says, her voice so small.

“I care about the quality of my *product*—that involves your health and safety,” I grind out, turning my face away from the phone

Shit.

Way to play the grade-school, tugging-on-the-cute-girl’s-pigtails game.

I clear my throat before I continue. “I care deeply about my employees’ well-being, of course. Until now, I never had to worry about my lab people staying so late. There are also liability issues. Insurance is hideously expensive.”

“*What-ever*. Softie.” She laughs loudly again and hangs up.

I slump back in my chair with a groan.

I think the most annoying woman ever born is onto me.



THE NEXT DAY, I’m back in my office with a steaming black Americano at my side, reviewing a proposal.

I’ve got a meeting in less than two hours, and I need to close this out.

The deafening *knock* at my door doesn’t care.

“Who is it?” I yell back.

I don’t need more interruptions right now.

The door swings open. Katelyn Storm stands behind Destiny with an exasperated look.

Dess stares at the floor with the same sheepish face I’ve seen a thousand times.

“Do I want to know?” I fold my arms, knowing what’s up before I even ask.

Something’s wrong.

Kate crosses her arms, and from her posture, I can already tell she's set to give me hell. "You know I have twin boys, right?"

"I'm aware," I say slowly.

"They did the whole job shadowing thing a few months ago. Only, they don't listen to me and they're pure chaos together. They had to choose a place where their parents don't work, and they couldn't choose the same place because I guess no one deserves that," Kate says without taking a breath.

"Okay?" I'm not sure where this is going, but I know it's nowhere good.

"So, one son was Microsoft's problem while his brother went off to harass Alaska Airlines. But my employer—aka, *you*—didn't have the foresight to make his kiddo someone else's problem. Now, what I don't understand is why *I'm* being punished for it."

Fuck. Because I thought my daughter could handle this job without piling misery on my poor EA?

"What did you do?" I give Destiny a stern look.

Her head darts up like a deer hearing a rustle in the brush, her lower lip protruding.

"Um. *Nothing.*"

My eyes shift to Kate, knowing it's *something*, or they wouldn't be here.

"She's not lying, actually," she says with a soft smile for Dess. "That's what she did. Absolutely nothing. But now the filing isn't done because you told me she needed stuff to do, so I saved a week's worth of it for her. When I came back, everything was still boxed up just like I left it."

My eyes fall on my daughter, watching her face turn into a tomato.

"Anything else, Katelyn?" I ask.

"Well, one more thing." She strides forward, leaning over my desk with a whisper. "She took off for a two-hour lunch earlier. I'm not sure where she went, because there's nowhere around here where you can lounge around and eat for hours without someone trying to turn you out for table space."

I look behind her, again fixing my eyes on Destiny.

"Just thought you'd want to know. I'm going to go catch up on the filing. I'll leave you two to talk it out." My assistant retreats with her usual tact, knowing when to leave things in my hands.

My gaze on Dess hardens.

"Explain yourself," I say.

She sucks in a deep, frustrated breath, no doubt spinning teenage half-

truths by the second. “Okay. So, like, don’t be mad, but I was going to this new pizza place just past Pier 67 and the fancy hotel, but I stopped by the ferries to Canada and there was this cluster of baby seals. They were all—” She pauses, imitating fins with her arms. “*Arf, arf, arf! Take a picture with me—*”

Goddamn.

It’s torture keeping a straight face. She might be fifteen, but she’ll always be an adorable little girl to me, and her seal impression doesn’t help me stay mad.

Still, I *try* like hell not to laugh, pressing my lips together into a thin line.

“So, um, I had to take pictures with them. I threw them up on Instagram and I got over a hundred likes and comments before I even left! I was there for over an hour, Dad, so by the time I got to the pizza place...it was late and I was starving, okay? And like how important can these files be if they’re not even digital? Why does your company still have so much paper?”

I suck in a breath, mulling it over.

“Destiny, you’re fifteen. You’re here on assignment in a grown-up work environment. You can’t just disappear unsupervised for hours—no matter how cute the wildlife might be. This isn’t just about your work schedule, either. How many times have I told you Seattle isn’t always safe when you’re alone?”

“Dad, in three years, I’m going to be completely unsupervised. Basically forever. I’m thinking about New York City...” Her eyes flare, taking the chance to rub it in. She’ll be on the other side of the country. “Do you *really* think you need to worry about me for a couple measly hours?”

“Worrying is what dads do. You know that. I think you’re taking advantage of this job shadowing situation because I’m your old man. You need to put work first, little bee. Your future before internet likes.” I lean back in my chair with a muffled groan of exasperation.

She rolls her eyes, huffing a breath.

“Okay, but—I don’t actually love coffee, you know? I definitely don’t love filing, data entry, and the other *boring* stuff Katelyn has me do. Kinda hate it, actually.” She sighs and looks away before meeting my eyes again. “What if I don’t want anything to do with Wired Cup someday? What if I want to be a marine biologist or something? Shouldn’t I be shadowing seals?”

“The seals aren’t biologists, Dess,” I point out.

“Well, neither is anybody here.” She huffs out a breath.

That makes me crack a half smile.

“You really want to be a marine biologist?”

“Arf. Yes!” She does the fin thing with her arms again.

I shake my head, grabbing my phone. “Hold on. I’m recording that for posterity—or just your friends.”

“Dad, no!” Her jaw drops. She crosses her arms in front of her chest. “Be serious.”

The heavy look I give her could break weight records.

“If you’re completely serious about this new passion, I’ll see about getting you an internship at a marine sanctuary,” I say.

“Really?” She brightens, her dirty-blond ponytail bobbing behind her.

“Yeah. Back in my Navy days, they were marked on the maps all the time. Hmm.” I pause, stroking my chin thoughtfully. “If I recall right, there’s a fine one in Barrow, Alaska. That should keep you out of my hair for a while. As long as you like husky sleigh rides and all the hot chocolate you can drink.”

“Dad! That’s just...brrr. No.” She clutches her shoulders like she’s freezing.

You know you’ve got a teenager on the ropes when you’ve rendered her speechless.

“What do you have against Alaska, Destiny?”

But before she can answer and beg for an internship in SoCal or Mexico, there’s another knock at my door.

“Not again. I’m dead in here!” I call through the door, properly annoyed.

“He’s alive,” Destiny calls after me.

“Snitch.”

The door opens and Eliza Angelo stands in front of me, looking like every man’s mad scientist fantasy with her chestnut hair blown back, framing those strawberry lips and caramel eyes too perfectly. She clutches a thermos in each hand.

“Did something escape the lab? You look like you’re on the hunt,” I joke, mostly for Destiny’s sake. *Mostly.*

“And you missed our appointment for the tasting.”

My eyes flick to the clock on my computer.

Shit, she’s right.

“My apologies. Unexpected disruption. My daughter found some baby

seals and ghosted us for a few hours. I was just trying to help her understand why that's not a good idea in a professional environment."

She looks at Destiny with a fondness shining in her eyes. "Don't piss your dad off, young lady. It doesn't get any easier than this. You'll be back in school soon and the rest of us still have to deal with him."

"Sorry," Dess says.

My eyes flick from the crazy badger lady to my daughter.

"Hold on. You don't know her besides watching her tear me apart in my store and you're being this nice?" I snort.

Destiny nods, her lips turning up in a lopsided smile.

"She gets an apology and I get lip? Dess, I've taken care of you your whole life. Tell me how the hell that works?"

"Dad, I—"

"Guys." Miss Angelo claps her hands together softly. "I hate to interrupt whatever weird family thing is happening, but I was up all night working on this and...and someone's drinking it today. So, what are we trying first? Latte or mocha?"

I hate that I'm impressed.

Her desire to cut the crap and get down to business fires a missile at my own heart.

"You managed a latte *and* a mocha? Did you forget I just wanted one good specialty drink?" Apparently, my body forgot it's not supposed to have an electric current in her presence.

She grins. "They're prototypes, right? I wanted to offer you two drinks so I can cross compare, knowing one will turn out better than the other. That way, I can keep refining the weaker drink."

Or she's that terrified of me hating her efforts and demanding better. I don't say it, of course.

Time will tell.

Either the drinks are shit, or she's more talented than I dreamed.

"Bold choice. How did you come up with two distinct beverages in such a short time?" I ask.

"The latte is something I was already thinking about and the mocha is just a variation with chocolate. So are we ready?" Her eyes are damn near gleaming with excitement.

Maybe she's not nervous. I should be happy about that—if only a small, buried part of me didn't want her to find me intimidating.

“I want the mocha!” Dess meets my eyes. “You made one good decision this week, Dad. You hired Badger Lady.”

“Miss Angelo,” I correct, even as my daughter rolls her eyes.

“I actually prefer Eliza,” she says.

“Eliza! I love that name.” Destiny beams at her like she’s offering a tall glass of Bailey’s rather than a frigging burned mocha. She holds out her fist.

Eliza stares back, confused for a moment, then bumps her fist with a soft laugh.

“Fine, we’ll start with the mocha. Don’t give Destiny too much,” I say, holding in a smile while Dess glares at me.

I duck behind my desk to fetch a few cups.

Eliza sets both hulking Yetis on my desk. She opens the pink one first and pours a muddy dark liquid with a strong cocoa scent into the cup I set out.

“I can smell the chocolate. Miss Angelo, it better be dark and delicious and the bane of Destiny’s sweet tooth. We do *not* want any sugar-lick frou-frou drinks,” I say.

She stops, swinging the cup she was about to hand to me over to Destiny.

“I’m the CEO,” I warn.

“Yeah, but she’s nicer.”

Destiny doesn’t hesitate, taking a long pull from her cup.

“Whoa. It’s like tasting a bakery. So good! Dad, you don’t even know you’re drinking coffee until you swallow it and—bam!—mule kick.”

I wonder if my baby girl will ever come up with an analogy that doesn’t make me think of hooves to the face.

“Let me try it,” I grind out, reaching for the cup.

Dess passes it over.

I drink deeply and settle back in my chair, swishing it from one cheek to the next like I was taught to do at five different wineries.

Even for me, the sweetness is tolerable. Present, but not overwhelming, which is key for letting the other flavors come through.

Roasted marshmallow.

Dark chocolate.

Smoky undertones.

That bourbon taste that isn’t really bourbon.

Yeah, it’s interesting, all right.

The only thing keeping this from being liquified s’mores in a cup is the missing graham cracker. I swallow and look at my lab girl.

Goddamn, has she been watching me this whole time?

I decide to ignore it.

I need to make sure this wasn't a happy accident born from Eliza working herself sleepless and stirring together whatever she thought would taste good in just the right ratios.

"What are we going for with this, Miss Angelo? Explain."

"S'mores," she says with a smile that hooks my gaze.

"It mirrors the flavor well," I agree. "However, you're still missing the graham cracker."

Her smile fades. That sour look I've come to know so well returns.

"*Good job, Miss Angelo! No one else could have come up with roasted marshmallows perfectly folded in chocolate in less than three days. We just need graham crackers and it's all gravy,*" she mimics me, her voice lowered an octave or two. "Thanks, boss. Glad you like it so much."

The thumbs-up she aims my way feels like a loaded gun. It's pure hell not laughing.

"Don't worry what he thinks. He's a perfectionist porcupine. I like it and I want to share it with all my friends," Dess says cheerfully.

"That drink doesn't see the light of day until I say so," I remind her. "It's company property."

"Oh, Daddykins..." Destiny's eye roll could shame every cheerleader in her peer group.

"For the record, I pay Miss Angelo quite well to worry about what I think." I look at Eliza, who's staring back with boiling eyes. "And I have to believe you've been working on that for longer than three days."

"Is that a compliment?" She perches a hand on one hip. "Prove it."

"What else do you have for me?" I ask, ignoring her challenge.

"Eh, if you didn't like that, I'm not sure you'll like this one either. It's basically the same concept, only it's a latte. More cream and less marshmallow." She opens the blue thermos and pours a beige-brown liquid into the cup.

At least she hands *me* the cup without any shit, this time, and not my kid. Maybe miracles can happen.

My sip becomes a slurp as the lighter, almost foamy drink glides over my tongue.

"This, I like, without any fussing over the graham cracker. Consider it ready for market."

“Let me try it!” Destiny lunges for the cup.

I pass it over—almost reluctantly—but I wonder what her younger verdict will be as she takes a sip. “Ohhh, silky! Yum.”

“It’s still a lighter s’mores take, and yes, we’re missing the graham crackers,” Miss Angelo says, tapping a finger on the corner of her lips. “I’d like to figure out a work-around to add that in. I thought maybe pairing a Belgian cookie with a graham cracker crust in the s’mores line would be better than adding graham cracker crumble to the drink as a finish..”

I reach for the cup. Destiny hands it over, and I take another drink.

“Forget the cracker. We can call it roasted marshmallow latte and move on, but I’m noticing a slight hint of chocolate. Nothing like the mocha, but it’s there and it’s interesting.”

For once, she looks at me like she isn’t planning my murder.

“Yep, good call. I mixed cacao beans in with the coffee beans when I brewed it up. Then I boiled sugar and vanilla into the cream I steamed for the latte.”

“Thoughtful, Miss Angelo. Your ideas are on point.” I look away before my compliment goes to her already inflated head. “I’m not sure a food pairing will achieve the full effect, though. If you want to sell me a true s’mores experience, I need the combination in the cup, ideally.”

“Oh, I’ll work on it, but I doubt it happens today...”

“Oh!” Destiny gasps. “Wait, Dad, I have an idea.”

I look at her, dangerously skeptical.

My daughter’s ideas—especially the ones she gets really excited about—are rarely practical.

“Don’t keep me in abject terror, Dess.”

“I should shadow Eliza,” she blurts out.

Aw, hell. I’m a little disappointed it’s not suggesting we add ostrich egg yolks to the drinks or something equally absurd.

Eliza smiles softly at her and nods. “Sure, come knock yourself out. I’m cool with it if your dad is.”

“What are you up to, Dess? You realize shadowing Miss Angelo means long hours locked in the lab?” I say, side-eyeing her hard.

“Um, yeah. Making cookies has to be less boring than the stuff you do up here.” She turns to Eliza. “Can I test them, too?”

She laughs. There’s nothing remotely badger-like about her when I see those red lips peeled back, that gleam in her eyes, the way she looks so

deliciously innocent while she's being nothing but gracious with my dearest brat.

"Isn't that the best part of baking?" Eliza says.

"Destiny, you're supposed to be studying management. You need to learn how to run this place—"

"Yeah, but...we literally wouldn't have coffee shops without the people who develop the products, right? So I have to *learn* this if I'm ever going to run anything." Destiny smiles at me defiantly.

My little girl's growing up before my eyes, wielding her logic like a weapon.

"Well, Eliza isn't making cookies for one—"

Miss Angelo's face falls. "What? Not even when they're directly related to the drink line? You said you needed the pairing to make a decision..."

"You'll email the food R & D team for their input. Tell them what you're after and they'll put it together. We compartmentalize food and beverages so we can pair them up properly in the end," I tell her.

"That sounds...limiting," She says. She really means *stupid*. "That's like saying we could bring in the Dunkin' CEO to do your job."

"Just give them your damn recipe," I snap.

"Relax. I'm still experimenting."

"Just like the food team. They'll experiment using their specialized knowledge and confer with you when it's done."

Here we go again.

Our gazes lock like dueling swords, angrily waiting for the other person to blink.

This time, Miss Angelo cracks first.

"You think this is a science. It's not," she says softly. "Brewing these drinks is art, even if it's happening in your shiny corporate lab. I can't just download my brain and pass it on. With someone else working on a key part of my recipe, I can't know what needs altering until I taste it and send the notes. That's a lot of extra steps."

"Do you know what enterprise is?" I ask with a sigh.

"No, but I'm sure you're about to lecture me, professor," she says.

From the corner, Destiny covers her laugh with a hand. Barely.

My eyes flick to her and she flashes me an apologetic smile.

"It's where art meets science. There have to be rules to the process—boundaries—or you'll never make the same batch twice," I say. "Also, it's

rather inefficient for one person to juggle five jobs instead of excelling at one.”

“So, you want to turn what’s basically a culinary art into an assembly line? And you wonder why your drinks are described as *reliable*?”

Damn her, I walked right into that one.

She looks at Destiny again. “Wanna go make some reliable, boring coffee for your dad?”

“Sure! Why not?” Destiny hops off the armrest of the sofa against the wall.

“You’re sure she won’t be in the way while you’re trying to work?” I call after them.

“Oh, she can’t be worse than the older Lancaster. She’s not jaded enough yet.” Then, like the honey-eyed badger she is, Eliza turns on her heels and walks out the door.

Destiny follows close behind her. I hear their fading voices, already chattering away about the seals she saw during lunch.

Jaded? That last comment irks me because it cuts too deep, even if Eliza Angelo can’t know it.

That settles it then.

I’ll show them I’m not so jaded I’m walled off to new ideas.

Even if it means the damn Badger Lady stealing my daughter and corrupting her with that attitude.



DESTINY DOESN’T TALK MUCH when we get home.

She just scarfs down her internet famous 'hot girl salad'—goddamn, do I hate that name—and goes to bed, leaving behind a familiar silence.

This house is so big she could sneak right out and I’d never hear her.

Over an hour later, after studying every high-end graham cracker in existence, I climb the stairs to her room and nudge her door open an inch.

She’s sleeping like a kitten, curled up in her bed, still hugging the same oversized bumblebee she’s had for ages. I brought it home from a coffee conference in Vietnam when she was two years old. She’s kept it through several moves and at least two professional mendings to keep it clean and shapely.

I watch as she turns over, fighting with her orthodontic headgear for a minute before she shoves it off without ever fully waking up.

“Love you, little bee,” I whisper.

There’s no denying she’ll always be the baby in my heart, even when I’m walking her down the aisle someday, giving her up to whatever idiot decides he wants to deal with a lifetime of my shit.

Her teeth grind loudly. She remembered the headgear, but not the night guard.

I slip inside and walk to her bathroom, wash my hands, and grab the night guard. I try to lay it on her bottom teeth without waking her up.

Easier said than done when she bites me.

She jerks up, rubbing her eyes when I yelp at her like she’s a mouthing puppy nipping my hand.

“Dad? What are you doing?”

“I could hear you grinding your teeth a mile away. Wear your night guard, baby girl, or we’re going to have to go the dental implant route before you graduate high school.”

“*Fiiine*. I will, now go away.”

I hand her the night guard I couldn’t get in her mouth. She pops it in and falls back on the pillow like her head weighs a hundred pounds. She’s snoring before I even make it out of the room, gently shutting her door behind me.

All she said to me was *go away*. I guess I’m a glutton for punishment because it doesn’t make me love her any less.

In fact, I expect her crap. I relish it.

What the hell will I do when this kid moves away for the real world?

Maybe I agreed to let her go off with Eliza too soon.

I don’t know much about my mad scientist other than the fact that she frustrates me to the bone.

What would Aster do? Assuming she was in the right state of mind to do anything...

My late wife was creative, artsy, always leaping from one project to the next. First it was her own gallery, then a cosmetics’ line the next month.

You could never pin her down when she was all over the place, her mind going wild with half-finished projects she’d quickly tire of and abandon before the groundwork was done.

Aster probably would’ve encouraged Destiny to explore her options.

She wouldn't have thought twice about letting her hang out in a lab with a new hire who makes a daily habit of pissing me off. Hell, by the end of her life, she was desperate to pass the kidlet off to a nanny whenever I wasn't around.

How could this be worse?

Only, my parenting may be far from perfect, but I'm sure as hell not outsourcing it again.

If I'm being honest, my concerns about Destiny spending time with Badger Lady in research and development have nothing to do with my daughter. It's more the strange, almost violent reaction to Badger Lady.

It's the way my eyes wander over Eliza's ample body. She's not a scrawny girl—definitely on the thick side—with curves for miles. Completely unlike any woman I've ever had in bed before.

And unlike anyone who's ever worked for me, she makes my cock hard enough to engrave my name in steel.

Fuck.

I don't want her *more* entangled in my life, striking up a friendship with my daughter.

Time to nip this in the bud.

I pull out my phone, open the email app, and start typing.

MISS ANGELO,

PLEASE INFORM me if Destiny becomes negligent in any of her duties during her time in R & D. She'll be off to college in three short years, and it's time for her to learn some work ethic.

I also want to make sure she's not getting in the way of any real work on your end.

As you know, this scorched drink line is crucial to Wired Cup's new vision. I won't have my beloved teenager's antics disrupting our mutual success.

SINCERELY,

COLE LANCASTER JR.

Chief Executive Officer, Wired Cup Noble Inc.

A MINUTE LATER, I'm still staring at the screen, frowning and second-guessing myself.

What the hell? I *never* have doubts over a simple email.

What has she done to me?

With a rough groan, I delete it unsent.

There's no point.

Eliza's too gentle, too easygoing to squeal on Destiny for playing around.

That fucked up part of me I want to ignore wishes I could see Miss Angelo outside the lab, away from work.

Would she bring the same smart mouth with her over drinks?

Would she go stiff and warm and delectable like she did when I cornered her in the lab and we touched?

Does that mouth of hers have other talents? How many undeserving punks got to find out if she sucks as hard as she insults?

Goddamn.

"Knock it off," I mutter to myself, lightly tapping one side of my face.

My fingers come back slick. I'm sweating bullets.

Utterly ridiculous.

There's a reason—no, a thousand reasons—why I've never brought any woman to my bed since Aster and I'm not about to start now. Not for any shortage of options.

I could have my choice of willing lays. Yet I'd rather live like a monk, married to my own right hand over any risk of complicating my life again.

Let alone poor Destiny's.

Maybe I'm still haunted, too.

Our marriage was seriously flawed, but Aster was my daughter's mother. My wife, my woman, for richer or poorer, in sickness with little health.

She deserves a certain respect.

Sure, Dess might joke about me getting remarried now that she's older, but it opens up a big enough can of worms to hijack a bait shop.

Fifteen is a hard fucking age.

Losing her mother when she was barely old enough to understand it was brutal enough.

No matter how much she grows up, I swore a long time ago I wouldn't make it worse for her.

Never mind the glaring fact that I'd never get mixed up with an employee.

Strict HR policies against it aside, I don't have to think hard about the example I'd be setting to know it's a piss poor choice.

I won't have my baby girl thinking it's acceptable to date your boss.

Hell, if her boss ever tried, I'd hunt the dickhead down and tear him limb from limb.

Though if somehow Destiny didn't know about a reckless fling with a badger of a woman who might be too much honey—

Cole, fuck you. You're playing with fire.

I sigh, knowing that venomous little voice in my head is right.

I've always been smart enough to choose cold, hard reality over any wet dream.

And I'll damn sure choose sanity before I give Eliza Angelo a whisper of a chance to burn me.

CHARITY COFFEE (ELIZA)



The next day, Destiny sits on the marble counter I'm standing over, her long legs swinging under her.

"Give me the crushed graham crackers, please," I say.

She picks up the clear glass bowl without hesitation and hands me the crumbs I just spent the last half hour crushing before she came in.

"I thought Dad said you couldn't make cookies?" She gives me a nervous look, flicking her gaze around the room like she's half expecting His Highness to stroll through the door.

"Destiny, your dad can kiss my ass. Uh, no offense." I dump the melted butter into the bowl and give it a quick stir.

"Why are you putting butter on the graham crackers?"

"To make the crust."

"But I thought we're making cookies?"

"Belgian cookies," I correct her with a smile. "Key difference."

"Belgian cookies have crust?"

I pick up the mini bar baking pan. "These do." I spoon a lump of my buttery cracker mix into a slot. "See, now I'm going to press this down so it's even, and that's it. Get up and grab a spoon so you can help. There's another pan on the other side of the counter."

"Okay!" She slides down and fetches the spoon and pan like the good helper she is. I'm not sure why Lancaster was even worried. "Um, aren't you afraid Dad might find out? He's a massive hardass when it comes to rules. He could yell at you."

"Eh, he'll do that anyway, sooner or later. We might as well get these

cookies right and cut out the middleman,” I say.

Destiny giggles, grabbing another baking pan and spoon while she sets to work.

I focus on pressing my cracker mix into the last slot and tamp it down.

“There. We’ve already preheated the oven. Once you’re done with that tray, we’ll put them both in and set a timer for ten minutes. Use the big rubber mitts—I won’t risk you getting burned.”

“Gotcha!”

After I’m sure she’s not heading for the oven yet, I run to my desk, grab the reusable shopping bag I brought with me this morning, and head back to the lab. I’m lost for a second as I scan our surroundings.

“What are you looking for?” Destiny drops a spoonful of graham cracker into her pan.

“I just realized...we have an oven but no cooktop.”

“The cooktops are in the food lab, I think.”

I blink at her. “You’re sure? I thought you always stayed upstairs?”

She laughs. “When I was little, Dad and Kate would bring me down here all the time. The food lab was always my favorite because they gave me treats.”

Such a cute kid.

If I met her anywhere else, I’d never know she’s a billionaire’s daughter.

“Why do we have an oven?” I wonder out loud.

“It’s just a roasting accessory, I’m pretty sure. Do you want me to go to the food lab and ask if we can use a cooktop?”

Frowning, I consider it for a few seconds and shake my head.

“No. We don’t totally need it right now. I want to pair a cookie with that mocha so Commander Coffee thinks it’s good to go, but I also don’t want him to know I’m working on it until I have the right cookie.”

She smiles. “You’re sneaky, Honey Badger. I like it.”

I make an exaggerated clawing motion that pulls a laugh out of her. I’m not even sure if it’s what badgers do, but since when do honey badgers care?

“Actually, I used a grill yesterday to brew the coffee. Maybe I’ll fire that up and give it a shot.”

I pull out the grill, set it up, place a fresh bowl in a saucepan on top and throw a lump of Kerry Gold from the keto coffee line into the pan, followed by cocoa and milk powder.

Destiny pops the mini bar pans into the oven and comes to watch me.

“What are you doing?”

“Making chocolate. Grab two more mini bar pans, please.”

She nods and disappears like the race is on to do this in record time.

I can't help but smile at the girl's energy.

By the time I have a silky smooth milk chocolate, she's back with my pans. I pick up a spatula and carefully pour melted chocolate into each slot.

“We'll have to refrigerate this first,” I say.

“So cool. I've only seen someone make chocolate from scratch once, this nanny we had years ago...”

My ears twitch.

Nanny, huh? What kind of father is Cole Lancaster?

It seems like she's turned out decent enough, but was that all him or did he have a lot of help? And where's her mother?

“Well, it's super simple. You just stir it over heat and let it cool to harden. But you have to be patient.” I put the chocolate in the fridge for cold drinks, fighting the urge to ask nosy questions. “So, I don't mean to pry, but are you in summer school?”

“No, not much. It's just an easy work experience thing for an extra college credit over the summer, plus a math class I wanted to knock out. We're doing our job shadowing assignments and turning in a paper at the end.”

“And you wanted to shadow your dad?” I flash her a pained grin. “Brave girl. I think I would've picked one of the other five thousand companies around SeaTac.”

“He pretty much insisted,” she says with a sigh. “That's Dad, though. Always obsessed with the family business and legacy and blah, blah, blah. Deep down, he really wants me to take over this place just like he did...”

“What do *you* want to do, Dess?”

“Hmm, good question.” A light dreamy smile lights up her face. “I've thought about throwing in an application at the Seattle Aquarium for a volunteer position, but Dad would flip his shit.” She clams up. “Uh, sorry.”

I can't help but smile. “Why there?”

“The otters are the *cutest*, Eliza. I love ocean mammals and all the other weird creatures. Have you seen the jellyfish? Heck, if he'd let me, I'd try SeaWorld. Perfect combination, being in SoCal out of the rain. But I guess this lab isn't so bad. At least I'm actually doing stuff. Upstairs is naptime. It's just staring at screens, clicking around, shuffling papers. I don't even care

how many zeros are behind those numbers. Ugh.”

She’s speaking my language. I can’t imagine corporate coffee office work being exciting for any high schooler. Though I wonder, why didn’t she shadow her mom?

“What does your mother do?” I ask absently, wiping down the counter.

When I look back, Destiny’s face sinks, and those bright-blue eyes seem dull.

My stomach flips over.

Oh, no.

Clearly, I’ve stepped on a landmine. I was just making conversation. I didn’t mean to upset her.

“Nobody told you?” Her voice comes out strained.

“No, but it’s okay. You don’t have to tell me anything if it’s too personal. I wasn’t trying to pry. I just wondered if she’d be a better person to shadow for this school thing...”

She hesitates, twining her fingers together.

“My mom died when I was five,” she whispers.

Oh, crap. There it is.

The answer I was *dreading*.

Without thinking, I step forward, pulling the girl into an instant hug.

“I’m so sorry, honey. I had no idea.” I release her. “Don’t tell him, but your dad’s kinda right. I have a big mouth sometimes. I never should’ve—”

“Eliza, chill. It’s okay,” she rushes out. “It was a long time ago. I’m not upset about it anymore. I barely remember, honestly... I guess I just kind of miss her sometimes. And the few good times I remember.”

“I bet you do,” I say firmly. “Part of you always will.”

Poor, poor kid.

Poor Grumpfather.

For the first time, I realize with some horror that my demon boss is a human being with heavy life experiences that have nothing to do with commodifying coffee and yelling at people.

He lost his wife ten years ago.

He raised this wonderful young girl alone.

Maybe that’s what made his heart a charred lump of coal, infinitely more scorched than his stupid drinks.

That gives me an idea for a terrible new name. He’s a lump of Cole now.

Lump.

But I'll hold off on that one until he does something so awful I can't feel sorry for him anymore.

Right now, my heart feels like lead.

I almost wish I'd never asked about Cole Lancaster's life and gotten hit by the empathy bus.

Knowing there's a good chance that life made a tyrant out of an otherwise pleasant family man kind of sucks the fun out of harassing him.

I mean, he's had his battles. He may have owed Wayne a fat apology, but should I really keep adding to his woes?

I try to throw myself into cleaning—saving the janitorial staff some work—while Destiny taps at her phone. She gets up and grabs a broom on her own a little while later, sweeping around my feet, doing this awkward little dance while she hums a viral song I've heard on TikTok.

I'm lucky she wasn't too stressed over my dumb questions. Or she bounces back on her feet lightning fast.

Once the chocolate finishes cooling and my timer dings, I start whipping up a fresh batch of marshmallow fluff.

“What's next?” Destiny asks, emptying the dust pan in a bin nearby.

I grin at her. “You'll find out soon. Start popping the crusts onto plates, assuming we have any we don't have to beg the food team for.”

“On it!” She washes her hands and gets to work.

I transfer the marshmallow fluff to a bowl, grab a couple spoons, pull the chocolate from the fridge, and set everything up beside Destiny.

“Here, check this out. You tug on the wax paper and it comes up with a chocolate bar.” I pull one out and remove it from the paper. “Add a small line of marshmallow fluff and glue it to the graham cracker crust. Voilà! Your dad has his precious graham cracker to complete the S'mores Mocha.”

“Oh, cool! Can we try it?”

“Be my guest.” I gesture at the spread of cookies.

She's still munching away on her third cookie when Mr. Lancaster comes to pick up his daughter a little while later.

He looks at Destiny with what seems like a tired glance. Or maybe it's just my imagination now that I know he has good reasons for being world-weary.

“Dess, let's go. I've still got a heap of work to catch up on at home and I have to make dinner.”

He *makes* dinner? No live-in chef?

“Hey, uh—she did a fantastic job today, Mr. Lancaster,” I say carefully. “She’s an awesome kid. The work would’ve limped along much slower without her lending me a hand. I think she learned a few things, too.”

He nods with a suspicious look, like he doesn’t trust my praise.

“Good. Just make sure she doesn’t get in the way of anything major.” He doesn’t even make eye contact as he walks over to the bench against the wall to fetch Destiny’s bag—probably so she doesn’t forget it.

“Hey, wait, I was helping Eliza finish—”

“I said let’s go!” he barks.

Destiny rolls her eyes as he power walks away and then starts moving to catch up.

Beautiful.

Why did I ever feel sorry for this walking time bomb again? I want to tell him to watch how he talks to her, but she’s not my daughter.

I barely know them. It’s definitely not my place to butt into their family life.

Still, that has to sting.

I look at Destiny and whisper loudly, “You were a huge help today. Thank you so much. See ya soon.”

“Destiny, I said *let’s go*.” He waves at her, standing near the exit, the door propped open with his shoulder.

“Sorry,” she mouths to me and scurries away.

Jeez. His whole aura bleeds melancholy today.

I don’t think he looked at me once. What gives?

“She doesn’t get in the way, dude,” I mumble under my breath. “The lump of Cole who picks her up, on the other hand...”

He lingers at the door as Destiny walks past him.

Before he leaves, he turns his head over his shoulder and looks at me. “Don’t stay here all night. Security changes at ten. Our garage has never had an incident, but you’re still a walking insurance liability after that.”

If I punted a cookie in your face, Cole Lancaster, would that be a liability?

I don’t say it, though.

I settle for, “Piss off, Commander Coffee.”

He doesn’t even grunt in response.

Somehow, silence is worse than a parting shot.

This guy is so off-kilter.

One minute, he needs me so bad he'll track me down through a random barista and dole out big bonuses. The next, I'm not worth talking to.

Whatever.

I'll deal with it the way I handle most of my people problems—by eating most of the test cookies that aren't left for Gina and the techs.

I only leave enough extras to go with the S'mores Mocha I plan on him sampling tomorrow.



I'M WORKING on a drink in the lab when I hear the big metal door swing open.

Commander Coffee marches up behind me and throws his arms around my waist.

This should be awkward. Highly inappropriate.

But when I turn to face him, I'm smiling like it's pure heaven.

He hoists me up and sets me on the marble counter, cupping my face with one huge hand while his big blue eyes drill through my soul.

"Eliza." My name is a statement. A question. A *promise*.

"Cole," I whisper back, a tremor in my voice.

He tilts my chin back roughly, his hand gliding to my throat.

Oh, God.

It's so wrong, but the way my core pulses sends my moral compass spinning.

My eyes flutter shut and I forget how to breathe.

When I finally do again, he smells like salt and citrus mingled with coffee. He smells so—*Cole*.

When his lips crush down on mine, I'm flipping delirious.

The kiss is long and smooth and devilishly sensuous. His hands are another kind of black magic, moving up my thighs, spreading them apart, bringing his fingers to my aching center.

He leans me back against the cool marble, never breaking the interplay of teeth and tongue and so much passion.

"I'm going to fuck you now. Right here," he whispers hoarsely. His beard rakes my skin as he pushes his mouth to my ear.

I'm trembling.

His warm hand teases my mound before running down my entire leg and coming back up again so slowly. He shoves my skirt out of the way with a guttural noise burning in his throat.

Ahhhhh!

I'm screaming.

Actually, something else is *screaming*. The world's most annoying alarm clock.

I jolt up and bang it with my fist, wiping sweat and sticky hair from my brow.

Sweet baby Jesus.

This stupid alarm steals my orgasms *and* robs me of sleep?

More importantly—*yikes*—I've got to get laid. It's no question when I'm having wet dreams about Commander Coffee right after his latest grump-fit kept me up half the night overthinking.

It hurts to look at the clock.

Yep, it's time to get moving.

I'm meeting Dakota at another homeless benefit downtown, and I promised to bring along my best cold brew.

I rush through the shower and grab my things, then arrive downtown on my bike only a few minutes late. Dakota is already there, setting things up.

"Hey! How's the new job going? Surviving?" she asks with an amused smile.

I place the coffee urns on the table next to a box of pens and the usual rating cards.

"The job itself is pretty awesome. You wouldn't believe the lab—it has *everything*, Dakota. There's probably a coffee-powered vibrator tucked away somewhere I haven't found yet."

We both burst out laughing. She leans on my shoulder for support.

"You're hilarious and you seem really happy. I love it!"

"Well, yeah. It's a dream job, minus Commander Coffee. He's still a massive jerkwad, but no need to waste the breath on him, right?" I say, honestly hoping she doesn't ask. "What's the game plan here?"

Dakota scans the table, adjusting a few signs. "Donuts are three bucks each. Coffee goes for five bucks a cup today, or they can get a donut and coffee combo for seven."

"Those are some high-dollar donuts."

Lincoln appears from the back, weirdly baby free. He drapes an arm

around Dakota.

“Half an hour at the zoo and Ma says she’s already tuckered out.”

They share a moony-eyed moment, whispering back and forth about the baby and her outing with grandma until I clear my throat.

Yeah, these two are disgustingly cute. Hard to believe they once hated each other’s guts.

“Hey, Eliza. All proceeds go to Seattle homeless shelters today,” he says with a friendly smile.

I meet his eyes. “You’re decent—for a billionaire.”

“Thanks—I think?” He shrugs, chuckling. “I can’t give up on the homeless even after Wyatt made it out of that camp. He had me to get back on his feet. How many of them have nobody?”

Dakota grins at him. “This is small potatoes, though. A way for the people to give back. But he gives most of the profits of his company to the cause.”

I smile at him. “Nice. I’m glad to hear there’s one CEO in this city who’s not a total jackass.”

“So what did Coffee Dick do to win the hee-haw award this time?” Dakota picks up a donut and turns to Linc as she takes a gaping bite out of it. “Keep a tab for me. You can just write a check at the end of the day.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says with a swat on her butt.

“His teenage daughter started shadowing me for a school project...” I start, filling her in on the latest.

“Sounds rough. But I don’t know, should you really be babysitting at work if it isn’t part of the job description?” Dakota bites her donut again with the kind of appetite only a new mom has.

“She’s a sweet kid. I don’t mind. Her dad is just a hornet. He wants her to take over Wired Cup when she’s older, and she’s not interested. So she’s hanging out with me and learning all about the research side. I’m saving her from a boring stack of paperwork.”

“Smart kid,” Dakota says, sipping a coffee.

“Did you say you work at Wired Cup now?” Lincoln asks.

“Yeah.”

“Cole Lancaster?”

“You know him?” I ask, raising my brows.

“Not well. I’ve met him a few times, yeah. Think you might be the only person in the city who wants to throw a brick at his face,” Linc says with a

laugh, his big shoulders rippling.

I raise an eyebrow. He's got to be kidding.

"I find that hard to believe. The people in his stores must hate him. You didn't see the way he talked to this barista friend of mine..."

"He can be gruff sometimes, but he gives them good performance bonuses, from what I've heard. I tried to steal his EA once. No salary bid would buy her, though, and when I asked why, she said the Lancasters were like family. She wouldn't leave Cole."

"Well, maybe, he's different with the senior roles. I don't know. I just know in R & D we call him a lump of Cole."

Not quite. *I* call him that now. But I'm R & D, so it still counts, doesn't it?

While Lincoln collects cash, Dakota sells a few cups of coffee, and I ask every donor for a coffee rating. I might as well gather data while I'm here.

"Hey, Commander Coffee! Over here," Linc says loudly.

"Not funny." I spin around and glare at him.

But what happens next is one big cosmic joke.

The Lump himself struts up like he belongs here, hefting two huge Wired Cup branded urns on the table.

"Has she been talking about me all morning?" he asks with a knowing look.

Holy no.

I must be hallucinating. But the longer I stare, the less likely it is that he'll just go "poof" in my hallucination.

"What are you doing here?" I grind out, almost afraid to ask.

"What does it look like, Miss Angelo? Giving back to the community on a sunny morning. Nothing new. I could ask you the same question."

"I've been doing this long before I knew you existed..."

"What's this?" He motions to my coffee urns.

"A summer campfire brew with hints of watermelon. *My* brew, not yours. Try it."

"Save it for another time. Wired Cup is providing the coffee here, and your brews are now confidential corporate business," he says, not even deigning to look at me as he heaves up the worst choice of words.

"Oh, no. You haven't actually licensed anything yet, and even if you had, you can't claim the coffee I make in my own kitchen. Plus, you have two giant urns. When I run out, we'll use your very *reliable* coffee." I smile,

knowing he'll hate that.

"I suppose you can leave yours out. It's probably better to have more on hand," he says, annoyingly calmly.

Destiny appears over his shoulder, wearing a Wired Cup t-shirt. She's leading a pack of chatty teenagers balancing a couple huge boxes on their shoulders.

I stare as the pack moves.

He glances at them over his shoulder and then looks back at me. "They need community service hours for Honor Society. And I see your rating cards—feedback from charity coffee isn't very scientific. You don't need to lug your brews around town anymore, you know. We have panels for taste tests I'd be happy to open for you. You're not an amateur anymore. Welcome to the major leagues."

It takes all my willpower not to roll my eyes.

"For the CEO of an 'okay' coffee brand, you're arrogant. And what are they carrying?"

"Boxes full of insulated coffee and espresso drinks, all branded with Wired Cup's name. Everybody wins at this event. Besides, I can serve more people than you can."

My foot taps the ground, imagining I'm stomping his face.

"Dad! What do you want us to do with this stuff?" Destiny yells from across the room.

He stares at the table for a minute.

"Let's put a few urns under the table for volunteers only." He walks over and starts moving them as he's saying it. "And then we'll put a box of coffee and another box of espresso drinks on the table, and line the bottom with several more for easy reach. The rest are going to go to the actual Wired Cup booth."

"This isn't our booth?" she asks.

"No, this belongs to Haughty But Nice. I believe they're selling donuts—which has nothing to do with fashion—so I'm not sure why they're even trying to steal our thunder."

"We sponsored the fashion show, but Dakota thought donuts would be fun," Lincoln cuts in with a serious look. "I can never tell her no."

"Wise man." Cole grins at him with a real smile that has me doing a double take.

He just has to go from ten to eleven on the McHottie scale when he grins.

Shoot me now.

“Is Eliza coming to our booth?” Destiny asks.

“I don’t know, is she?” He looks at me.

“Nope. I’m here to help Dakota today. Sorry,” I say.

“Can I stay with Eliza?”

“No, you’re here helping your company and your friends,” he tells her.

“But Eliza is selling coffee too! It’s research, Dad.”

“Just let her stay,” I say.

He glares at me. “Sure. I always wanted to have my parenting decisions questioned by a lab tech.”

Ouch. I shrug, pretending it doesn’t get under my skin.

“And I always hoped my boss would be the surliest man in the industry. Guess dreams do come true.”

“She’ll get in the way,” he warns, walking closer and sizing me up.

“I’m fifteen, Dad! Not five. God.” Destiny stomps her foot.

“She was with me all day in the lab. I tried to tell you that before you left for the day, but you had other things on your plate, I guess,” I say pointedly.

“Fine. But if anything goes wrong—” He points at me. “You’re fired.” He points at his daughter next. “And you’re grounded.”

She jerks her eyes away, pretending to ignore him.

Good move. I do the same.

“The best part about this job is all the exercise my eyes get,” I say with an exaggerated eye roll.

Destiny giggles.

Cole glares at me and storms off, taking the other volunteers with him.

Thank God.

Destiny’s cool, but I’m not sure I could deal with that many teenagers.

When we’re alone again, Dakota leans in close, tapping my shoulder frantically. “Earth to Eliza? Where have you *been*? You didn’t tell me he looked like *that*.”

Oh, crap.

“Like what?”

She fans her face. “You *know* exactly what I mean. He’s a smokeshow with the whole tortured dad vibe...”

I almost gag.

But I can’t just go down this road again today on what’s supposed to be my day off.

“He seems like he’s into you,” Dakota teases with a massive grin.

Does he? I think like an excited teenager, but then I shake my head. We can’t do this right now.

“It’s not like that,” I say sharply. “Nothing like before.”

Except it’s really *exactly* like that, and my voice is whiny and defensive and possibly a little panicked.

I hope wincing ends the conversation.

“Oh, no. Definitely not like—before.” Dakota’s face falls. “Sorry. I was just teasing, lady. Didn’t mean to imply anything about that gross relationship with Derek. Yuck, I still can’t believe he did that to you...”

“Dakota, not here. Apology accepted.”

“I’m sorry again,” she whispers.

But maybe she’s right.

Maybe my baggage is the reason why I can’t have a single peaceful interaction with this man.

He’s a different person, but he fits Derek’s profile.

Older. Rich. Commanding. Attractive.

Maybe I’m just scared to death of ending up a sidepiece again—even if there’s a *negative* chance that ever happens with my boss.

I’m not nearly stupid enough to get involved with someone I work with. But maybe the similarities keep tripping some long repressed psychological switch deep in my brain.

Because even here at this charity function, we can’t have a truce.

Not when Cole Lancaster is one bad cup.

SPECIAL ORDER (COLE)



My lips curl in amusement as I stare at the message on my phone between the break in longwinded panels.

I can't believe you're doing this, Lump. My brew wasn't good enough for an undiscerning charity function, so you're taking it to a conference now?

I laugh. It's the tenth time Miss Angelo has texted me this morning, ever since she caught wind of the upcoming event and my travel schedule.

I'm probably enjoying her reaction more than I should be.

I reply, ***After considerable thought, I prefer Commander Coffee over the unflattering Lump. That does a disservice to my weekly jogging routine and the way it keeps me in shape.***

That earns me a string of red faces with \$!~# over their mouths.

Eliza: Lump. As in Lump of Cole, you lunk.

Cole: Regardless, you need to calm down. This is the perfect place to judge the new product. No one at this conference will mince words.

Eliza: ...that's what I'm worried about.

Cole: I'm confident they'll love it. And if they don't, I'll just keep paying you to experiment until you produce a drink they'll adore. I'm not sure what you're worried about.

I watch the dots at the bottom of the screen indicating she's typing stop and start again. Several times.

Eliza: Maybe I just hate disappointing my boss. He's rude as hell and gets scary when he's mad.

Cole: He also hired you at a premium after a stormy altercation and

provided ample direction. If you fucked up, he has no one to blame but himself.

That must catch her off guard.

I don't get another text for half an hour as I return to reading over Troy Clement's latest sourcing report about our Brazilian facilities.

When my phone pings again, I look down, expecting another text from Eliza.

It's Destiny this time. She's sent me a picture of the first slide of her presentation that goes with the paper. It's eye-bleed purple and decorated with animated coffee beans that make me bite my tongue.

"Let's hope the content is better than the style," I mutter.

The center of the page reads, "Bean Business: The Science Behind An Empire."

Well, the title has a nice ring to it.

I forward it to Miss Angelo before I can second guess, adding ***Destiny seems to have enjoyed her time in Development. Thank you again.***

She immediately responds with a smiling cat emoji. ***You're welcome. And the text you sent before this—the one where you took responsibility—that's one thing I never expected.***

I glare at my phone with my face overheating, scratching my beard.

There's no need for such heavy words when this conference is nothing special. It's the same as every other networking booster ever invented for men and women with net worths exceeding eight figures.

Corporate. Stiff. Droll.

Barely two hours in and I'm restless as hell.

Maybe it's because I'm in a hurry to finish, press a few hands, and go home so I can pay a personal visit to the R & D team. It's been almost a week since I sparred with my sassy new lab dork in person.

I sit through another panel, only half listening as some advertising mogul from Chicago named Heron drones on about his company's success. The few mentions of how he found peace for his family and his company vaguely catch my attention.

I'm glad when it's over, ready to grab a water for my parched throat.

I'm walking by the table that has the beverages when a tall man approaches. It takes me a second to put a face to the name.

Brock Winthrop?

I've only met him once, but he's a whale among big fish, and heir to the

international Winthrop luxury hotel brand. So when he wants to talk, I make time to listen.

He might be a bit of a young hothead from what I've heard, but what he lacks in age, he makes up for with that last name of his, which always wins respect. He's also running more of the brand ever since his grandfather moved into the background after the grand opening of their Chicago jewel a couple years ago.

"Mr. Lancaster. I had to come over and tell you how otherworldly this coffee is. I love it," he says, tapping the side of a complimentary cup with my brand logo on it.

"Thank you. We've been working on the latest line for a while. We're testing it now for a launch late this year."

He brings his nose to the cup and inhales sharply.

Damn. I can tell he's not just faking it, which shocks me.

If the drinks are good enough to satisfy a billionaire's palate, imagine the blowout this could be with everyone else.

"Delicious. I've never tasted anything quite like it." He pauses reverently before he says, "We just opened two new Hawaiian resorts. One on Lanai, and the other on the big island. I've been searching high and low for extras to stand out. Everything from volcanic spa soaps to bamboo tree houses. I'm involved with approving the menus in our restaurants personally. And the minute I tasted this, it hit me like a truck. This coffee could elevate every meal we serve."

Two Hawaiian hotels? Shit, the Winthrops never stop.

He stares at me like he's making an offer I'd be a certified lunatic to refuse. I wonder how many deals those hawkish eyes alone have sealed.

"Are you looking for exclusivity?" I ask, turning over what this means. The scorched drinks are a critical part of Wired Cup's new vision for the public. I can't just abandon that. However, a deal with Brock Winthrop could be ridiculously lucrative.

"What do you think?" He cocks his head, his face set like a mask.

Damn. No wonder he's been on the *Forbes* Thirty Under Thirty list for most of the last decade.

"Listen, I'd love to do business with you, but I have to think about this. These drinks are slated for our new product launch next quarter. If you're asking for these recipes, exclusively, I can't promise that."

The way he looks at me says I'm making a big mistake. It also tells me he

hasn't been turned down much—if at all—before.

So what? Is the man shocked and appalled that someone might actually pass on becoming part of a Winthrop hotel's magic?

“Wired Cup is a highly successful regional chain. Why the change up?” he asks slowly.

I open my mouth, but before I can get a word out, he snaps his fingers.

“Oh, wait! Are you trying to go *national*? I know people who can help with that.”

I clear my throat. “No, not exactly. We've had ample opportunities for that, but I have better quality control sticking to the West Coast. We'd have to refine new drinks for Midwestern and East Coast tastes, and that means Wired Cup becomes another Green Mermaid knockoff. Perish the fucking thought,” I growl under my breath.

That wins me a rough laugh.

“Tell us how you really feel! So why the new direction then? Hasn't Wired Cup stood by its legacy flavors for decades? You're obviously after something special with the new drinks,” he says pointedly.

I brace for a backhanded insult.

If he calls my coffee *reliable*, there's no goddamned chance he gets a campfire roast in any of his resorts. No matter how much money he showers on me.

“And what do you think that legacy is?”

“Bold, consistent flavors, right?” He cocks his head. “A taste everybody knows and remembers.”

I'll let that *consistent* comment slide.

“I might be able to work out a deal with exclusivity based on the new beverage line—if you're really interested,” I say with a nod.

The thumbs-up he gives me comes with a wolfish smile.

“Damn right I am. There's one big catch—everything at the resorts is locally sourced. We're pushing sustainability hard for the green crowd, and I'm a man of my word. That coffee can't be sourced from anywhere outside the islands.”

Fuck.

That gives me serious pause.

Pure Kona coffee is expensive and in short supply, even if I do own significant farms there. And our common Hawaiian blends are at least thirty percent Kona bean mixed with others, unlike many others with the label that

have far less Kona bean.

Then again, if Winthrope wants to pay out the ass for pure Kona coffee, this could be lucrative.

“I can do that,” I say. “Though I’m sure you’re aware that pure Kona blends don’t come cheap?” I hope my eyes aren’t full of dollar signs.

“That’s part of the charm, isn’t it? Fortunately, the average Winthrope guest puts experience over price. If their day begins with a fourteen-dollar coffee drink pressed exclusively from the best Kona beans, they’ll pony up.”

As a man who’s life-deep in the coffee business, he’s right. High-end Kona blends are worth the hype. It would be hard for even the most unsophisticated palette not to know the difference between a pure Hawaiian blend and your run of the mill mix.

I need to think this through, though. Taking on a project like this while I’m in the middle of a big launch could stretch us paper thin.

“My card,” Winthrope says, pushing a hefty piece of aluminum into my hands. “Just scan the QR code for my contact.”

There’s a crowd flowing around us now. A few other people butt in, complimenting the new coffee before the next session starts. When I look back, there’s no sign of Brock Winthrope.

Once I’m back in my seat with a water, I take out my phone and text Eliza. ***Everyone loves the new campfire drinks. Congratulations.***

Eliza: Told ya. I know my bean juice.

I snort at the screen. Could she pick a less elegant way to describe what we do? Still, a smile fights its way across my face.

Cole: We need to talk when I get back.

Eliza: You can’t. I retired.

Cole: Retired? Bull. You’ve only worked a month and you’re twenty-six years old.

Eliza: I’m saving myself the trouble. Nothing good ever comes from any variation of “we need to talk.”

Drama Queen. I stab the send button.

Eliza: Only when I’m dealing with you.

I chuckle so loudly a woman in designer heels passing by almost loses her balance.

Cole: Has anyone ever called you high-maintenance, Miss Angelo?

Eliza: Not really.

Cole: Not really—that’s a yes, right?

Eliza: Nope. That's me informing you that I don't normally deal with cavemen.

Cole: Are you calling me a goddamned Neanderthal? That's no way to talk to your boss.

Eliza: My bad, Lump. Try not to dwell on it all day.

Damn her to *hell*.

It's like she knows how much mental space she already occupies, and how helpless I am to evict her.

I dwell, all right. I think about Eliza's mouth and other parts of her through the rest of this glorified ego trip disguised as a business conference.

Especially every last primal act of savagery I'd like to do to her.



IT'S AFTER SEVEN O'CLOCK, and I find Eliza in the lab alone.

"You've got three hours before the lab closes to all staff. New policy."

"Don't remind me." She looks up from a spread of familiar Wired Cup pastries, plus a few new ones I don't recognize. "You just got back?"

"I've been back for an hour, but I had some cleanup to do before I came to talk," I say.

"So should I clean out my desk?"

"Why would you?" I tilt my head, unsure what the hell she's getting at.

"Like I said, when people want to 'talk' it's always bad news..."

"You have a strange sense of humor, Miss Angelo." I eye her spread, desperate to keep my gaze off her body. "Also, I believe your sweet tooth could put a saber tooth tiger to shame."

"I'm just going over flavor profiles, using existing food products to see how well the drinks are holding up as complements. I've introduced a few new ones as well." She picks up a golden cookie with a chocolate bar on top. "Destiny and I made this to go with the S'mores Mocha not too long ago. I just needed to tweak it before I had you taste it."

"Did I not warn you that you're not on the food team?" My jaw tightens.

Mischief gleams in her honey-brown eyes.

"Oops. You tell me a lot of things. It's hard to keep up. Sometimes I really only listen when it makes sense. Here, try less death-glaring and more eating." She shoves the pastry at my mouth and damn near pushes it in.

I angrily bite off a chunk of her cookie, catching her fingers between my lips in the process.

Fuck.

She falls back a step, her eyes closed, a startled sigh slipping out of her before she moves away. For a hot second, I wish this was more than a botched taste test in my company lab.

I see her in my bed, under me, staring up at me with bright-eyed expectation.

This time, I'm the one pushing my thumb into her mouth. She takes it real sweetly, sucking it nice and slow, a prelude to the way I'll tame her mouth with something far bigger than a finger.

Goddamn.

I swallow the fantasy like a cactus stuck in my throat.

"I'm not fond of too much sugar...but it's good," I say. Not nearly as delectable as the sick thoughts ravaging my head, but it's definitely quality. "I'm glad you found a way to work my graham cracker in."

Her lips quirk up in a smile a thousand times more inviting than her cookie.

Then she leans in, slowly and cautiously—like she wants me to slam her against the nearest wall and show her what a real taste test would be like.

Goddammit, woman. You don't know what you're getting yourself into...

I take a deep, halting breath.

Don't do anything stupid, Cole.

When she tumbles toward me a second later, I almost think it's my own searing thoughts that pull her off-balance.

There's only a split second.

It's catch her or let her hit the floor—and the second option would be unbelievably cruel.

I lunge forward, diving for Eliza. Her weight falls into my arms and I hold her in this odd tilted position.

I'm right the fuck over her now.

Our mouths, maybe an inch apart at best.

Her lips flutter open in shock.

Is it *just* shock?

Her gaze is fixed on my lips.

Eliza damn Angelo is breathing so hard it stalls my heart.

She recovers quickly, though, clasping my arms for strength, balance,

whatever. Her tiny nails have a charge, soft static electricity against my skin.

I'm tingling?

Bullshit. I *never* tingle at a woman's touch.

Only, for the second time tonight, I wish this was happening anywhere besides this stuffy lab.

"Are you okay?" I whisper.

She doesn't say anything, just nods, her silky hair still splashed against my hand. It doesn't take much to bait my wicked brain.

One flick of my hand and I could have it coiled tight around my fingers, fisted, *pulled*.

Before I do something monumentally stupid, I push us both up so she's on her feet and we're both standing.

Her eyes are wide and glistening. She stares at me in stunned silence.

With her safely upright again, I drop my arms, giving up my hold on her and taking a step back.

I need space. Also, a week's worth of cold fucking showers.

"Um, sorry. Must be these shoes," she says breathlessly. "I'm still getting used to the new kicks I had to buy for the safety code here. I didn't strap them tight enough..."

I smile politely, a total front for the beast inside me, which is howling to drag her against my chest and sniff her mahogany hair.

"You'll need a more comfortable pair for where we're going," I say, enjoying the wonder in her eyes. "Fortunately, we don't need to talk much. I came to tell you to pack your bags. We're going to Kona for the next week or two."

"Kona? As in Kona, Hawaii?" She blinks.

"Is there another Kona I don't know about with premier acreage for the world's best coffee?" I say sardonically.

She glowers, her usual shields back up.

"If there were, I'm sure you'd rub it in my face—but why?"

"You'll get the details by email shortly," I say, checking the time on my phone.

"So this isn't just a crazy joke? It's a real...what, a business trip? To Kona?" Her whole expression shines with disbelief.

I nod firmly. "Yes. Don't make me repeat myself again, Miss Angelo. Now, I have one more call and arrangements to make with Destiny."

I turn and start walking, tugging at my shirt collar to release the steam

that's still hissing inside my suit from this encounter.

"Hey, Lump—umm—Cole—" She shakes her head fitfully. "Mr. Lancaster? Will you tell me *why* we're going to Hawaii?"

Fair enough. It's not just the surprise trip to paradise. When I look at her, I can tell she's as dazed from falling into my arms as I am catching her.

We had a moment.

A mutual effect.

A shared fever.

Regrettably, it doesn't look like it'll be cured anytime soon. Part of me already dreads ushering her off to a breezy island where she'll be showing more skin to stay cool.

Another part of me roars with delight.

Fuck, maybe I should have just kissed her now and gotten it out of my system, consequences be damned.

You dumbass, you're lucky you didn't, a panicked voice yells inside me. *Stop making death wishes.*

"This call is too important. Sorry," I say, annoyed that I've actually lost track of time.

"What call? What bigshot needs your ear this late?" she calls after me, her small voice bouncing around the massive lab.

"That's confidential," I yell back. "You'll have the details soon!"

Enough.

I all but *run*, throwing the heavy door open before any of my legion of depraved thoughts turn into destructive actions.

Also, I really did schedule that follow up with Winthrop the Younger.

Cowardly or not, sweet distance is the smartest choice right now.

Tom waits outside, holding the car door open when he sees me coming.

Thank fuck my driver is always so early. I escape into the back seat just as my phone lights up with Winthrop's call.

It only takes us ten minutes in late evening traffic to hash out some preliminary details. We're tentatively moving forward. If all goes well, he'll have a test batch for his team's personal approval in a few weeks tops.

We'll let a hundred emails and a small mountain of digital paperwork between our people hash out the rest.

This trip is a surprise, and for one person in my life, it could be a highly unpleasant one. The rest of the way home, I mull over what the hell I'm going to tell Destiny.

There's a good reason why we haven't been back to the old family estate on Kona for a decade.

She was just a kid then.

Now, she's almost a young woman. I suspect she'll be eager to prove to the world and herself that she won't be limited by any trauma.

She'll likely bound off the walls until she beats them down if I don't let her tag along.

If only I had any idea how she'll truly handle being there...

She may barely remember our last trip when Aster washed up on that beach. Not consciously, anyway. Subconsciously, though—*fuck*.

She doesn't even like warm beaches since our shared nightmare.

When she was seven, I tried to take her for a vacation. I knew better than to try Hawaii again, and honestly, it left a foul taste in my mouth, too.

Aster would never win any awards for mother and wife of the year. She was young and beautiful and temperamental as hell. She damn sure didn't deserve that final swim.

Maybe we were destined for divorce if she'd lived a few more years, but she had her whole life to change as a person. As a mother, for Dess.

Until she didn't.

With Hawaii becoming a graveyard, we went to Thailand instead. Picturesque white-gold beaches and a rich cultural history.

My little bee had to be coaxed out of the hotel room perched above the gentle rolling waves. She screamed bloody murder when I finally tried to lead her to the beach.

My gut churns as that conversation flashes in my head.

"What's wrong?"

"I...I just miss Mommy."

"Me too, sweetheart."

She stabs her little hand out, pointing at the ocean. "What if it takes me like it did Mama, Daddy?"

I'm about to tell her it won't. Promise her I'll never let that happen—but before I can, she gasps. Her eyes overflow with tears.

"What if it takes you? Who will I live with then? Mrs. Kate?"

"Katelyn will always be there for you, honey, but I'm not going anywhere." I walk over, bend down, and lift her up. She's almost too big for this, but right now, neither of us care. "We walk on the beach at home all the time, Dessy. What's so different here?"

“It’s not the same. That beach has seals and rocks and it’s cold if you dip your toes in the water. We don’t swim there. This beach has...the stupid trees that don’t even have real leaves. Everything is hot, and it—” She trails off, pointing at the ocean again. *“It wants to suck you to the bottom. It wants to pull and pull and drown you and never let you go!”*

She shakes against my chest.

I hold her until she’s breathing again and her rough sobs fade.

Okay, fuck. So the beach is a no-go.

“Do you want to see the temple instead? It’s supposed to be impressive,” I whisper softly.

“...no.”

“What do you want to do then, baby girl? Tell me.”

“Watch Disney.”

And that’s how most of the trip went. Aside from a few excursions into town to check out cultural landmarks and feast on street food, we holed up in the hotel room watching movies.

I never tried to take Destiny to a warm beach again.

Yeah, I’m in for an interesting conversation—and a heart-wrenching one.

I need to figure out what the hell to say to feel her out, to be sure I’m not bringing her back to a place that’s too damaging.

“Here we are, Mr. Lancaster,” Tom calls, looking at me in the rearview mirror.

We’re pulling up to my house and my insides feel like stone.

If I’m lucky, she’ll be preoccupied with her phone.

Then I’ll have a few more minutes to rehearse some combination of words that will make her okay with visiting the place where our lives grew darker.



HALF AN HOUR LATER, with a boulder in my throat, I tap on Destiny’s door.

“Come in!”

I push her door open and step inside.

“Dad, look! Solid A on the job shadowing presentation.” She taps her phone, holding up a scorecard from the school.

“Way to go, brainiac. The presentation looked good—minus the purple

people eater color scheme. If you're ever working in an office, it'll have to be more neutral."

"Oh, blah. Can't you just be happy about my A?" She makes a face.

"I always am," I say gently.

"What's up, anyway?"

I sit down on her bed. "I need to take a business trip in the next couple days. I'll be gone at least a solid week, maybe two."

She puts her phone down. "Business trip? Where are we going?"

I pause. "That's just it. Kate's willing to stay behind to look after you. She'll check in frequently here."

Her eyes widen. "Huh? But you always take me with unless it's overseas and I'm in the middle of school... It's summer."

I nod. "I do, but this time, I have to go to Hawaii—"

I'm not sure what I'm expecting.

Dead silence. Repressed tears. A look of utter disgust.

Instead, she just looks at me and laughs.

"Okay? So I'm not good enough for paradise?"

I smile thoughtfully. "You're telling me you love warm beaches now? Since when?"

She looks down, picking at a loose thread on her jeans.

"How would *you* know? I mean, you haven't even taken me to one since I was a kid."

"Destiny, you're more than welcome to come if you want, but this could be a hard trip for you. I need you to understand that. Think it through. I'm dealing with important business. If we get there and you're miserable, I can't just duck out early this time to be with you."

"It was a long time ago, Dad! I'll be fine."

I catch the defiant look in her eyes and wonder. *Will she?*

"Don't answer me tonight. Sleep on it. Because—for better or worse—we'll be staying at the Kona house Grandpa left me. That's where we were when—"

"Yeah, I remember." She bites her lip.

"And it's very close to where—"

"I said *I remember*." Her voice is strained.

I drag in a slow breath.

"Honestly, it seems like you're getting upset now," I venture.

"I mean, yeah. I don't want to relive the specifics—everything that

happened—but I'll be okay with the trip. There are plenty of things to do in Hawaii that don't involve the beaches, you know." She gives me a firm look.

"Like what?"

"Pearl Harbor! I've always wanted to see the USS Arizona Memorial," she says excitedly.

"Wrong island, unfortunately. That's on Oahu. There won't be a Pearl Harbor visit on Kona and the Big Island. If we can squeeze it in, it'll have to happen the day before we leave."

"Hula dancing then."

"...which is usually on the beach."

"Um, golf? Fore!" She yells it, her hands cupped over her mouth.

I try not to laugh.

"You find golf boring."

"Ugh, okay. Then I can just sit around sipping mocktails and Instagramming and watching the sunrise from Mauna Kea? How about that?"

"You're going to climb a volcano?" I stare at her incredulously. "Also, they get snow up there. Unless your mocktails are the campfire kind in a thermos, they'll freeze faster than you."

"Dad, you're ruining my whole vibe," she hisses. "And I bet you're going to Hawaii to stay in an office. Don't judge my extracurriculars."

Fair enough.

"There's plenty to do that's not on the beach and you know it. You're just being a dad."

"Well, I am a dad." I give her a lazy smile.

"Ugh, I know, but it's okay. I'm okay. I just—I can't hide from the beach my whole life because Mom died a long time ago, all right? I like sea creatures. Remember, marine biology? *Seals?*"

"You're right. I'll have to check what islands the Monk seals are on." I inhale slowly, knowing full well the rare seals are the least of our worries. "Destiny, I hope you understand I've been trying to protect you. I also know you're right. I have to let you move on in your own way—if you're ready."

She studies me for a long minute.

I'm sure she can't believe her own ears.

"Dad...are you sure *you're* okay? If—" She stops and sighs. "If you don't think you can do this, it's fine. There has to be someone else who can close the deal for you."

Do I look that forlorn?

She might be onto something.

What if it's not Destiny I'm worried about?

What if I'm not ready to face old ghosts?

I shift my weight restlessly on the bed, pushing down the bile at the bottom of my throat.

Aster and I had so many issues. We never got a chance to work through them when her life ended so abruptly. Who the hell knows how it would've gone down in the end.

But if Destiny can handle this—if she's ready and she's not too broken—so can I.

"I'm fine, little bee," I whisper sharply.

"For real?" She lays a hand on my shoulder, her slim fingers pressing into my skin.

"Yeah. Let's do this."

"Right on! I bet we'll both have an awesome time." She offers me a determined smile.

I want to believe her so badly.

We'll be spending time in Hawaii for very different reasons. I'll be working my dick off the whole time, running after sourcing and logistics and hopping on conference calls with people from Winthrope.

I shouldn't even have time to dwell on Aster's lifeless body—or how nasty, brutish, and short life can be, in the immortal words of Hobbes.

Still, I know one thing.

This isn't a happy homecoming to a vacation place I've avoided for ages.

I can never look at the Kona house the same way again, even if I can't let rotten memories keep me from revisiting paradise.

It's been ten goddamned years.

Also, I should be inspecting the farms myself where our Kona beans are harvested—the crown jewel in our operation since Wired Cup was Noble Bean—rather than trusting everything to agri-management.

I have a strong team of the best people, but a personal touch never hurt any CEO.

"Dad?" Destiny's voice pulls me from my thoughts.

"Huh?"

"When do we leave?" she asks, practically bouncing on the bed.

"Soon. I'll forward you the flight schedule. Go ahead and start getting packed. I need to throw a suitcase together and email my team so they can be

ready, too.” I stand and stretch my legs, ready to leave.

“Hey, wait...if I wanted to try the beach, do you think I could?” she asks in a small voice.

I turn back to face her.

“Absolutely. The Kona house is right off a fantastic stretch of shore. If you want to go swimming, be my guest.” I pause. “Though I’d rather you go when I can be there with you the first time, Destiny. Just to make sure you have everything you need.”

I hate how my stomach curdles.

The idea of Destiny going to the beach by herself and being run over with a rush of memories is more than I can stand.

“Well, I may not go at all. We’ll see. Just wanted to make sure you wouldn’t freak if I did.”

“We’re good. I promise. I’m glad you’re ready for this,” I say, shooting her a warm smile. “Life’s too short to let fears keep robbing us from a good time.”

For some reason, as I’m saying it, Miss Angelo stuffing that cookie into my mouth flashes through my head.

She’s essential on this trip.

The campfire coffee is hers, and she’ll be involved with producing a special derivative drink for the high-end resorts. Still, I need to be cautious.

It’s all too easy to lose my head when I’m with her and turn into an overgrown bear rather than a professional.

Destiny hops to her feet, swings her closet door open, and pulls out her glittery pink suitcase. The gaudy thing topples over in her rush.

“We’re not leaving tonight, baby girl. Relax.”

“Sorry! I’m just so pumped.” Her cheeks redden. “Hey, Dad, you should go do your stuff. I have to call Libby and tell her the news.”

“Of course. I’d wouldn’t dare intrude on the high school gossip line.”

“I have no idea what that even means, but bye!” She gives me a parting smile that shows off all her teeth.

If this is the hard part and she’s grinning like the devil, then maybe I can pull this off without a disaster or ten.

COFFEE SNOB (ELIZA)

A couple days later, I'm boarding a private jet for the first time in my life.

A week ago, the idea of a Hawaiian trip was outrageous.

Going to Hawaii specifically to play with coffee beans from a Kona farm never even occurred to me. But in roughly six hours, we'll be touching down on the island.

A literal tropical wonderland where I'll be breathing the jasmine-like scent of blooming coffee cherries.

Holy hell.

"I'll get that for you." Cole takes my bag as we climb up the steps to the jet.

"It's cool. I've got it."

"Don't be stubborn. It's bigger than you."

"Not really, and you've got your hands full."

He already has his own bag slung over one shoulder and Destiny's bag in his hand. "Madame, I've carried far heavier loads than this. Trust me."

I might not believe him if he didn't have the muscle to back it up—but it's also four a.m. If he wants to carry my bag that badly, fine.

I'm exhausted.

The life goes out of me the second after I step on the plane and I'm standing in what I guess must be the center aisle. Hard to say because this spotless white cabin with the stained wood and gold finishes resembles no plane I've ever been on.

It feels like a leather-wrapped bus, all plush and comfy with a few

clusters of recliners and a round table with bench seating in the corner. Just scanning the place is overwhelming.

Cole drops the bags he's carrying on the bench around the table and sits beside it. An attendant scurries up a minute later to stow them properly.

Destiny drags into the jet behind him with a loud yawn. "Can I go back to bed yet? I'm dying here."

"Since when do you ask? Just go," he tells her.

She collapses on the first available recliner and puts the foot rest out, curling up like she's done this a thousand times before.

"Hey, Dess." Cole stands over her when I look up, waiting for her eyes to open. "You need a blanket?"

"Mm-hmm," she mumbles groggily.

He opens a small compartment next to the seat and gently tucks a fluffy blue-and-white blanket around her.

For a second, she's five years old, not fifteen.

And he's just a dad, not an office dictator and the bane of my existence.

My heart melts helplessly. I also have a horrible desire to be tucked in by this man—*this Cole*. The one who can actually be decent rather than a grumpasaurus rex.

But a memory of an older, devilishly attractive man folding a sheet around me comes back.

Derek could be kind, too. And I let him melt my heart with a big greasy lie that made me the other woman in his life.

I flinch with surprise when Lancaster finally sits down beside me again.

"Did she turn in the big project yet?" I ask, nodding at a gently snoring Destiny.

"Solid A. Why do you care?"

"Sorry, it's not my business. I just got kinda invested when she was shadowing me."

He nods. "Understandable. She could've had the entire summer off, but she insists on squeezing in a few credits for college over the summer. I enrolled her in a private school after Aster died, so if I needed to take a trip, she could tag along without getting behind during the school year. They're generous with remote work and making up credits elsewhere." He shrugs. "In the early days, I'd bring along a tutor to help her, too. She was too smart and disciplined for it by the time she hit middle school."

"Aster is her mom?" I don't know if I should point out the name he

mentioned, but I do.

For a second, he rakes me with that harsh blue-eyed lightning. I think I'm about to get chewed out until his expression abruptly softens.

"Was her mother, yes," he says numbly.

There's a new tension in my shoulders.

Does it mean anything that he called her by name? Or that he didn't say "*my late wife.*"

"I'm sorry for your loss," I whisper.

"Thanks. It was a long time ago."

"You're a good dad, Lump," I add, not daring to meet his eyes.

"And still a blackhearted lump of coal, apparently. What would I do without your constant reminder, Miss Angelo?"

I roll my eyes. "Hey, you get an exception with Destiny. With her, you're no lump of anything but love."

He smiles at me so sincerely my heart flips over.

"Badger Lady, that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me. This trip is off to a damn good start already."

"Don't get used to it," I throw back, feeling my face heat.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Kate boards the plane last after a few other staff and settles into a recliner. From their chatter, she made a last-minute decision to join us on the trip. There are a couple other senior staff types I recognize by face but not by name.

From the looks of it, I'm the only person aboard who isn't part of the c-team except for the flight crew. "Who do we have with us?"

"Most of my executive team, you, and Destiny," he answers, staring at his phone.

Hmm.

Why did he pull me in over Gina with her seniority? What we're really doing jetting off to Hawaii has still been awfully vague, aside from the 'lucrative new opportunity' mentioned in his email the other evening.

Goosebumps form on my arm when he says "you and Destiny."

This is also new.

Referring to us—to *me*—so casually.

Eliza, stop. It's not personal.

He's not playing you like Derek—and even if he wanted to, he's still your freaking boss.

Cole Lancaster is not that stupid.

Every better instinct I have tries to choke the dreamy side of me trying to read way too much into mundane changes in his word choices.

But if I'm being honest, his age, chiseled appearance, and dangerously overconfident attitude aren't my biggest problems.

My fingers were practically in his mouth.

Our mouths were inches apart when I tripped and crashed into his chest.

We lived the awkwardly funny setup of every bad romantic comedy and

—

—and Commander Snarlypants wasn't even interested.

He ran off to go plan this trip like I was radioactive.

What do you even make of that?

No one likes rejection. But I'm *lucky* that he isn't interested in me that way—right?

Otherwise, I'd just get played again, and this time wind up jobless.

I inhale sharply—another thing I instantly regret.

His scent is flipping intoxicating today. Citrus and dark roast and raging testosterone.

He's sexier than ever without even trying to be.

This man's very presence is determined to complicate my life.

Something about his immaculately pressed grey suit against the spotless white leather of the jet feels tantalizing. It's like I'm seeing him in his natural habitat, like a tiger relaxing under a tree between hunts.

I'm sure I'm about to regret asking this, but I have to know.

“Question.” I wait for him to look up from his phone.

He's not annoyed. Good sign, I guess.

“Why am I the only person along for the ride who isn't part of the executive team?”

“It's your coffee, Miss Angelo. Only you know if the beans are absolutely right, how much to use, and how to roast them,” he says, returning to his reading.

Oh. That makes sense.

My stomach drops with shame. I'm not sure what I was expecting.

Would I have really liked it better if he'd said, “Because I couldn't handle a week without seeing you.”

You know the answer, idiot.

Sweet agony, your name is Eliza.



FOUR A.M. FLIGHTS weren't meant to be shared with Big Daddy incarnate lounging across the table from you, his long legs splayed out casually, his fingers stroking his beard in a way that's almost *obscene* without even trying to be.

Even when he changes seats several times, he's always too close. Looming too large in my field of vision.

I've got to get this billionaire incubus out of my head.

Also, I need a cup of coffee.

I don't know how these things work on a private jet. People knock commercial airlines, but at least you know that half an hour after takeoff, you'll get a mediocre cup of joe. Bad as it may be, it's still coffee.

"You're quiet today," he says just as I'm about to get up.

"I wish you were."

He looks up over his phone, not amused.

"Not fair. I even carried your bag, brat."

I gasp when he calls me that and instantly regret it. Those sky-blue eyes are laughing at me, even when his lips are barely quirked.

"I was going to grab breakfast. Do you want a cookie?" I ask.

He leans in closer and whispers, "Only if it's dark chocolate over graham cracker—and you shovel it into my face again."

Oh, God. Oh, God.

My stomach knots. Is he trying to kill me with flirting or confusion?

...because that sounded like a bona fide Cole Lancaster *flirt*.

My throat closes up. Almost like I'm allergic to handsome men messing with me.

I don't know what to say.

But I can't leave a deafening silence, so I say, "I'm sure I could find a badger to feed you cookies, if that's what you really want."

"Maybe. I do have a specific badger in mind, and I think she's the only one allowed on this flight under Hawaiian environmental regulations. Any invasive species can be seriously destructive."

His stare never leaves my eyes.

That was *definitely* a flirt, even if it was a weird one.

I'm still plummeting into his eyes and I'm not coming back.

My face flames.

Forget breakfast. I pull out my laptop, open the lid, and try to hunker down behind the screen so he doesn't see my cheeks on fire.

I pretend to work, tapping out the equivalent of *War and Peace* in total nonsense and F5 screen refreshes so I don't have to make eye contact. I'm able to keep up the front until the pilot announces we've hit thirty thousand feet.

This trip is way too slow.

I can still *feel* him there, invading my space, even when he's not looking directly at me.

Every so often, whether he means to or not, his foot brushes mine under the table.

Sweet Jesus.

I'm going to explode in a mess of jitters before I've had that coffee.

Eventually, I shut the laptop and stand.

"Something wrong, Miss Angelo?" Cole asks, sitting up in a tall, gentlemanly way.

Yes, and you're the reason why.

"No," I lie, walking to the makeshift galley. I'm not waiting for a flight attendant.

I don't even glance back at him, either.

"Can I help you?" A woman wearing a pale-blue polo shirt with the Wired Cup logo embroidered on her chest pocket sits on a small bench.

Oh, great.

My eyes flick to the tiny coffee pot bolted to the plane. "Hi, I just wanted to make some coffee."

She stands up with a plastered-on smile. "Great timing! I was just about to brew a fresh pot. Allow me."

"Umm—any chance I can try?" I force an awkward smile. "See, I'm a bit of a coffee nerd and I've never made it on a plane before. So, uh, if it's not against FAA regulations or anything, I'd love to try."

Embarrassing.

Why am I a stammering mess?

She probably thinks I'm sneaking off to snort cocaine rather than find a cup of joe.

Nope. I just have the hots for the boss from hell and I can't think when I'm stuffed into a seat next to him.

She nods pleasantly, eyeing me carefully. "Certainly. We're stocked with

standard Wake Up Call blend and decaf. I'll show you how to make it."

She gives me a quick rundown on how the machine works. It's nothing I haven't seen before, minus a few extra safety mechanisms.

"Let's do the standard blend," I say.

She opens a drawer, pulls out a bag of ground coffee, and hands it to me.

While I let her in the small galley, I notice Cole staring at me more than once while I linger just outside.

I fuse my eyes to the percolating pot and her hands, avoiding his magnetic gaze.

But when I look up again, Kate Storm is right behind us, looking like death.

Oops. There's actually a line of three or four people, all waiting impatiently for their coffee. I'm holding up the show.

I'm sure that also explains why the grump keeps giving me that evil eye. He probably just wants his caffeine hit, too.

Oh, but he'll get his last.

Once the pot is brewed, I pull out the big sealed carafe and tell the attendant I'll be back to brew more.

"I could take these for you, or I could start the next pot," she offers.

"Thanks, but it's a six-hour flight. I like staying busy."

"Ah-ha, my favorite kind of passenger." She smiles.

I take my three disposable cups and hand one to Kate before I pour fresh, fragrant coffee.

"Thanks," she says.

I point to the guy in the cabin next to her seat. "Is he asleep?"

"...huh? Is that coffee?" he pops up, muttering drowsily.

"Here's a cup for him, too," I say, passing the extra to the attendant.

I grab the carafe and make the rounds, saving the attendant some extra work.

"Hi, Eliza," Destiny says, rubbing her eyes when I pass her seat.

"Welcome back to the land of the living." There's an empty seat beside her, so I sit for a moment. "I thought you'd nap the whole way there."

"I can't go back to sleep now. I don't know, something about plane pressure never feels quite right."

"Sorry, hon. Do you want some coffee?"

She nods. "But, um, I like cream and sugar..."

I place the cup securely in the holder beside her. "Let me start another

pot, and I'll be right back to sweeten it up."

"You rock!"

I return to the galley and start a second pot. I'm scooping ground coffee into a filter when an unexpected warmth against my ear makes me jump.

Before I even turn around, I know.

I can smell him. Earth, citrus, a hint of espresso, and overpowering alpha male.

"You just can't sit still, huh? You had to take over the flight attendant's job?" His voice is a low rumble, a purr that plucks at my nerves.

The attendant rounds the corner and gasps. "Oh, I'm sorry, sir! I offered to do it, but she said she wanted the experience. I didn't see the harm..."

"Guilty," I say without looking at him. "I couldn't pass up a chance to join the coffee mile-high club."

His eyes flash with a wicked gleam when I realize my mistake.

"Are you done bothering me, Mr. Lancaster?"

He smirks at the flight attendant. "It's fine. I know how Eliza gets."

What? He doesn't even know me.

Why is he acting so familiar?

First the flirting, and now *this*?

Did he really bring me on this trip for the sake of coffee science? What do I know about Kona beans, anyway? I've never picked them by hand.

The sudden crisis of confidence hits like a Mack truck.

"Why don't you sit down? I've got this. I think we're the only people left without coffee," I say, ignoring how he squeezes into the tight space next to me.

Lancaster doesn't move. If anything, he inches closer, watching how I tremble every time he brushes me and—*oh, God. He's enjoying this, isn't he?*

When I grab the new carafe, I almost elbow him in the gut on my way out.

"Do you *mind*? Like I said, I've got this."

His look reminds me how very little I've got anything when it comes to self-control. I almost drop the coffee container on the floor.

When his hand darts around my wrist, I almost hit the ceiling.

I'm barely breathing as he moves his fingers slowly up my hand, gently lifting the carafe away from me.

"You're shaking like a leaf with a container of hot liquid. Are you sure you don't need a hand? Serving coffee isn't below my pay grade,

sweetheart,” he whispers.

Dear Lord.

I shake my head fiercely, until he gives up the carafe again when I reach for it, touching his fingers.

For the faintest second, my hip brushes his.

“I can handle my coffee, Mr. Lancaster, but...but thanks.” And because I can still feel his breath when he’s so achingly close, I add, “It’s not as hard as I thought it would be.”

He clears his throat loudly.

At first, my mangled words don’t register.

Shocked that this self-possessed man seems so flustered, I replay the last two lines in my head.

Oh. Shit.

It hits me what that must have sounded like.

Double entendre? More like death warrant.

He’s still staring at me as I turn, giving him an apologetic look.

“Umm—making airplane coffee. That’s what I meant! Not—y’know.” I stop cold and swallow. “It’s not any harder than doing it on the ground.”

The relieved smile that lights up his face almost makes me boneless.

He’s barely moved by the time I’m done serving everyone seconds and I squeeze past him again.

The galley’s tight, and Cole’s large, muscular body fills it.

Every accidental touch makes me eat my words.

There’s nothing soft about any inch of him whatsoever.

I’m sandwiched between him and the coffee pot bolted to the wall.

A fat bead of coffee splatters against hot metal and sizzles.

“Don’t know how they do this full-time. It’s steamy as hell in here.” His voice is low, all flames.

I think I just died.

I’m quiet so long he finally moves away, his heat trailing his heavy footsteps.

It’s been days since my fingers touched his lips and I saw myself kissing him.

I want to be reckless.

I want to turn around and *bite him* on the lower lip just to see how he responds.

Just to inject the slightest sanity back into my life by getting this craziness

over and done with.

Then I remember his daughter is in the front row.

We're on a plane full of senior staff, and he's still my boss, basically a prince of Corporate America.

Seriously.

What kind of fresh, caffeinated crapstorm even is my life?



ALL THE TRAVEL videos on social media can't prepare me for Kona's breathtaking beauty.

It's lush and green and mountainous with a salty, sun-kissed breeze and strewn with colorful flowers bursting to life.

Even the airport is open, letting the outside in, immediately welcoming me to a different world than anything I've known.

Most of the gorgeous homes we pass on the SUV ride are that way, too.

Of course, Cole's beachfront estate outshines them all.

It would be imposing if it weren't for the soft red woodtones and tall windows. The place is just off a beachfront stolen from heaven, surrounded by acres and acres of coffee plants and greenery so bright it nearly burns my eyes.

The inside smells like orchids and sandalwood. Until now, I've never stepped inside a house that has its own perfume.

But in Kona, the Lancaster mystique has a scent.

When a friendly staffer shows me to my room and I step outside onto the open lanai, my jaw hits the floor.

It's my own personal riviera. Manicured gardens, turquoise waters, gold-white sand, and blue, blue skies as far as the eye can see.

No postcard could ever capture this beauty.

No Instagram shot could ever do it justice.

And for however long we're here, it's mine, and I so don't feel worthy. I'm floating through a freaking fairy tale.

Apparently, the whole team is staying at the estate, too. Cole had part of it refurbished for makeshift office space and meeting rooms before we arrived, and another wing set aside as guest rooms.

I frantically unpack my main bag before I walk around the estate.

Southern California might be lovely, but it has *nothing* on this island.

I want to take it all in before I can worry about minor details like work.

Walking through the coffee trees, I try to get my pictures done early, snapping strange, fragrant flowers I've never seen before and silvery waves lapping against the beach. I haven't made it far when I hear footsteps approaching and turn.

"Hey, Destiny. I thought you'd be at the beach?"

Her goofy teenage smile fades. "Um, beaches and I don't quite vibe..."

That gets my attention. My head tilts, and I notice the tension taking over her face.

"But you came to Hawaii?"

She shrugs, her bare shoulders rippling in her tank top and already soaking in the sun.

"I just wanted to get some sun and see some cool animals. Plus, I didn't want Dad coming here alone."

Why does it sound like she's protecting him?

I stare at her, bewildered.

Cole must have flown tons of amazing places without her and survived—hasn't he?

"That's considerate of you," I say gently. "Looks like he's brought the whole crew, though. I'm sure he'll be fine."

The idea of this tiny fifteen-year-old protecting her billionaire hulk of a father is both adorable and unsettling.

"Can I walk with you?" she asks hopefully.

"Sure!" I nod, gesturing her to follow me along a big line of palm trees.

It is a little dark and jungle-like here, so maybe she's uneasy. Thankfully, the Hawaiian islands are one tropical hotspot where you don't have to worry about dog-sized lizards or snakes looking for a two-legged snack.

"It must be awesome being back here, no? Your dad said this place was in your family for years. I figured it would be like a second home for you..."

She shakes her head, biting her lip.

Why does she look so conflicted?

"Neither of us have been here in a really long time, actually," she says quietly.

I wait, but she doesn't elaborate. Dess just swings her head around, not staring at anything long enough for it to register. It's more like she's looking for a certain something in the landscape.

Odd.

The guy swears this breathtaking place is family property and he spent whole months here when he was young, but he never brings his daughter? What gives?

We walk through a breezy nirvana while she tells me about her classes coming up next year and how pissed her friends are that she's in Hawaii and they're not. The trees only get lusher, and I see several overflowing with bananas.

"Oh my God, do you harvest those for breakfast?" I point up at the trees. "This place is so beautiful. I can't believe you guys don't come more often," I say, somewhat giddy.

Destiny offers a smile that's too worn out for any normal teenager. "The bananas, maybe. I think most of the plants are decorative. They help with shade and nice views because they're so pretty. You should see the coffee trees Wired Cup owns."

"There's more?" My mouth is hanging open.

"I'll show you when we get back, Eliza." She grins, her nose scrunching up adorably under the sun.

We take a few more steps, working our way down a hill and exploring our surroundings in a friendly silence.

Destiny stops as we near a rocky path that looks like it ends at the beach. She releases a long sigh.

"I can hear the waves. We should go back..."

"You don't even want to see it?" I look at her.

Her jaw is clenched like she's about to pop bone through her cheeks.

No, she mouths.

"Destiny, I don't mean to be nosy but...are you okay?" I lay a hand on her shoulder.

Her weak nod tells me she isn't.

"I'm fine. Sorry if I'm ruining your fun..."

"Dess, no. I'm the one who's sorry. If I can get you anything, just let me ___"

"Can we just head back to the house?" She says it quickly, which tells me again how *not* fine she is.

I follow her back the same way we came.

Good thing she was paying more attention than me. I've lost my sense of direction and I'd never make it back to the house without a guide.

But I can't stop thinking about the way she tensed up the second she said she could hear the water. Like it was some kind of shock to her?

I don't understand.

We're on an island. A gorgeous one she's visited before. Surely, she remembers these dazzling beaches and the ocean?

I know I shouldn't keep pushing, but I can't help it. I'm worried.

"If you weren't okay, you'd tell me, right?"

"Eliza—*I'm fine.*" It's the closest she's come to snapping at me since I met her.

O-kaaay then.

I drop it for the rest of the walk to the big house.

About halfway up the hill to the huge porch, we see Lancaster—and I've never seen him like this.

He's changed into black shorts, showing off those tall legs that look like they could kick someone's ass to the moon and back.

Despite probably never wearing shorts at home—I can't picture it—he's not pale like I imagined.

How did I never notice how strong his thighs are until now?

How defined his calves are.

How *tight* that butt looks with the fabric hugging it, all sculpted muscle, a machine that could send him crashing deep into any woman lucky enough to wind up under him.

God.

Even if he was born that way, he clearly pays his dues at the gym.

My brain is rabbiting, imagining the appalling things those muscles would be good for—and none of them require a treadmill. My face burns.

Thankfully, I can blame it on the evening sun.

"You two look like you're settling in," he says.

"We were just exploring. The beach is that way, Dad. Same as ever," Destiny says sheepishly, jabbing her thumb over her shoulder.

"I know, Dess." He looks at her so gently. "How are you feeling?"

"Hot." Destiny fans herself, puffing out her cheeks. "I'm gonna need a day or two to get used to the humidity here. Even with the breeze, it's nothing like home."

Smiling, he meets my gaze. "You're flushed. Don't tell me honey badgers melt in this climate."

"You're not that lucky. I'm just hot, like she said." I point a thumb at

Dess.

“Let’s find you some shade,” he tells me, turning to the thick leafy trees closest to the house.

“Knock yourselves out, guys. I’m going inside,” Dess tells us, starting to move until her father holds up a hand.

“Show me your phone first.” He gives her a severe look.

Wrinkling her nose, she pulls the phone out of her pocket and holds it up.

“Good. Text me when you’re supposed to check in. If I don’t hear from you in an hour, young lady, you won’t be going anywhere alone until we’re back in Seattle.”

“Damn, Commander. You’re this strict in paradise?” I whistle.

He glares at me.

“Okay, okay.” Destiny sprints toward the house without looking back.

I watch her white sneakers as she runs.

“Is she okay?” I ask softly. “She seemed a little off when we were down by the beach, honestly.”

“She’s settling in,” he says harshly. “I’ll talk to her when we get back this evening.”

Oof. Why won’t he look at me?

“I thought you should know...she kinda freaked out when she heard the waves. Before we even got to the beach, she wanted to turn around.”

For the briefest second, the color drains from his face. It’s not the soft orange sunlight splashing him through the shadows, either.

“I was worried about that,” he mutters, like he’s forgotten I’m here.

Yep. I’m officially weirded out.

The girl’s reaction to the ocean was eerie enough, but Cole acts like he *expects it*. I wonder what big, scary secret I’m missing.

“Let’s find shade,” he says.

He doesn’t wait for me, just continues in the direction he’d started moving.

I tag along, making my heavy feet work.

When I’m at his side, he rests his hand on the small of my back, guiding me along.

My mind jumps back to the plane, the way our bodies touched in that cramped galley. It’s almost worse that he’s in shorts now.

There’s even less between me and whatever he’s packing below the belt line.

This should be uncomfortable—*he's my boss*—but it's not.

It feels too natural. I don't know what that means.

"Here." He places his hand in a thick mass of banyan tree roots and pushes them apart, making room for us.

I step through the curtain of greenery and come out the other side. I'm not expecting to see a giant flat stone.

The start of a walking path?

Cole moves behind me, so close his heat adds to the balmy air.

"It's not far now. Watch your step. The rocks are raised up a bit, almost like steps." He moves ahead of me to the next stone and holds a hand out.

I grasp it, feeling his strong fingers wrapping around mine as he helps me up. We repeat this until we're heading up a small elevation.

The stones get bigger, flatter, and soon we're on the highest stone that's big enough to hold two people.

"Have a seat, Miss Angelo." He never let go of my hand. He's still holding on tight as he guides us forward, stopping just where the stone touches another large, ancient-looking banyan tree.

Through the roots and greenery, there's a faint window to the ocean quietly lapping the shore.

We sit down, stretching our legs over the edge.

A few distant birds call, new sounds I've never heard before, and lovely enough to be in a fantasy movie.

So, this is why people rave about Hawaii.

I'm transfixed, staring out at a vast ocean and a beautiful forest in the same view. It stretches on as far as the eye can see.

Cole points to the edge of the forest. "See where those lower bushes start in the distance? That's all a hundred percent Kona coffee."

"Oh, wow," I whisper, accidentally squeezing his hand.

He doesn't let go.

"Out of all the Kona coffee plants, only a few rare bushes produce peaberry beans," he says, his gaze sharpening.

"Peaberry beans? Aren't those crazy expensive? I have to admit I haven't worked with them much." I'm not sure why I blurt that out, but it's true.

They cost more than your average bean, even by pricey Kona bean standards.

I'm gobsmacked that he even has his own supply. I doubt that they actually go into any Wired Cup products.

“Then you know why they’re so rare and highly sought,” he tells me. “They’re delicate, refined, and delicious. With Kona peaberries, there’s always that added sweetness. And that’s exactly why they’re a natural choice for Brock Winthrop’s discerning tastes.”

“Oh, so *that’s* what you’re planning to serve up at the resorts?” I nod. There’s no denying it’s the perfectly exquisite and exclusive rich person’s coffee. “Sounds like a coffee snob’s wet dream.”

He snorts. “And just what would you know about that?”

I scratch my suddenly hot cheek, ignoring his question. “Are you sure you still want it modeled on the new drinks? I mean, a peaberry campfire brew seems almost like a waste of that beautiful bean.”

“You’re not wasting anything, Eliza. You’re enhancing it.”

For a second, my breath stalls.

I think he’s just as shocked that he slipped and said my first name.

“Forgive me—” he starts.

“No. We can drop Miss Angelo. If I call you Lump, it’s less stuffy and formal if you just call me Eliza.”

“Eliza,” he repeats with a touch of reverence. “If that’s what you prefer...”

Holy hell.

I shudder. Is it just my imagination or do those vivid blue eyes match the ocean murmuring in the distance?

I’m lost in his gaze until a familiar scent makes my nostrils flare.

Is that—yeah. Definitely coffee.

The smell wafts in, mingling with the sea breeze like natural incense.

Also, there’s hints of citrus and a strong undertone, almost like leather?

Wait. I’m smelling Cole.

The faint sheen of sweat in this climate mingled with the trade winds must release more of his dangerously alluring scent.

Either that, or I’m too well aware of it now. I’ve got to get back to my room before I do something hilariously stupid.

The drug-like effect this man has on me should be illegal.

“And I bet you’ll be blowing up my inbox with all kinds of peaberry details soon?” I say with an awkward smile. “Guess I’d better go sleep off that jet lag...”

I start to stand, but my legs are wobbly. I slip.

But Cole springs to his feet, catching me effortlessly before I skid off the

stone surface.

Yikes. Here we go again.

His arms feel good around me, holding me up. The back of my head lies against his chest, and soon I've got a lungful of badly behaved bossman.

I'm flipping shaking, and it has nothing to do with losing my balance.

Very slowly, I lift my head and meet his eyes.

I don't make any effort to pull away—and I should.

...right?

He chuckles, this low, pleasant sound that makes the birdsongs sound like a crude reverb. "Understandable. I'll need your full attention tomorrow. Let me walk you back to the house, and do tell the staff if there's anything they can do to help you settle in. For this job, I need you at your best."

I know what I need, what every bit of me keeps screaming for.

A mystery man built like a Roman statue and cursed with the soul of Jekyll and Hyde. That would be a fantastic way to scratch the itch in my lady bits.

But I'm guessing his house staff can't help me there.

Since I can't speak, I just smile at him.

For a heady moment, we linger, until I finally move again, stretching my legs out.

We silently start descending from the rocks, taking them carefully one at a time.

I know exactly what I need to do.

Get back to my room and pray the plumbing delivers a cold shower. A very long, very ice-cold shower.

Cole climbs down the rocks behind me, his eyes glued to me the whole time. Is he just looking out for me or does he like what he sees in front of him?

I hate that I wonder.

"You don't have to come. I think I know the way from here," I say, after pushing my way through the curtain of banyan trees again.

He laughs. "And risk you falling before tomorrow's meeting? No. Someone has to keep you vertical, woman. I don't trust your clumsy-ass feet."

Damn this man.

I want to tell him it's not necessary—or at least respond with some equally stupid retort ending in Commander Coffee. But all I can do is laugh.

I walk to the grassy hill feeling dizzy, hungry, and slightly overheated.
But before I can waver too much, he takes my hand.

Cole Lancaster never lets go the entire way to the back door.

BITTER CUP (COLE)



I make an extra lap around the farm on the ATV the next morning, enjoying the pristine view and pleasant breeze.

Out here in the sunny hills with a pulsing green landscape handcrafted by God, it's easy to send your worries packing.

We'll nail the perfect drink for Brock Winthrope. Dess will take a swim before we're on the plane home. And I won't explode from horrifying blue balls every time Eliza goddamned Angelo invades my personal space with her sweet scent and beaming caramel eyes that make me ache to ignite her.

Surrounded by this island beauty, I can almost believe all my wishes will come true.

If only I wasn't too aware that the picture-perfect beach behind my house is terribly deceptive.

When I start driving toward my place again, I'm frowning.

Fun time's over. I'll need to meet with my staff soon.

Coming closer to the side lot with the shed for ATVs, I spot a familiar face that pulls me deeper into the past.

Troy Clement, my old friend and sourcing head, in the flesh. He's bent down and stretching, wearing an oversized Hawaiian shirt with black-and-red fern leaves and running shoes. I park the ATV and jog up to him, slapping his arm.

"Hey, you castaway asshole. It's been forever."

He turns, his lips curling into a shit-eating grin.

"Cole! Man, I can't remember the last time I was here, either. It's just as beautiful as ever—almost as sexy as Bali. You're looking good."

No joke. Troy has the job any sane person would ever want. I could've had his life of travel if fate hadn't made me a single dad marooned in obligations and acid heartbreak.

"You're just heading out?" I ask.

"Nope, I'm wrapping up my workout. The flight here left my legs stiff as nails."

Could've fooled me. There isn't a bead of sweat on the guy. That's Troy, though, always put together like solid granite no matter how much he complains.

"Come with me to the meeting then. It's a rare chance for you to show off in person instead of over a screen," I say.

"Sounds good." He follows me back inside the house through the huge open doors.

"Have you found your room and gotten settled in yet?"

"Yeah, but it's no big deal. How could I ever forget this place?" He gives me an easy smile. "You'd need a pipe to the head to forget this scenery."

He's trying to be friendly and easygoing. Even if he's been away from this house as long as I have, he also made the trips to our Hawaiian farms I couldn't bear to.

It's stupid to resent anyone for gushing over this place.

Hell, this company would be far worse off without Troy handling sourcing. He's always ready to island hop at a moment's notice and spend whole weeks away from civilization, hashing out production woes with local managers and sweating it out in steaming warehouses without air conditioning.

Still, I knew this was coming.

The jagged unease that keeps knifing me in the gut every time I look at him. My own traitor mind tries to claw me back to another time and place.

"Go hit the shower so you don't stink up the room," I joke. "We'll reconvene in the back hall. It's the one place big enough for everyone."

"Sure, boss. Have you put Destiny to work yet?" he asks with a gaping smile.

I force a smile back. "Her job shadowing for a project recently was hard enough. I'm not sure there's any use putting her to work in a place as distracting as this. Although she does seem to like Development."

I can't say I mind how well she's been doing since we landed, but I need to keep an eye on her.

“I saw her while I was out walking. The little lady’s almost as tall as you.” He laughs loudly.

My smile never wavers as I nod. Something about that comment bothers me.

I just can’t pinpoint what.

Probably my damn overwound instincts overreacting. It’s hard for anyone who’s been in the military to dismiss them, even when they’re misfiring.

“She’ll be glad to see you again,” I say cordially.

“Yeah! She’s still like a niece to me, Cole,” he says, his eyes turning serious. “You kept your distance—I get it—but I’m still mighty fond of her. That’s why I kept sending you the Christmas postcards all these years. Shit, she looks so much like her mother, doesn’t she?”

No denying it.

Destiny resembles Aster more with every passing week.

That’s something to be proud of, never mind how it stings my heart. Her mother was a lovely woman, a walking magnet for every male gaze anytime she stepped into a room. Hell, objectively, she was a goddamned knockout—even when we were so strained it dampened my own attraction to her.

He’s telling me the truth, but I still have to try like hell not to glare.

“She’s fifteen years old, Troy. The kid has a lot more growing up to do.”

He looks away, scratching his neck like he needs to reconsider his next words. “Well, it’s in the face, I think. There’s a serious resemblance—a good one, man. That’s all I meant.”

I wish I could just take the compliment and move the fuck on.

Not spiral into the dark crevices my brain keeps tumbling into.

How much time has he spent staring at my daughter’s face? Every time I read a news story about some sick fuck who goes after a child, I bristle, so maybe I’m just extra-sensitive.

I know Troy. He’s nothing like that. There’s no double meaning or innuendo in his words.

Christ, I need to get a grip.

This guy was my best friend once. He truly was like a stand-in uncle for Dess during her first five years of life.

Just because we drifted apart after everything that happened is no excuse to treat him like a criminal.

“What was she doing, anyway?” I ask, raking him with a look.

“Huh?”

“You said you saw Destiny.”

“Oh, I don’t know. It was right after I got here and they were hauling my luggage in. I think she was standing on the hill, looking out at the sea...” His face falls and he turns away from me. “I hope she wasn’t looking for the spot,” he adds in a whisper.

My jaw tightens like a vise.

He means that beach. That scene.

Aster’s twisted, cold body lying on the sands with the foamy waves still washing over her. My gut twists.

Fuck, those doubts I had come crashing down like a load of bricks.

I agreed to this trip for the lucrative Winthrope deal, but am I really ready?

Here I am, ready to beat the shit out of an old friend and excellent employee for telling me that my daughter looks like my dead wife.

I’m on knife’s edge. Just waiting for something to go wrong.

Fortunately, my staff starts filing past us in the hall a minute later, putting an end to this conversation.

Seeing Eliza helps in the worst way.

My breath fucking catches in my throat the second I look at her.

She’s wearing a pale-blue island dress today. It’s strapless and looks like a towel that would only take the slightest pull to rip off her.

I’m staring, frozen and dumbstruck and well aware I shouldn’t be.

I don’t care.

Not until I sense Troy’s eyes following my gaze.

Shit.

My heart slams my rib cage. I don’t want to give him a chance to talk to her, but I also don’t want to be a raging dick to an old friend.

“Eliza, join us,” I say, waving a hand.

She comes over obediently and stops beside me with none of the usual suspicion on her face.

What? Is she going to give me less shit now that we’re on a first-name basis?

I look at Troy and gesture to her. “This is Eliza Angelo. She’s our new R & D beverage specialist.”

“Ahhh, our ace with those scorched drinks, right?”

“Campfire drinks,” she corrects softly.

“Oh, yeah. Right. Gina couldn’t say enough good stuff about you in the

emails.” Troy’s eyes roam up and down her barely clad body.

I belatedly realize I’ve altered my stance.

Now, I’m partially blocking her from his view. I’m also fighting the sudden urge to drag her off after this for a talk about dress codes and company events.

Not that it’s her fault Troy keeps gawking at her like he’s having the same diabolical thoughts about that dress—like the fuck wants to strip it off and hurl it to the trade winds.

“Thank you, Mister...?” she trails off.

I realize I never introduced him.

“Clement,” I supply.

“Mr. Clement, Cole—uh—Mr. Lancaster tells me we’ll be working with the peaberry bean. I’m pretty pumped about that. I’ve never worked with anything so rare, let alone this fresh.”

Troy’s lips turn up, his smile almost predatory.

“You’re in luck, Ace. The farms here use the latest harvesting techniques. We should net just enough small-batch peaberry loads to keep up with demand for the resorts. But since this crop is more delicate, you’ll probably have to test them over and over to find just the right method for your campfire brews. I’m no expert in development, of course, just a thought.”

I hate how she looks at him.

Why is she smiling?

And what the actual fuck is wrong with me?

“I don’t mind the testing. It’s my favorite part of the job, actually, but are you sending the peaberry beans to Seattle? I don’t have a lab set up here, so —”

“You have everything you’ll need in a sunroom on the other side of the house,” I bite off, cutting in. “It’s not as large or as glamorous as your usual workplace, but with your skills, you’ll manage.”

My fists are slightly more relaxed as her smile shifts to me and her cheeks go pink.

“Oh, wow. I wasn’t expecting that. Thank you!”

Any-fucking-time.

If only a hundred scenarios weren’t stampeding through my head every time my eyes try to see through that dress.

All of them end with her under me, scratching my back as she screams, battle scars I’ll gladly show to goddamned Troy so he knows she’s off-limits.

Fuck me.

I'm breathing harder than I should.

Yeah, I've got to get my head screwed back on.

My phone buzzes with a calendar reminder. Meeting in ten minutes now. Thank God.

"Go sit, Eliza. We're about to get started," I say.

She nods and scurries inside the room to the first open seat, throwing a sunny smile over her shoulder.

Goddamn, I'm glad this gathering doesn't require much brainpower.

Thankfully, Troy also disappears for his shower and returns a few minutes after the meeting starts.

It's a quick gathering just to review the mission and plans for the next few days. I remind everyone we'll be meeting virtually daily as long as we're here for a quick check-in.

I'm well aware I can't expect all work and no play.

This isn't my first trip to a place rife with wonders competing for company attention. Without the regular check-ins, it's too easy for them to get lost on the beaches, and then a vital trip costing tens of thousands of dollars becomes a missed opportunity.

I dismiss the meeting and people trickle out, talking amongst themselves loudly.

"Cole, why didn't you tell me Ace is smoking?" Troy says when it's just us again.

I hold his gaze, careful not to let my temper boil over, my face set like stoic steel.

"Ace is not her name. That's probably also not an appropriate comment to the CEO about a woman you work with while we're on a work trip."

He does a double take and slowly winces. Before he can even hold up his hands, offering a half-assed apology, I shake my head.

"Look, I know things are more laid back in Bali. I'm not here to bust your balls or play a game of 'gotcha,' but my c-team back home expects a certain discipline. If it's anything I'd frown on with them, then it isn't fit for me to be a huge fucking hypocrite and gab about her appearance either—no matter how striking she might be."

For a second, he's damn near speechless.

Way to be a sanctimonious jagoff, I think to myself. Where was your concern when she had her fingers in your mouth? When she tripped into your

arms and you almost fucking kissed her?

But I left the lab then. I refrained from leaving teeth marks on her lips under the banyan tree.

I do the right thing, dammit, even when it's the very last thing I want.

Troy stares at me, his mouth parted in this awkward half smile. Then he throws his head back and chuckles.

"What?" I clip. I wasn't expecting that.

"Oh, man, *good for you*. The single widower has moved on." He slaps me hard on the shoulder. "It's healthy, Cole. I'm happy for you. Honest to God."

Fuck this.

I should've known he'd read between the lines and start flinging crap.

"I have no idea what you mean," I growl.

"Like hell, you don't," Troy whispers.

I stare him up and down, wondering how he's matured so little when he's married to his job like I am. And how was I ever close friends with this guy?

"If I said the same thing about Lola Goodwind in finance—"

"I'd tell you to get your eyes checked." Lola's image comes to mind. She's not hideous, but she's a human chameleon. Maybe if she stuck to a single color or at least one color palette and washed her hair regularly, she'd have men up her ass. She also keeps about fifty different inspirational quotes taped around her desk, the surface littered with disposable cups from every coffee she's drank that week. "And maybe your head, too," I add glumly.

"See? No harm, no foul. Like I said, the big man's moving on and I love it," he ribs me again.

I shove his arm away, taking a step back.

"Enough." I try to loosen my frown. "Again, I'm not trying to be a hardass, but what if Destiny hears us? She'll be upset if we're talking about our female staff like wagyu steaks, and I'm not having it."

"Bullshit. You know it's okay if you get on with your life, right? It's been years. You're allowed to have a pulse, Cole. I bet your daughter doesn't expect you to be celibate for the rest of your life."

My hand balls into a fist at my side. Mainly because he's right, and it's annoying as hell.

"Point is, my fuck habits—or lack thereof—aren't on our agenda."

He sighs, slow and hissing. "Yeah, okay. Well, we used to be more than just co-workers, remember? We were friends, Cole."

He waits for me to respond.

When I don't, he continues. "Why'd you shut me out, man? Really? I did everything you asked after Aster—well, after—"

"After she died. You can say it," I spit.

He flinches. "Right. After that. I did everything you asked—including taking on this overseas role that keeps me three thousand miles from home. Not that I'm complaining, the lifestyle suits me. But still, why'd you go and freeze me out?"

I don't have an answer.

Maybe I just didn't feel like talking after Aster died. And Troy—sole witness to the torture I went through immediately after her death—became the last person I ever wanted to deal with.

There was no deeper reason than soul-crushing grief and single parenting. I never had time to analyze it in gritty detail.

Now, standing here in the same room with him and seeing the same old Troy, I can't say I regret it.

"I expect reports on the availability of our peaberry stock at each farm by four," I say coldly, taking a step toward the door and halting when I'm almost there. I look back over my shoulder. "Remember, Troy, *I* manage our people. You handle the farms."

His head rolls from side to side slowly.

"I don't get it. Did you have me fly in from Indonesia just to berate me?"

"No. I called you here because I need detailed reports. This is too important. I also thought you could add value to the daily briefings as we work on this new specialty line," I say, all business, answering him but not addressing his real question.

I've had enough of his shit, and I'm out.

Before he can utter another word, I'm stomping out the door.



BROODING IN PARADISE FEELS ILLEGAL, but here I fucking am.

I sit on the lawn under my favorite tree, inhaling the sea salt and sun-kissed air. The clouds overhead gather in a thick line, marching across the sky and making me think there's a rainstorm on the way.

I welcome it.

The quick island cloudbursts usually last no more than a few minutes—

just long enough to cool the skin and wipe the grease off my soul.

It's like the weather wants to match my mood.

Destiny walks by, holding a couple yellow-green bananas freshly plucked from a tree. Anyone else would mistake her for happy.

But I know my daughter. Her shoulders are too high, her spine too straight, her body too stiff, and her smile is fake as hell.

"Destiny, what's wrong?" I call.

Her brows lift. "What?"

"You're traipsing along like a scorned cat." I shrug. "Just wondering."

"No, Dad, I'm good!" She says it with way too much enthusiasm, searching for a diversion until her eyes land on her hand. "Banana?"

"No thanks. You enjoy."

Part of me wants to tell her it's okay to have a hard time here. It isn't wrong to grieve, to process, especially now that she's a young adult and not a child who lost her mother years ago.

But another part of me says I'm better off leaving it alone and not dealing with the fallout until she signals she's ready.

She passes by too quickly before I can say anything else.

Why shouldn't she be guarded?

Aster's death was a fucking shock. There were always more questions than answers surrounding it, too.

A tragic drowning. No mystery in the end result. As for everything else...

Why the hell was she out so late?

She knew how dramatically the ocean changes out here.

Did she just walk into the waves or fall off a cliff?

I'll never understand why she just had to go to the beach alone in the dark.

Sure, Aster always kept me guessing, especially as her mental health worsened. In the beginning, her unpredictability was what drew me to her.

If my family put me up to marrying a woman of their choice, at least it was one with a spontaneous side.

Still, I wonder. Did her condition worsen, far beyond any danger her doctors noticed?

She was never suicidal or prone to self-harm.

She took risks, but not outrageous ones.

In all the time I knew her, that nighttime death swim didn't seem like something Aster would ever do.

She was there for a reason, but why?

Did she take her own life after all?

Was it part of some fucked up energy cleaning ritual she read about?

I don't know.

There's a hole in her final chapter and a yawning chasm in my life.

If she took her life, that's partly on me. I couldn't give her a happy home.

Everything I did to support her was never enough.

The sex was fine—when it happened at all in the last few years—and once Destiny came into the picture, I liked watching them together. They had their good moments between her storms.

If only we'd had a connection beyond entangled finances and raising a daughter together.

Deep down, I think she craved that connection, the kind of love Hollywood serves up to the masses. She was a romantic at heart.

A romantic who found her way into a goddamned arranged marriage.

Her parents owned a major shipping company, making coffee cheaper to import to North America.

My parents never asked me what I loved about her—or even if we needed more time together before I agreed to a life with her.

For our families, it was business.

My folks were too excited about the soaring increase to their net worth and status, plus the prospect of new investments. Hers were no better.

At the engagement party, her father never referred to me as “son.” He called me a coffee prince.

To him, she was a bargaining chip, an expendable thing to secure more clout and money and connections.

Is that what ended her life? Being locked into this dreary disappointment she could never walk away from? Being stuck with *me*?

My gut churns, and I wonder for the ten thousandth time if I'm the reason why she's gone.

Of course, the official reports said otherwise.

The local police chief settled on a tragic accident within days and never looked back. The detectives always frowned on the suicide theory, though it was possible.

My fist slaps the ground next to me so hard it vibrates up my arm.

Fuck it.

Waiting around for the first heavy beads of rain to slap my neck isn't

doing me any favors.

The rain thickens, but I'm back inside the house before it starts pouring.

With everyone in their rooms or out sightseeing, it's eerily quiet.

I gaze around the family room, full of priceless antiques and old mementos Aster bought on this trip or that over a decade ago.

I never asked the staff to change anything during our absence.

Maybe that's the problem.

Everything's left in place like a depressing time capsule. Aster's presence is still alive, frozen in her bygone style.

My heart sinks and I huff out a disgusted snort.

Even in paradise with unlimited money, I couldn't keep her happy.

Our marriage was atrociously shallow.

We looked good together. We made people jealous.

I brought a beautiful woman who was a billionaire in her own right to every business function I had, and we had a passable physical connection.

It just never went further.

It was never love.

It was never what she wanted—and then her life ended.

As horribly as it is, I'll always be grateful for one thing.

Destiny.

Whenever anyone asks—which they didn't until Troy stuck his nose in things—she's also my excuse. I've never dated again because it would be hard on my daughter.

No matter how she'd deny it, it's true. Imagine seeing your mother's body washed up on the beach and then watching your father start a new life.

I could never protect my family and keep it whole.

I couldn't give Aster the life she craved.

Who the fuck knows if I could ever make any woman truly happy.

Especially women who are already intimately involved in my work life and up in my face. An unworkable polar opposite, regardless of whether or not she aches for me like I do for her.

"Cole?"

Katelyn's voice startles me. I whip around, nearly knocking a tall antique vase off a mantle as I do. I catch the bastard thing—just in time—and place it back where it belongs.

"Sorry. I was just—fuck," I stammer, thrown off my game.

She nods, offering a knowing smile.

“This is the first time you’ve been back here, isn’t it?”

I’m still rattled, though I’m not sure it’s visible to anyone but me.

I hope it isn’t.

I sit down on the couch, safely away from any priceless artifacts.

“You know it is,” I mutter.

“I heard Destiny doesn’t want to go to the beach,” she says quietly.

“Between a teenager who loves sea creatures so much she avoids the ocean, and you staring into the void, I put two and two together. If this is hard, Mr. Lancaster...it’s okay. Don’t feel embarrassed.” She smiles sadly. “I have to let you know, I was in the hall and overheard you and Troy talking...”

I bury my face in my hands with a defeated sigh.

What the hell else can go wrong today?

“I told him to cut the crap. He shouldn’t be talking about employees the way he—”

“Honestly? I think he was right. Not the unprofessional guy talk, but the way he called you out.” She clears her throat. “I saw you coming up the hill yesterday with Eliza. You looked like you were having fun with her. That’s good.”

“Not good, Kate. She’s an employee and the key to why we’re here,” I snap. It’s automatic.

Thankfully, she’s had well over a decade of dealing with me.

“Oh, I agree. But Seattle is full of beautiful women. It’s been ten years and you haven’t found anyone. You can’t let optics scare you away from a good thing. If it’s meant to be, then—”

“I’m not having this conversation,” I growl, tugging at my collar.

She’s quiet, staring, and I hate that it came out so acrid.

“With all due respect, I taught your daughter how to wear a tampon. I’m not sure this is the most awkward conversation we’ve ever had.”

My eyes flick to the wood ceiling and back again as I let out a rolling sigh.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know—”

“I did.” She smiles. “And if anything ever happens to Patrick, I expect you to pick up the slack with my boys.”

I nod sincerely.

“Fair enough.” That sobers me up fast. “I’m a decent father, just a shitty husband. And Aster—maybe she saw death as her only way out of the misery.”

Katelyn stares at me, her eyes growing wide.

I know I'm in a mood, far past the point where I should shut my damn yap.

If only I could take it back.

"Mr. Lancaster?" She waits for me to look at her, and I do with another sigh. "You can't be responsible for Aster's actions. What happened was an accident based on every report I ever saw. You know that, right?"

"Accident or not, our marriage was a dumpster fire. All thanks to me," I say.

This conversation is also flaming trash. I'm about to stalk off when she speaks again.

"My sister's first husband sucked—definitely not like you. She divorced his butt, took his money and his kids, and moved to L.A. She works for the Mouse now, and she and the kids get season passes to Disneyland every year. She chose how she responded to her situation. I know it wasn't the same for you, but if the reports were wrong...then Aster made that choice." She throws up a hand. "Not that I'm saying she did! If the cops said it was an accident, I bet they're right."

I turn my head. "Who the fuck knows. It doesn't matter."

When I look again, Kate's staring at me.

"Is there something else?" I ask over my shoulder, annoyed.

She grimaces. "I need to ask you a question, but I'm not sure how without offending you."

"Ask." I've had enough drama today.

"Do you think maybe your inability to let go of this is why Destiny won't go to the beach?"

Deafening silence.

"Are you saying Destiny can't move on until I do?" I look at her sharply.

She swallows. "I don't know. I'm no shrink, but I do know you're the most important person in her life. If you have any lingering doubts, it's likely she's picking up on them. Kids are intuitive, and Destiny is smart as a whip. She deserves to be happy."

"I know." The words feel like solid lead.

"You deserve to be happy, too, boss."

"Irrelevant. And I won't be—not until I know what happened that night," I say, shocking myself.

I didn't realize that was even what I wanted until now.

“You’re a billionaire. You’re connected to every high and mighty moron in America,” she points out. “So, if you feel like you need answers for closure, go get them. This is the time and place. I guess I don’t understand, though... The police already gave you one set of answers you didn’t like.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Are you sure you *need* more answers? Or do you just need to accept ones you already have?”

I mull that over for a minute, stroking my beard.

Could that be the problem?

If the police just up and told me Aster killed herself, or they were looking for her murderer, would I have believed it?

Yeah, I would have.

I might’ve been a rotten husband, but I knew her well enough to know she didn’t just decide to go for a dip in the dead of night.

“I need more,” I say, more confident of that now than I was before she asked.

“If you insist. And speaking of chasing things down, I think your R & D girl is alone in her makeshift lab...”

I shake my head angrily. “For the last time, she’s nothing and you’re not goddamned cupid.”

She huffs out a breath. “O-kay. Stay here and mope then—”

“I’m not moping,” I throw back.

“Fine. Brood away, Mr. Heathcliff. I have to go fetch your reports for the next meeting, or you’ll make me look worse than I already do for getting personal.”

I laugh bitterly. “Isn’t it the other way around?”

“I’ve always known who the real CEO was.” She starts speed walking toward the wing with the guest rooms.

“Kate?” I call.

“Yeah?” She faces me, blinking slowly.

“Destiny and I would’ve been lost years ago without your help. You’ve done enough for us. Stop worrying, and leave the rest to me.”

“I won’t,” she says sharply. “And bossman, don’t you know? I won’t stop saying you’re a good man who deserves to smile until you actually believe it.”

Poor Katelyn.

She’s going to be waiting until hell freezes over.

COFFEE ADDICT (ELIZA)



This room is no fancy-schmancy superlab, but it'll do.

Everything is set up and just waiting for me to add my creative touch. It's a comfortable environment, almost like someone's living room with homey wicker and rattan couches and tall lounge chairs surrounding the table with beakers, scales, and burners.

It's a million times better than the beast lab back in Seattle in one way. Golden light pours in from the ginormous floor-to-ceiling windows. A few are slightly open, letting the sea breeze in.

I take a deep breath, scanning the room, and smile.

I'm about to brew coffee with an ocean view. I've come a long freaking way.

Let's do this.

I go in, hand grinding lightly roasted peaberry beans for a shiny new batch of campfire brew. It doesn't take long before the fresh aroma fills the room.

While I'm waiting for coffee chemistry to do its thing, I drop into a lounge chair and stare out at the breathtaking view.

For men like Cole, this is the good life. If I just had a mai tai, it'd be perfection.

Only, there's no denying the way he and Destiny keep dancing around some big, ugly shadow hanging over this place.

What kind of dark side does paradise have?

"Something smells goddamned delicious."

I jump at the sound of his voice.

He hasn't even entered the room yet, but that smooth bass voice covers my arms in goosebumps. I hop up, pulling off my safety goggles.

He comes around the corner a second later, all ripped muscles on full display in tan shorts and a colorful Hawaiian shirt.

Holy hell. Deep breath.

But he's such an anti-Lump today that he doesn't make it easy.

He stops in the doorway, deep-blue eyes roaming up and down my body. He doesn't hide how they linger on a few choice places along the way.

My mouth is like cotton. When I swallow, I almost cough, crushed under the weight of Cole Lancaster's hungry eyes.

When I'm finally able to look at him again, I see red.

Jesus.

Until him, I didn't know a simple look could cut me open.

"I see you've settled in. I dig the island look," I say, taking off my apron slowly and self-consciously.

"Glad you approve." He bowls me over with that billion-dollar smile. "You working on the peaberry brew already?"

"Yep. If you want to stick around, it should be ready soon."

"It's only fair I offer up my services as taste tester." He stops, his nostrils flaring, closing his eyes for a few heavy seconds as he inhales. "Goddamn, woman. If it's half as good as it smells, I could kiss you."

What?

I rock back like he just jabbed me with a cattle prod.

"To be fair, I've never worked with beans this delicate. I'm curious to see how it goes...." *And not at all horribly curious about how he tastes*, I lie to myself.

While we make small talk about the coffee farms, my brew finishes. I ladle black liquid into a cup, serving the first batch black like he requests.

Cole nearly rips it out of my hand before I can take a sip.

"Careful!" I shake my head. "Impatient, much? I wanted to make sure it's even palatable before I serve it to my boss."

"Like you've ever cared I'm your boss before." He smirks.

"I mean, I need you alive to sign my paycheck. Can we lay off the coffee burns today?"

He snorts so hard his broad chest shakes.

"Y'know, I think you belong in Hawaii. I've never seen you so amused before." I fill another cup, bring it to my mouth, and take a long sip,

wrinkling my nose. “Eh. Not awful, but it’s a little more scorched today than I’d like.”

Cole looks at his cup and shrugs. He practically tosses it back in one gulp.

I’m not breathing, feeling the same tension a person on trial must get before a jury’s verdict.

“Not awful, Eliza? I could sell this now. Tastes like black gold.”

“Oil?”

“You know what I mean,” he grumbles.

I give him a doubtful look. “If it were just the mainland stores, maybe. But do you honestly think this is worth fifteen bucks per cup in a luxury resort?” I pause. “Smells like highway robbery to me.”

“It’s not the final version. You’ll tweak it and do a proper tasting survey, but it’s hardly a bad starting point. Quite a bit smoother than your average Kona roast.”

I eye him suspiciously, but see no sign he’s pulling my tail.

“I’ll admit you’ve spent way more time in luxury resorts than me. But I’m not sure the slogan of a Winthrop exclusive coffee should be ‘better than average.’”

He smirks, his eyes glowing like he could spank me—and wouldn’t that be *godawful*?

“Don’t kid yourself about the high-end crowd, honey badger. Rich people aren’t always as discerning as they think. Sometimes they’ll assume something is better only because they paid more. I agree we’ll make improvements, but I doubt it needs the work you think.” His gaze is so intense as he takes a step closer. “Perfect is the enemy of good enough, and that’s what makes the world run.”

“Did I accidentally sign up for your business course? I want out.”

I stare up at him, suddenly too breathless to keep sassing.

My eyes drop to his lips, that thick seam perfectly framed by his jaw, slowly chewing a hole in my whole world.

Yes, I’m aware I’m staring like a flipping idiot, but can I stop?

No.

“I don’t expect you to be chained to this lab the entire time we’re here, you know. Get the hell out. It’s a beautiful island. You should explore it. Fuck knows how many hours the rest of the team is actually working,” he rumbles.

Why does every little bout of grumping just make him hotter?

I swallow the heat trapped in my throat, finding enough air to force out an answer. “You’re serious?”

He nods, folding his arms. They flex across his chest like timbers.

“Have you ever really seen Hawaii, Eliza?”

“First time. I don’t even know where to start.” Am I rambling? “As far as exploring goes, I mean. I wouldn’t—”

“Try the beach first. You can follow me—if you want,” he adds, almost as an afterthought.

I blink. “What?”

“You basically just said you need a guide. So we’ll start at the beach and I’ll fight off any great white sharks that want to make an afternoon snack of your ass.”

I actually gasp until I realize he isn’t serious.

Cole ashat Lancaster just cracked a stupid joke.

He turns away, staring at the scintillating waves out the window and stuffing his hands into his pockets. “This isn’t business. I’m offering to show you around off the clock, after hours...”

After hours.

Oh, God.

My heart leaps up my throat and crashes back down again. I never imagined such a mundane phrase having the force of a wrecking ball.

I’m about to jump at the chance to throw myself headfirst into whatever this is—or might be.

But Derek’s stupid smug face floods my mind. A man with his bright-eyed smile, his crisp button-down, his bouquets in hand and dangerously sexy salt-and-pepper scruff.

Forever tarnished with heartless lies. The easy way he brought me to dinners and concerts and held me in bed like I was the only woman he’d ever love.

All while his wife and kids were at home, oblivious to this loser gentleman using me for his selfish pleasure.

I can’t.

I can’t go down that road again—and Jesus, I definitely can’t with my boss.

“...to talk about the coffee, right?” I say sheepishly, my gaze fixed out the window when he looks at me.

Part of me wants him to say, “*Fuck no. To suck the salt water off your*

lips,” so I have an excellent reason to run out of here screaming like my hair is on fire.

But a bigger, needier part of me wants to hear him say it so I can be stupid.

So I can gamble on making another mistake because at least I know there’s no other woman this time.

But most of me wants him to say, “Yeah, coffee,” in a completely disarming way. Then I could safely step foot on a sandy beach with this alphasalacious prick while pretending to be sane and saving face.

Yes, I know.

I am the queen of hot messes.

“If you want,” he finally says with a one-shoulder shrug, swallowing so hard it’s audible. “After hours doesn’t have to mean work. I’d be open to talking about more.”

More? Panic floods my veins, but I don’t surrender full control.

“When? I get the impression any time before five o’clock is an early day for you.” It comes out of my mouth in a husky whisper.

I don’t sound like a professional woman who’s eager to discuss a new luxe coffee. More like a desperate tramp ready to fall on her boss’ salami.

But can’t they both be true?

Can’t I be both without initiating my life’s self-destruct sequence?

I want to believe.

Especially as I meet his bristling eyes and he mutters, “One o’clock. I’ll meet you at the end of the main path.”

Then his heavy footsteps pad away, leaving behind my own drumming heart.



“THIS FEELS A LITTLE LIKE HOME. Except San Diego beaches were always twenty times more crowded.”

I stare out at a few lazy surfers in the distance. A parasailor glides along the horizon as we stroll across the beach hours later, shoulder to shoulder.

There’s a large swell forming offshore that must be a surfer’s delight.

“Did you spend a lot of time at the beach growing up?” he asks, reaching down for a smooth rock tucked in the sand.

“Yeah.” I grin. “But in San Diego, the beach is hard to miss. And if you’re having a bad day, a drive up the Pacific Coast makes everything better.”

“Damn. I forgot how much I enjoyed visiting this place,” he says absently.

I meet his blue eyes which almost match the ocean.

“You used to be here a lot then?” I pause. Duh, his family owns the Kona farms. “I’m sure you have. I forgot it’s your family’s farm.”

“Yeah. My grandparents retired out here before I was born. As much as my grandpa ever *could* retire, anyway. Here, he could oversee the farms and still enjoy some quiet. I think I was eight the first time I came here. We used to spend every other Christmas and Thanksgiving here, and even as a young man, I spent a lot of summers here. Hell of a place to make memories.” His voice lowers as he stares at the ocean. “Just wish they’d all stayed good ones.”

What does that mean?

I’m afraid to ask.

I won’t push him if he doesn’t want to talk about it, but it’s an odd thing to just drop in a conversation without explaining it.

I follow his gaze to the ocean, indifferent and sparkling with sunlight. Silver-blue waves crash impatiently against the beach.

“So much like California...but so different, too,” I say.

“Yeah. I’ve seen plenty of damn nice beaches. After a while, they all start to look the same.”

“Oh, I’m sure. You’re—well, so you. Billionaire traveler man.” I laugh gently. “But not all beaches look the same—”

“What does being a billionaire have to do with it?” he asks point blank.

Oof. I hope he didn’t take that as an insult.

“I just meant it’s only natural you’d see the world. Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it...”

“Besides Hawaii and a couple trips to Southeast Asia, most of the beaches I’ve seen were during my time in the Navy. The ports showed me a good sample of the world. And with the built-in duties, it was a more realistic picture than the image I got staying at resorts and lavish houses with my parents.”

“You served? Oh, I had no idea. Why would someone like you enlist?” I regret how it sounds, but not the question.

“Lancaster family tradition. I wasn’t going to be the one to break it. That’s Destiny’s job.”

I smile. “I don’t know. She likes seals, and you could probably see like a dozen different species from a cruiser. Then again, she hates beaches, right?”

Oh, crap. I’m not thinking.

The easy smile on his face disappears.

“How did you know that?” he asks, his tone hardening.

“...she told me. Was it supposed to be a secret?”

“No,” he mutters slowly. “Did she tell you anything else?”

“Nope.” A chill sweeps up my spine. Is Destiny’s disdain for the beach related to whatever tragic memories he mentioned earlier? “I mean, I know she goes to the shore back home to watch the seals.”

“Those piles of rocks and overcast skies Washington calls beaches are nothing like this,” he points out.

“For sure. Um, you mind if we sit down for a minute? I need a coffee.”

He scans the scenery around us. “There’s a stand for smoothies and frappes up the beach a little ways. Think they’ve got hot drinks too. I’ll buy you a cup.”

“No way. I came prepared.” The curious look he gives me makes me laugh. “Just sit!”

I drop down on the sand and pull out my secret weapon—an ornate brew pipe. It’s like a regular pipe except it has a cup at the end, just enough to collect a long shot of espresso. It just needs the light I pull from my pocket.

Cole sits beside me, looking around frantically before he whispers, “Eliza Angelo, don’t tell me that’s a crack pipe?”

I bite my lip and glare at him.

“You’re surprised? Isn’t it every girl’s dream to go to Hawaii and get high with her boss? You wouldn’t mind, would you?” I nudge him in the side playfully.

“Eliza—”

“Relax, bossman. This thing makes coffee.”

“Coffee?” He throws it back like a curse. “How the hell do you plan on brewing with that contraption? Where will you even get coffee from?”

“It’s a brew pipe. Relax. Also, it’s already loaded up. I’m always packing bean,” I say wistfully.

He looks at me like he’s wondering if he should have me committed.

“You still need heat with that abomination, don’t you?” he asks, snorting

loudly.

“See this 'contraption?’” I say, holding it up. “It’s called a lighter.”

“I’ve seen a lighter before, Badger Hellion. Just never paired up with a pipe that ridiculous.”

“What’s ridiculous about it?” I ask, but he shakes his head. “C’mon, Cole. I thought you of all people would be open-minded when it comes to the latest coffee gear.”

“Gear? You’re telling me it’s on the market and not something you rigged up yourself?” He groans, swiping a hand over his face.

I grin and nod happily.

“There are some inventions humanity was never meant to discover,” he says bitterly. “If this is the latest trend everyone adopts, I’ll let Wired Cup go bankrupt. Where did you even get that thing?”

“It’s a brew pipe, and Wayne found it online.”

“Wayne. Of course,” he says gruffly.

Snickering, I uncap the water bottle I brought along and pour it into the end. Then I flick the lighter on and hold the flame under it. The metal heats up fast.

“Ridiculous,” he grinds out again.

“Nope. What’s ridiculous is you not knowing about it when a lowly barista did, Commander Coffee. Seems like a major intel failure.” I smile sweetly.

“Now that I do, I wish I could un-know it.”

“By the way, he appreciated his referral bonus. It helped his mom big-time.”

He nods, turning his gaze away like he’s suddenly uncomfortable.

Ugh. Leave it to this lunk to turn into Captain Modesty when he does a good deed.

“It’s almost brewed,” I say a minute later, setting the pipe down on the tiny holder it came with. “Now we let it cool a few seconds for optimal taste.”

Cole laughs, brushing sand off his thigh. “I’ve never met anyone as serious about coffee as you, and I grew up coffee royalty. You and Wayne spend a lot of time together?”

“Not really. Before I took this job, I bounced around a lot of coffee shops, studying their flavors and menus. I picked up a few shifts when Wayne was short on people, but nothing too official. We’d talk about coffee whenever I

went to Wired Cup, and we've hung out occasionally at charity events together..."

Is it bad that I like the jealousy gleaming in his eyes?

"That's a relief. You can do better than him," Cole snaps. "What the hell sort of boyfriend only shows up part-time?"

I laugh. "Behave. Wayne isn't my boyfriend. He's not even my type."

He turns his head, raking me with a slow, burning look.

"What, pray tell, is your type, Eliza?"

Oh. My. God.

I ignore the question, but I'm sure he finds his answer with the way I jerk away, staring intently at the brew pipe.

I touch the end to make sure it's cooled, then put the pipe end to my mouth and languidly sip half the shot. My head rolls back and I purse my lips like I'm enjoying a fine cigar.

"Man, that's on point. I added a hint of macadamia nut to the roast." I pass the pipe. "Try this."

He tilts it in his fingers like he's holding an alien device.

"Careful. It's still *hot*. Go ahead, taste the nuts," I urge.

"No need. *You* are nuts, Eliza Angelo." But he shuts up long enough to suck a long pull from the pipe.

The way his eyes ignite with stunned pleasure tells me he's about to swallow his pride.

"Well?" I venture.

"Good. Surprisingly smooth. I never imagined I'd enjoy sucking coffee through a damn crack pipe, however..."

"*Coffee* pipe, you idiot," I insist with a giggle.

"Whatever, badger." He leans back on the sand, casually draping his arm around me.

My face heats.

At first, I make no effort to move, but then when I see he doesn't pull back like he's realizing his mistake, I scoot closer.

We sit there, sharing the stillness, alone except for the murmuring waves and my heartbeat drumming in my ears.

My boss has his arm around me.

My hot, unhinged, tightly wound boss who seems too smart to complicate our lives.

Even with the fresh caffeine hit, my brain keeps stuttering, trying to

process what we're doing. His seductive, masculine scent doesn't help when it smells a thousand times better than the finest fresh-brewed coffee.

"You never answered my question," he says. "If Wayne isn't your type, then why are you so serious about coffee? I thought for sure it was the barista's influence..."

"Honestly, I'm not sure I have a type," I lie. Because unfortunately, I do, and it's totally Cole Lancaster. "No time to date much."

His jaw sets and he sighs. "Damn shame. You're young and pretty and you have an annoying sense of humor. Men should be lined up at your door holding grudge matches to take you out—then again, are there still *men* in the age of Tinder? Can't imagine sending pickup lines over a screen."

What the what? He thinks I'm pretty?

My giddy heart vibrates like a plucked guitar string.

And I can't help but laugh. He's not that old, but his ideas about dating are hilariously old.

I'm starting to believe his love life is more boring than mine.

"Could be because I don't know that many people in Seattle," I say carefully. "I've lived there a few years, but it's harder to meet people as an adult."

"I get it. No time to pull yourself away from the bean."

"Right." My face turns redder with every lie.

"You never told me why you're a coffee freak."

I look over and he's so close, his face mere inches from mine.

Close enough to see the imperfections on a person's face, but Cole has zero. No scars, no lines, no deceit swirling in his eyes.

Just good, honest grumpy bossman who sometimes lets his storminess fade to distant thunder.

Seeing him this close renders me breathless. I think he takes my silence as hesitation.

He smiles warmly. "No judgment. If anyone should take coffee so seriously, it's me. I just can't muster the same spark. Not like you, so I'm curious."

"My obsession actually started with a prank when I was seven..." I say slowly, unsure if I want to tell him this story. But he makes me weirdly comfortable when we're lounging like this.

"Seven? You were already addicted as a first grader?"

Laughing, I nod. "Not like you think, but...it's a sad story. My dad and I

liked to prank each other all the time, so one day I emptied the sugar holder on the kitchen table and filled it with salt. My dad came home from work, started the coffee pot—which was strange because he usually only had his coffee in the morning—and slumped down at the table with a steaming cup. He put five heaping teaspoons of salt in his coffee and took a big drink—”

Cole snorts. “I suppose he didn’t appreciate your early experiments.”

“He burst into tears,” I say quietly.

The amusement on his face vanishes.

“Tears? He cried over a bad cup of coffee?”

I glance down as the memory returns in vivid, painful detail.

That only brings the crown of my head closer to Cole’s face. It’s the most natural thing in the world when his lips brush my hair and he breathes me in.

I take a deep, halting breath, loving how his chest swells, relishing the moment before I hurry back to the story.

Neither of us should make more of this than it is.

We’re just two people enjoying a splendid Hawaiian afternoon.

“Turns out, Dad got laid off from the job he had for twenty years before he came home that evening. My mom was a stay-at-home mother at the time. He was scared.” I lick my lips softly. “I guess some men tie their self-worth to their livelihoods, so losing the job was a huge deal. But I realized if I hadn’t messed with his coffee...he might have held it together. He wouldn’t have had a breakdown.”

I pause, tingling as Cole lays his chin softly over my hair.

“There are lessons in pain,” he whispers knowingly. “Especially the kind that’s so innocent. You didn’t mean to hurt him.”

“Yeah—and that’s how I learned how powerful a good cup of coffee can be. I knew it had to be when a bad cup could be so devastating. Oh, and when my mom came and sat down beside him, she picked up the cup, sipped it, and said ‘This is different. Like sea salt caramel without the caramel. I like it.’ Crazy part is, she wasn’t joking. So I also learned that people can have drastically different tastes.”

I look up into his sky-blue eyes, fixed on me now, bright and protective and *safe*.

“The guilt ate at me, of course,” I continue. “I apologized until I was blue in the face, but the man just wanted a break—one tiny little *break*—and I had to shit up his coffee with salt. I had to make it up to him. I spent years trying to brew him the best cup of cheap drip coffee he’d ever had. Like I could

somehow make it good enough to forgive what I'd done. To forgive myself, maybe."

Cole chuckles softly, his big chest vibrating against me.

"If that's the worst thing you ever did to your old man, I'm sure he forgave you," he says.

"He did, but it's not the point. I made one of the worst days of his life worse. I saw how big the little things can get when you're already feeling crappy."

"I would have been damn lucky if my parents showed that much emotion, for what it's worth. They were stiff, no-nonsense people," he says slowly, turning his attention back to the churning ocean. "They didn't spend time with me the way I do with Dess. For them, my life was planned from the time I could walk, learning to take over what was then Noble Bean when the time came." He sighs.

God help me.

My heart bleeds a little for Cole.

"I'm sure it wasn't easy," I whisper.

"It wasn't all bad. I grew up comfortably and my future was clear. I accepted having my life hitched to a legacy." He pauses, inhaling me again like he needs the scent of my hair. "This place may fall apart if and when Destiny takes over, but I stood at my father's funeral years ago, struggling to care. When the delayed grief hit, it was more like I'd never had a father than if I'd just lost my dad."

Again, my heart nosedives. Knowing he's had at least two big losses in life must be partly why he's so closed off.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's not your life and I'm not asking for tears. Especially not in this beautiful place where it feels like a sin not to smile," he says sternly.

He takes the brew pipe and pulls one last sip from it before passing it to me, caressing my face as he does.

Those incandescent blue gems in his face catch my eyes again. His hand goes from softly skimming my cheek to cupping my face, his fingers relishing my heat.

Oh, hell.

Then that sparkling gaze drops from my eyes to my lips.

There's something feral in his expression.

Something wild.

Something that wants to taste me with teeth.

I stretch my legs out, feeling the breeze, suddenly aware of how wet I am.

Just in case, I place my hand over the brew pipe and push it toward the sand next to me. I'm not ruining this by getting burned if it's still hot.

He must read my mind, bringing his other hand to my face and inhaling sharply.

God, I love how his breath trembles. Like it's taking his entire soul to hold back from turning me over, hiking up my dress, tearing off my panties, and taking me right here where anyone can see.

"You are fucking dangerous," he growls, giving words to the harsh thoughts in my head. He urges me up in his arms.

With both hands, he pulls my face to his.

When our lips touch, I hug him with a loud moan spilling from my throat.

I'm not like this.

I don't go to pieces kissing strange, broody men on exotic beaches and aching for sex that's guaranteed to complicate my life.

But with Cole, I become someone else.

Someone who melts into a puddle when I see the shine in his eyes as he dips his face to mine, knowing it can only mean one thing.

His kiss falls on my lips like a meteor, hot and intense enough to blind the high tropical sun.

I'm freaking electrified as our mouths collide, my life flashing before my eyes, his tongue swiping mine and then pushing in.

Not asking. Taking what he wants.

My toes scrunch up in my sandals. He seizes my bottom lip with his teeth and a low animal growl, only relenting to chase my tongue again.

His tongue delves against it, teasing and claiming, pulling a raw whimper from my throat.

"Oh." I sigh, tumbling back with my mouth tingling.

For a second, we stare at each other, eyes searching for any last doubts. Though I'm honestly not sure if they would stop us.

It's the only invitation he needs.

He grabs me again and hauls me onto his lap, pushing my legs around his muscular body. Our faces melt together.

He explores my mouth.

My tongue ravishes his.

His hands grip my waist, brushing my sides, my thighs, and finally

wrapping behind me, squeezing me deliciously.

I hook my legs around him, loving how he isn't afraid to be rough with my ass.

Oh.

Oh, shit.

I can feel him.

I can feel what he's got and it's so devilishly thick I gasp against his kiss.

He pulls back with laughter in his eyes. "Guess you see where the big ego comes from. I may be an arrogant bastard, Eliza, but I come by it honestly."

When he moves, I'm so not ready.

His hips punch up, pushing between my legs, raking his hard, throbbing desire against me.

Holy hell!

The friction makes my eyes roll.

I bite my lip as his cock rubs my pussy through the fabric, as he rears back and thrusts against me several more times, each movement coming harder than the last.

This man wants me violently.

I'm sweating rivulets—and it has nothing to do with the hot sand under us.

God *damn* him.

I want more. So much more, but he's my boss.

A strange, hurt beast who'll command a heavy price if I let him drag me into bed.

I shouldn't want it.

I shouldn't focus all my energy on devouring his mouth, warring with his tongue, becoming paralyzed with pleasure as his fingers skim the waistband of my panties.

As his hand flicks under lace.

As he finds my clit and pinches it oh so softly—but still hard enough to make me push my face into his shoulder, where I bite down on his shirt.

It's all I have to muffle this scream.

I have to end this.

Before we wind up having horizontal monkey-sex here on an open beach.

I have to—

"Fuck!" he snarls in my ear, so low and vicious it's barely even human. "I could lick this raw, Eliza. I could give you a thousand of these sunsets with

your pussy on my face.”

Foly Huck.

This kiss is enough, I lie to myself.

It’s the closeness I crave.

Everything else, his hand there, his crude promise that makes me so soaked I’m afraid I won’t even be able to walk—it’s too much. Too soon. Too *tempting*.

He must sense my confusion and the way I’m trembling because he pulls back.

His mingled scent of salt water and coffee and man is overwhelming. The strength of his arms still wrapped so tight consumes me.

“Eliza, if it’s too much—”

“No. Not if we stop now,” I whisper, smiling into his lust-lit eyes.

I swear, I could live in this moment forever.

For now, his kiss is enough, and I need to get my soul seated back in my body.

I’m slowly, reluctantly untangling myself from him and standing when a young voice calls, “Dad? Dad, where are you?”

Moment over.

Cole bolts to his feet so fast I almost topple over.

He’s too distracted to catch me. I shoot him a glare as I dust sand off my arms and legs, but I can’t hold too much of a grudge when I see the alarm on his face.

I sit down again a few safe paces away, grabbing the brew pipe.

“Daddy! Where are you?” Destiny shouts, sounding frantic.

“Here! Right here, sweetheart.” But by the time he says it, she’s already found us.

“Why? Why didn’t you take me?” Destiny stands behind me.

Cole looks at his daughter. “You said you didn’t like the beach.”

She pouts. “We’re in Hawaii, Dad. I have to *try*.”

“Sorry, Dess. I didn’t know you were ready.”

I raise an eyebrow. She’s fifteen and walks to the harbor daily. He’s acting like she’s three and she’s never seen water in her life, but she’s definitely got this mysterious phobia...

What’s really going on?

Destiny sighs. “Well, I didn’t know either, but Kate and Uncle Troy—”

“Uncle Troy?” Cole repeats, his face tightening into a scowl.

Destiny blinks. "He's known me since before I was born, right?"

"Right." Cole nods heavily.

"Anyway, a couple people on the team said they saw dolphins this morning on a boat ride, and I wanted to go see them. But Kate got sunburned, so she couldn't come. She said I had to find you, or I couldn't go to the marina, so I've been stumbling around here looking for like half an hour! So, can we go see the dolphins? Please?"

Cole sighs. "Katelyn Storm needs a raise."

I laugh. "What? You don't compensate her for nanny duties?" I whisper. I place the brew pipe and ladder back in the pocket of my sundress and stand. "Come on, I'll take you. Let's go see some dolphins."

"Really?" Destiny claps her hands.

"Yep." I'm almost as excited as she is.

Cole gives me a look I can't decipher. So many emotions that don't match his words when he says, "Are you still going to let your dad tag along?"

"Hell yes! This is the best day ever," Destiny says.

I smile, slightly more at ease as Cole returns it.

"I love dolphins. They're just big sea puppies," the girl says excitedly.

"Is there an animal you don't love?" Cole grumps.

"Um, the ones I'm allergic to?" Destiny says pointedly. "They make me sneeze. Not a big fan of the creepy crawlies with a thousand legs either..."

"You love all sea animals," he corrects.

Destiny grins. "Yeah. I heard there's a few rare starfish somewhere around here, too. Can we see them?"

"Not sure. That might require snorkling, Dess. We'll see how you do on the boat." Cole gives her a serious look.

"Okay. Sure." Destiny smiles sheepishly as she links her arm through mine. "What was that thing you had anyway?"

"What thing?" I laugh at the random question.

"I saw you put a pipe in your pocket, but like, a weird one. Were you smoking?" She whispers, pushing her small face to my ear. "I won't tell Dad if it's some weird mini bong but...you don't look like a stoner."

This girl. I burst out laughing.

At least she's too young to know about crack pipes.

"It's a new kind of brew pipe. It makes coffee."

"Coffee? No way!" Laughing, she gives me a glance like she isn't sure

she believes me, but it's all in good spirits as she whispers outside Cole's earshot again. "Whew. Here I thought you were trying to get Dad to lighten up and relax. But you were getting him hooked on the hard stuff. He's already an espresso fiend."

"I'm no *fiend* of any kind, young lady," Cole throws back.

But the look he gives me over his shoulder says we both know that's a blatant lie.

To me, he's a fallen angel, and soon he'll claim my body and soul.

CAFFEINE HEADACHE (COLE)



Goddamn, I'm an idiot.

I lost my fucking head.

I take a deep breath, trying to hold it together on the catamaran as it scours the water in search of dolphin pods.

How could I do anything but lose my shit?

She had that adorably ridiculous brew pipe.

Then her adorably ridiculous story about how she fell in love with coffee.

Then the ridiculously not adorable way she straddled me, my hands roaming her ass, my lips mauling hers like a man possessed.

Hand to God, I never had a prayer.

It's almost worse now that she's traded her island dress for this black-and-white polka dot bikini. I can see her tits and ass threatening to spill out of that flimsy fabric every time she moves.

I almost want it to happen.

It's not safe for work—*not safe for life*—if this torturous trip can even be called work anymore, much less living.

If Destiny hadn't found us, I wouldn't have stopped.

If we weren't in public *and* my daughter hadn't been looking for me—
Fuck.

That kiss was searing, forbidden, and not nearly long enough.

In my head, it never ended. I can still taste Eliza Angelo.

That's why I ignore the girls laughing on the other side of the boat. They let out ear-splitting screams every time we spot a pod of dolphins.

I need space.

That's why I'm happy to be alone, gripping the boat railing like I want to break it and trying to pull enough blood into my arms to deflate the hard-on from hell.

I know I should stop fucking off and be grateful.

I'm *damn* lucky my daughter didn't catch us mid-act. I'm sure she didn't, otherwise she never would've let this go for an evening on the water.

And what if she had?

How would I have ever answered the ten thousand embarrassing questions she would've blasted at me like an entire firing squad?

I swallow, groaning as the wind beats me in the face.

Even if I avoided a total disaster, I haven't truly escaped shit.

I have to talk to Eliza about what happened, preferably without a teen audience.

This buys me time to figure out what I'll say, and nothing more.

Scratching my beard roughly, I shake my head, wishing I could eject the unsettled thoughts from my brain.

Why the hell am I more upset about Destiny almost catching us than I am about the fact that she knows what a bong is?

Eventually, I fight back my bile and the bulge in my pants enough to rejoin them.

Eliza laughs, pointing as another group of pointy silver backs emerge from the foaming sea. She's faster at spotting the dolphins than the ship's guide, who retreated to the canopy above the main cabin after realizing he wasn't needed.

The happy shimmer in her eyes tears at me—something I never thought I'd see.

I stay quiet, only breaking my mood to smile softly at my daughter. I won't let my own crap boil over and ruin this for her.

A dolphin barely ten feet away leaps up, breaching the waves, hovering under the bright sun and sparkling like a lump of silver before it goes crashing back into the ocean.

"Holy—wow! Dad, did you see that?" Destiny doesn't wait for an answer; she just takes off, sprinting to the back of the boat for a better look.

"No running!" I call after her, even if I can't help grinning like a fool.

She's out here on the ocean, enjoying herself, without a hint of fear. It almost makes up for everything else I mucked up today.

Eliza's loud laugh reminds me who I should be thanking, all sultry music

in my ears. It also brings back the hard-on from hell.

“Eliza,” I whisper her name while Destiny has her back to us, fixated on the dolphins.

She spins around on one heel to face me, a nervous twitch in her eyes.

“Come closer,” I growl, reaching for her hand the minute she’s in arm’s reach.

I don’t hesitate.

I don’t ask.

I don’t even think.

I just pull her against my chest, loving how she gasps as she dips down, and I smother her lips. My teeth find her bottom lip and anchor down, firm yet gentle, the animal inside me pulling violently on its chain.

By some miracle, I break away as she blushes.

“Cole. Jesus. Shouldn’t we be... I mean, won’t Dess notice? I don’t want to upset her.” Her cheeks are screaming red.

I’m grateful she has a cooler head.

I’m damn glad she cares about my daughter.

“She’s highly distracted,” I say, silencing her with another ten-second kiss that pulls the breath from her lungs before she can protest.

Fuck, I’m bad. I only realize how bad when she’s pushing at my chest.

“Cole,” she whimpers, her chest heaving, her tits brushing me.

Goddamn.

If we were alone for ten minutes, if we even had a storage closet—

Stop. Stop it, you horndog fool.

I wish it were that easy. Apparently, spending the better part of a decade celibate makes my brain implode when there’s a young, beautiful woman breathing against me with her flesh hanging out.

A woman who acts like she’d come real sweet for me at the faintest touch.

I pull back—*barely*—making her gasp again when my cock grazes her hip through my shorts.

So hard. So ready. So insane with want.

“I had to tell you, I enjoyed our evening. Messy shit and all,” I whisper, well aware that I’m usually more eloquent.

“Yeah?” Her grin widens and her eyes sparkle with relief. “Um, me too. It’s the most fun I’ve had since...”

Thank God she doesn’t finish that thought.

Her smile just digs my grave deeper—or is it a tunnel straight to hell?
Without even realizing it, I've crossed a boundary that was sacrosanct,
and we'll have to acknowledge it eventually.

Just like we'll have to decide if we want to breach that red line again.

I have no clue what I'll say. I can't convince myself that this is right.

Though I'm not sure I'd ever regret taking this woman to bed.

Not true, you caveman prick, I think. You live for rules.

You also don't fuck strange women behind your daughter's back.

You don't ask for pain.

All you have are regrets.

No, not quite.

All I have are *what-ifs*, and they stab me every time I let myself fall a little deeper into Eliza Angelo's smile, the way her chestnut hair splashes down her shoulders, the soft curve of her body against mine...

What if Destiny hadn't come?

I know where there's a hammock in a secluded corner, not far from where the trees begin. I don't think anyone knows about it. I could have led her there.

I could have stripped off her soaking wet panties and splayed her legs open and mounted her like a bull in rut.

My cock pulses at the thought. I have to fight not to grind myself against her like a dog.

Fucking hell.

What if instead of apologizing for the colossal mess I've made by acting on my attraction, I grab her by the hand and lead us both into stupidity?

What if we're so addicted to the fireworks it doesn't stop when we get home?

What if I let this breezy little snack of a hellion sink her teeth into *me*? All while I lie back and enjoy it.

And what the hell if it's more than just sex? What if it turns into candlelit dinners and tense sit-downs with HR and introductions to everyone as a "couple" and—

I hate that I almost physically push her away when I stagger back.

Just in time, too, because I hear Destiny calling.

"Dad! Dad, come quick—I think I see a turtle!"

Brakes slammed.

So hard it hurts when I look back at Eliza and see the confusion lashing in

her eyes.

Yeah, I've been down this road before, regardless of whether or not this route has different twists and turns.

I know where they inevitably lead.

Calamity.

Clearing my throat, I step away from Eliza, muttering, "I should keep a closer eye on Dess. The evening waves can get strong out here without notice and she keeps leaning on the railing. Don't want her falling over."

Eliza's eyes barely register the comment before I've darted away to find Dess again. Thankfully, she's still so obsessed with sea critters that she's oblivious to the dynamite kiss that was going off behind her the entire time.

With precious space, maybe I can think before tripping into chaos.

Destiny grins from ear to ear as she looks up at me. "This is so cool! If you're quiet, the guy in the back told me the dolphins come closer sometimes. Eliza deserves a raise for this."

"You think it's her doing?" I ask.

"Dad. You're encouraging and all, but with both of you on this boat with me—I dunno—I'm not afraid. Not even for a second." Dess turns her face up, gleaming in the sun. I try not to see a younger Aster. "She's just a chill lady and it makes everything easier. You'd better give her a beast of a bonus when we're home."

I smile at her. "We'll see. With that enthusiasm, maybe you should explore marine biology after all."

"Oh, I'm thinking about it." Her smile thins into a serious line.

Damn. I was still half joking, but there's nothing whimsical in that look.

She's young, but if she truly thinks there's a future in this and she can get past the ocean and its bad memories...well, I'll be damned if I'll keep her chained to a family legacy.

A few minutes later, I hear soft footsteps padding on the deck behind us.

Eliza stands so close to me we're barely touching. I won't meet her eyes as she looks at Dess. "If you're having fun on the boat, I think there's a local tour around here. They'll take you out deep enough in the water to snorkel and swim with the dolphins."

"Oh!" Destiny meets my eyes. "Can we go, Dad? I...I think I'm ready," she adds in a small voice.

My phone buzzes with a text. I pick it up, see a message from Troy, and frown before I feel Destiny's eyes still on me, waiting for an answer.

I look up.

“I’ll see when my schedule aligns again with Miss Angelo’s,” I say neutrally, finally looking at this storm of a woman I want to regret kissing.

The shine in her eyes won’t let me.

Her sunny, curious gaze just makes me want more—no matter how recklessly intense or monumentally stupid acting on that want might be.



LATER, I stare across the table, relieved that I can keep a smile with this man without looking like I’m chewing on broken glass.

“The food’s spectacular. They source it all locally here. Hell, the mahi-mahi might be the best thing on the menu in my not-so-humble opinion. You won’t regret ordering it, Cole,” Troy says with a wide grin.

“Thanks,” I tell him. “This restaurant wasn’t here last time.”

He nods, sipping his mai tai. “Oh, yeah, lots of interesting changes around these parts. I admire you for coming back even if it took some time—both of you. I know it isn’t easy.”

Destiny smiles warmly, and it must be infectious because I don’t feel like I’m faking it. When Troy sent over that text asking for a dinner to square away our argument, I didn’t have the heart to turn him down.

“What can I get you?” a smiling server asks.

I look at Dess first, knowing she takes a million years to decide without a little encouragement. “You got your eye on the mahi-mahi too?”

“Um, yeah. With garlic mash and island slaw.” She nods firmly, her dark-blond hair flapping.

“Excellent choice, madame. And to drink?”

She looks at me. “Can I get a piña colada?”

“As long as it’s a mocktail,” I grumble.

She rolls her eyes at me like she’s actually expecting me to slip the lady a bribe to spike my underage daughter’s drink.

“We can certainly make it one,” the waitress says.

“Actually, just give me a banana smoothie,” she says, sighing like only a disappointed bratty teenager can.

I look back at the server. “Two mahi-mahi specials, a bourbon, and a smoothie.”

“I’ll have the same,” Troy says.

The waitress grins at him. “With the banana smoothie?”

“Surprise me,” Troy says with a laugh, falling back in his chair. His permanent tan makes him look like part of the scenery, blending him with the lacquered wood and high leatherback chairs under the low lamplight.

“How much trouble have you guys been getting into today? I saw Dessy a couple times around the house, but I heard you hopped on a boat earlier?”

“Yeah! We had to see the dolphins, Uncle Troy...”

I sit back while she talks his ear off, as if he hasn’t been living the island life for the past decade.

“Dang, girl. I thought you were building up to tell me about mermaids,” he jokes with her before he looks back at me. “So you’re both having a good time?”

“We’re good,” I say bluntly, taking a purple-tinted taro roll from the basket.

“Happy as hell to hear it.” His eyes dart to Destiny. “I know it’s a little heavy coming back here—say no more.”

My eyes flick to her nervously, but she just smiles and nods.

I know I should just behave.

He’s a nice guy who genuinely misses us, not some damn creeper. Why did I overreact so harshly when he started asking about Destiny?

Maybe because it’s becoming more obvious that she’s not the one who needs to put a lid on her emotions on this trip.

“We’re good, Troy,” I repeat, considering my next words. “We had to come back sooner or later, didn’t we? I never sold the house.”

“You would’ve gotten an earful if you had. Your future grandkids would never forgive you. Right, Dessy?”

She laughs awkwardly in the way a kid only can who’s being teased by a stand-in uncle.

A surprisingly normal scene.

Yeah, I think I was only so short with Troy because he was the only one here when fate tore a hole through our lives.

It’s subconscious, this stupid unease. I read a hundred articles about trauma back when it happened.

That’s why his presence around the people I care about puts my shields up.

The drinks show up and I instantly go for my bourbon, taking a long, gut-

scorching sip.

Katelyn's right. I haven't let go of Aster's death, and it's turned me into a fucking snapping turtle.

Destiny doesn't deserve that.

Neither does Troy.

Neither does *Eliza*—even if I can't decide whether she deserves my other moods.

I just know I need to back off for everyone's sake.

"...I understand. Yeah, no, it couldn't have been easy..." Troy is nodding when I look up, so much empathy in his eyes for my daughter.

What the hell were they saying?

Destiny saves me from having to ask. "I was honestly okay. I had a great time on the ship and Eliza said she'd take me surfing anytime."

"Eliza surfs?" I cut in. I vaguely remember her mentioning something about it before we stepped off the boat.

"Dad, you were there." Destiny laughs. "Her cousin taught her, remember? He was a lifeguard and big surfer and all in San Diego. So obviously."

I smile, imagining Eliza hanging ten on a surfboard in that skimpy dotted bikini of hers.

My cock seethes. I may need a leash if I don't fuck this girl.

"I never knew residency was a requirement, Dess," I say absently.

Troy's lips curl up, regaining my attention. "Eliza from R & D, right?"

"Yeah." I don't look at him.

If I say anything more, he'll be like a dog with a bone. I'm also not sure he's smart enough to keep his yap shut about it in front of my daughter like he should.

It's only natural, I suppose, considering old times.

We were in the Navy together for four years before he came to work for me. We may have drifted apart over the years, but he still knows me better than almost anyone.

That happens when you share a bunk on a cramped spy ship and have to breathe another man's body odor every night.

And the fact that he knows me so well—old me—is scary as fuck.

I look at Destiny. "You and Eliza have gotten chummy, haven't you?"

"Chummy?" She stares at me like I've grown another head.

"Friendly."

“Oh, yeah. She’s a badass. I like her and she seems good with you,” Dess says with a wink.

“See, Big Daddy?” Troy throws a shit-eating grin across the table at me. “She’s even in good with the kid.”

I glare at him.

Then my eyes trace to Dess again. I remember I’m here to make peace, not snap his head off in front of my daughter.

“Right, right.” Troy holds his hands up, lowering his voice. “Don’t think you’re off the hook, my man.”

Destiny’s gaze slowly sweeps from Troy back to me. “What are you guys talking about?”

“Nothing important, baby girl. Did you email that turtle sanctuary to see if they’d let you drop by one day?” I change the subject swiftly.

Troy continues to look over his drink at me, damn him.

And about that time—*perfect timing*— the waitress returns with a tray stacked with our food. She places a steaming plate down in front of each of us and smacks her head. “Oh, I’m such a dummy. I forgot to refill your waters. Let me grab that.”

“Not a problem,” I say politely.

I’m so happy for the distraction that she could’ve poured the whole tray on my lap and I’d still thank her.

“God, I’m starving!” Destiny cuts into her fish, scraping her knife loudly across the plate.

I can’t even get after her.

With the kidlet gushing about the best fish she’s ever had, I don’t have to suffer Troy and his diabolical sense of humor. If I’m lucky, I might keep Little Miss Science Chick off my brain for five minutes.

When the waitress returns with our water, I order a second bourbon to help take the edge off.

Am I really okay with Eliza teaching my kid to surf?

My stomach twists at the idea of Destiny—okay, either of them—out there far enough on the water to get into trouble. I’ll scare up an extra lifeguard later and make sure they’re discreetly waiting in the wings to step in if anything goes wrong.

Hopefully, I’ll also have another day to come up with whatever I’m going to say about that kiss.

That goddamned kiss.

When my new drink arrives, I swallow half of it in one gulp.

It's been that kind of day. I tune out while Troy and Destiny make conversation.

"Hey, Dad, can I check out the arcade next door?"

I glance over, about to tell her to eat first when I realize she's cleared her plate.

Damn. I've only taken a few bites.

It feels sinful to lose my appetite with such a delicious dinner.

"Have you eaten today? Before now?"

"A few bananas and an acai bowl for lunch," she tells me.

"You only ate fruit?" My brow furrows, hoping I don't have an eating disorder masquerading as a new fad diet on my hands.

"I was busy."

"Before your dolphins? And with things that aren't digital?" I gesture to her phone.

She nods. "The signal out here kinda sucks anyway. Troy just told me it gets better in town."

I smile. "There's a booster in the conference room if you need it. A little time off the grid could be good for you—as long as you remember to check in. And let's try for three square meals tomorrow, okay, little bee?"

"Ugh, I'm fifteen, Dad. Not five. Don't call me that." She sits up straighter with an indignant look. "Can I go to the arcade now? I saw some old-school pinball machines..."

"Your phone still gets a signal here, right?"

She nods.

"Then go. But don't talk to any strangers and you only leave to come straight back here. Got it?"

"Yes, sir." She pushes her chair out and stands awkwardly.

Oh, right. Old-school, she said. That probably means the machines still take coins or tokens.

I fish a twenty out of my wallet and hand it to her. Her face twists like it's not enough, but she knows better than to keep milking me for more.

I watch her leave, noting that she looks too much like a grown woman in that dress with her pink bag swinging off her shoulder.

"How 'bout another round?" Troy asks, hammering his empty glass down with a decisive *clink*.

"Sure," I say, draining the last of my bourbon and liking how my brain

fogs over.

He waves the waitress down and orders a couple shots of gold rum for both of us. No point in waiting for one to be gone to reorder when we're both in the mood to indulge.

"So, tell me, man, now that it's just us... Is it going to be just you and Destiny forever?"

I snort. "Straight to the point, huh? Listen, I'm either on the phone trying to convince a lit teacher my kid isn't the anti-christ or I'm at work. I don't know how I'd ever have time for anything else."

"C'mon, Cole. Destiny seems way too chill to get in trouble."

"It's normal trouble, thank fuck. She uses her phone too much or talks during class, but it drives her English teacher crazy. Still, she has a four point oh. Unweighted. She landed a 1540 on her PSATs last fall—a year earlier than most kids. I know I'm lucky and I shouldn't bitch. Just wish she wasn't glued to her phone twenty-four seven."

Troy laughs, his face as boyish and easygoing as I remember, despite the fact that he's started greying slightly at the temples. "Welcome to the 2020s, bossman. Every kid on the planet stays glued to their phones—so do most adults. That's nothing to sweat. She's turning out great. She'll be out of the house soon, won't she?"

"A few more years, yeah. She was looking at Columbia or Cornell—really interested in seeing the other coast—until this marine biology obsession cropped up recently."

"Let her explore. You're only young once."

"Yeah, well, it's not like I have any choice. She's a smart cookie. I'd planned on her working for me so she could take over the company someday. No sign she's interested, though. And maybe that's for the best." I sigh. "I also don't think she's really found her calling yet, but that's another story."

"She still has time. Don't stress."

Our shots arrive and Troy grabs one, holding it up for me. I take it with a friendly nod and toss it back.

I watch as he follows suit.

It's almost like old times, venting over booze with a close friend. A bizarre way to end a day where I feel like I've lived as someone else.

"She has a couple years before she settles on a college. We've been joking about marine biology a lot lately. I hope she takes it seriously, though, because seals and dolphins are all she cares about besides her phone."

“If she likes her phone so much, she could make apps or be an influencer. Lots of fat stacks in that,” Troy says happily.

“I’ll have her in a submarine with the whales before I ever let my daughter be a TikTok sensation,” I snarl.

We clink glasses and down our second shots.

“If she’s off to school on her lonesome, and you’ll be alone in a few years,” he says quietly. “You ever thought about finding another woman? I’m just asking. Maybe the R & D chick?”

Shit, we’re back to this, again?

“I told you, Troy, that’s *not* happening,” I say harshly.

The fire in my blood isn’t all booze. It tells me I’m a filthy liar. It burns hotter every time I think of her.

“Yeah, but—”

“She’s an employee,” I clip. As if I cared about that when I had my tongue down her throat earlier. “And you’re one, too.”

He pulls back, stricken, and I feel like shit.

There was a time when I told him everything, before the fucking sky shifted and the stars fell out of my world.

“Look. I don’t have time to get mixed up with relationships. I’ve got my company, I’ve got my daughter, and that’s enough. I’m not sure why you don’t get it when you’ve spent the last ten years banging Bali pool girls.”

Anyone else would take that as an insult. Troy just throws his head back and laughs, drunkenly pounding my shoulder.

“Still got it, you bastard. And so do I. This boy wasn’t made to settle down.” His too-wide grin fades and he settles back in his seat with a heavy look. “You, on the other hand... I just want you to be happy, Cole. That’s all. Half your life is leaving and you’ll have a lot of free time on your hands. A long time ago—before the accident—I remember when she made you happy. Maybe someone new could, too.”

I don’t know if it’s my mood or the drinks or this damn humid night.

As soon as he finishes, I glare across the table, my lip curling.

“Troy. Drop it.”

He holds a hand up. “Okay, okay. Sorry, I didn’t mean to take it that far. It’s just...I know. I get it, man, everyone moves on in their own way.”

Moves on from fucking what?

He’s described my dilemma without knowing it, though.

Is that what I’m doing with Eliza? Giving in to temptation? Trying to

prove to myself that the past is the past, over and done and buried like Aster's ashes.

Troy isn't the only one who's mentioned moving on recently. So has Kate—the only person who knows me almost as well as he does.

Maybe there's something to this.

Troy knows what kind of man I used to be before I became a workaholic husk without a life beyond Wired Cup and Destiny.

I need to keep my shit together. Especially with a lab girl whose chemistry could blow my life—and hers—to kingdom come.

I'd do well to remember that the last woman who was tangled up with me that way hurled herself into dark, dangerous waters and never came home.

No siren deserves my selfish fantasies.

No one needs to share the shadow hanging over my life.

No beautiful young woman needs my damage when damage is all I have to give.



TORCHES BLAZE OVERHEAD, casting warm firelight on every surface.

Eliza wears that lethal dotted bikini and tight cutoff shorts. She skips ahead of me, giving me the view of a lifetime. Her ass looks so delectable I want to fucking bite it.

“Where are we going?” she asks, tossing her hair over her shoulder.

I don't care.

I just know I'll be sad when we get there if it doesn't involve having that ass.

“Hello? Earth to Commander Coffee?” She stops, waving her hand in front of my face.

“My beach.” I point past the lush vegetation at the edge of my property, the neat line where the soil becomes sand. “Do you want to get closer to the water?”

“Sure.” She smiles like the devil as she shimmies off her shorts and runs into the tide, kicking and splashing water.

I admire the view until she disappears under a tall wave, diving as gracefully as the dolphins we saw earlier.

Go ahead. Call me a dirty old fuck.

I still want to punish that tight little ass of hers.

With my cock tenting my shorts, I wade into the water beside her.

I just watch her, the way the moonlight makes the beads glow on her creamy skin. It's looking a little more tanned every day.

Eliza gestures toward me impatiently.

So I close the distance between us, pulling her into my arms. My fingers push under her bikini, greedy as hell, squeezing her ass underwater.

"Are you sure about this? Tell me now—before it's too late to stop." If I'm being honest, it already is.

She just stares at me, breathing softly, her nipples peaking under her bikini top.

Even in the darkness, her eyes are so needy.

She leans her face down, planting an innocent kiss on my shoulder.

"Yes," she whispers intently. "Cole..."

My grip around her tightens as her hand skims my thigh, reaching for my cock.

I groan the instant her fingers wind around it, and she strokes me in one teasing flick.

"Holy hell. You scare me," she whispers.

I look at her darkly, pushing my hand over hers, helping her fingers glide up and down my angry length.

"Woman, the only thing that should scare you is what happens if I'm not inside you in the next sixty seconds." I'm growling, brushing my lips against hers, adding teeth before I pull away.

She gasps with delight, her brunette curls so soft in my fist.

Her mouth opens eagerly like she's been waiting for this all damn night—I know I have since the day she was hired—and the first caress of her tongue matches my urgency.

I only break our kiss to nibble down her jawline, down her neck.

"Oh, Cole. Oh, *shit*."

That tremor in her voice flips some hellish switch in my head.

Any control I ever had is gone.

I sink to my knees, peeling away her wet bikini bottoms. My fingers roam soft brown curls, seeking her clit.

When I find it, I press my finger in, massage that pearl in quick, teasing circles.

"Oh. Oh, God. Oh, Cole," she whines, her caramel-sweet eyes flickering,

inviting, reflecting back my own lustful stare until it's all I see and—

And then everything goes black.

Sirens wail in the distance, but they're moving closer.

The noise engulfs everything until I can't hear her moan, her hot breathing.

There's a knock on my door.

I swing it open and find a cop on the other side. "Can you come to the station, sir? She's gone."

I don't have to ask who or what the fuck he means.

Eliza.

But he's here, so why are the sirens still going?

I jerk up violently, my eyelids ripped open, a hard-on the size of Canada stabbing at the ceiling like a sword.

"Holy fuck," I mutter.

Just a dream—a goddamned annoying one.

No sirens.

No tragic surprises.

No heavenly first fuck.

The wailing is my alarm clock. I don't know how I shut it off without chucking my phone at the wall.

My options are a cold shower or my hand.

Deciding on both, I kick off the sweaty sheets tangled around my legs and head for the bathroom, my fist already tight around my raging dick.

The cold waterfall shower sends me over the edge in under a minute.

Eliza.

My head snaps back and I'm grinding my teeth, my whole arm pumping, spattering the wall with thick ropes of my release.

This is what she's done to me.

Ropes for days.

Reduced me to painting the shower like a fucking boy before prom night.

When I'm gasping and finished and the water washes the mess away, I soap myself down, then stand under the ice-cold water, my fingers pressing deep into my eye sockets.

I'm sick in the head. Terminally ill.

I've got to keep some distance between us because I'm now aware of two things.

I have no control around her anymore. The effect she has on me is

maddening.

Secondly, the last woman I got involved with left scars for life.

Eliza doesn't deserve that, and honestly, neither do I.

If only Destiny wasn't so attached. I'm not sure how to neutralize that friendship without hurting them both.

Still, I have to man up and *resist* Eliza Angelo, along with my own fever dreams.

Our chemistry is too strong.

And if I can't contain it, and soon, we'll only brew an acid drip that disintegrates every bit of our lives it touches.

RAINBOW SHOT (ELIZA)



Kona days are long and breezy and everything glitters like gold under the spectacular Pacific sun.

They're only broken up on this side of the island by brisk rainstorms. I love how refreshing it feels, like someone reaching to sweep the air clean.

I'm also starting to adore my makeshift lab even more than my fancy lab at home. The soaring ocean views make it easy to fall in love.

When the clouds peel back like curtains and the sun pierces them at just the right moment, I'm always in awe.

But nothing could compare to the brilliant double rainbow exploding across the sky right now.

The huge multicolored bridge spans the entire ocean in neon ribbons from east to west.

Grinning like a fool, I grind fresh peaberry beans and start the best brew of my life.

I've pushed the recipe closer to perfection over the last few days, using a lower flame for a longer brewing time.

This won't be a fifteen-dollar cup of coffee by the time I'm through. More like twenty-five bucks of absolute luxury.

The scarcity of the peaberries isn't the only thing commanding a higher price tag. Process adds a premium.

Each batch of this stuff takes at least twice as long to brew as a more basic bean.

And I don't mind the longish brewing time when it lets me flop down on my lounge chair and remember the way Cole kissed me—when Dess barging

in was the only reason that encounter stayed PG-13—and then vanished for three days and counting.

Hi, I'm an idiot. Nice to meet you.

Seriously.

You'd think I would have learned my lesson the last time a skeezy older man played racquetball with my heart, but apparently I'm a sucker for punishment. Or is it a chump for Lump?

Same old heart trap, and I walked right into the snare. *Again.*

Thinking about Derek feels like summoning the devil. The saddest moments of my life replay like a cringe compilation video.

My chest burns.

All the peaberry sweetness and double rainbows in the world can't make up for the way I let that wretched man crawl up inside me.



Two Years Ago

I'M SITTING behind my desk at this god-awful legal firm—just a three-week temp job, thank God—when he strolls in.

I look up like I feel a presence.

Of course, I do.

He's that kind of man, the sort who holds a room spellbound the second he enters.

Thick blond hair tumbles around his face like a mane, framing those pale-blue eyes. His three-piece suit hangs perfectly off his body. He looks like the hero in every cheesy rom-com movie ever made—only, there's nothing funny about the way his eyes rake over me.

“So Michael finally traded in his secretary? I approve of the upgrade,” he says with a self-assured smile.

What else can I do but smile back? “Oh, I'm just the temp. Lydia's out on maternity leave.”

“Could you let him know I'm here? Derek Stevens.”

“Will do.” I pick up the phone and call the attorney's office. Voicemail.

“I think he’s in a meeting, Mr. Stevens. I’m getting his voicemail. Would you like a coffee while you wait?”

“That would be stellar,” he says.

“Any particular flavor?”

“There’s a menu now?” He grins like a movie star. “Damn, lady, you are a big improvement.”

“Personal pet peeve.” I clear my throat. “I can’t stand the canned stuff in the break room, so I brought a couple fresh blends I roasted myself...”

Oh, how those blue eyes ignite with surprise.

“Impressive. Anything’s fine, really,” he says with a friendly nod. I feel his eyes linger as I turn around and hear him call, “I don’t suppose I could convince a beautiful new lady to have one with me while I wait? Or would that be asking too much?”

Oh, God.

This isn’t me.

I can’t believe how I smile back at him over my shoulder. I never smile at strange men who hit on me in public.

Let’s blame it on the sexy eyes and million-dollar good looks.

I brew up two cups of Madagascar vanilla in no time. When he takes his first sip, his head falls back and he groans. I almost have to look away when he pinches his thigh like he’s dreaming.

“Holy shit,” he whispers, his eyes snapping to mine. “You said you’re a temp, Miss—?”

“Eliza,” I offer.

And that’s how he offers me a job I decline, laughing the whole time.

But it gets us talking for almost an hour until Michael finally emerges from his office with a scowl left by his conference call.

By the end of our conversation, a few things are clear.

Derek is seventeen years older than me.

He owns a major film company with a degree from UCLA, and he despises Hollywood so much he only flies back there from his hometown, Seattle, whenever he absolutely must.

He admires my big café dreams, even when I turn down his office job.

He also walks away with my number, and he calls me that night.

We don’t have coffee again.

Instead, we bond over a three-hundred-dollar bottle of champagne at one of the finest oyster bars in the city, and then in a lavish hotel room

overlooking Elliott Bay.

After that, we're rarely apart.

He's a busy man—even when he's not traveling—and he tells me the high-end rooms are just so he can escape and clear his head. They're his special oasis with a special lady, where he can be the special man he tells special me I totally deserve.

And I believe him like the lovesick little fool I've become.

Despite the fact that he always slips out before I wake up the next morning with a delicious breakfast alone and the room paid for, I don't even question it.

A month later, he meets my parents.

They don't like that he's so much older, but they don't complain about how respectful he is.

Dad says Derek is protective. He'll take care of me.

Mom claps her hands together and says he's besotted and kind, and “oh, honey, these true gentlemen are so rare.”

I even mention him to Wayne when I drop by to dress up Wired Cup's latest very average fall beverage line of pumpkin spice lattes, and he's a little more suspicious.

Life isn't a fairy tale that throws Prince Charmings at you out of nowhere. I need to be careful, take it slow, but he respects my choices.

Three months later, Derek whisks me away to the Four Seasons on a trip to L.A. We're in the valet line. He takes my hands and stares into my eyes.

“I'm so fucking tired of sleeping alone, Eliza. I can't wait to wake up next to you,” he whispers.

“I love you,” I slip as my heart bursts into butterflies.

He leans over and kisses me like I'm the best thing he's ever tasted. “Me too.”

The driver knocks on the window.

Derek hands him the keys and holds my door open.

We don't fuck like we usually do.

We make love for the first time that night. My first time ever having sex with real, deep feelings attached.

It's like losing your virginity for the second time, only far more intense.

It's not like the way it looks in movies.

I come so hard it hurts.

Then I stare at the ceiling, gripping him so tight my legs go sore when he

groans and collapses on top of me, but the way he holds me after...

It's so very delicious, so sweet, so beautiful I'd do it a thousand times over.

Nothing compares to the pure bliss of waking up with him the next day, or the anticipation of falling asleep in his arms again.

Nothing.

But a month later, it happens.

Derek has to go to Vancouver for a long weekend to check out some locations for a future film. No big deal.

I head back to San Diego on a whim with a couple friends from high school. We head over to Anaheim and visit Disney.

And in the *It's a Small World* line, a devastating irony.

The love of my life stands there, surreal and inexplicable.

"Derek!" I call. "Derek, what are you doing here?"

He turns around. The happy grin on his face melts into sheer dread.

Weird. But maybe he doesn't recognize me in my thick sunglasses and new blue highlights in my ponytail.

Is he just surprised to see me?

I run toward him with my arms outstretched.

He steps out of line with his hands out, guarded, as if he wants to shove me away.

"Eliza, what the hell are you doing here?" he says coldly.

I crash into his chest, closing my arms around him.

"Um, I'm just here with friends. But I thought you were in Vancouver this weekend?"

His isn't hugging me back with the same adoring reverence he always does.

Why?

"Dad? Who's she?" a kid who looks like she might be nine or ten asks.

She's talking to Derek.

I drop my arms and stumble back, the blood draining from my face. My eyes trace from Derek to the kid who has his eyes and back to him.

"Oh... You didn't tell me you had a daughter." I'm careful to keep my voice steady.

I'm understanding and open-minded. He should have just told me.

Then a tall blonde holding a baby arrives at his side, her lips pursed in a razor-sharp line. "Derek? Who's this?"

His voice is arctic. “Eliza Angelo. She...she works with me. Huge surprise seeing her here.”

“I do?” It comes out so dry I almost choke.

What can I say? I’m slow. It hasn’t fully hit me yet like an avalanche.

“Eliza, say hello to my lovely wife, Darlene.” He motions to the blonde with a look that says, *say hello, and if you say anything else, I will slit your throat.*

I have no idea what he says after that.

I’m too blinded by stinging tears, frantically pushing through the thick crowd, my heart shattered like blown glass and already beginning to cut me to pieces.



Present

THE AROMA of fire-roasted coffee mixed with fresh coconut shavings and decadent chocolate snaps me back to the present.

Jesus. I’m such a ghastly moron.

How could I ever let myself get close to an older rich man again?

I know their game.

Rich boys think they own the world. Women are just play things, easy and expendable.

Then. Now. Forever.

That’s just the way of this pathetic world and all you can do is build a bunker around your heart. But I don’t have time to mope around thanks to Derek or Cole or anything else.

I have a big coffee tasting coming up, and the timer just dinged for my taste batch. I just need to pack it up and get to the conference room.

I pull in a lady from the house staff and ask for a coffee urn.

She brings in the fanciest silver container I’ve ever seen. I transfer the coffee from the open pot I brewed it in.

“Can I please get some cups, too? And any chance you could put them in the conference room for me?” I’m not used to giving orders.

She nods respectfully. “I can do that. Do you think you can carry this? There’s plenty of auxiliary staff standing by if you can’t, per Mr. Lancaster’s instructions. He’s always very helpful.”

I blink.

“Lancaster helps the help?” I wonder out loud.

Whatever.

He’s still a rich man with a past, and you’d do well to remember it, a voice groans in the back of my head. You saw how he was practically drooling at you in your bikini. You’d be his toy. Nothing more.

She smiles and nods. “My family has worked here for generations. The Lancasters are good people.”

“Thanks, but I’ve got it.” I manage to haul the heavy container to the conference room one baby step at a time.

By the time I make it there ten minutes later, they already have the cups set out.

Cole—Mr. Lancaster, and I really should go back to calling him that—sends a man to take the urn from me and set it up in the middle of the table. Not long after, people start filing in for the meeting.

Ugh. How do I get through this?

It’s my first encounter with Lump since it happened. The jackass avoids making eye contact until he’s finished his daily briefing.

He looks at me without a whisper of tension. He just smiles warmly and says, “Eliza, do you want to do the honors? This is your creation, after all.”

“It’s self-serve,” I say coldly.

“And you should take the credit. It already smells divine.” The bright twinkle in his eye hints that he doesn’t just mean the coffee.

It takes major effort to keep the butterflies at bay. But I get up, take a paper cup, and start dispensing the coffee.

Once it’s half full of black liquid, I pass it to the bosshole.

He brings the small cup to his lips and takes a slow sip. “Delicious. The peaberry’s natural sweetness stands on its own, even with the added undertones.”

I keep my face neutral.

It feels like it might crack.

“Who knew R & D girls still played barista?” I joke.

Curiosity flashes across his face as he tilts his head, but he quickly snuffs it out.

“Form a line, people. That also means you, household staff,” he tells the crowd gathered in the room. “Everyone should come taste this brilliance.”

Awesome. Now I’m stuck playing barista for twenty people, but Cole helps, standing by to help pass out filled cups.

Everyone stops by later to tell me how delicious it is, how creative and hardworking I must be to have mastered this otherworldly beverage.

For my part, I stare at the floor, waiting for this meeting to be dismissed the same way you want a bad cold to end.

If Cole Lancaster wants to keep this strictly professional after kissing out my soul, fine.

Honestly, it’s probably for the best. I have zero interest in being another rich man’s anything.

But it might have been nice if he’d at least considered that before his tongue tormented mine and his hands grabbed my ass.

As soon as the meeting ends, I’m out, speed walking across the aged wooden floors so briskly the boards creak.

I also don’t stick around to debrief.

I’ve done my part in paradise.

Let Cole Lancaster figure out what the hell to do with his peaberry baby.

It’s his problem, and if I have any say in it, I won’t let him become mine.



“WHAT IF THE problem isn’t that I don’t like him? What if he doesn’t like me?” I hold my breath, phone pressed to my ear, waiting for Dakota’s sage advice.

“That’s...not your problem,” she says sharply.

Yeah, not helpful.

“Oh! Wait. You mean you *like him*-like him?”

I don’t answer. She’s figured it out and there’s no point in adding to my disgrace.

“Does your boss—er, this guy—know?”

“Yes,” I say flatly.

“And he’s not interested?” Dakota’s voice sharpens. “Did the sea breeze go to his head? What the hell is *wrong* with him?”

If only we knew.

She laughs. “Tell me one thing. Are you sure he knows you’re interested? I mean, until I accidentally sent my man a dirty poem, he didn’t know for sure. If it wasn’t for that slip, who knows how long it would’ve taken him to make a move..”

I smile. Their romance feels like it happened a decade ago and it’s so sweet.

“Trust me, Dakota. He knows. He’d be an idiot to have any doubt..”

“Well, men often are.”

“This guy isn’t an idiot. He knows and he just doesn’t care. I think he regrets showing any interest and wants to keep things professional.”

“Makes sense,” she says glumly. “Office love gets complicated. Take it from me. If it goes wrong, it can ruin careers. He might even think he’s protecting you with his walled-off act. Men are dumb like that—especially the rich, bossy types.”

“Protecting me from *what?*” I hiss.

“Women always get blamed for this crap when it goes sour. It’s always the hen’s fault and never the rooster’s.”

“Well, he kissed me first. I kissed him back and I—I encouraged it, okay? But his mouth found mine *first.*”

She pauses for a heavy second. “God, I like that you kiss and tell, lady. What happened after the kiss?”

“His daughter found us—”

“Frenching? Holy shit.”

“No! We...we stopped before she saw us. But he’s been avoiding me ever since. He’s acting *weird*, Dakota, like nothing ever happened, and it’s driving me nuts.” I don’t add *because it’s all I can think about.*

“Yep. He freaked. Or maybe he just feels bad about initiating a kiss with a woman he works with. Maybe he panicked. The whole workplace romance thing might scare him, especially if he has a kid in the mix.” She sighs. “Still, not all workplace romances end in scandal. Mine gave me a husband and Evermore.”

I hear the little bundle of joy gurgle in the background.

“We can’t all be as lucky as you.”

“Lady, I’m a Poe, even if the last name changed. Nothing lucky about that,” she says with a laugh. “Anyhow, you should catch him alone. Talk to him. He kissed and ran and that means he owes you a conversation if he isn’t a soggy douchecanoe. If he wants to claim temporary insanity or blame it on

being drunk, whatever—but at least make him say it to your face. You’ll see the truth then, no matter what he says.”

I nod. “Right. I swear, married life has made you wiser...”

Dakota laughs and I hear Lincoln yell at her in the background.

“*Shhhhh!* If he hears you, it’ll go to his head. Also, you two work together. You have to clear the air either way or any future work meetings will be torture. But I can’t imagine any man going frosty on you, Eliza. He’s just confused and not as indifferent as you think.”

Oof. What if she’s right?

I swallow before I say, “I—this is going to be like Derek all over again, isn’t it?”

“What? Holy crap, no. If he makes you the other woman, you’ll give me his home address and I’ll hire a whole murder of trained ravens to paint his car white.”

I burst out laughing because she might actually be serious about the bird poop parade. When Edgar Allan is a distant relation, there’s nothing off the table with revenge.

“I’m just afraid,” I whisper. “After Derek—”

“Stop it. This is *not* Derek,” she says sharply. “You’d know if he was taken, right?”

I hate that she’s right. Even if most of Cole Lancaster’s life is still a black void, I do know that.

“Just because he’s single doesn’t mean he won’t break my heart,” I say.

“That’s always a chance in any relationship. But I’d like to think most guys aren’t cheating scumbags.”

“How can you say that? Your ex was just as big a cheating douchebag.”

“He was, but Linc served up justice, didn’t he?”

“Yeah,” I admit. “But before that...he busted your heart, too.”

“What?”

“Sorry. I just can’t forget the sobbing mess you were after he decided you were better off apart...” I hate that I have to remind her life wasn’t always so picture-perfect.

“He was *scared*, Eliza. And if I had to guess, that’s what’s going on with your beau. Men always fuss about being big and tough, but they can’t handle half as much as we can. Go talk to him.”

“I mean, what other choice is there? We’ll talk. If he doesn’t care, if he’s too afraid, he’s going to have to say it to my face. After Derek, I’m *done*

playing guessing games.”

“Good girl.” She pauses as a grumpy baby squeals impatiently in the background. “And somebody’s up from their nap. I have to go. We’re having dinner with my mother-in-law later, but let me know how it goes.”

“Will do.”

I hang up with a sigh, stuff my phone back in my purse, and then head out the door.

While I’m still high on courage, I head for the beautiful library Cole turned into a personal office.

I knock a couple of times, but there’s no answer.

Fine. The door is unlocked, so I go inside.

Surprise, surprise. He’s not here.

You’ve got to love how answers are always scarce when you need them the most.

But I’m not suffering through another sleepless night and a morning running on stinging eyes and pure ristretto shots.

The afternoon sky has an orange-creamsicle tint. It catches my attention, and I walk closer to the window.

Once I’m there, I realize there’s another door, a sunroom attached to this library.

The sunset filters in through two sets of windows, giving everything that orange splash. It’s just above the pool on the lower level. I see someone out there, moving, and—

There he is.

There’s no mistaking a body that could make Poseidon jealous.

Toned muscles ripple down his bare back and built legs as he propels himself through the water.

Is he naked?

Oh, hell, I think he is.

He’s all hard, lean perfection. He’s a human wall with the softest lips that turn me inside out effortlessly.

I’m instantly wet.

Yeah, this might not be the best time to talk. I’m at a scary disadvantage.

Also, if the heat radiating from my face is any indication, I’m redder than a lobster at this distance. How awful will I look if I confront him while he’s in his birthday suit?

My eyes drift to a black patch over his unbreakable butt.

Dark trunks hug his legs, something I didn't notice at first, which means seeing him fully naked was a wishful hallucination.

Sigh.

Leaning against the window, I try not to enjoy the show, and fail miserably.

At some point, when I'm gnawing my bottom lip and turning into a boneless mess, it slides open from my body's pressure.

Whoops.

So it's a door. And I'm falling halfway through it, stumbling a few steps onto a small landing before I realize my mistake.

I exhale sharply.

There goes my excuse to avoid him.

Closing the door behind me like I totally didn't just fall out of it, I march down the small flight of steps to the pool deck and sit on a lounge chair, watching as he swims like a dolphin.

He doesn't catch me staring until he comes up for air, raking his thick sandy-brown hair back with his fingers.

My blush burns my cheeks.

"Eliza? Did you want to use the pool?" He swims up to the side where my toes skim the pool.

"Umm—no. I came to talk."

His eyes gleam, soulful blue fire in the evening light, swirling with questions.

"Thanks for taking Destiny surfing yesterday. She hasn't enjoyed herself on the beach in a long damn while and now she's hooked. I hired a lifeguard —"

"You what?" I do a double take.

"Purely to keep an eye on her. Both of you, really, in case anything went wrong. I wasn't sure if she'd panic," he admits, his face falling with the worry only a father has for his little girl.

"Thank you," I offer. "I'm sure I could've managed, but it would've been nice to know we had back-up."

"If it happens again, you'll know." He pauses, stretching his arms out in the water. His muscle ripples, a powerful canvas of ridges. "You're a talented woman, and not just with slinging coffee. You helped Destiny let her guard down, and I'm grateful. She hasn't been swimming for years."

I feel my willpower bleeding out of me.

Why does he have to be so *nice* right now?

“I do what I can.” *Except pry the answers I need from you.* But when he falls back in the water with a huge smile before standing again, my heart beats so hard in my chest I can’t bring myself to care.

“Swim with me.” He grabs my legs.

I kick lightly, but he’s so strong it doesn’t matter.

“No, I don’t have my swimsuit. I thought I’d find you in your office...”

“So you were looking for me? You don’t need your swimsuit here. It’s just us, it’s my pool, and I say sundresses are acceptable attire.” He gently pulls on my legs, inching me to the very edge.

“Cole, don’t. I came to talk. Seriously.”

Too late.

The next thing I know, I’m splashing down in the water with those massive arms holding me up.

Holy hell, I’m glad it cools me down.

He’s so close we’re touching skin to skin. If it weren’t for the water, I’m sure I’d be in flames.

“What did you want to talk about?” His voice is low thunder, calm and serious as ever.

I wanted to talk? Um.

My eyes fall on his lips.

It’s like a shot of espresso to the brain. They’re beautiful and cursed and they feel so amazing.

“Eliza?” he breathes, pushing forward until we’re face-to-face. “What the hell do we need to talk about?”

The way you kissed me, asshat. But I can’t get the words out.

Instead, my face falls forward as he drags me closer.

My lips land on his.

And my big brave plan dies with a whimper, tracing his bottom lip with my tongue.

I start to pull away and apologize, but he’s kissing me back, holding my bottom lip hostage with his teeth.

He pulls—*aggressively*—leaving no doubt what kind of conversation he wants to have.

Shit.

When his tongue swipes the seam of my lips and pushes into my mouth, I’m in no position to protest.

Lacing one arm around his neck, I put my other hand in his hair, pulling his face closer, closer, but still not close enough.

It's maddening.

How easily he takes control without even *trying*.

But when I'm hugging a giant, feeling his big hands push my dress up, and folding my legs around his waist, I'm in no mood to moralize.

I just want Cole, and nothing else.

He adjusts my position slightly so my warmth is perfectly aligned with his hardness before he wraps his arms around me, pinning me in place. He sucks my lip harder, furiously, drawing a ragged breath that makes it clear I'm not the only one losing my head.

"Fucking hell, Eliza," he growls, tearing his face off mine. "Sweetheart, can we *talk* upstairs in my room? I have a goddamned lot to say."

Oh, and he shows me how much, pushing his hard erection against my thigh.

My nails sink into his back on trembling fingers.

"Uh-huh," I whisper. "Okay."

He lifts me out of the pool and sets me on the side before coming out, dripping wet and glorious, splashed with sunset shadows. He grabs a huge fluffy white robe from a lawn chair.

"Come here, Eliza."

My legs are jelly, but I manage to stand and walk over. He takes his sweet time wrapping the robe around me like I'm delicate and breakable before he finds a towel and starts drying himself off.

It's awesomely terrible watching how he drags the fabric across valleys of taut muscle, abs you could eat off of, and that insane bulge that's barely held back by a thin scrap of cloth.

He never takes his eyes off mine, like he's aware of what he does to me.

This man is built like he was made to eat, drink, and breathe raw eroticism.

I laugh for no reason—blame it on the jitters.

"Don't you need the robe? I feel bad since you brought it."

"That dress is see-through now. If we pass anyone, they're not getting a peek. My eyes only, woman. That's the new rule."

Dead.

He just killed me.

But his chest is completely bare and hard and magnificent. I press my

hand to it, trying to stay grounded.

“Um, thanks?” I whisper.

He doesn't say you're welcome. He just stamps a hungry, yet gentle kiss on my lips, scooping me up in his arms in my cotton cloud and tossing me over his shoulder.

“What if we actually do pass someone?” I whisper in his ear.

“I'll pay them to pretend they didn't see shit,” he rasps.

I'm trying not to shake.

This man is so impossible not to adore.

Thankfully, we're alone as we walk through the house. There's another staircase at the back leading to a new area I haven't seen before.

He carries me the whole way, right across the threshold to this old-world room of dark wood that smells like an island forest. There's a silky curtain hanging around the biggest bed I've ever seen, something right out of the last century, and he rips it aside before laying me down.

Oh, God.

My chest rises and falls, each breath more intoxicating than the last when he's so close, and all I can smell is *him*.

It's cooler and darker here. Between the air conditioning, the ceiling fan, and my still wet clothes, my teeth chatter.

“Stay. I'll get you warmed up as soon as that dress comes off. Guess I didn't think that through very well.” He kisses my forehead and then drifts down to my lips.

Like anything could ever be wrong with what's happening.

He pulls me up gently, unties my robe, peels it off, and throws it on the floor.

Except it was dry.

Now, I'm even colder—but not for long.

His wolfish gaze slides down my body for what feels like a full minute, burning me from head to toe. When he reaches out, I'm grateful for the coolness left by the pool.

He latches on to wet fabric and tugs my dress over my head, making quick work of my panties and bra a second later.

Too much.

Too hot.

I'm...I'm going to flipping faint.

My skin crawls with goosebumps as I rock back, falling on the bed,

suddenly realizing I've never been this naked and vulnerable.

And this man devours me eyes first, his lip curled back in something like awe.

"Cole..." I whisper, licking my lips.

"Don't," he snaps off.

"Don't what?"

"Don't fucking move, beautiful. Just give me a minute."

Even with my blood warming to three hundred degrees, I do.

I sit there silently, trying not to go to pieces, while this man drinks me in with his gaze.

His hand drops down his massive thigh, his fingers gliding over the outline of his barely contained cock.

Staring, he pushes his waistband down, shoving his swimsuit to his knees.

I can't bring myself to look at what he's packing.

"Cole—"

"Eliza, quiet. Let me have my moment," he growls. "Go on. Look at me."

My eyelids flutter shut and I take a deep, slow breath before I open them again and—

Whoa.

Is the man part horse?

I haven't seen that many penises in my life and they've never done much for me over other parts and attitude, but *holy dick*.

He's girthy. That's the only word that makes sense—the only way to describe the length and thickness and lust pulsing in his hand.

Even in his own massive palm, his fingers barely close around it, his swollen head peeking out as he strokes his cock achingly slow.

"Fucking shit. If I knew what you had under that dress, I would've had you in the trees before Destiny found us. No lie," he rumbles, that monster dick throbbing in his hand.

My mouth falls open, but I'm too dumbstruck to speak.

After a few more intense pumps, he shoves his swimsuit off and leaves it on the floor. Then he's stepping forward, stopping between my legs, taking me by the wrist and helping me back into bed.

If I didn't just get the shock of my life from cock-zilla, I might appreciate how the Egyptian cotton duvet with a million stitches feels like a cloud.

"You're red. Are you warm enough yet?" he demands, pressing his forehead to mine, brushing my lips with his breath.

Can sex give you heatstroke? I wonder.

He pulls me closer, locking his arms around me, molding his lips to mine again and again until I'm a molten mess beneath him.

When I can bear to open my eyes, staring into his starlight-blue pools, I don't care about the heat.

I just nod. I *think* I do.

His lips find mine with a vicious smile.

The kiss comes longer and sweeter than before, even as his huge chest rises and falls, drawing breaths that seem rougher each time.

I'm not sure what I expected in his bed, but it's not the length or depth of this tender kiss, especially after how fast our clothes fell off.

Though I'm kinda glad the tenderness doesn't last.

His kiss makes me urgent, his fingers spooling my hair around them.

My nails dig at his back.

Cole matches my pace, biting back harder when I nip at him, rocking the ridge of his girthy cock against my clit until I'm moaning hotly in his mouth.

"Shit. *Shit*, Eliza, if that pussy gets as hot as your lips..."

I'm about to protest, to tease, to drag his mouth back to mine.

I'm not ready for the kiss to end, but he nibbles my earlobe, kissing down my jawline and then my throat.

His lips march over my clavicle, stopping in my cleavage.

He covers one breast with his hand, drawing rough circles over my nipple—right before his mouth claims the other one.

"Oh!"

I thrash against him, too wrecked for words.

He sucks nice and slow at first, his teeth forming a ring with just the right pressure. It's gentle and sweet, just like how the kiss started, and he only stops to lavish attention on my other breast.

For a second, I think I might come before his hand even slides between my legs—until it happens.

It's *incredible* how rough his hands are for a man who spends his days typing and signing papers. He traces the round nub, cautiously at first before I hear the knowing growl oozing out of him.

I gasp, but he doesn't linger.

His hand slides closer, skimming my thighs, tracing my opening.

"You're fucking ready, aren't you?" he whispers. "No need to answer. Your body's too honest."

I. Am. Gone.

The thousand searing sensations darting through my body keep my eyes from opening, but I'm able to whisper back, "Is that bad?"

His free hand combs my hair. "Fuck no. It's perfect. You want this as bad as I do. Just hold on to that passion so you can keep up."

His lips flick mine and he pulls away, leaving me alone. I hear him on the other side of the bed, rummaging around in a drawer, and then a metallic crinkle.

I barely see him glide the condom on his length before he's between my legs again, teeth bared as he sinks into me in one slow-burning push.

Crap.

Crap.

He's a human battering ram.

I'm shaking as he fills me, hands pressed against his back, beyond grateful he's taking his sweet time. If he'd gone any faster, I'm not sure I could take it.

I expect it to hurt with his size, but he's so gentle, even as the lust in his eyes makes dark, wild promises.

When I'm thoroughly stretched and he's in to the hilt, pulsing in my depths, he gives me a harsh look with hot, narrowed eyes.

"Arms around me, sweetheart. Hold the hell on," he urges.

"Yeah," I sigh roughly, my voice cracking, cupping his face with my hand in the last second of peace I'll know.

Then his hands slide under me, grabbing my hips and pulling me closer, fully engulfing every inch of him as he begins to *move*.

Thank God someone still has their wits.

Slow, punishing strokes rock me from the inside out.

His massive body moves over mine like a mountain.

I'm already on the edge, and we're barely a dozen strokes in before I feel myself imploding, clenching on his cock, my nails raking his skin.

"Cole, Cole—don't stop!"

And he doesn't.

His pace only quickens as I become frantic, and his mouth attacks mine, pushing a growl against my tongue as my vision blurs into white-hot stars.

Coming!

I didn't know orgasms like the kind Cole Lancaster delivers existed.

To even classify what Derek and the few boys I'd messed around with

before did to me as the same thing feels like a gross insult.

He turns me inside out, crashing through my O, slapping my body against the bed like the churning Pacific plowing the black lava rock on the shores.

I'm shuddering—and I can't flipping stop—even as I float down from the high with his tongue against mine.

He slows his strokes for a minute, giving me time, but the frenzied darkness in his eyes says he can't wait long.

My hand traces his jaw, worshipping his stubble, and I know I don't want him to.

"Cole, don't hold back. I want you to come inside me," I whisper, pushing my feet into the backs of his calves, spurring him on.

He doesn't need much encouragement.

That glint in his eyes brightens like blue torches, and soon I'm shocked, plunging up and down on the mattress like a storm pummeling my body.

He could light me on fire with how fast he goes.

He could burn me down right now, and make me fall faster and harder and helplessly.

When he stabs down one more time, anchoring so deep, every chorded muscle flexed like a drawn bow, I'm gone.

My vision blurs and I taste the guttural thunder rising from his throat as lightning erupts inside me.

Cole Lancaster comes like a force of nature, all raging heat in my depths, pouring himself out so hard his head snaps back in rapture.

I just wonder if I'll ever *come back* from this.

A shameless part of me already knows I don't want to.



WHEN IT'S OVER, we lay there, twined together and slick with sweat in our own private world of pillows and spent hearts.

Oh, crap. Crap to the nth power.

That really just happened.

I just fucked my boss.

And I already want to do it again—but I need to wrap my head around this first.

Something I can't do while he's so near, distracting me with his scent and

his rock-hard perfection and his storms for eyes that see right through me.

Everything about him mangles my senses.

“I should go,” I whisper, finding the will to stand on two sore legs and pulling the cover with me. I start scavenging my stuff from the floor—only to remember my clothes are still disgustingly wet.

He stands too—shamelessly comfortable in the nude—but with a body like that, why wouldn’t he be?

“You can’t put that dress back on. You’ll catch a damn cold walking to your room.” He picks up a large t-shirt lying on a chaise in the corner and throws it at me. “Here, give it back to me later.”

It’s crazy how hard it is to fight the instinct to raise his shirt to my nose and inhale.

He walks across the room, picking up a thick brown robe hanging from the back of his bathroom door. “You want a fresh robe?”

I smile. “Because that looks less suspicious than just wearing your shirt?”

Grumbling, he pokes his head into his living room of a walk-in closet, scanning around for anything else.

I pull his shirt over me and start for the door, but he grabs my waist and stops me.

“Man, you’re making it hard to leave.”

“Too bad,” he throws back, kissing my neck, running his tongue up my throat.

Giddy, I look up at him, playfully pushing him away.

His mouth darts against mine for good measure. “One more before you’re gone. If people wouldn’t talk, fuck, I’d keep you here for breakfast.”

God. How many times can he ruin me in one night?

I feel like champagne, shaken and fizzy and light. Ready to foam over the edge if I don’t get some space to start dissipating this crazy energy.

But then he says, “I promise this isn’t the end. In case you wondered.”

“No,” I lie, his eyes searching mine.

“Next time, I’ll take longer undressing you. Just didn’t want you freezing.”

“There’s going to be a next time?” I ask, steeling myself.

“Damn right,” he says with a grin, and then his face straightens. “Right?”

Oh, crap. Is Cole Lancaster nervous?

This time, I answer him with a kiss.

My tongue delves in his mouth, lingering, tracing his, wishing next time

was *right freaking now*.

But I'm glad he urges me away gently, opening the door, his hand pressed to the small of my back as he shepherds me out of the room.

I step into another world made of rainbow emotions, wearing only his t-shirt and a bright confidence I've never felt before.

COFFEE FOR YOUR HEAD (COLE)



I, Cole Lancaster, am a royal asshole.
I freely admit it.

I kissed Eliza and avoided her for days rather than talking about it like a normal human being.

Then, instead of admitting I lost my head and have no idea what it means, I dragged her into my bed.

I fucked her without shame or mercy or common sense—and I enjoyed every scalding second of it.

Now, there's a whole hell of a lot more to talk about.

The brain meltdown could rival Chernobyl, and I still don't want to talk.

I want to ravage her again, tangle her around me, whisper filthy promises, and watch her stare at me with fuck-me eyes I don't deserve.

Of course, she just has to be a hellcat in the sheets.

So shy at first, and then wild enough to need taming.

She's delicate and needy and so goddamned good for me she's bad. Like any helpless addict, I'm already jonesing for another hit, and ready to throw the consequences to the wind.

"Cole, you with me? Does that sound good?" Troy reaches across the table with a dimpled grin and flicks me between the eyes.

"Ah, fuck you," I mutter, swatting his hand away.

He laughs like it's the funniest thing he's ever done.

"Do that again, and you're fired," I snap.

"Had to get your attention somehow. It worked, didn't it?" He settles back in his seat with an assessing glance. "So, the price lock for the

Winthrope proposal. You sure you're good with decoupling from fair market value for those beans?"

"Yeah. It's only for five years." It takes too long to remember Brock Winthrope wanting a price guarantee on the peaberry beans being supplied to his resorts.

I need to get my shit together.

Too many people's futures are on the line for errors, and errors are all too likely when I'm painfully consumed by Eliza.

"You seem distracted. Everything okay?" Troy studies my face.

I can't help but smile. I'm better than I've felt in years.

"Yeah. I'm good, and so is Dess."

"You look different. Almost like a man who's waking up with a reason to smile again—or is it waking up with someone?" he asks excitedly.

"None of your business," I bite off.

"Is it Miss E-lectric?"

His moronic nickname makes me cringe, even if I can't deny the current Eliza jolts through my soul.

Plus, I've known this man since I was nineteen. He doesn't give up easily.

"Not appropriate. How many times do I have to tell you, Troy? She works for me. For *us*. Lay off of her and my damn sex life while you're at it."

He rolls his eyes, throwing his hands up in the air.

"Somebody's touchy." He lowers his voice. "And somebody definitely got laid."

Christ.

My look could cut him open from his balls to his chin.

Before I can lay into him again, the door to my library office swings open.

"Daddy, there's a bunch of turtles up the beach! Want to check them out?" Destiny stands there with a golden tan, her coral-pink shades already pulled over her eyes.

There's my excuse to shut Troy down. I stand.

"Yeah, baby girl." *And then we can do anything you want because you just saved my ass.*

I go to meet her at the door.

"I'll tell my people we're on for the price lock then," Troy calls after me. "Oh yeah, and nice save, Lancaster."

“What’s he mean?” Destiny asks, giving me a puzzled look.

“Who knows. Your Uncle Troy isn’t right in the head,” I mutter.

“Dad, that’s mean!” She smacks my arm. “But let’s see if Eliza wants to come...”

Oh, fuck.

Just hearing her name and knowing she might show up with too much skin hanging out makes my cock twitch.

Oh, fuck, *no*.

No, I can’t be doing this.

“She’s probably busy,” I warn. And I’m still not sure what this is, Eliza teaching my daughter to enjoy the ocean while I teach Eliza how to surf waves of ecstasy she never imagined.

“We should at least ask,” Dess says insistently.

I shrug, holding in a huge sigh.

If I’m already in hell, I’d might as well get comfortable with the heat.

“I suppose we could—hey!”

I don’t even finish the sentence before Destiny takes off, running around the house and looking for Eliza. I’m equally relieved and disappointed when she doesn’t find her.

“Dess, I have a meeting at three o’clock. If you want to go see these turtles, we’d better go now, or we won’t be able to.”

“Okay!” She leads the way down to the beach, bounding out the back door.

Halfway to the supposed turtle nest, I pass the spot where Eliza pulled that ridiculous little pipe from her pocket and brewed coffee on the sand. The same place where we first kissed.

Damn, she makes me come alive in such dangerous ways.

“Dad, did you hear me?” Destiny asks.

“What?”

“Can we get a smoothie? I’m so thirsty. There’s a stand up there.”

I look up and see a couple beach bums with a makeshift smoothie and acai bowl stand.

“Sure. It would be refreshing,” I say.

Dammit. I’ve turned into a sap.

A few minutes later with a banana-coconut drink in hand that I really wish had rum, we find the heap of green sea turtles up the beach. They’ve already been roped off by the authorities to keep them safe from dumbass

tourists. Destiny wades into the water past the ropes, hoping for a closer look.

“Give them their space, Dess. They’re a protected species!” I call.

She whips around with a mortified look.

“Um, yeah, I know. Since 1978, Dad, I looked it up. Their protection is almost as old as you, Boomer.”

“I’m *not* old enough to be a Boomer, Zoomer brat,” I grind out.

What if she’s serious about this marine biology thing?

Am I really happy with a lifetime ahead of my holier-than-thou daughter jamming her wisdom up my ass?

I find a big piece of driftwood on the beach and sit, holding her smoothie while I gulp down mine until the paper straw collapses.

Protected species or not, the lazy turtles have a mind of their own. One of them waddles into the water and swims up to her like a big dog with flippers, poking its head above the surface as soon as Dess surfaces.

They’re almost face-to-face and she bursts out laughing before the beast ducks down again and swims off.

“Dad, did you *see* that?” She turns to look at me with a smile that’s pure joy.

I smile back, watching her hold her hands up to the evening sun like she’s giving thanks to the universe.

In a single moment, she’s a young woman and a kid again all at once, bursting with wonder. My kind, excitable, happy daughter, bobbing in the water without a hint of the tragedy that unfolded on this beach.

I give her a thumbs-up, refusing to let my mind crawl back there.

If only I had my turtles.

If only I had somewhere else to go besides Eliza and the filthy ways I want to defile her pretty little face. She struggled so sweetly just to fit me—and not nearly long enough.

I want to fuck her into the next century a thousand different ways.

I want her body molded to my cock, ruined for anyone else.

I want to take every hole, bend her over, and press her face deep into the mattress.

I want her to bite the bed as she screams my fucking—

“I *love* these guys. I’m gonna miss them so much.” Destiny appears at my side, the smoothie I was holding already in her hand. She sucks her drink down loudly.

Goddamn.

Where is my mind? Is it ever coming back?

I glance at her. “Yes, I think we’ve established your love for everything that swims.”

“Oh, Dad. Definitely not everything. Weren’t you listening the other day when Uncle Troy tried to tell me about sea worms? I mean, they’re interesting, but *yuck*. No parasites for me.”

“Got it. We’ll find you a program that only lets you work with cute animals then. I’m sure it’ll be a breeze.”

Her jaw drops at my sarcasm and she rolls her eyes.

Fine. I had that coming.

I’ve got to do some Googling and find out what the career path is for marine biologists. Damn, why couldn’t she just take over Wired Cup? This would be much easier.

At least I manage to avoid Eliza and the impending hell-discussion about *feelings* or whatever the fuck for the rest of the evening as I sign off from my last meeting with finance back in Seattle.

If only I were just as happy to avoid her all night too.

By the following evening, it’s been a day and too damn long since I saw her.

She’s not in her lab when I go searching, so I look around outside. On the other side of the house, a few yards away, I see smoke curling up in the distance.

I think it’s the old picnic area with its fire pit and laid stones where my grandparents would host luaus and barbecues ages ago.

Something tells me to follow it.

My nostrils tingle as I close in and see a small, familiar figure with curves that make my body knot.

She’s sitting in front of the fire pit, brewing coffee over an open flame in a small pot balanced over it.

Out here, we’re alone, surrounded by lush vegetation and a makeshift wall on one side. I sit down beside her.

“You fired up the old fire pit for brewing?” I ask.

“Why struggle with a lab grill when I can do better out here? This is a real campfire, a lot like what Wyatt used to brew the original stuff.”

“Wyatt?”

“The guy who gave me the original idea back when he was homeless. The latest flavor is mine, but he was a huge help with the original technique,” she

explains. “I tried to see if he wanted to help refine it before I started working for you, actually, but he’s busy with his girlfriend and a real job and all...”

My jaw relaxes when I hear the word girlfriend.

Fuck. I hadn’t even realized I’d gone full jealous Neanderthal.

My growl is still neolithic when I reach for her, pulling her into my lap with a startled squeal. “You spend too much time on your feet. I have a better idea. It’s after nine, Eliza. Why not end your day at a decent hour?”

She turns, devastating me with this moonlit smile that turns her eyes into amber gems.

“Because, Lump. We’re both horrible perfectionists.”

I smile. “I thought it was pretty close to solid? Don’t tell me any of the staff gave you a bad review at the tasting?” I run my finger around the nape of her neck.

“No, but some of the comments were really helpful for making tweaks. Especially from the household staff—they know what fresh Kona coffee should taste like when they’re getting it every day from the farm.” She relaxes against my chest. “Also, I know *you* think my stuff is perfect, but you’re biased.”

“Bull. You were talented long before you bewitched me,” I growl.

She giggles.

“Is your boss really such a hardass tyrant that you’re afraid to quit working before ten at night?”

“My boss is a big softie. He doesn’t scare me—not much—I just like doing things right,” she whispers, tracing my jaw with her finger.

“A brat like you doesn’t startle easy. One of your best qualities. Then again, so is this.” I cup her face, relishing her softness before I bring it home.

I lean down, kissing her until her moan flutters against my mouth, all teeth and tongue and seething breath.

“Oh!” She pulls away from me and gasps. “Wait. Let me get this fire out.”

“I’ll do it. You have another fire to tend to,” I say, unbuckling my belt.

She blushes. Her eyes are already glued to the angry ridge in my pants.

Fuck, everything about this woman is damn right adorable.

Once the fire is extinguished, she gets up, ready to go to my room.

I lead her back to our spot with wonder in her eyes.

“Why take you inside when I can have you under the stars?” I whisper. “You’ve brought a perfectly good blanket.”

She bites her lip and doesn't protest as I throw it over the grass next to the rocks.

Then, with one last lingering feral look, it's fucking *on*.

I lean over her, tearing off her dress, stamping my hungry mouth down her bare flesh until her leg curls around my waist. I trail kisses down her body until I'm on my knees, stopping over her panties to inhale her deeply.

Her scent fucking unglues me.

My fingers barely have the patience to shove her panties aside before my mouth is on her, loving how she gasps. Her knees give instantly and I fold my arm around her ass, holding her up against my shoulder as I eat my fill.

"Cole! Holy shit—"

I'm glad that my tongue on her clit chokes her off. There's nothing remotely *holy* about what I'm doing to her pussy, growling as I push my face into her.

I make her ride my beard, dragging its roughness against her inner thighs each time I breathe before my tongue plunges into her again.

I could tongue-fuck Eliza Angelo morning, noon, and night.

Her taste, her cream, the way she tenses as my mouth sweeps over her drives me to the brink of insanity.

Maybe that's why I'm so urgent to push her over the edge, too far gone to stretch this out as much as I'd like.

I want her to come for me, dammit, to paint my fucking face with the force and the glory of her fireworks.

So when she rasps "Cole!" I grab her ass hard, digging my fingers in, holding her up like a willing prisoner as I drag her nub between my teeth and lash her with my tongue.

Her hand finds my shoulders and her fingers dig in—hard enough to bruise.

I need it, honestly.

I need the hint of pain because it's the only thing that keeps me from shooting off in my pants, my cock straining against the fabric when her legs shake frantically and her head tosses back.

She screams herself hoarse into the night.

Then it's all Eliza coming real sweet for me, her pussy convulsing on my face, leaving me drenched from nose to chin.

I am this desperate, damned thing, drinking every bit of her as she comes apart, as she gives up the first orgasm of many I promise to thief out of her

tonight.

When she's coming down from her high in my arms and I'm breathing again, I hold her, stroking her soft mahogany hair while the breeze licks our slick skin.

"Cole. God. I'm—that was—"

I hold a finger to her lips, loving how she stutters.

"A favor. Now here's your chance to return it," I say, falling down on the blanket, a hard-on like steel still trying to rip through my pants.

Her shocked look turns to glee when her eyes rake over me.

I can't believe how much I enjoy the feeling of her hands opening my pants, parting them, releasing me.

She gives my dick a few rough strokes with her eyes gleaming before I mutter one word.

"Suck," I order, lacing my fingers through her hair as she leans over me.

It's goddamned glorious watching her figure out how to take me.

She doesn't have it easy, but she tries, slowly fitting my swollen head in her mouth.

I never even push her head down, but she still gags.

Probably ten times before she's able to work her way even a third down my shaft, her eyes glowing with determination.

And it's the way she looks at me with my cock in her mouth that makes my balls pull up, the come inside them burning me from the inside out.

I don't know how I keep it together with her tongue swiping under my crown, her soft lips pulling at my flesh, her hair hanging wildly around her face in messy tufts.

She'll still look like a woman who's been freshly fucked for sure, regardless of whether I throw my load down her throat.

A couple minutes in, and my throat becomes sandpaper.

My hands dig at the blanket, the ground.

I'm shaking with a low murmur trapped in my throat as she finds her rhythm, her little hand caressing my balls as she sucks.

"Eliza, goddammit," I rumble, fisting her hair. "No."

I jerk her head back just when I'm on the brink.

Her wet pussy won't leave my head, and I'm ravenous to fill her up, as much as a sinister part of me also wants to leave ropes hanging off her face.

She looks at me, eyes asking if she's done something wrong.

I reassure her with a deep, growling kiss before I flip her over, making

my intentions clear.

I push my boxers down—remembering to rummage around in my pocket for a condom at the last second.

Fuck.

I'm so far gone I almost pushed inside her raw, and if I had, I would have spilled every drop of come in her womb.

It's like she knows it too. She moans as I roll the rubber on and bury myself inside her, ass up and pussy tight and ready.

Fuck the moon and stars and sea breezes and torch light. This might be the most romantic place on Earth, but for us, it's debauchery central.

I can't bring myself to fuck her slow, knowing I won't last long.

I drive in, making her lush ass ripple with every impact, loving how she meets every punishing thrust.

We move together.

Melt together.

Rut together.

We cling to each other as we fight for breath, her little hands falling into mine as she reaches over her head.

I hold her tight as I drive into her, our breath drumming into the night as the pleasure intensifies.

Soon, she butchers my name with a shriek that announces her orgasm.

Ecstasy picks me up and slams me back into myself as her pussy tightens around my cock, throbbing and squeezing, sucking me off.

My spine goes electric.

White-hot fire hits my brain, and then I'm just one long growl, spilling myself inside her, both of us seeing stars that belong to something far darker than the night.

We don't even speak when we're sane enough to stand again.

I just wrap her in the blanket and fix my clothes, carrying her to my room.

There, we pick up right where we left off.

We don't even stop for dinner, barely breaking for water to replenish the sweat soaked into the sheets. I've fucked her three times—every which way from Sunday—before I take the notion to pull her into a cool, crisp shower and call in a late-night food order to the kitchen.

I never showered with Aster. She was so private, always pushing me away when I offered.

With Eliza, it feels too natural, the way we take turns washing each other

off between kissing and wandering hands. And when we're finally clean, we have to get dirty again, my hands guiding hers to the wall and my lips against her ear.

"Destiny lied. There's no badger in you. You're all fucking honey," I snarl. "You, Eliza, are becoming my fucking addiction."

She replies with a loud moan, and I show her just how dependent I am, pounding her into the wall.

I wish we could spend an entire week like this, locked in the room naked. One long conversation spoken in shrill whimpers and guttural groans.

But she leaves around sunup, before there's a chance to truly discuss anything.

This pattern continues for a few more days—carefully avoiding her during work hours so I don't have to talk about exactly what the hell it is we're doing at night.

I'm worried my addiction might be literal. It hurts to go twenty-four hours without her.

Then one morning, I wake up to the hot sun pouring through the window, painting Eliza in a warm glow. She's still nestled in the covers with my arms around her.

She stayed.

More than that, I realize how much jealousy pulses through my blood, how I don't want her to be anywhere else.

I pull her closer, cradle her to my chest, and plant a kiss on her head.

This is the most taboo kind of ecstasy.

Not just because she's an employee.

My wife—the only other woman I've ever shared this bed with—died within walking distance of here.

Having another woman here should be the worst kind of mind fuck.

Should be, but it's not.

Why does it feel so perfect, fucking her ever-loving brains out in this godforsaken place?

Is Kona turning my wheel of fate again?

I wonder.

Is there any chance Eliza Angelo could be my new beginning, rather than another heart-ripping disaster?



HOURS LATER, I find Eliza at her fire pit, diligently working with no trace of the sex hair I left last night.

“Aren’t you suffocating out here? It’s noon and there’s not a cloud in the sky,” I say, wiping sweat from my brow.

She shrugs. “I mean, yeah, it’s hot, but I need to get this right. Eighteen years in San Diego got me pretty used to the sun.”

“How many drinks do you have ready with the peaberry brew? Including espresso.”

She thinks for a second. “Five.”

“Good. Brock Winthrop is flying in with his team tomorrow for a personal tasting. I’ll need your best batch ready.”

She nods but her face goes pale with panic.

“Don’t tell me you’re nervous? Eliza, your drinks are impeccable, and I’ll do most of the talking. You just work your magic. Present your ambrosia, and if someone has a question, answer it. Otherwise, you’ll just be standing by for your accolades.”

She manages a weak smile.

“I hope it goes that well. This is a high-end crowd and it has to blow their hair back.” She sighs. “I should probably kill the fire and start working on answers for question time. I know the presentation matters just as much as the drinks.”

“How long do you need to brew it in the morning?” I sit down beside her.

“A few hours for a big batch, if you want to showcase everything.” She looks at me with the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen. “Normally, I’d be terrified. I probably wouldn’t sleep all night. But I have to say, the past ten days have been pretty incredible.”

“No argument here.” I push a strand of loose brown hair out of her eyes. “Glad you’ve enjoyed it as much as I have. Without you, this trip would’ve been a lot less enlightening...”

Before she can ask what that means, I bring my lips to hers in a feverish kiss.

She meets me with the same passion and urgency she always does.

This is the storm I’ll miss if Seattle means different weather. How the fuck can I live without her energy, her brightness, her sugar and spice and so much life?

We spend the next hour brewing another test batch, talking and kissing.

“I’ll miss the beach when we’re gone. Same goes for the scenery,” she

says.

The way her eyes sweep over me says she isn't just talking about the unique view.

"You visit home, don't you?"

"It's not the same. I don't even know if I'll ever be on this island again. I should spend more time in San Diego, though. It's been a couple years..."

My heart slams against my chest at the thought of this hellion being anywhere I'm not.

"You're not going to do something stupid like leave Seattle, are you?" I whisper.

"Maybe. Maybe not." She gives me a coy smile.

It's jarring how my cock hardens jealously while my fist pulses at my side.

The peaberry coffee aroma is pervasive. Normally I'd welcome it, but I hate how it drowns out her scent.

Eliza ladles a steaming black liquid into a cup, blows on it for a few seconds, and sips it slowly. "Hmm. I think I like it."

She hands it to me then.

I take a small whiff and toss the drink back with a satisfied grunt.

"Tastes like Kona. All the Hawaiian islands, actually. What is it?"

"Peaberry beans with a dab of toasted coconut and salt."

"Salt? What made you think of adding salt? Your father's prank?"

She looks down and smiles shyly.

"Out here, you always taste the salt in the air when the trade winds blow just right. This might be the best week and a half of my life. I thought about how I'd remember it in a drink once I'm home. If I could put Hawaii in a cup, what would that taste like? And three distinct flavors came to mind. Salt water, coconut, and coffee..."

I stare at her, mystified.

"It's so rare to find someone with a mind just as fucking incredible as their body," I say.

Her face heats with that redness I've come to love.

"Not sure about that. But I need to get this fire out so I can get started on the boring stuff for tomorrow—uh, no offense." She stands.

I help her extinguish the fire.

She passes me, heading inside.

I catch her arm and she meets my eyes.

“I’ll see you before tomorrow, right?”

Her face lights up and she nods, leaning in for a kiss I’m too happy to oblige.

But as I release her reluctantly so she can walk on ahead of me for appearances, I know how fucking deep I’m digging my hole.

It’s only a matter of time before someone sees us together.

Hell, it wouldn’t take much for Destiny to spot us and start asking questions.

Then my life goes up in a puff of doubts and lies that can’t possibly fit together.

Then I remember how stupidly reckless I am.



THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up at five to a blaring Taylor Swift song.

Eliza is dressed and moving to the door, her hair shining and freshly brushed.

“Sneaking out on me again?” I say, bolting up.

She turns and grins at me. I wait with my arms crossed while she prances back to the bed, leans over it, and kisses me passionately.

“You’re not that lucky, lunk. Today’s the big day and I have four drinks to prep for the big meeting,” she says.

“Otherwise, we’d be waking up together in an hour?”

Her smile shouts *yes*.

I pull her face back down for another devilish kiss.

“Should I expect to wake up to Taylor Swift every damn time your alarm goes off?”

She laughs, smacking my shoulder playfully.

“Any chance I can convert you to Metallica—or at least Green Day?” I try again.

“None. And unless you want to look bad in front of your billionaire buddy, I’d better get these drinks—and myself—ready.”

“You’re dedicated. I like it.”

“See ya soon.” Eliza slips out of my room.

Once I’m up, showered, and dressed, I find Destiny lounging around at the massive dining table on the second floor that overlooks a dreamy sunrise

stolen from a Monet painting.

“Hey, I know my work bores you to tears, but I need you to come to a meeting with me today.”

“Why?” she asks, tilting her head like I just asked for her wisdom teeth.

“It’s with Brock Winthrope, and it’s an important negotiation,” I tell her.

“Oh.” She plunks her juice glass down. “He’s really hot.”

“And far too old for you,” I growl.

“Just sayin’. Lighten up, Daddykins.”

“Since he has an Instagram and I can barely use it, will you come?”

“Yeah. But are you gonna let me talk?”

“You’re fifteen. I’m not sure you’re ready to hold your own in meetings yet. However, negotiating skills will always serve you well. Even if you do most of your talking with sea lions.”

“What-ever. You just can’t use Instagram and your big client man has his own hashtag. He’s got like, whole fan accounts that post pictures of him in his suit with messy hair... Doesn’t he run hotels or something?”

I almost facepalm. “I see his social media presence serves his brand well. Regardless, I’d like you to come. Preferably without drooling at his ‘messy hair.’”

“Dad, I’m not a prop. If you just want me to stand in the background, what’s the point?”

“You’re not a prop. You’re my daughter. This company will still be yours one day, whether you’re running it or leaving it to your managers while you write a book on talking to whales. You have a vested interest in its success and your continuing education.”

She huffs the purest teenage indignation I’ve ever heard.

“Start acting the part,” I say. “By the time I was your age, I’d spent three summers in the office. I never even had time for movies.”

I turn away when I realize how fucked up my youth sounds.

She puts down her phone with another huff and stares at me like I’m the unreasonable one.

“I’ve been to the office every summer, too. Checkmate,” she says matter-of-factly.

“Except I was actually *working*.”

“...it still counts. God, Dad.”

“You’re coming to the damn meeting.”

“I’m talking then if Mr. Brock has a question.”

“If he has a question for you,” I grind out.

“Uh, okay. By the way, your crusty vibe died in like 1849.”

“If he asks you to weigh in on the coffee, you can give the keynote speech,” I snarl. It’s weird how much you can love your own blood when they also piss you off at every turn. “Any chance you brought something professional to wear?”

“Yep! Because I planned on making a board presentation for a gazillion dollars.” She rolls her eyes. “Can I wear my bikini? That’s formal, right? I mean, it’s black.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, hoping for a full dose of that peaberry brew and not one of those little tasting cups. I’ll need it to chase back this headache.

Still, after I lunge and tickle her until she laughs, I hug her for a solid minute.

My little smartass is growing up.

TASTE TEST (ELIZA)



Later that day, everyone piles into the impressive-looking conference room with Brock and his team seated at the long table.

The moment of truth has arrived.

It's a stark contrast between the two sides.

Besides Destiny and I, everyone from Wired Cup is pushing forty, if not older.

Brock Winthrop himself is closer to my age than Cole's—and probably the oldest person on his team of hawk-eyed, stylishly dressed twenty-somethings.

Cole insisted on looking sharp, and now I see why.

Even Destiny shows up in a nice blouse and skirt that makes her look ten years older.

Brock wears a light blue suit, but the rest of his people are more casual. There's a woman in a three-quarter sleeve tee and a mini skirt, and a guy in a blue-and-gold Versace button-down shirt.

Mini Skirt takes one look at us and practically sneers. "Mr. Winthrop, this presentation feels...dated. Are you sure this stuff is suitable for the younger crowd?"

Destiny steps in front of me—and before I can stop her—clears her throat so loudly their heads turn to face her.

"Mr. Winthrop, hi. Can I ask you a question? How many of your under-thirty guests would *kill* for coffee? The kind they can't get anywhere else." Destiny smiles.

I can't help but smile.

The kid's seriously brave. There's no way I would've had the courage to challenge a billionaire at fifteen.

"Our guests are a mixed demographic," Winthrop says with some amusement in his eyes. "We get some honeymooners and young people with their parents. A lot of business guests come in the winter months. Some are under thirty, and a lot of them aren't."

"Is hip really what you're after, though? From your Insta, I kind of thought you went for sophisticated." Destiny holds his gaze.

"Fair observation. I do." He nods firmly.

Mini Skirt scowls at Dess and slouches in her chair.

Brock's whole team files in then and sits across from us.

"How many drinks are you slinging today?" he asks.

"Four," I say with a smile. "Do you want to start with espresso or the drip brew?"

"The drip. If I didn't have to taste it, I'd ask for an IV."

I laugh politely. It's nice to see a guy even richer than Cole with a sense of humor, even if his jokes seem dumb.

"Wonderful. We'll start with the Kona campfire basic brew then. It's actually the perfect starting point since this is the original inspiration for today's espresso drinks." Neat rows of white tasting cups sit in front of each of us. I wait for the staff to fill each one before I pick up my white cup labeled "K" and hold it up like a precious chalice.

"If you all want to grab a 'K' cup, that's the Kona campfire brew." I bring it to my mouth and sip anxiously. My tongue doesn't work and I don't taste much while I wait for them.

Brock lifts his cup, turning it over slowly in his fingers. He takes a small sniff and then throws it back in one gulp.

His face goes blank...and thoughtful? *I hope.*

Does that mean he likes it?

Oof. If he doesn't, he'll hate everything.

My stomach knots. I'm not used to people hating my stuff, and I can't afford to blow it with this crowd.

Mini Skirt takes a small sip and sets the cup down. Her face screws up as she says, "Well. It's okay. A little sweet."

Big yikes.

Also, it's peaberry coffee. That's the trademark flavor profile.

What the hell was she expecting?

But the room goes quiet as Brock clears his throat.

“It’s surprisingly delicate—at the same time, the flavor couldn’t be more robust. I’m fucking impressed.” My heart soars, but he holds up a finger. “However, bear in mind I have to please *everyone* at my resorts. That’s why I travel with a team, and today I’ve brought two of my finest people, my head chef from Lanai and a sommelier with twenty years refining her palate.”

Oh, God.

While a professional wine taster doesn’t know coffee, they have sensory skills that can rival a bloodhound. If there’s anything off with my drinks, they’ll find it.

For now, the rest of the team compliments the coffee while the golden duo step forward.

Cole has been lingering near the back after greeting Winthrope.

Now, he stands up and comes close to me, his presence so thick and warming it’s like I can feel him holding me even when he can’t do it openly.

It feels like an eternity as the chef and professional taster do three rounds of tastings, clearing their mouths with water each time.

“It gets a solid A from me, chief,” the chef says.

Brock nods happily and all eyes turn to the sommelier, a thin birdlike woman with glasses that seem too big for her face. She holds up her cup, peering through it, her lips pursed in an unreadable line.

“It’s a complex beverage. Remarkably faithful to the flavors of Kona while also standing on its own. While it may not pair with everything—not without checking every item on the menu, at least—I think, Mr. Winthrope, that you have an acceptable headline coffee.”

Acceptable?

Oh, my God.

Coming from her, it feels like having a gold medal hung around my neck.

I almost can’t believe that Mini Skirt’s “It’s okay,” is the worst criticism the coffee gets.

When it’s all over, after showing off the special espresso drinks, I exhale so long I’m light-headed and floating.

I did it.

Brock Winthrope wants to sign a contract today thanks to my work.

I turn to Cole, grinning, and absentmindedly throw my arms around him. He swings an arm around me, leans in close like he’s about to kiss me, and freezes.

“Eliza,” he whispers hoarsely.

Oh, crapsticks.

What was I thinking?

We’re in a meeting surrounded by co-workers and clients. Not his bedroom. Not the beach.

I wince at how easy it is to slip and fall so effortlessly into lust with him that my brain exits my body.

“Oh, sorry.” My voice is louder than I intend as I pull away. “I’m just so happy for you. Congratulations.”

Cole nods, watching me carefully.

I tense, wondering if my impulsive little hug blew our cover...

Did anyone else notice? My eyes scan the room nervously.

Destiny is on the other side of me, within arm’s reach and still glued to her phone, thank God.

Brock Winthrope crosses the room with a bright smile in his eyes for both of us. “A word of advice, Lancaster. Keep her employed at all costs. Beauty, brains, and art doesn’t grow on trees.”

...that advice doesn’t sound bad.

“Relax. I have no intention of letting her get away,” Cole says.

I let out a tiny sigh of relief I hope no one else hears.

“I have a contract ready with all the terms previously discussed.” Kate pulls two thick packets of paper out of a black binder. She passes one to Cole and the other to Winthrope, who immediately starts reading it.

Soon, people start filing away from the table as I begin to understand less and less of what Cole and Brock are saying in their legalese.

“It’s naptime,” Destiny whispers with a disgusted smirk.

I can’t disagree.

“I saw someone bringing in a dessert tower earlier. I think there were macaroons,” I whisper back.

Destiny laughs and we start scanning the room together.

“Sweet. Let’s go find some cookies,” she says.

We gravitate toward a table at the back where a decadent spread of Hawaiian snacks and desserts are laid out. We each grab a handful of bite-size pastries. I’m happy to get my hands on everything coconut.

“Let’s get out of here. No sense in wasting more of this beautiful day.” She leads me to another balcony I didn’t even know existed.

Yeah, I’m starting to think I’ll never fathom the sheer size of this house.

She walks up to the thick wooden railing and leans against it, her dirty-blond hair rippling in the breeze.

“Gorgeous spot,” I say. “But I don’t think there’s a single ugly one here.”

“There is.” The way she says it surprises me. Her voice drops. “I kind of dreaded coming here, Eliza, but it’s been fun. Thanks for making this trip so easy. Honestly, I’m not sure I would have gotten through it smiling without you.” Destiny pops a cookie into her mouth and chews harshly.

I try not to stare, wondering where this is coming from.

What’s she talking about?

Hawaii hardly seems like some bitter ordeal to grind through. But I’ve clearly touched an emotional nerve.

She whips her head around, pretending she’s stuffing another cookie in her mouth, but she isn’t fast enough.

I notice the hot tear that rolls down her cheek.

“Hon, forgive me, but I’m not sure what you mean,” I say gently, moving closer.

“It’s just...it’s so gorgeous here, but we haven’t been since I was a kid. I just didn’t think I could ever be happy here again. Not after...” She pauses. “After my mom washed up on the beach...this place felt like *poison*.”

I freeze. Turn. Stare at her.

“What?” It comes out in a stunned whisper.

She sniffs hard, still not looking at me.

“I actually thought I was allergic to warm beaches for a long time, Eliza. When Dad took me to Asia, my throat closed up. I couldn’t breathe. Some kind of anxiety or panic attack. We spent like the whole time in the hotel because just walking by a beach upset me that much.”

I can’t decide if my heart skips or breaks for her.

“You poor thing,” I whisper, laying a soft hand on her back. “I’m so sorry, Destiny. I didn’t know what happened to your mother.”

She’s ugly crying now, wiping red eyes with her shaking hand.

“I-it’s fine. The point is, I smiled. I laughed. Every day I’ve been here. I even got on a boat and surfed and swam with turtles... I couldn’t have done any of that without you. Oh, and I was worried about Dad, too, but he looked so happy with...with you.”

“Well, he’s got a lot to smile about considering he’s signing a contract for the world’s most expensive coffee,” I say carefully, still feeling a little shell-shocked.

Wow. So, this is the big tragedy everyone keeps tiptoeing around.

No wonder she's been so busted up.

"You know what, new rule. Nobody gets to be sad in Kona. Not if you want to avoid the eight-armed hug."

"Eight-armed what?" she echoes.

I throw my arms around her and pull her into a bear hug, wrestling her around until she laughs. "I octo-hug you like I have eight arms."

"Hey! Not fair," she whispers, but I'm glad she's smiling now.

"So your parents—your family, I mean—all stayed here when you were young?" I venture.

"Yeah. This was a messed up place for us until this trip," she says, her face dropping again. "Mom died here and Dad...he just completely changed."

Sadness pierces my heart.

A terrible thought invades my head.

Has Cole been making love to me? Or a memory?

Am I a surrogate for his dead wife?

Bile churns in my gut so violently I almost gag.

Destiny moves away from me, and that's when I notice a golden turtle hanging around her neck, glittering in the sunlight.

"Whoa. New necklace?"

She looks down, pinching the turtle between her thumb and forefinger. "Oh I—I found it in Mom's old room..."

Her mom had her own room? *Has* her own room?

Like some kind of memorial or shrine to her?

I wonder.

I also wonder if the late Mrs. Lancaster slept in a separate room from her mister? And if so, why?

"She still has a room in the house?" I ask neutrally.

"Yeah. She had an artistic side, and I guess she liked to paint there. Kalani—one of the older housekeepers—she said my mother was a great painter. And she loved the lighting in that room best every time she was here."

So, she didn't have her own room-room then.

She had a studio.

And apparently it's still there, filled with her belongings, a shrine to someone they clearly can't forget...

I don't even know what I'm supposed to feel.

Probably not this weird mix of sadness and worry and self-doubt foaming up inside me.

“The staff kept everything the same since we left. I finally worked up the courage to go in there this morning. The necklace was just sitting on her dresser with a few other things. Maybe I should’ve left it, but...it’s a turtle and it’s so pretty. I thought somebody should wear it rather than leaving it sealed up like a museum piece.”

“Good call, Dess. It’s stunning.” I reach out, gently fingering the necklace, smiling at the intricate detail etched in gold. “It feels like a nice way to remember Hawaii.”

To remember *her*, too, I think, but I feel too weird to say it.

When a man comes up behind us a second later, I jump.

“Too much caffeine? Don’t tell me—you have to taste everything personally before the big meeting, huh?” Troy Clement belts out a messy laugh and grins. “Way to go, Miss E-lectric. Your campfire coffee sealed the deal.”

It’s hard to smile back when I barely care.

Right now, I just want to get as far away from this place as possible.

“Um, yeah. Thank you.”

He’s one big walking smile—until his gaze falls on Destiny’s necklace. Not that he could miss the way it sparkles every time it catches the sun.

“Holy shi—is that—your mom’s old necklace?” For the faintest second, his eyes are massive and shining before he slips back into his usual smug, friendly look. “Wow. She loved that one, Dessy. It’s gold and handcrafted. Your old man bought it for her on their last trip here. I’m surprised she wasn’t wearing it when—well, say no more. My bad.”

He coughs awkwardly and turns.

That makes two of us. I’m reeling.

It was a gift from Cole?

Didn’t he say it was an arranged marriage of sorts? That he never cared that deeply about her?

But if he was still giving her gifts up until the end, he loved her.

The evidence of that love—however misguided or difficult or pointless—is hanging around Destiny’s neck, scattering the island sun.

Never mind the bigger pile of evidence I haven’t seen. The closed-off, secret memorial to a woman a sick part of me wants to barge into and explore.

I feel like this is Dakota's territory. She's a Poe, naturally at ease with whatever moody love and loss and angst is swirling around us.

Even my questions have questions.

What did she look like? Did she ever give them presents? Did she go to her grave with a piece of Cole's heart?

I can't be jealous.

God, no, there's no reason.

He had a life before we met and it's not my place to judge anything—much less get upset over a dead woman. I'm not even sure what I am to him alive.

Definitely not someone he loves. And why wouldn't he have loved someone else before he knew me?

He has a freaking teenage daughter.

I'm little better than a one-night stand and his lab rat. We're not together.

Not yet.

Not ever.

But Troy strikes me as a dumbass clod.

Here's Destiny, already crying because she forced herself to confront a terrible loss by herself.

Does he really have to remind her what happened? Even if the embarrassed look on his face says he realizes his mistake...ouch.

At least I'm starting to understand why everything in this house is so hush-hush now.

"Me and my big mouth, huh?" Troy smacks himself lightly on the face when I look up again. "Let me make it up to you, Dessy. You want another boat ride before you head home? I've taken that sunset cruise three times this week. I'm practically drinking buddies with the captain. We can find your dolphins again. I'm sure your old man won't mind."

"T-thanks, Uncle Troy." Destiny pulls herself together, putting on a brave face. "That sounds kinda nice. I would like to see them again before we leave."

I'm not sure why I'm frowning.

"Destiny, are you sure your dad's cool with a boat ride without him?" I ask.

She looks at me and nods.

"Please take your phone," I say, trying not to sound like the concerned adult and probably failing. "Um, you know how he is. Your dad makes you

show it every time you go off by yourself, so I feel like if you don't take your phone—”

That wins me a laugh. “He won't be mad at you, Eliza. He'll just crucify *me*. Don't worry. I'll take it, plus we've got Uncle Troy's. I'm gonna go get ready.” She wanders off.

“You did a hell of a fine job back there,” Troy says.

“Thank you.” I feel like this conversation is going around in circles and this bizarre man just won't stop smiling.

Why is he still here?

He stuffs his hands in his pockets, pacing around the balcony like he's working up to something. Then he looks at me, his eyes all heavy silver discs.

“Honestly, you've done a good job befriending Destiny, too. I've known her folks since before she was born. She doesn't let many people in, but she trusts you. The girl could use a cool older lady in her life. You know, what with her mom being gone and Cole being Cole...”

Again, that raucous, almost inappropriate laugh bursts out of him.

Awkward.

I look at him, confused. Maybe he just doesn't hang out with people much.

“I haven't known her that long. I just work for her father.”

That permanent grin grows wider, stretching his almost leathery tanned face. “Don't be modest around me, lady. You're good fucking news for both of them. I haven't seen Cole this happy since—well, hell, ever.”

My heart twists.

Does that mean I am a surrogate then?

The notion is so creepy, I don't know what to do about it.

I feel lucky Cole moaned *my* name the last time he came, and not his dead wife's.

But I have to try to play this off. Go on with my day. Think things over without a crying girl and this odd man circling me.

“Thanks...I think? I guess I don't know what you mean,” I say, playing it cool.

He looks away, scratching his neck.

“Oh, shit. Right,” he mutters to himself, turning back to me. “I saw you hug Cole in the meeting, and you seemed so close to the kid, I just assumed...” He trails off. “Aw, never mind. That's the way this crazy noggin gets sometimes, always reading too much into things.”

He winks at me.

“No worries. I was just overly excited my drinks were a hit. Before my job at Wired Cup, I never even imagined a research job. It’s been a good fit for me. I get to spend my days inventing awesome coffees. If I ever open my own shop, I’ll have tons of drinks ready to go.”

“Hell yeah!” There’s something boyish about his enthusiasm and too-wide smiles.

I’m trying to decide how I can step away gracefully when I hear footsteps. I turn right into a pair of sky-blue eyes gleaming with gratitude.

“Eliza, you were fucking *dynamite*.” Cole slips his hand through mine, twining our fingers together. I try to pull away at first, but one look at him and I’m powerless.

The poor man has lost so much.

And here I am, jumping to the worst conclusion after a few goofy-ass remarks from Troy and Destiny’s understandable emotional dump.

When I squeeze his hand, he grips mine tighter.

I think everything might be okay. I think he sees me when he looks down, and not some weird mirror image of his last heartbreak.

But even if it’s not that simple...so what?

Does it change how he makes me *feel*?

This is a place where fantasies are born, come alive, and frolic.

What happens in Hawaii stays in Hawaii.

I just wonder what’s going to happen next when we get back to Seattle. Because whatever’s coming will be a lot more truthful, raw, and lasting than everything that’s happened in this magical place.

Cole’s thumb caresses my fingers.

I stop overthinking when I catch Troy staring. There’s a different smile on his face now, warm and maybe a little sad?

“Well, I should go pack and catch up with the munchkin,” he says, walking over and slapping Cole on the back. “I told her I’d take her out to see the dolphins one more time. Hope you don’t mind?”

“That’s fine. Make sure she has her phone,” he says after some pause. “Are you leaving?”

“Yeah, bright and early tomorrow morning. Almost a red-eye. I’ll catch up with you guys in Seattle.”

“Seattle? I thought you were going back to Bali?” Cole asks, his face turned up with surprise.

Weird. He's the CEO. If his sourcing chief has something to do at headquarters to help close a billion-dollar deal, wouldn't he know about it?

"Don't worry, boss. Fly decision. I thought I should take care of some loose ends in person since I'm already halfway across the Pacific—nothing to worry about with the new deal. It'll probably be squared away by the time you're home and we'll shoot the shit at that little pub on Bainbridge. Fucking shit, the fish and chips there, man—" Troy throws his head back, making a pleasurable noise that's so grossly inappropriate I almost laugh.

Cole's face is tight and his forehead creases.

"Yeah, okay. It was good seeing you again, Troy. I'll catch you in Seattle—and let me know ASAP if my dolphin-obsessed daughter is more than you can handle."

"Will do." Laughing, Troy nods and heads inside.

Finally.

He seems harmless enough, but the guy makes me cringe like nobody's business.

"Where were we?" Cole asks, wrapping his arms around my waist before he kisses me deeply. "You were pure witchfire in there, sweetheart. Now it's my turn."

I smile, but stiffen.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I force a smile. "Just...aren't you a little afraid someone will see us?"

He gives me an annoyed look and steps back slowly, putting ample space between us.

"Fair enough." That hangdog look on his face makes me feel worse.

I'm so stupid. Why did I have to say anything?

I want him—I want to help him celebrate—but I want to make sure he really wants *me*.

Eliza.

Not some stand-in for a ghost.

"I'm sad that we're leaving soon," I whisper.

"Yeah. Paradise gets awfully addicting, but there's no point in us lingering now that the deal is done. The whole crew wants to go home to their families." He scans the balcony. "Did you see Destiny before she ran off with Troy?"

I smile. "Yep. She was pretty excited for the boat, but she promised to

take her phone.”

My skin ices over despite the tropical heat.

I don't say a word about Destiny crying. I can't guess how he'd take it, even if part of me wants to find out.

“We're alone then,” he says, raking me with a look that glows.

God.

I know I'll regret this because it's just getting harder to stay away from this man.

Heartbreak, here I come, but I might as well make the most of the time I have left, right? At least it can't play out worse than Derek.

“Didn't you say there's a place on the farm only you know about?” I ask, remembering how he mentioned it the other night after we were spent and exhausted.

“There are a few places only I know,” he says cryptically.

“Show me one,” I whisper, grabbing his hand.

If I'm on a collision course, then I'll spend what time I have left in heaven and deal with the fallout later.

The house is crawling with people as we head inside, so he keeps a safe space between us until we're outside again.

His arm slides around my waist and he leads me to a small service area where the staff keep their golf carts. We climb inside the cozy little vehicle.

“Are we going to the cliffs?” I ask.

“Not today. You'll see.” His sunlit smile melts me all over again.

He drives carefully down a narrow road through vibrant, low-hanging vines. When the house looks like something made for a doll in the distance, he parks next to some leafy brush and helps me out.

There's a break in the overgrowth a little ways in. A hammock hangs between two tall coconut trees.

“Oh, wow. I never would've guessed that was here,” I say.

His eyes twinkle like blue sapphires. “That's the point.”

He flops onto the hammock first, but keeps one foot firmly on the ground.

“Get your sweet ass over here,” he orders.

“What if I flip us over?” I say with a smile.

“You won't. I'll keep us steady, Eliza.”

Eliza. The way he says my name when he looks at me leaves no doubt that it's me he's seeing and devouring with that gaze.

He reaches out and I take his hand.

“Lay down slowly.” He gently pulls me closer.

Cautiously, I lift one leg on the very edge of the hammock and it gives.

“You’re sure this is big enough for two?”

“Positive. I’m not going to let you fall. Here, lean back.”

Slowly, I recline, but Cole’s big body takes up most of the hammock. The only way to lie back is to do it snugly against him.

He lets go of my hand, sliding his arm securely around me. “I’m going to raise my foot now. We’ll rock, but we won’t fall.”

We sway back and forth as he does exactly that.

Once I’m sure I’m not about to hit the ground butt first, there’s nowhere else in the world I’d rather be.

We’re teleported into a warm, cozy dream.

My lips wander to his shoulder, wishing his silk button-down shirt wasn’t between us.

“The flight home is going to be hell,” he says, kissing my forehead and then my lips.

“Why?” I ask.

“I’ll be with you for six goddamned hours and won’t be able to do anything about it,” he growls.

“We’ll land eventually.” I almost hate that it’s true.

There I go, giving myself false hope.

There’s actually a disgusting chance we’ll only be working together as soon as we hit the tarmac, but I want to live this fantasy a little while longer.

“One more day before the flight,” he says, running his hand up my thigh. “I was just thinking we should spend it wisely. Have a lazy morning. No six a.m. Swift songs.”

I elbow him playfully. “What if I need to work?”

“You won’t even be asleep before six, woman,” he growls, his fingers pinching my thigh.

I grin. “What if I’m abstaining?”

“You’re not. I need to be in you as many times as I can,” he rumbles against my ear.

He’s too freaking good at this.

“Cole?” I whisper, feeling warm all over.

“Yeah?”

“I’ll always prefer your bed to work.”

He pulls me on top of him and cups my face. “You have no fucking clue

how insane you make me. *None.*”

And I believe it a second later. He kisses me with so much lightning in his lips, I press my body into his, wanting to be as close to him as possible.

“Cole?” I whisper again, waiting for him to look at me. “Say my name. I just like to hear it.”

“Eliza,” he whispers, kissing my neck.

I shudder with delight.

I half expect his hands to roam and turn this into a heavy, soaked makeout session, but they don’t.

It’s even better.

He just locks his massive arms around my waist, holding me until I fall asleep.

The last thing I hear—almost as a prayer—is my name on his lips, over and over again.

COFFEE DATE (COLE)



“Oh, Cole.” I wake up to the best sound on Earth—and the view isn’t half bad, either.

Eliza’s mouth forms a perfect ring, her eyes flutter shut, and her head tilts back.

I lean down, brushing my lips over my little addiction before my tongue meets hers, chasing and massaging it.

This is where the anticipation and teasing ends.

That glorious split second before I remind her she’s my property—and it’s got nothing to do with being on payroll.

I swallow her hot whimper, relishing it with an appreciation I’ll never have for any coffee. With a murmur, Eliza Angelo overwhelms my fucking senses.

Too delicious.

Too gorgeous.

Too intense.

I break the kiss with a rough gasp, swinging my hips forward and plunging deeper inside of her.

“Cole!” Her nails reach for my chest, scratching me, telling me she’s on the edge.

“Come for me,” I urge, pressing my forehead to hers as my lips meld to her mouth again.

I’m ravenous, stealing the pleasure from her throat as I loot her little body.

A few more strokes and her pussy tightens around my cock.

Her fingers curl—she’s too awestruck to rake her nails—and hellfire engulfs my balls.

With a low curse, I bring us home, slamming myself in, grinding her clit with my pubic bone, catching her lips in my teeth, and coming out my soul.

Her body clenches around me a split second before I release.

Fuck.

Fucking hell, yes.

I collapse on top of her, proudly wearing the sweat that’s dripping off me. My head falls against her hot breasts, her nipples peaked and so rosy they already look like they’re begging for more.

Soon.

A minute later, I realize she’s running her fingers through my hair, stroking my face with a slow, devoted touch.

“I’ll never get enough of you,” I confess.

“Are you sure?” She laughs.

Her voice is playful enough, but something about the question irks me. I roll off her and prop myself up on my elbow.

“The hell does that mean?”

Her smile never wavers. I’m horribly tempted to lean down and kiss her, but I have to know what she means.

“I never expected to be here.” She waves her hands around my bedroom.

“Here?”

“I didn’t think you’d dare bring me home. I kind of thought that when we left Hawaii—”

“Wait.” I cut her off. “You thought I was toying with you on the island? That it was just some island dick frenzy I could just switch off?”

She places her hand on my chest and leans closer.

“Don’t be offended. I just thought…well, maybe we were both living it up a little. And maybe it would have to end when we came home.” She sighs. “I mean, it’s only a matter of time until someone finds out.”

Ah, fuck. That’s what she’s worried about, and I honestly don’t blame her.

“I told you last week, I’ll deal with it,” I say, pushing my fingers possessively through hers.

“You don’t think it’s too soon?” Her eyes shine with a doubt I want to smother.

“I’ll handle HR. Then we can explore this thing without needing to sneak

around like a couple of alley cats. Trust me.” I squeeze her fingers.

“This thing, huh? Interesting. So, it’s a thing now? A Cole-Eliza thing, and not just a coffee thing?” She beams at me.

Fuck me, she’s right.

This is a *thing*.

And I’m just realizing that I’m the fool who made it one.

Still, I don’t regret it. The way she looks at me like I just hung the stars, how could I bear to let her down?

If there’s a ‘thing,’ we’ll confront it head-on.

Kona was the second chance of a lifetime and it’s all thanks to this woman.

It’s time to lower the shields and rewrite rules of my life I thought were etched in stone.

Eliza deserves more—and maybe, I do, too.

I rake my eyes over her miles of curves, drinking her in.

What would it be like to date her freely and openly? Where neither of us are hiding anything and we can share our hopes and dreams and passions without worrying about breaching some stupid workplace policy or even our own ethics?

It could be goddamned divine.

Or it could be a godless disaster.

Regardless, I’m ready to find out one way or the other.

“Let’s get sushi tonight. After work,” I say.

“What if I have issues eating raw fish?”

I chuckle and pull her closer. “You ate your weight in poke in Hawaii, brat.”

She kisses my chest, trailing her teasing lips to my neck. “What if I’m just tired of it, Cole?”

“Order katsu chicken or hibachi steak and scallops.”

She snorts adorably. “What if I can’t stop thinking about the poor fishies?”

“We’ll go to a damn steakhouse. Or are you a vegetarian now?”

“Nope, just messing with you. I love sushi.”

I bite her bare shoulder until she squeals and then dive lower, blowing a raspberry on her stomach.

“Cole, stop!” she shouts.

“Not until you get what you deserve for driving me mad.”

She laughs knowingly, her hair hanging in messy chestnut locks.

She tries to move away from my tickle-storm and only succeeds in pressing her body to mine. We know where that leads.

I close my arms around her with a hot growl in my throat.

She turns to face me, and I lean up, stealing a kiss.

That sweet peck turns into a long sensuous kiss in about five seconds.

Eliza climbs over me without breaking the kiss. Her knees squeeze my sides and she releases my lips, drawing in a slow breath as she straddles me.

Goddamn, do I love this position.

Her tits hang in front of my face so easily it feels criminal not to suck them. I flick my tongue across her nipple, gently nibbling as I devour her.

“Ohh,” she moans. “Cole...”

She nudges her wetness against my length, always so ready for me.

I grasp her hips, drunk on sex, pulsing so hard I feel like I’ll explode if I’m not inside her in the next two seconds.

With a heavy look, she presses herself over me inch by inch.

I grasp her hips, desperate to hold her eyes as I sink into her eager little pussy again. “Look at me. Don’t you *dare* look away when I fuck you.”

Her bottom lip disappears against her teeth.

She’s so much more than I deserve.

So completely bad for me.

Tangled together, we ride through a second intense round of fuckery that ends in fireworks, still clinging to each other when it’s over.

“Let’s hit the shower,” I mutter, grabbing her leg.

We’ve become that inseparable. In a matter of weeks, it feels weird to scrub myself down without having her breasts to massage or her little mouth to swallow my come.

We take our usual thirty-minute shower, and when we come out, Destiny is blasting Olivia Rodrigo music from the kitchen so loudly it bleeds through the ceiling. The only good news about that damn clock app is that it’s catapulted some underrated musicians to success.

If only Dess didn’t hijack my speakers and amp up the volume so much they can hear it on the moon.

That’s also when I meet Eliza’s eyes with an awkward realization.

“Shit. I’m sorry. I need you to hide in here until—”

“Dad! Where *are* you? Should I leave without you? I’m going to be late and Mrs. Werner is a *beast*.”

Eliza covers her mouth, suppressing a giggle.

“That’s the lady who oversees the summer internships at the aquarium. I need to drive her,” I tell Eliza. “As soon as we’re out of here, I’ll have my driver pick you up. You can go to the lab or go home. Take your time; the car will wait while you get ready.”

She nods.

Before I rush out, I lean down and steal another kiss. “Doubt I’ll see you at the office today—more sourcing shit on the agenda with Troy—but I’ll see you for dinner.” I turn toward the door.

“Cole,” she whispers.

I pivot around, waiting.

With a smile that damn near sparkles, she rises up on her toes and adjusts my tie. I wait, frozen, until she kisses me again.

“It was just a little crooked. Now go.”

Damn, this woman.

I never had a problem before with getting my girl to school on time. Now, I’d rather crawl into a cave of wasps than leave this room.

I head downstairs reluctantly, fumbling with my phone on the way to shut off that music before my eardrums burst.

It flicks off just a second before I round the corner.

Destiny stands in front of the breakfast bar, her backpack slung over one shoulder and her arms crossed.

“You could’ve let the song finish. Jeez.”

“We’ll be late. Are you ready?” I ask.

“I’ve *been* ready, Dad.” She studies me a little too hard, this odd flicker in her eyes.

Shit.

What is it she’s sensing?

I rub my neck, tugging up my collar.

What? Do I have a fucking hickey? Maybe, because she’s still staring.

“I don’t say this enough, but...I’m proud of you.”

I stare at her as she points at my neck.

“First time in forever I don’t have to adjust your tie. It’s always crooked when you’re in a hurry.”

I sigh with relief.

“Pretty sure I’ll be late. They expect me to *work*, Dad, not just stare at cute otters all day. We totally won’t beat the morning traffic unless you

bought jetpacks,” she says, finger-combing her hair.

“My fault. I’ll write you a note.”

She squints at me. “You know, you seem different, ever since Hawaii. Do you still have jet lag or something? You’re kinda old.”

“Mouth off again about my age, and I’ll find that jetpack and send you on a one-way trip,” I say with a snort. “I’m fine, Destiny.”

“Okay? So why do you keep acting like you’ve got a bug up your—”

“I’m fine. Let’s go, before we’re even later.”

What the hell? Since when does my daughter parent me?

After I finally get to work after fighting our way through traffic and letting her off at the Seattle Aquarium, I’m slammed with meetings the whole day.

When I come up for air, I text Eliza. ***Hey, I’m sorry about this morning. Also, I need to delay our dinner plans by a couple of days.***

She responds immediately. ***No big. I’m down in the basement like usual, helping Gina with the pumpkin drinks for fall. It’s a fun break from the campfire stuff.***

I smile. It’s been several months and she still hasn’t lost a bit of her passion for this job.

I’m a lucky man in more ways than one.

Cole: Will I see you tonight?

Eliza: Mayhaps. Fair warning, I’m exhausted.

Cole: I’ll let you sleep. Promise.

I may be crossing my fingers as I hit send.

Eliza: Ha, I’m not sure I can let you sleep without a goodnight romp. Or three.

My cock shifts in my pants, instantly jolted to attention.

I just hate that I had to postpone our first real date.

I expected her to be pissed. She’s almost too chill.

Why?

After three more back-to-back meetings, I expect to open my phone to belated texts asking why I’m postponing again. But they never come.

Katelyn comes into my office while I’m still up in my own head. “I’m going for a lunch run, bossman. Do you want your steak salad or a sandwich or something?”

“I’d like that. Where are you going?”

“The deli down the street.”

“Make it a club. With chips.” I pause. “And Katelyn?”

“Yes?”

I hesitate until I see the impatience creeping into her face. “Listen, if a man asked you out and then postponed it, would you be mad?”

“No, but my husband would be pretty pissed.” She folds her arms. “If I were single, I might not be mad. I’d just friendzone him.”

Friendzone?

That sounds as fun as licking sandpaper.

Shit, what if that’s what Eliza’s thinking with her non-responses?

Kate grins, undoubtedly loving the stricken look on my face.

“I’m glad you’re moving on, Mr. Lancaster. You’re a billionaire with a decent bod—and that’s not me saying it, but every red-blooded woman on the planet. It’d be pretty hard to exile you to the zone. So, your lady’s either very understanding or playing hard to get.”

I nod slowly. There’s no point in denying my hapless ass needs the help.

Only, why does her smile look so wicked?

“Between you and me, if you already took her out in a place like—oh, let’s say Kona—I’m sure it’s not really a first date to her. And if it isn’t, you can expect her to be more accommodating.”

Fuck.

Busted.

“I didn’t say anything about Hawaii,” I bite off.

“Boss...you’re blushing.”

“I don’t blush.”

“Okay. I’m off to lunch. Whenever you finally make it to dinner, tell Eliza ‘hi’ for me.”

I stiffen in my seat, wondering how much gossip is already darting around the office.

“You can’t say anything. I haven’t had the discussion with HR yet.” *Or anyone else like a certain teenage daughter with a sixth sense for drama*, I don’t add.

Kate’s mouth forms an O.

“So you’re her sneaky link. Juicy.”

“Lunch now,” I say, gently thumping my fist on the desk. “Before you’re fired.”

“Like hell,” she says as she goes flouncing out the door.

Her laugh echoes back at me and I bury my face in my hands.

What the hell is a sneaky link, anyway?
And why is every woman in my life so goddamned annoying?
If Katelyn ever retires, I decide right now my next assistant is going to be
a workaholic gay man.



A COUPLE DAYS LATER, I check my suit in the mirror and notice a smudge on
my cufflinks.

Frowning, I comb my hair for the third time.

Destiny appears in the doorway.

“What? Too much cologne?” I grind out.

“No.”

“Not enough?” My eyebrows go up.

“Ew, Dad. No. And believe me, I have zero desire to sniff you.”

I snort loudly.

“I just came to tell you I’m spending the night at Sarah’s. Her boyfriend
broke up with her over an argument about a Band-Aid. She’s pretty upset.”

“She’s better off without the pencil dick.” I catch myself too late. “Pardon
my French.”

Destiny bursts out laughing.

I’d chide myself over the coarse language, even if I know she’s heard a
thousand times worse by now from Netflix and a hundred different teenagers.
But more importantly, Eliza and I have the house to ourselves.

I wasn’t expecting that.

“Harsh. You don’t even know him,” she says.

I shoot her a hard look. “I was in high school once. Any girl is better off
without high school boys. Trust me.” I wag my finger.

She rolls her eyes.

There are times when I wonder if she’s hiding her dates from me,
knowing I’d like to get to know any boy after my daughter over cold beet
juice and polishing my Navy tactical knife.

“Does my hair look okay? This damn humidity, I swear...I miss the rain,”
I say, running a hand through my hair again.

“Looks like it always does,” she says with a nod.

“What does that mean?”

Destiny shrugs quickly. “Dude. If she likes you enough to go out with you, she’ll be happy with your hair. It hasn’t changed in ten years and it’s not tangled up in a greasy bird’s nest. That’s pretty good for a guy.” She cocks her head. “I mean, there might be some grey streaks, but...you’ll manage.”

I side-eye her hard.

“You put the grey there, Dess. And what do you mean ‘she?’”

“C’mon, it’s obvious you have a date tonight.”

I bite back a smile.

“...what if I don’t?”

“You do, Dad. I’m not dumb. There’s no point in acting like you’re on a secret mission.”

Shit. I wasn’t expecting this conversation right now.

Still, I look at her and say, “Should we talk about it?”

“Um, no. There’s nothing more awkward than talking about your love life.”

Thank fuck.

I dodged a massive bullet.

“But it’s okay, Dad. Really. I want you to be happy, have a normal life, especially after you’ve spent so much of it raising me. No need to worry while I go listen to Sarah whine all night about her loser ex. I told her not to date him anyway.” She huffs out a breath. “Just try not to ruin this, okay? I like Eliza.”

Gaping silence.

I’m almost taken aback, even if I know I shouldn’t be.

“You know it’s Eliza?”

“Duh. You *drool* when she walks in the room.”

I’m definitely boned. Someone in HR must be too scared to bring me in for a talk if a fifteen-year-old noticed.

“It’s not *that* obvious, is it?”

She stares through me like I’m stupid. “Uh, maybe not if you’ve never seen a movie or gone to like middle school.”

Damn.

“It’s cool. I think she likes you too.”

“You do, huh?” I quirk an eyebrow, adjusting my sleeve in the mirror again.

“Yeah. When you’re in a room together, she always watches to see if you’re going to look at her. When you do, she tries to look away but always

smiles when she does.” Destiny shrugs. “I guess some things never change after high school. Oh, and if she didn’t like you, she probably wouldn’t have agreed to this date in the first place.”

“You’re too observant,” I clip.

“Well, yeah. Uncle Troy told me too.”

Of course he did.

“You and Troy talk a lot lately.” How much time is he spending with my daughter?

And what the hell is he telling her?

I need to have a talk with him since he’s been hanging around the office longer than planned.

“Don’t be mad! We both think Eliza is *lit*—like, totally good for you—”

“Destiny, you can’t say anything about this, okay? Not even to Troy. Don’t encourage him. He might be my age, but the man never left high school, socially. This is all very new.” I sigh. “We also have a strict policy against managers dating their employees for everyone’s protection. Eliza and I need to figure out an ethical way to see each other soon, but until then, I need you to keep quiet. You promise?”

“Promise. And Dad, there’s one more thing...”

“What now?”

She shifts in place, staring at her feet before she looks at me again. “I kinda have a date tomorrow, too—and you’re not going to complain.”

Oh, damn her to hell.

She’s engineered this whole thing in her favor.

“Who?” The word comes out like a bucket of nails rattling.

“Um, with my boyfriend?”

“You have a boyfriend? Since when?” Goddamn, I’m going to need to pull that tactical knife out of storage after all.

She nods nervously.

“Do I know him?”

“...I don’t think so. He’s a freshman...at Seattle University.”

Rage tears through me, all teeth and claws.

“When were you planning to tell me you’re dating a man? How old is he?”

Her cheeks heat. She knows she’s in deep fucking doo-doo.

“Nineteen. We...we haven’t done anything and he promised he won’t until I’m eighteen. He’s a really nice guy. Can’t you just be cool?” Hope

strains her voice.

I shake my head like she just pulled out a syringe full of heroin.

“No. Not cool.”

She gives me the saddest pout.

“What the hell? Hypocrite much? Because Eliza is like twenty-six, and you’re like forty. I’m fifteen, Dad. He’s only four years older than me.”

I fold my arms, not amused in the slightest.

“First off, I’m *not* forty. Not even close. Secondly, how do you know how old she is?”

“She bought me a smoothie in Kona and they asked for her driver’s license when she picked up a beer.”

“When you’re thirty-seven, you can date who you want, young lady. While you’re fifteen and under my roof, you’ll follow the rules. And one of those rules is *zero* college boys, no matter how ‘nice’ they may seem. Also, you don’t get to date until you’re a senior.”

“Hypocrite,” she mutters, her face flushed red with disappointment.

“Bull. When I was fifteen, I did what my parents said.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

I sigh. “Are you serious about this boy?”

Slowly, her eyes snap back to me, and her anger fades into a pained grin.

“Gotcha! I don’t have an older boyfriend. I just wanted to see if I could make your forehead wrinkle up.”

I stare at her coldly while her laughter bounces off the walls.

“Brat. I’m calling Sarah’s mother later to make sure you’re really over there. And I have wrinkles?” I glower at her.

Ridiculous.

The women in my life—all of them—are forces of nature and all dead set on turning me into a walking joke. Maybe I should rethink this dating BS after all.

Dess bursts into a new fit of laughter.

“Now what?”

She runs forward and hugs me. “At least we both know the ground rules now...”

I wrap my arms around her. “I’m pretty sure this is the part where I auction you off online.”

“Whatever you want, but no one will bid.” She pulls away with a red-faced smile.

A flash of gold around her neck catches my attention, a small golden turtle dangling on a long chain.

“Did you buy that in Hawaii?” I flick my thumb at it.

“What?”

“The necklace.”

“Oh.” Her smile vanishes. “No, I...I took it from Mom’s room and brought it home with me. Haven’t worn it for a couple weeks since we came back, but I remembered it today. You bought it for her, right?”

I stare at the necklace, feeling a turtle-shaped hole in my brain. I keep it to myself because I don’t want to sound like a jerk, but hell.

I don’t remember buying that thing.

“Yeah. I must have a long time ago,” I mutter.

“Well, it’s beautiful. I’ve got to get going, so ciao, Dad.” She walks out.

When I leave my room, I find Destiny waiting by the stairs. “Do you need a ride to Sarah’s? I’ve got Tom on his way and I can drop you off first.”

“If you insist...”

When we get to her friend’s house, I walk Destiny to the door, still hoping for her sake that this nineteen-year-old punk boyfriend is a bad joke.

“Dad, we’re here, I can go through a door on my own.” I don’t move away. “Um, what are you doing?”

“Meeting the adult in charge of you tonight.”

“What? *Why?*”

“Because I’m that annoying helicopter asshole of a dad.”

She rolls her eyes. “You said it. Not me.”

After a few minutes of small talk with Sarah’s mother to convince me the kids are properly chaperoned, I climb back in the car.

Twenty minutes later, Tom pulls up to Eliza’s apartment building. I get out and walk to the door, but she’s already outside waiting for me.

“I expected to walk you to the car,” I say, offering her my hand.

She takes it. “The buzzer isn’t working. I figured this was easier.”

I scan the short, snug black dress that hugs her body in all the right places—especially that peach of an ass—and meet her eyes again.

“You’re triple stunning tonight,” I whisper.

She smiles. “Thank you.”

I hold the car door open and help her in, then slide into the back seat. “It’s been weird not seeing you for two days.”

“I know. I felt like I was missing a limb.”

I put up the soundproof privacy guard. “Then why have you stayed away from me?”

She laughs. “Aren’t you the one who’s been busy?”

“Yeah. Sorry I postponed this. Too many annoying meetings I couldn’t push back.” I slip my arm around her, trying not to gasp at the softness of her skin. “Didn’t mean to piss you off.”

She lays her head on my shoulder.

“I wasn’t angry, Cole. I haven’t had much sleep since Hawaii. I was tired.”

“I’m aware.” I kiss her.

“And you didn’t invite me over last night...”

“Because you blew me off the night before.”

“I was *tired*.”

“You never invite me over,” I point out.

“My apartment is basically a shack compared to your house. Plus, you have a kid.”

“So?”

“I’m not having you leave her alone overnight just because I like waking up next to you...”

I can’t hide the smile that cuts across my face. “You, Eliza, are goddamned amazing.”

“Yeah?” She quirks an eyebrow.

“I like how often you consider Destiny,” I say. Part of the reason I never dated was because I wasn’t sure how Destiny would take to someone new—or how well they’d manage with her.

But Eliza already feels like a mama bear with my girl, and it plays my heart like a drum.

“Where are we going?”

“Sushi Zushi. Fairly new place on Alki Beach. You’ll love it.”

“Do they have good coffee?”

I chuckle, shaking my head.

“What?” she asks like she doesn’t know.

“Maybe a Tokyo lungo? I’ve never ordered coffee there. Do you really need it with every meal? Try the sake with me.”

“No, but I always have coffee with breakfast and after dinner.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“It’s good for digestion,” she insists with a smirk.

“What?” I demand.

“I can’t tell you,” she says softly.

“Why not?”

“I just can’t.”

“Eliza—”

“No. You’ll be mad.”

“I won’t be. Now spit it out. You’ve said too much to back out,” I warn.

“Okay, well... You know how you got mad when I told you Wired Cup’s whole brand was reliable?”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t drink enough coffee. You don’t savor it enough to know the difference between reliable and reverent.”

“Guilty. That’s why I hired you.”

“Then why were you so offended about being called reliable?”

I grin, shaking my head.

“Woman, just because I don’t want to spend all day tasting coffee doesn’t mean I want to be known as the CEO of a boring fucking brand.”

“You’re a strange man,” she muses, pushing her hand into mine. “Good thing I’m hooked on you.”

It’s about half an hour before we arrive at the posh restaurant. Tom opens the door with an affable nod, and I help Eliza out of the car, walking her through the stylish glass doors.

Her hand stays clasped in mine as we walk to the hostess booth.

“I have a reservation for a private room,” I say.

“What’s the name?” the hostess asks.

“Smith.”

She checks her book and nods. “I’ve got it.” She picks up a couple of menus. “Right this way, Mr. and Mrs. Smith”

Eliza’s brows knit together as she leans up to whisper in my ear. “But it’s Lancaster? Don’t tell me you picked a name so unoriginal for whatever it is you’re hiding?”

SECRET RECIPE (ELIZA)



Cole doesn't answer when I ask what kind of game he's playing with the Smith alias.

We follow the hostess to a back room with menus waiting on each side of the table.

He pulls out my chair and waits for me to sit. He might be a grump to his core, but at least he's a chivalrous one.

"Thanks," I say, trying not to blush as he sits across from me.

"I'll grab you some waters and your server will be with you shortly." The hostess exits the arched entryway to this private room with its black walls, tan seats, glass, and low lights that make it look like it was transplanted straight from Tokyo.

"So, why did you make the reservations under a fake name, Mr. Smith?" I should probably drop it, but I have to know.

"Privacy," he answers, his eyes narrowed.

"We really need more of that?" I whisper across the table.

He studies me for a moment.

"Eliza, is something wrong?"

"...I'm just curious."

"You're sitting at the most exclusive Japanese restaurant in a city of almost a million people. Places like this attract money, and it's a small world. You'd be surprised how ruthless the competition can be. All it takes is a little encounter with an executive from another coffee company who slips some jagoff on Twitter a juicy tidbit about Cole Lancaster dining with a beautiful young woman. Suddenly, my 'eligible bachelor' face is plastered all over

social media and I've got a very big, very annoying distraction to deal with. When you head up a major business of any sort, you're always somebody's target."

My stomach drops.

That's definitely a fair reason for secrecy, and worlds apart from any two-timing older men who played me before. I almost feel guilty for wondering.

"But Smith? Seriously?"

He glowers, but before he can speak, a young girl with curly red hair arrives to take our order.

"We'll start with two sakes," Cole says. They throw a few expensive brand names back and forth. I can't even pronounce them without knowing a word of Japanese.

This is me. Swimming with the big fish and already drowning.

"Do you have ginger ale too?" I ask.

"We have a house made ginger soda," the waitress tells me.

"I'll take it."

His lips barely move, but Cole laughs with his eyes.

"Afraid you can't handle the sake?" he asks after she moves away.

"I don't drink a lot..."

He nods, studying me over the rim of his glass as he sips his water.

"I don't think you were done."

"What?" He sets his glass down.

"You explained the need for privacy—I get it—but it seems like you wanted to add something more." I sip my water, studying his handsome face.

He shifts in his seat—and do I see a tiny crinkle of nervousness on his face?

"Our co-workers can't find out about this yet, Eliza. Until I talk to HR, we're technically breaching several major rules against fraternization."

"Fraternization." I laugh sourly.

Also, didn't he say he'd deal with HR days ago? I can't be too judgmental.

He's not Derek. I'm not being played for a selfish man's ego.

Still, when you've been burned before, you start looking for any whiff of smoke.

"What's wrong?" he asks gruffly, fixing me with a stare.

"Hmm?"

"That laugh. It's not your usual peppy giggle."

No joke. I'm trying not to be a paranoid bitch when I know I shouldn't be.

The server returns with our drinks before he can press me. "Are we ready to order?"

"Whatever you call the crab with avocado and spicy aioli," he says immediately. "I want a couple of rolls of that, a spread of your market sashimi, a tempura roll, and throw in a California roll for my lovely date from San Diego."

I stare at him, unblinking.

Wow. Until now, I never thought I'd like having a man order for me. But there's something oddly charming about trusting Cole enough to take care of me.

Now, if only we could build the same trust outside of delicious food and sheet-ripping sex.

"Bring it on the Zushi boat, please. I'm a sucker for a good presentation," Cole continues.

She taps the order into her tablet and disappears.

Under the table, Cole catches my foot gently between both of his. I gasp and look at him.

"We're not off to a great start, are we? Minus the impeccable sushi order, I mean."

"We're fine," I lie.

"*Fine.* Exactly what a man wants to hear on his first real date in a decade," he says with a snort. "I don't want any secrets between us, Eliza, so let me be clear. We have to keep a low profile around the office for just a little while longer. Not that the truth hasn't slipped out to a couple people already. Troy knows about us, and I'm sure Katelyn does, too. He even said something to Destiny."

My heart skips.

"Oh, like what? Why? And why would he tell your daughter of all people?"

Cole sighs. "He's known me for too long, and I've never just been his boss. He saw us together in Hawaii and picked up on the obvious, I'm sure. Can't say I'm thrilled with him talking to Destiny, but he's an odd bird. The man never had a class in manners and as much as he pisses me off sometimes, he does his job flawlessly. Still, we don't need a whole peanut gallery talking in hand signals about the last time we kissed or winked at each other. That kind of shit will definitely make it up the chain, and we can't have

that happening when it's not on our terms.”

I sip my ginger drink slowly.

Everything about this is confusing. I'm also not great at hiding, even if it's for a good reason.

Having dinner in the open as a couple was also his idea. I never asked for this.

I just mentioned people would find out sooner or later.

Deep down, every time he mentions Destiny, I can't help remembering what she spilled in Kona.

Is he actually over his dead wife? *Can* he ever truly be 'over' her?

I get it. A small part of his heart might always belong to her considering they had a flipping child together.

But I can't handle being his rebound, his stand-in, his ghost made flesh.

After Derek and his heartbreak on a stick, I can't stand being anyone's shadow girlfriend.

While I'm still brooding, a huge wooden boat shows up with two waitresses, piled high with colorful sushi so beautiful it's hard to eat.

Lit sparklers shine at each end, crackling shades of orange and yellow.

They set the boat down in the center of the table with a few plates and our waitress snuffs the flames with a golden spoon before she disappears.

“Holy crap. Dinner and a show?” I whisper, hoping my awkward smile doesn't tell him how unclassy I am.

He smiles across the table. “I thought you'd like it. The presentation is part of the experience.”

Trying to swallow my worries for now, I pick out several pieces of my spider roll with spicy aioli and some California roll and drop them onto my plate.

Cole loads his plate without seeming to care what he grabs.

A voice in the back of my mind won't leave me alone while I'm trying to savor the delicious meal. It tells me I'm being silly, I'm letting my fears rule me, and I should just *shut up and enjoy this fairy-tale beast of a man*.

But it's too hard to let my guard down after the way the night began, even when the conversation eventually becomes easy again.

We laugh about Hawaii, Destiny's turtles and dolphins, plus all the little spots we explored far more intimately than any tourist should.

Near the end of dinner, Cole looks up as the waitress reappears with dessert menus.

“My lady would like your best coffee. I’ll have the plum wine,” he says, catching my eyes and ordering for me again.

God, why does that give me all the butterflies?

“Wonderful. We have a Tokyo lungo with locally sourced cream and a dessert latte. Otherwise, we have plain black coffee.”

“She’ll have one of each, and she’ll let you know what she likes best,” Cole tells her.

“Noted,” she says.

I stare at him. “Did you just order me three cups of coffee at nine o’clock at night?”

“I’ll drink whatever takes second place for you. And it was worth it to see the look on your face.” He smiles. “I was starting to worry I wouldn’t see it again tonight.”

“You mean it disappeared when you transformed into Mr. Smith?” Lifting one foot from my shoe under the table, I slide it against his leg.

The sly smile he gives me makes me feel naked.

“If anything I said offended you, tell me,” he whispers.

“Cole, we’re cool.” And I will myself to make those words true.

The server returns soon, carrying coffees on a silver tray with an assortment of creams, high-end sweeteners, and honey. She sets a carafe down with an empty ceramic mug. “Black.”

The next one is a huge see-through mug. It’s covered in whipped cream and drizzled with fragrant chocolate, with a middle layer of what looks like the Japanese coffee jelly I’ve heard about.

Finally, the Tokyo lungo in a wide mug. The long shot of espresso steams the air with its glorious scent. She also leaves Cole his plum wine in a glass.

“Anything else?” the waitress asks.

Umm—I’m good for like the next week on fancy coffee, but I look at him.

“I think she’s happy, and that’s all I wanted,” he says, sipping his wine smugly.

I can’t help but giggle once the waitress leaves.

“I hate you. You make it way too hard to stay mad,” I say.

“Good. Then you’ll finally tell me what you were mad about?”

“Oh. I wasn’t mad exactly...”

“Like hell. Something I said ruffled your feathers, Eliza.” His hand slides across the table, capturing my fingers.

“I misspoke. I’m sorry. I was never mad. More like...” I trail off, taking a long pull from the dessert drink and slipping into coffee heaven. It reminds me of hot chocolate with a delicious Japanese twist, the best of east and west coming together in a taste-gasm that curls my toes.

“What were you then?” His eyes are piercing as they search mine.

“Huh?” I pick up the black coffee for a pallet cleanse. It’s nothing special, but I can dress it up however I want for a few sips before I pass it over to him.

“You said you weren’t mad. You used the wrong word. What were you, sweetheart?”

Good question.

“...I don’t know.” I pause, trying to decide how I condense my whole messed up history with Derek into something he’ll understand without thinking the worst of me. Or even if I *should*.

This whole time I keep wondering if he’s over his wife, but what does it say if Derek is alive and well and evil as ever in my own memory?

“I was just enjoying the moment. With Cole, I mean—not Mr. Smith. Honest.” I squeeze his hand, digging my nails softly into his palm.

After dinner, he helps me to the Lincoln waiting at the curb and slides in beside me. I’m so full it’s a miracle he doesn’t have to roll me into the car.

“This was my first date in over a decade,” he says, the city’s nighttime shadows cascading across his face. “Don’t write me off just yet over one dull alias, Eliza.”

“I guess I won’t this time, Mr. Smith,” I joke.

“We won’t have to hide forever,” he promises, taking my hand and kissing the back. “Once we’re in the clear, we’re done with this cloak and dagger bullshit.”

“How sweet of you,” I tease.

He lifts my hand, turns it palm up, brings it to his mouth, and plants his lips in the center.

God. How does something so innocent melt my soul?

Does it only make me crazier for ignoring red flags and jumping into bed with him?

He’s still staring at me with an expression I don’t recognize.

“You enjoyed the date then?” he asks.

I smile so wide my face hurts. “You’ll see me again soon. There’s your answer.”

“Without the dress?” he growls in my ear just as the car stops next to my apartment.

We get out and he walks me to the door.

Before tonight, we also agreed that we’d try to keep things clean—try to control the storming desires that can cloud any new relationship so easily.

But when he pulls me close and his tongue delves into my mouth, it’s all the encouragement I need. We’re both sucking and straining and gasping for air when he breaks away with a muffled, “Fuck.”

“Cole?”

“Yeah?”

“Never wait three days to kiss me again. Also, never let me make any stupid promises about ending things with a goodnight kiss,” I whisper, brushing his lips.

His lips find mine again with a low, hungry rumble. I love his frustration boiling into my mouth, the passion lashing in his eyes as he rips away from me.

“If I ever entertain this stupid chaste shit again, shoot me first,” he says, his hand sweeping my hip. “It has to be less painful than this. Definitely less brutal than the smurf balls I’ll be dragging home tonight.”



A FEW DAYS LATER, I’m in the lab, working on a frozen drink when I hear footsteps.

Troy stops at my side, wearing that pearly white smile that seems permanently riveted to his face.

“Hey.” I smile at him and return my eyes to my blender.

He comes over to the metal lab table I’m working at and leans against it. “I had to see the campfire magic for myself. Cole insisted.”

“Did he?” I try not to sound annoyed.

“Yep. I’m just the bean delivery guy, but every so often I get a wild hair to see the final product. Especially the new stuff.” Troy winks at me.

“Your timing could be better. I’m only working on frappes today...”

“Would you mind showing me the campfire base? I’m sorry to pull you away from your other work; it’s just, you know what a hardass the bossman can be.” He makes an exaggerated panicked face, raking his fingers through

his hair.

“Well, it’s no big deal to whip up a quick batch. Here, you can see it from the start...” I grab the blender, stick it in the freezer, and set up the grill. “Any particular drink?”

“Just the basic drip. That’s the part you actually do over the fire, right?”

“Right. Kona or the Wired Cup brew?”

“Is it the same process?” he asks.

“Basically, yeah. With the peaberries, you use less flame and more time to get it just right. The home version brews faster because you can add more heat without burning the Sumatran and Brazil mix.”

“Kick-ass. I see you’ve done your homework.” He scribbles a few notes into his phone with a stylus. “Give me the Wired Cup stuff. No point in wasting precious peaberries for a demo.”

I get a pot going over the open flame on the grill and start the brew, setting the timer. I disappear for twenty minutes to my desk, taking care of records and saving myself from more awkward conversation.

But I can’t stall him out forever.

When I return to my station, he’s sitting in my seat by the grill and looks up. “So, you and Cole really hit it off like a house on fire back in Hawaii, yeah?”

I blush, but I don’t dare confirm or deny it.

Just because Troy knows doesn’t mean it’s open season.

I remember how much Cole stressed privacy. I also don’t have any raging desire to get Troy started on our love life, even if he is a dear old friend of the man I’m dating.

He shoots me that too-wide grin again. “Relax, Badger Lady. You don’t have to kiss and tell. It’s all safe here among friends.”

I frown. Hearing that silly nickname from him is the only time it’s ever annoyed me. I’m not sure why his entire attitude rubs me so wrong.

Maybe it’s because he’s just too close to a mysterious past that keeps surfacing...

“Say, can I ask you something, Troy?”

“Of course.”

I clear my throat. “...what do you know about what happened to the late Mrs. Lancaster?”

He sobers up fast, that easy smile disappearing instantly.

“Aster?” He scans the room like he’s afraid of someone dropping in.

Even though we're the only people in the lab, he still whispers when he says, "You don't know? Well, it's only natural to wonder... Long story short, she killed herself. Everybody knows it, deep down."

I gasp, rocking back against the counter.

Whatever I was expecting, it wasn't that.

"S-she did?"

"Yeah. She was...a good woman. Stunningly beautiful. Smart. Amazing head on her shoulders for art. She had a lot going for her before—you know. But she was also pretty messed up, mentally." He looks away with a heavy sigh. "Poor woman really had something going wrong in her head. Her family was all perfection, but I always knew there was something rotten in her life. It wore at her. It corroded her."

Corroded? Interesting choice of words.

"That's awful," I say softly, the only thing I can manage.

"Yeah. Suicide is a hard fucking pill to swallow, and just between us, I don't think Cole ever came to terms with it. He probably thinks he's partly responsible for not keeping her happy even though she had an army of therapists." He pauses, slowly meeting my eyes. "Destiny was so young. I'm not sure she ever totally understood it. I'm just damn glad they're both finally moving on. For a while, I didn't think either of them would. They kept their distance from me for years. I think that big trip was a way of dealing with things for a lot of reasons." He smiles brightly. "Hey, you seem pretty close with Destiny, too. That's great. It was cute the way you made sure she had her phone before you let her join me on the boat ride."

I shrug, forcing a smile.

"That's just what her dad does. I figured it must be the rule."

"Has she ever talked to you about her mom? Just curious." He levels a serious look on me.

"A little. Not much. She only said that this was their first time back on the island since her mother died there..." I'm downplaying that tearful conversation, yeah, but I don't know how much Troy talks.

He holds my gaze, something like hurt in his silver eyes.

"Destiny was happy there and I was damn glad to see it. That's her family house. Hell, the whole farm, really. The way they left it before this recent trip, I wasn't sure either of them would ever go back. But she had a great time, and she liked surfing so much, she's been begging Cole for a weekend in SoCal with her friends."

“Yeah? I wasn’t sure how much she liked it,” I say.

“Why’s that?”

“She seemed a little apprehensive. Once she got going, she didn’t hate it. But she mentioned how she used to be afraid of beaches. I wondered if it was a little overwhelming for her. I also got the feeling that surfing was almost like a way of confronting her fears more than any burning interest, unlike her time with the dolphins and turtles.”

“Oh, damn. Wow. That’s news to me. I’ve never met a kid afraid of the beach,” Troy says slowly. “Did she say why?”

“No. She mentioned they found her mom there a long time ago. Maybe it’s just the idea of being so close to that spot. Losing Aster so young must’ve been insanely traumatic.”

“Fuck. She didn’t see anything, did she?” he leans closer, his face pulled tight before it relaxes into his carefree smile. “Sorry. It’s still a little hard on all of us, sometimes, even if it was ages ago. I always thought Destiny was home with Cole when it happened.”

“I don’t think she saw anything. It’s just knowing her mom’s body was there...”

“Yeah, sure. That makes sense. *Thank God.*” He mutters the last part to himself, nodding.

Huh?

The loud timer whistles through the lab, empty except for us. I wave my hand in front of the boiling pot on the grill.

“Here we go. This is basically all there is to the campfire method. You need to make sure it always peaks around a hundred and eighty-five degrees.” I lift the digital thermometer in the pot to check. “Close. But we’re not there yet.”

“Cool. I’ve seen just about enough to get the gist of it. If it’s good enough for you, then it’s good enough for me to call it right here.”

“Nobody minds a shorter day.” I smile, feeling a little better about having him around.

“Thanks again, Miss E. For being there for my friend and his daughter, I mean,” he says, looking up from punching a few more notes into his phone.

I nod, mostly to myself as the man turns his back and starts walking.

“Hey, Troy, if you’re this worried about him... Do you think he’s over her?”

He turns around and rakes me with a look.

“He wouldn’t lead you on, if that’s what has you worried. He’s not that kind of dude. Have you asked him about it and talked it out?”

I hesitate, my throat suddenly feeling like cotton. “No. It just feels a little callous asking him to swear he’s over his dead wife... I mean, it’s not even my place to ask.”

“It was eons ago, Eliza. He’ll probably never be completely over her, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t care about you. Deeply. Anyway, I’m probably not the person you should be having this conversation with.”

“Right. I’m sorry. You’re his best friend, so I just thought I’d ask...”

“No biggie. I can tell you what I know, but I don’t want to speak for Cole, right?” He searches my eyes.

“I understand.”

“Good, and thanks again for the science demo. I’ll see you later.” Troy leaves the lab.

I run to the drinking fountain by my desk for water with my stomach swirling.

All of those alarm bells and red flags are burning my senses.

No, I don’t think Cole is like Derek, but that’s not the point.

He’d never cheat and lie.

Okay, he’d never cheat.

He might lie—harmless, necessary little white lies like his Mr. Smith act at the sushi place—but I don’t think he’d ever hurt anyone on purpose. But what if he’s not fully over Aster?

Half an hour later, Cole texts me. I jump when my phone vibrates.

How are the cold drinks coming?

Dude. You sent someone down to watch the campfire method and you think I’ve had time to get your frozen drinks ready?

They’re not coming yet. I got a little sidetracked with Troy’s visit, I send back.

Cole: Just let me know when they are.

Eliza: Will do, but it’s going to be a few hours.

The next text he sends is an image of us.

Me, specifically, asleep in his arms on the hammock in a green Hawaiian oasis. ***I took this after you fell asleep. You were too fucking cute not to.***

There go my worries again.

I’m smiling like a moonstruck fool at the memory.

If only I could hold on to that.

But if his wife's death is making him hold back, making him hesitate, then all our happy Hawaiian memories are tainted.

And if coffee and secrets are all we have, then it's one bad cup I can't stomach.

FINE GRIND (COLE)



It's been almost a week since my sushi date with Eliza, when I promised her I wouldn't go three days without kissing her again.

Still, I get the nagging feeling she's avoiding me.

If I'm being honest, she was distant, even that night.

She's been all fucking distance since we came home from the island.

Why?

It's past nine o'clock when I head down to the lab.

Not only is she still working, she's there alone, the other techs and supervisors long since ducking out for the day. She stands over a marble counter, measuring beans and mixing them with something I can't see from here.

I walk up behind her, lock my arms around her waist, and kiss her neck like a man possessed.

"Kissing me at work? Very bold." She relaxes into me with a soft laugh. "What are you doing here?"

"I promised I wouldn't go three days without kissing you again, and I'm done with blue balls." I kiss her neck again. "Come home with me tonight."

She doesn't turn toward me, but she doesn't pull away either.

I watch as she carefully finishes dicing toasted coconut with my arms around her.

"You've got half an hour before security closes up for the night," I remind her.

"Ugh, don't remind me." She rolls her eyes. "Look, I won't turn into a pumpkin at ten, if the coffee robbers outside don't break in and steal me away

first...”

“That’s another minute gone,” I say, tapping my watch.

Despite her smile, her eyes never leave her tiny strip of toasted coconut.

“Come the fuck home with me. It’s been too long. I miss you, and so does my cock.”

I feel her shudder deliciously in my arms.

She sets her knife down and turns to face me, but not with her usual enthusiasm. “Cole, where is this going?”

Oh, boy. Now I know I’m about waist-deep in shit.

“What do you mean?”

“A few days before you were Mr. Smith and we hid in a private room. You were ready to—” She does a faux deep voice and uses finger quotes now. “Handle HR and whatever else—” She drops the fake voice and puts her hands down. “Then you needed two extra days before having dinner with me...I get it. I gave you an easy out.”

She’s not wrong.

Everything happened just like she says and I realize it’s worrying.

Still.

“What easy out?” I throw back.

“I told you, it was just a matter of time before someone found out about us, and you swore you didn’t care. Obviously, you do.”

“I’ll go to HR as promised. I just thought—”

“No, don’t apologize. I’m not angry,” she rushes out.

“You sure? You sound pissed.” I stare, trying to decipher the strange, conflicted look on her face.

She hugs herself with a heavy sigh.

“Cole, I’m sorry. I get overly emotional sometimes. It’s complicated—I get that—and I’m not upset with you.” She pauses, inhaling sharply. “Troy came to see me the other day. He told me he’s been worried about you and Destiny for years.”

What the hell? It’s bad enough that Troy runs his mouth more than he should with my daughter, but now my woman too?

“He’s right about that,” I clip. “I just don’t appreciate him having that talk with you before I get a chance.”

“Oh, no. He was totally polite. I was the one asking nosy questions, and he said I should talk to you when I asked too many.” She holds her hands up. “Look, I know you’ve never fully gotten closure with your wife’s suicide.

I'm sure that's why you don't know what you want with me, and—"

"What did you say?" I cut her off.

I stop cold, arms folded, ice sweeping through my veins.

Her face falls. "Jesus, I'm sorry. That came out all wrong. I just—"

"Before that. Back the fuck up."

"You never fully let go of, um, Aster..." Her voice is so small, and the word that's missing—*suicide*—is almost deafening with its absence.

"Eliza, whatever the hell happened to her is none of your goddamn business. Understand?" I turn away from her.

I can feel her staring, but she's too scared to say another word.

Shit.

I knew we'd need to touch on my past sooner or later, but not like this. It's all coming out wrong and I'm angry, snarling at her like a wounded animal.

I look at her sad, wide eyes.

"It's deeply personal, Eliza," I try again. "I'm willing to discuss it without being ambushed like this. And for the record, Aster didn't kill herself."

Her chest rises and falls. "Okay. But Troy said—"

"Troy doesn't know his ass from his mouth." Fuck. Why the hell have they been talking about me? About *Aster*? And what the hell else has my supposed friend been feeding Eliza and Destiny? My blood feels like acid, burning me from the inside out. "Perhaps you're right to be concerned. We've fallen too hard, too fucking fast."

"Cole, no! I—"

She reaches for me, but I stiffen, holding up a hand.

"Don't. And don't talk to me about my dead wife again until I tell you some facts."

Her lips tremble. She nods, but I see the way she quivers as she turns, how she wipes a hot tear from her cheek before she can speak.

"I...I know. I won't. I shouldn't have blurted it out. I knew you'd be hurt, and for good reason... But hearing you say it out loud makes it way more real." She pauses, waiting for me to say more, to hug her, but I don't.

The gulf between us feels a mile wide.

I loathe it.

I'd rather have a hole in my head.

"Well...if you'll excuse me, I have work to finish," she whispers.

I glance at my watch. "You can't be here after security changes over. It's

against policy now. You have less than fifteen minutes to clean up.”

“Oh, so we care about corporate policies *now*?” Hurt sarcasm drips from her voice.

“I won’t have you or anyone else here alone past ten. You know that,” I say coldly.

“And I’d rather not have you in this lab at all, but here you are.”

My fingers form a fist, and I bang it softly against my thigh. I just can’t stop the train wreck rolling out of my mouth.

“Why do you have to be so goddamned difficult?” I growl.

“Mr. Lancaster, you’re distracting me from my job. It’s after hours and I’m tired. Please just—get out. Get out of my workspace.”

It’s surreal, watching yourself fuck everything up without an easy way to un-fuck it.

“Don’t make this personal,” I whisper. “It’s a simple safety precaution. If something ever happened to you…” I pause, inhaling air that scalds my lungs. “I’d never forgive myself. Never, Eliza.”

“What difference does it make? You shouldn’t have let me in, remember?”

Fucking hell.

The worst part is knowing this wretched case of foot-in-mouth disease was so preventable.

Before I do more damage, I storm out of the lab.

Tom waits for me patiently with the car, and I throw myself inside of it without another word.

Amazingly, tonight’s blue balls are the least of my worries.

I should’ve known better than to get mixed up with an employee.

I damn well should’ve known better than to reconnect with old friends.

Why the fuck did Troy have to squawk about Aster at all? When the sensation to stab him in the throat slightly fades, I call him from the back seat Bluetooth setup.

“Cole? It’s late, man, what’s up?”

“Are you still up?” I bite off.

“Yeah…what’s up?”

“Meet me at my house ASAP. It might take me a few minutes to get there. I’m leaving the office now.”

“Okay, sure. No problem. Is everything okay? You sound really—”

“Just come, Troy. We’ll discuss it then.”



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, I overfill two large glasses with brandy and hand one to Troy.

He sits on my black leather sofa in an oversized island shirt with a blank expression. His usual shitty grin was wiped off his face the moment he stepped through the door.

I could smell the stink of whisky on him, and it brings me some small pleasure to know I tore him away from the bar downtown and his next hookup tonight.

Still, he gives me that kicked puppy look I hate when I hand him his damn drink.

“Cole...I’m sorry I let too much slip. I didn’t mean to tell her point blank that Aster killed herself, and I definitely never expected her to hassle you about it.”

My eyebrows go up sharply.

“...it’s your business. Family business. I get it. I really screwed the pooch and I’m sorry.” He hangs his head, staring into his drink.

Am I being too hard on him?

He’s never been anything but supportive since the night he saved me from a knife fight in Manila on leave. If he hadn’t been there to drag my drunk ass away from four nasty guys I’d gotten into an argument with, I might’ve never had Aster or Destiny or Eliza to worry about at all.

There’s also no denying how strange Aster’s end was, how it’s given me nothing but questions.

I sigh, rolling my shoulders.

“Whatever. It’s not your fault,” I mutter, taking a pull off my drink. “It’s not even Eliza’s. I should’ve laid my cards out before anything happened with her.”

Sympathy shines in his eyes. “Man, you just need to open up with her. Have a heart-to-heart. Tell her the truth without holding anything back.”

“I can’t.”

Troy gulps his brandy and sets the glass down with a *thunk*.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t even know the fucking truth after all these years, Troy.” I throw back my brandy, waiting for the fireball in my gut before I ask, “You want another round?”

He hands me his empty glass.

“Fill me up. And Lancaster, you *know* the truth, you heartbroken asshole. You just don’t want to admit it.”

I sigh again as I refill our glasses, sloshing booze on the table and not caring.

“I’ve been thinking about it constantly ever since we came home. Destiny brought back this turtle necklace she took from her mom’s room. Thing is, it’s driving me crazy. I’ve never seen it before, but Dess is convinced I bought it for Aster on our last trip there. It’s the only explanation that makes sense, but I just can’t take credit for jewelry I can’t remember. How fucked up is that?”

“You don’t remember?” He squints at me, his silver eyes flickering in the shadows.

I hand him his glass and down mine.

“I’ve tried like hell. Maybe I blanked it out,” I say bitterly.

He throws back his brandy and leans forward. “I was with you, Cole. It was the first day on the island, the last time we were all there. We stopped at that little farmer’s market that rolled into town, remember?”

“...I don’t remember shit. We did?” I rack my brain, trying to pull up any hint of what he’s describing.

“Yeah!”

“Maybe I’m too drunk.” I shake my head. “I can’t even remember going into town that day.”

“We stopped for snacks. It was just you and me. Aster, I think she was giving you hell about something—”

“That part I believe. She was always up my ass about something. My drinking, my eating, my work habits, my not spending every waking hour with Destiny when she agreed to watch her, et cetera.”

He grins knowingly. “Ain’t that the truth! You were too good to her. Whatever the hell else you don’t remember, I hope you still know that. You bought her that necklace at this pop-up jewelry place next to the shaved-ice stands. I think it was a couple traveling artists selling their stuff. They came over from Maui—Lahaina or some place. The necklace jumped out at you with all that intricate detail and you grabbed it on a whim. You thought it might smooth things over...”

It’s believable enough, but my memory is a hole.

“Did it work?” I ask grimly.

He shrugs. “Yeah. She loved it, man. For like ten minutes...”

We both chuckle.

“Fuck. I feel bad for laughing,” I say, pressing my fingers into my sore eyes. Guilt and brandy are a potent combination.

Troy nods slowly.

“It’s hard, because she’s gone, but that doesn’t change what she did while she was here. You did your best, Cole, I know you did. It takes tough stuff to handle a woman like her and—and she’s gone now,” he whispers, staring at his glass. “Listen, you only get one life. I’m not sure you should spend the rest of it mourning what happened to Aster ten years ago. It was horrible—don’t get me wrong—it was fucking *tragic*. It changed your life and Destiny’s forever, no question. I’m not suggesting you should have just bounced back like snapping your fingers. But now...now when you’ve got this pretty little thing who looks at you like you just hung the stars...don’t you think maybe it’s time to let it go?”

For a moment, I’m quiet, rolling his words over.

“Don’t know. I’ve never been fully convinced Aster killed herself, honestly. And I know it wasn’t an accident.”

He shakes his head sharply, his friendly smile gone.

“Cole, that’s crazy talk. How do you know?”

I stroke my thumb over my chin.

“During my entire marriage, did you ever see Aster going on wild adventures at night? She knew how choppy the waters could get after sunset. She’d never walk up the cliffs like they thought she might’ve done. She saw them a thousand times and swam off that beach plenty of times during the daylight. She wouldn’t sneak out on a spontaneous nighttime swim without telling anyone. It just didn’t happen.”

“Okay, maybe you’re right,” he says slowly. “But why don’t you think it was a suicide? Nothing else makes sense. It wasn’t just a crazy night walk if she had a purpose...”

I grab the bottle. “Another round?”

“Why not? This is heavy shit.”

I fill our glasses again, hating that I need a lot more than three glasses to drown the constant aching mystery in my head.

“I don’t know how to say this. Any way I phrase it, it’s going to sound shitty. I feel horrible because she’s dead, and I’m not trying to be disrespectful,” I say. “But think about the story you just told me. And I didn’t

even remember that one.”

“The necklace?”

I nod, throwing back my drink and enjoying the fire in my gut.

Troy takes half his drink, too, and starts coughing at the end. I wonder if we’ve both had enough.

“What’s that got to do with Aster offing herself?” he asks.

“Nothing. Except, people who are suicidal are usually convinced other people are better off without them. Does it sound like she cared about anyone else being better off? I remember the day before she died on that trip. We stopped off for a plate lunch in town and she talked nonstop about starting her new designer soap business. She wanted me to pull some strings to have a new LLC and production line set up the following week. I just wanted to enjoy my damn kalua pork with Destiny laughing on my lap, and instead I got a goddamned business meeting.”

Troy laughs. “I thought you didn’t remember anything?”

“I don’t. Barely. But I remember how every other day of married life went down with the same basic script. Not my point, though. Does that sound like a woman done with life? And convinced everyone around her would be better off with her gone?”

He finishes his shot slowly, nursing it like a cup of coffee.

“Hell, I don’t know. Maybe she thought it was the only way out...”

“Out of what? Being married to me? Believe me, if she’d asked for a divorce, I wouldn’t have contested it. Not that I was ready to give up—I always swore I’d go down fighting for us,” I tell him.

“So, if you don’t believe it was an accident and you don’t think she killed herself...what are you suggesting?”

“I don’t fucking know, Troy.”

That’s just it.

The only other option is foul play, and I can’t see anyone killing her.

“Not a lot of other options,” Troy says matter-of-factly.

“I know. And you’re right that I owe Eliza the truth. About as much as I owe it to myself to find some closure.” I pause, letting my words sink in. “Only, how do I even give her the truth without knowing it?”

“You’ll never know what happened that day. When someone dies abruptly like she did, that’s how it goes. The only person who knows is gone. And man, pardon me if this sounds cold, but does it *matter*?”

My eyes snap to his. “What do you mean?”

“If you find out what happened, will it bring her back?”

“No.” I sigh. “Hell no.”

“Right. So, either way, all you can do is move on. Count your blessings. You’ve found a great girl who adores you and loves your kid. You want my advice? Don’t blow it because you’re all twisted up in something that happened almost ten fucking years ago.”

“I hired a private investigator. As soon as I have the answers—and closure—I’ll tell her everything. I just don’t feel like I can until I know for myself.”

For a second, he stares at me blankly.

“A PI? Sounds like a big waste of money,” he snaps, staring past me and shaking his head violently.

Not what I was expecting.

“What? Why?”

“Because. How many times does it need to be investigated, dude? The police did their legwork when the evidence was fresh. Now, it’s ancient history. What do you think you’re gonna find?”

“I get it. Turning up anything new seems unlikely. If the PI comes back with the same theory the cops did, I’ll accept it. If they don’t...then I guess I’ll have to decide who to believe. I always felt like there was too much chaos after she died, and maybe the case was closed too fast.”

“Cole, you were grieving. If they told you anything besides, ‘Sorry, wrong Aster Lancaster. Your wife is safe at the Kona Community Hospital,’ you wouldn’t have believed it. You weren’t ready to hear it,” he says sharply.

Is Troy right?

I wanted out if we couldn’t fix what we had, but I never wanted Aster dead.

I never wanted to watch Destiny pick at meals for a year because she was waiting for mommy to come for dinner.

I never wanted to wake up at three a.m. in a cold sweat. Day after day after goddamned day because Destiny had another night terror and was screaming. Another dream where a shadow man was taking mommy away.

“Maybe so,” I tell him. “Still, I want a second opinion to put this whole thing behind me, and as you pointed out, I haven’t managed to do that yet.”

“Jesus, yeah. Can I have another hit?”

I find the bottle and fill his glass again.

He knocks back his drink, his throat working, and slams it on the coffee

table in front of us.

“If you think it will help, whatever. Go for it. But as a friend—I think it’s only going to help if you’re willing to accept it this time with *no more questions*. And if you’re willing to do that, you could just read the police report again and save yourself the time.”

“I want a new report. Also, I’m drunk and tired. I need sleep, Troy. Should I call you a ride or are you crashing here?”

“Call the ride.” He refills his own glass and downs another shot, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. “I’ve got to get the hell out of here. Big call with the team in Brazil tomorrow.”

I nod and summon Troy a car by app. We don’t talk much, even though I try to wait up with him until it arrives.

By the time it shows up and he slips out, I never hear it.

I’m so drunk and tired I pass out on the couch.



I LINGER at the office the next day, long after any sane person would be gone, and finally drag myself down to the lab.

If she’s not there, I’ll go to her apartment.

I have to see her.

I have to fix this.

I can’t let it fester like an open wound in my heart.

Of course, she’s there.

Eliza stands over a pot on the grill, her chestnut curls pulled up in a bun, stirring her brew with a contemplative focus.

“Can we talk?” My voice echoes through the empty lab like a cave.

She glances at me over her shoulder. “Whatever. It’s your company.”

She turns her head back to her work like I’m not even there.

Shit. Nobody ever said swallowing your own ego was easy.

“Eliza, I was a jackass,” I say, stepping forward.

“I know. I’ve got a new brew, though. Would you like a taste, Mr. Lancaster?”

I’d like a taste, all right, but not of that stupid coffee.

I’m also not sure what she’s playing at with this non-response.

“Sure,” I say cautiously, stopping near her side.

I wait while she ladles it into a small cup and passes it over. “Let me know how you like it. It’s a Hawaiian blend with sixty percent Kona beans, forty percent Sumatra. For the next Wired Cup line, theoretically, though I’m not sure if that’s economical.”

I blow on it for a second and take a drink.

As usual, what starts as a flavorful cup of joe explodes across my tongue, revealing delicate layers of macadamia nut, coconut, and something fruity.

“Good. It’s not as delicate as the peaberry blend, but it definitely tastes like Kona.”

“I’m glad you think so.” She kills the grill, picks up the pot, and walks across the lab to the sink.

I follow her. “You’re not going to make this easy, are you?”

“Make *what* easy, Cole? I don’t even know what you’re doing here if it isn’t checking out the latest products.”

“I came to apologize,” I growl. *Isn’t it obvious?*

“I’m listening.” She dumps the coffee without looking at me.

“I hate that I freaked out on you, and I’m sorry. Aster’s death is a sore spot. There are still a lot of questions about what happened then, and part of the reason I haven’t told you much about it is because I’m not even sure what I know. I hired a PI recently—”

“When?” She faces me for the first time since I walked in, her eyes slits.

“When we were in Hawaii,” I say flatly.

She frowns, her face screwing up with confusion.

“Jesus. Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“Don’t know what you mean by that. I planned to tell you everything as soon as I had the right answers. Hell, I made peace with that before our flight back.”

Her face relaxes. “Well, thank you. When were you planning on having this conversation?”

“Not soon enough, obviously. Eliza, it’s no excuse for how I talked to you yesterday—”

“You’re right. It’s not, but that’s not even what I’m upset about.”

I cock my head, staring at her, unsure where she’s going.

“I told you I wasn’t mad,” she says with a sigh. “You lost your wife. Tragically. People don’t just do a cartwheel and bounce back from that. But I —” She turns her head away from me. “I fell for you hard, Cole. Like *really* hard. I’m not mad at you when it’s not your fault—but I can’t just be a

rebound.”

“Rebound?” I spit the putrid word. “Eliza, you are *not* my fucking rebound.”

She meets my eyes. “But you’re not over her or the past. You still have one foot stuck there, and one in the present. Any relationship you have like that feels doomed to be a rebound...”

“So you’re a relationship shrink now? Didn’t see the medical degree on your resume.” I snort, shaking my damn head. But she’s still staring at me with those wide, glistening brown eyes as soft as melted chocolate. “You remember the hammock?”

“Like I could ever forget,” she whispers.

“I asked you to trust me. I promised not to let you fall. I was as good as my word, wasn’t I?”

She nods slowly, rinsing her pot.

“It was lovely, but I don’t see your point,” she says. With her back turned, she walks over to the grill and dismantles it, putting her tools away.

“We’re on a hammock now, Eliza. I need you to trust me again. I promise you I’ll drop off a cliff before I ever let you fall.”

She looks at me with her lips drawn tight.

“You’re on a hammock, Cole. I’m walking a tightrope with you.”

Damn.

My jaw tenses and I work my brain, trying to find the right combination of words to patch what was once such a happy road we tread together.

“If the hammock broke, what do you think would’ve happened?” I ask.

“We would have hit the rocky ground and it would have sucked.”

“For me, yeah. I had you positioned so you’d land on me if anything collapsed. I wouldn’t have let you get hurt—I would’ve taken the blow—and it’s the same now.”

“Go ahead then,” she says quietly.

I sigh. “I know I fucked up. I shouldn’t have gone off and made you feel like an outsider, an intruder, whatever. You’re nothing close to that. You’re way too important. Anything that matters to Destiny and me matters to you, sweetheart. And I hope anything that matters to you also matters to me.”

“And the hiding? The Mr. Smith fake out?”

“I’m going to HR next week as promised. You’re right. I told you I’d handle it, and I’ll make good on my word. But if I have a talk with HR, can you handle a conversation with me?”

She bites her bottom lip.

“I enjoy conversations with you very much. You know that.”

I hold my arms out, waiting. She walks into them and I close them around her, swallowing a possessive growl as I inhale her scent.

“You smell goddamned glorious,” I blurt out. “And I missed you like hell. You can’t ever do this to me again.”

When she finally smiles up at me, I relax for the first time, relieved that there’s the slightest chance I haven’t ruined this beautiful thing we’re meant to be.

“I missed you, too. And I’m sorry.” She tilts her chin and stares up at me, so fragile I hate myself more for ever hurting her.

Growling, I meet her lips, taking her little mouth hard.

She melts into me, running her tongue across the seam of my lips. I deepen the kiss with heat pulsing in my veins, begging me to reclaim her body and never, ever let go.

Eliza holds on tight as her body fuses to mine.

When my hand skims down her ass, squeezing a handful of luscious woman, she pulls away from me and sucks in a ragged breath.

I savor it, seeing how sweetly messy she looks as she stumbles back.

Goddamn, I’ve missed this—her feel, her taste, her weight in my arms— as much as I’ve missed the scorching kisses and screaming red sex.

“Cole?”

“Yes, sweetheart?” I embrace her again, stroking her hair.

“Umm—you know all of those invitations I didn’t take you up on?”

I chuckle. “Are you trying to tell me you want to come home tonight?”

“...what I mean is, I’ve just missed you. And this.” She smiles, her hand caressing my thigh for a hot second before her fingers brush the bulge in my pants.

My cock snaps to attention, pulling like an angry animal.

“Eliza, come home,” I whisper in her ear.

“I don’t want to be away from you,” she whispers, more breath than words. “But there’s something you need to know.”

“What’s that?”

“You don’t need an invitation with me. With this. You’re always welcome.”

“Yeah?” My hand roams her ass again.

I fight the urge to push my hand between her legs right here. If I ripped

aside her panties now, I know I'd find her soaked.

"Yeah. I'm exhausted, so let's get out of here, but kiss me one more time first?"

How could I ever refuse?

She doesn't give me a chance, though. Eliza comes up on her toes, pressing her mouth against mine with so much urgency it boils my blood.

Her little tongue sweeps mine, teasing and soft, tempting the beast inside me to snap its chain.

When we finally leave the lab, we do it hand in hand and mouth in mouth, intermittently slamming each other against the wall as we make our way to the nearest exit.

The town car waits for us outside.

We slide into the back seat, and I pull her into my lap, pushing my hand up her skirt and flicking her panties aside.

"I promised not to let you get hurt. You said you trusted me, right?" My thumb finds her clit and the pressure comes.

She tenses, moaning breathlessly. I don't move in circles until she nods.

"I need a promise, too," I whisper, pushing two fingers into her drenched pussy while my thumb quickens its pace around her clit.

"Whatever, yes. Whatever you want," she says quickly, her eyelids fluttering.

"If you're going to be in that lab until closing time, you text me so I can pick you up. So I can have *this*." I'm snarling as she starts grinding against me, her pussy so needy, begging for her first release of many tonight.

My cock feels like a loaded gun. My pulse roars in my ears so hard it drowns everything else out.

Tonight, I am going to fuck this girl like I've never fucked anyone.

Right after I'm done dragging her through this orgasm for the next ten city blocks.

She doesn't answer, but her eyes search mine through her lust as my hand works her toward heaven.

"You never go home without me after dark," I say, well aware of how insane I sound. "If something happens to you—I just need you to trust me, Eliza."

Her lips are on mine again, silencing me, banishing those dark, horrible memories of identifying Aster's pale, cold body.

She explores my mouth with a whimper.

Her nails dig at my shoulders as she rears up, all the better for my fingers to fuck her, and this time when she breaks away it's only to nibble my neck.

It's all she can manage before I pinch her clit with the pressure I know she loves.

Before her mouth drops open and she bites my shoulder to hold in a scream.

Before I struggle not to shoot off in my pants as her pussy tenses around my fingers, and then she's grinding out her pleasure, panting, my head pressed back against the seat.

Before my entire world condenses into nothing but her cries and the hot, slick heat of her ecstasy on my hands.

"Goddamn, little girl," I whisper through clenched teeth. "Get it all out right here. Come with all the ways I've screwed you up. Come for me."

And she does it so beautifully it hurts me to the bone.

It takes all the strength I have to let her fall against my lap for the last ten minutes back to my place. Somehow, I settle her on my lap, flicking her skirt back down, holding her still in my arms.

"As pleasant as that was, I need an answer," I whisper.

"I trust you."

"You can't change your mind if we get into another fight or even break up," I warn, tilting her chin up with the same two fingers that were just inside her.

Her smile looks like it was stolen from a dream. "Cole, if I'm fighting with you...why would I want you to stay with me?"

"I'll have security bring you home for those times I piss you off," I growl. "Because I will, sooner or later, like the demented water buffalo I am."

She laughs and I can't help but smile. "If you ever fight with me again like that, you're not going to have to worry about what happens."

"Why?"

"Because I'll string you up like a piñata. A big water buffalo piñata full of chocolate-covered espresso beans." Her tongue flicks out, teasing and so tempting to bite.

"Big talk, brat. I'll take that as a sign you can handle a little tough love tonight," I rasp, devouring her with another kiss that takes my whole soul.

STORM IN A CUP (ELIZA)



“**W**e’re gonna need another batch of those kick-ass pastries—they’re flying!” Meadow says with a toothy smile.

“No problem, we’ve got a whole stash.” I reach under the table, pull out a second tray, and place it on top.

“Woo-hoo, you rock!” She flashes me a thumbs-up.

“Nah, thank Cole for letting me use Wired Cup’s test kitchen to whip these babies up. It’s easy to make enough to feed an army—”

“Or at least a homeless camp.” Meadow peels the foil off the new tray, inhaling the sweet scent with an appreciative grin.

I love her excitement, how genuine it is knowing she was once on the streets herself.

Then I go to work, filling row after row of disposable cups with piping hot coffee and placing them on the table beside the pastries.

My phone dings and I pull it out.

“Is that your pastry daddy?” Meadow asks with a wink.

“Um...” My face heats as I glance at the screen and shake my head. “It’s Destiny, actually.”

“Nice! Don’t tell me she’s canceling on us?”

“She’ll be here, I’m sure.” I tap the screen and pull up the text.

Destiny: I’m on my way now. Leaving the library. I’m walking so it’ll be a few.

I type back, ***Meadow and Wyatt can handle things here for a minute. Why don’t I come pick you up?***

Destiny: No, it’s cool. I’ve already gone two blocks. Oh and I’m

stopping off at Sweeter Grind. The cinnamon lattes there are bussin. Let me know if you want anything.

Eliza: Traitor. Don't let your dad see or he'll kill you. I add a skull emoji.

Destiny: Not if he doesn't know. She punctuates that with a wink emoji.

Laughing, I drop my phone back in my pocket.

“Well?” Meadow asks.

“She’s on her way now.” I return to dutifully filling up coffee cups.

We work through the next big rush until the line clears. As always, the traffic comes in waves. So do the donors who just want a treat and they’re happy to throw down a twenty for a good cause.

“Whew, I’m working up a sweat. Must be twice as many people as last week,” she says.

“Woof, you’re right. Huge crowd.” Something bothers me, though, and it’s not just the relentless stream of hungry people. I stand on my toes, looking for Destiny’s head. “Hey, Meadow, how long do you think that last rush was?”

“Dunno. Maybe a good twenty minutes?”

I take my phone out again to check the time.

Yikes.

It’s been almost an hour since Destiny texted me.

It shouldn’t take that long to get to Sweeter Grind; it’s just down the street. The walk itself, well under half an hour.

Shit.

I call her. It rings seven times and goes to voicemail.

Destiny, where are you? I text.

When she doesn’t respond in five agonizing minutes, I try again. ***Hey, just checking in, are you almost here?***

No response.

I’m feeling sicker by the minute, my mind hurtling into overdrive.

Ten minutes later, after I’ve imagined Destiny kidnapped and thrown in someone’s trunk, hanging out with switchblade-wielding gangsters in some back alley, being forced to cook meth, and a dozen other horror scenarios, I decide to text her again.

Dess, I'm not upset if you're late. I just need to know you're okay, I send.

Another five minutes of dead air.

Don't freak. She's probably fine, I tell myself. She's probably just so into her coffee trip and phone that she lost track of time. Maybe she even ran into a kid from school...

Meadow sees the worry on my face, though. When I look at her, her eyes are wide with concern.

"Everything okay, E?"

"Destiny's late and she's not answering her phone. I'd better go to Sweeter Grind and find her. Probably nothing, but I'll be right back. Sorry to leave you hanging." I say it lightly, but inside, I'm freaking.

Wyatt walks up. "Who are you leaving hanging?"

"Meadow...and now you, too," I say. "Sorry, I have to go!"

He gives me a firm nod. "We've got this. Go right ahead."

"Thanks!" I don't even look back as I sprint through the park toward Sweeter Grind. When I close in on the shop, I pass a narrow alley along the way.

I'm three steps past it when I hear a decidedly pained moan coming from the alley, followed by a sob.

I wince, half expecting to see a group of kids messing around.

But when I double back to look, there's a slim figure crouched against the brick wall, straining to breathe. Their face is hidden by a hoodie.

Damn it, not now. Cole trusted me with his daughter.

I've got to find her, but I can't just leave someone hurt and alone in an alley.

Sighing, I walk toward the crumpled form.

I'll be quick. Just make sure the person's okay, call 9-1-1, and then go find Dess.

"Hey there, are you okay?" I ask.

I'm not even in front of them yet when I hear a familiar voice.

"Eliza?"

Destiny shoves her hood back, lifting her head.

Holy shit!

Her face is red and tear-streaked. Every bit of her shakes as she lurches toward me so fast she almost falls over.

"Oh my God!" My heart drops through my stomach. "Destiny, what happened? Are you okay?" I grab her hand, fighting down my panic so I can help her up. "Can you stand? Don't try if your legs are hurt. *What happened?*"

She staggers up, sure, but I'm terrified of making anything worse.

The poor kid heaves a few rough breaths and wipes another tear from her eye.

"I-I think I'm okay, y-yeah." She grips my hand, falling against the brick wall for support.

I hug her tightly. "What happened, honey? Did you fall?"

She shakes her head and pulls out of my embrace, dabbing her cheeks.

"N-no. These two guys..." She pauses, drawing a shaky breath. "They came out of nowhere and pushed me down. One dude stepped on me, so I couldn't get up. His asshole friend grabbed my necklace and they took off. I tried to chase them, give them money, give them my credit card for the necklace, but they ran so fast. When I got too close, they threw me on the ground. Knocked my breath out and I just—I couldn't get up. I couldn't catch them."

Oh my God.

It's not much better than my meth-and-switchblades scenario.

This fifteen-year-old sweetie went after two psycho thieves to get back her dead mother's necklace. Thank God she couldn't reach them.

"Destiny, promise me if this ever happens again, you won't try chasing anyone—"

"But they took Mom's necklace!" Her voice cracks again, her mouth peeling open as sobs wrack her body.

"I know, baby. I'm just afraid you'd be a lot worse for wear if you'd followed them. You're way more important than any jewelry."

Her eyes are so wide with shock, her mouth a gaping ring. "But...but she's gone and now the turtle is too. Now I have *nothing*."

My heart breaks for her.

I'm torn between being grateful she isn't hurt and hating these people for stealing something so precious.

"I know. I'm sorry. But your mom will always be with you, Dess. No one can take away her memory, I promise you." I scan her up and down. She's still standing and looks brittle now. That's a good sign. But my eyes stop on a nasty gash going down her leg, the blood already crusted over. "Does that hurt? Anything feel broken?"

"No. Not really." She stuffs her hands in her pockets and turns her face down.

"Stretch your arms out and wiggle your wrists for me."

Destiny blinks. “What?”

“...it’s what my dad did when he picked me up from school in fourth grade after I fell off the monkey bars. Just do it.”

With a frustrated sigh, she holds out her arms, rattles them, and then rolls her wrists.

“See? No permanent damage. I think.”

“Try rolling your ankles, too,” I say, watching carefully as she steps away from the wall.

“And then I do the hokey pokey and turn it all around?” She raises one foot and moves it around in a circle for me. “You’re acting like Dad.”

“Humor me, please.”

With a trademark teenager eyeroll, she raises her other foot and turns it.

“Good, good. You’re a lucky girl.” I grab my phone then and dial Cole’s number.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Calling your father,” I mouth as his phone rings in my ear.

“You’ve reached Cole Lancaster. This is Saturday and I’m in a meeting until five o’clock. I’ll get back to you as quickly as possible.”

Voicemail. I cut the call.

“That figures. Looks like he’s in a meeting I didn’t know about.” He’s going to hate me.

I pull up the number for the Seattle PD and hit Call.

“What now?” Destiny looks at my screen, worried.

“We have to do a police report. Your thieves could still be out there, and maybe you were just the first hit,” I tell her as a woman answers.

Thank God.

I explain the situation and she says she’ll send a police unit over to the area.

I try Cole again, get his voicemail again, and then text him while I grind my teeth.

Call me as soon as you get this. It’s Destiny. She’s okay, but you’ll want to see her ASAP.

We’re there for another half hour or so, dealing with the cops.

A deputy asks her to tell her story, what the men looked like, and she gives them every detail, her voice trembling. They ask her if she wants to go to the hospital, but she refuses.

Meanwhile, my heart splinters about a hundred more times.

This hurt, scared girl looks so much younger than her age.

Finally I say, "Is that enough for now, Officer? She's fifteen and she's been through a traumatic event. She's answered your questions. I'd like to get her out of the sun, somewhere she can rest."

"Of course, ma'am," the cop says.

I turn to Destiny. "Let's go. My apartment isn't far. I'll make you something to drink, and you can rest until I get a hold of your dad."

"If you haven't got in touch with him yet...does he really need to know?" She sounds so tired.

"Yes. Your dad has the right to know that someone mugged you, Dess. Don't be too hard on him."

"*Fiiine.*" She groans. "He's just never gonna let me leave the house again."

I'm not sure I blame him, I think as we start moving.

Destiny follows me at a slow, steady pace as we exit the alley.

Outside the chaotic scene, it's a serene summer day. We pass several groups of loud, laughing people with bulging shopping bags swinging from their arms.

"Ma'am," the cop says, reappearing behind me.

I spin around on one heel to face him.

"You ladies need a ride home? It'd save her some stress on that leg, I bet."

"Oh, sure. That would be great," I say.

He leads us to his car and we both slide into the back.

Destiny looks at me with an unexpected grin. "Badass. I'm posting a selfie from the back of the squad car."

I fight the urge to laugh.

"Dess, please don't post anything until I've talked to your dad. We don't want him freaking out more than he already will be if he sees it."

Once the cop is behind the wheel again, I give him my address, and he pulls away from the curb.

I glance up at the officer in the mirror. "Can I ask a question?"

"Sure," he says.

"Do you think it's okay for her now?" I hesitate, unsure how to word what I need to say. "Do you think she..." *Will recover? Will have soul-crushing nightmares for months to come over this?* I can't say that with Destiny right here, even if she's absorbed in snapping selfies she shouldn't be

taking.

“She’ll be fine, ma’am. I think this was just a random robbery and assault. There’s been a string of them in this area, I’m afraid.” He drops us off at my apartment a few minutes later. “You two be careful, now.”

I take Destiny inside and sit her on the toilet in my bathroom for a better look at her wound. With a quick scrub and some antiseptic, it’s not so bad. A little bandage and she’s good as new.

In the kitchen, I throw together a seltzer water. I pour it over ice with a twist of lime, mashing the wedge on the side of the glass.

“You have a soda stream?” She stares at me in awe.

I smile shyly. “What can I say? Sometimes you just need bubbles.”

“Sweet! Do you make fizzy cold brews?”

“I do, and I’ll make you one as soon as that water disappears. You’ve been through an ordeal and it’s a pretty hot day. You don’t want to get dehydrated on top of everything else.”

“Thanks, Eliza.” She sips at the drink. “I mean, for everything today.”

“What are friends for?” I say, reaching over to muss up her hair. “Can I get you anything else? Are you hungry?”

“I’m good.” She sucks down the water in less than a minute.

“Hey, did they take your phone?” I ask, before remembering they couldn’t have—she was taking selfies in the back of the cop car, after all.

She shakes her head and reaches into the handmade Hawaiian purse that hangs over her shoulder, holding the phone up. It has a cracked screen but the display lights up fine. “Dad’s gonna kill me. Another screen bites the dust.”

“But it still works. So, why weren’t you answering my calls? I could have gotten there sooner,” I say, throwing together another seltzer water for myself.

“It was on silent and I was a little messed up. It fell pretty far in the scuffle. Took me a minute to find it.”

I stop mid-sip, frowning around the straw.

I don’t know. Something about this just seems...off?

A second later, I realize what.

She’s still got her phone. A top notch iPhone, no less, usually a prime target for any thief with a brain.

Random robbery? Why doesn’t it feel like it?

“Dess, you need to stay close to your dad for a few days. If he’s not with you, keep me or Kate around.”

“Why?”

“Because. They took your necklace, but they left an expensive smartphone and your purse... Don’t you think that’s weird?”

Destiny turns her face up to the ceiling with a strained laugh and soft, “Oh my God.”

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“You’ve been around Dad way too long. You’re getting almost as paranoid as he is.”



“ELIZA!” Cole barks, banging his fist on my door like a sledgehammer.

“Guess who.” Wincing, I look at Destiny.

She laughs as I walk over and open the door. Cole stomps past me and goes straight to my sofa. He scoops Destiny up in his arms, pressing her against his chest with a muffled curse.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt? Destiny, did they...” he trails off, even as she wriggles away from him.

“Dad, calm down! I’m not seven. I just scraped up my leg.”

He sets her down with a reluctant sigh. “I’m going to take these damn bandages off so I can look at it, okay?”

“What? No, really I’m fine and—”

“I’ll be careful,” he growls, his hand already reaching for her leg.

He rips the bandage off so loudly I grimace. *Poor kid.*

I head into the bathroom and grab a couple fresh bandages. They never stick as well the second time around.

“Looks rough. I don’t think you need stitches, though,” he says, relief in his voice.

“Jeez Louise! I told you, it’s not *that* bad. Eliza cleaned it up hours ago. Give her some credit.”

“It wasn’t Eliza’s call to make,” he says coldly.

My breath stalls.

I’m right behind him when he says it.

Not that he cares, though, judging by the edge in his voice that’s all overprotective papa bear.

I don’t want to be mad at him. She’s probably never had anything this

serious happen before so yeah, he's panicked.

"Here." I hand him the bandages since taping her up probably isn't my place either.

He peels them and helps place them on her leg, passing me the dirty ones to discard. I start walking, but this time he follows me to the trash.

"What the hell were you thinking, Eliza?"

I stop, stomping the trash can pedal, and stare at him, too shocked to speak.

"How did this happen? You were watching her. You let this happen while you were with her?"

Oh, boy.

I have a sneaking suspicion I'm about to break that promise we made just days ago, when he loved me to mushy pieces and left me deliciously sore the next day.

That Cole, I could trust forever.

But the angry man with blue storms for eyes who's staring right through me?

This Cole is a stranger.

"She was on her way to volunteer with me at the homeless camp. I wanted to come meet her, but she told me she was walking over from the library. She never showed up, so I went looking for her. Someone knocked her down and took her necklace before I ever showed up."

"Fuck!" His face tightens into a grimace before his gaze resettles on me. "Why would you let her walk through a homeless camp alone? I know you're not stupid."

"Cole, it's a park. You know the place. You had Dess and her friends working with us before, so I didn't think it was an issue. It's fine during the day, too. Plenty of people around. For the record, she was ambushed a few blocks away..."

"That was a city sanctioned charity event. Most of the patrons weren't homeless." He holds up a hand, his lip curled in anger. "Before you say any shit, I'm not trashing homeless people. You damn well know bad actors infiltrate their spaces sometimes, and desperate people sometimes do desperate fucking things. And why did you bring her here—of all places—after she was attacked?"

For the first time, his look scares me. I've seen him look hurt and annoyed and angry before—but never this close to broken.

Never like I'm the one responsible.

"It was closer than your house, Cole. Jesus." I pause, swiping a hand across my face. "Look, she was exhausted, stressed out, and scared. She needed water. I even had the cops drive us home so we didn't have to walk. But now I'm curious—what's so wrong with this place?"

He stares at me.

"Eliza, goddammit. You live in spitting distance of weekly robberies, plus the occasional armed carjacking that gets somebody shot. This neighborhood is far from safe. Hell, *you* shouldn't be here. But you're a grown woman and you can make your own choices. My fifteen-year-old daughter damn sure can't."

Oh, the nerve.

I nod slowly, biting my tongue so hard I taste blood before I say, "Okay. I didn't realize my locked, perfectly crime-free apartment isn't good enough to fix up your hurt kid while you were still at the office jacking yourself off."

His eyes bulge and he opens his mouth to fire back, but a small voice cuts him off.

"Eliza—" Destiny starts.

Oh, crap. Since I normally don't have screaming matches here, it's easy to forget just how small this space is.

I hold up my hand.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have said that." I turn around and look at Destiny. "You're always welcome here, if you're *allowed*. That wasn't directed at you, hon. But apparently, I made a big mistake by assuming you would be."

Or I just didn't realize I'm good enough to make your dad's coffee and ride his dick.

But somehow, I'm not good enough in all the other ways a demanding, rich grump-ass like Cole Lancaster needs.

"Let me settle this for both of you," he says softly, turning to Destiny. "You, young lady, are not allowed here without my permission. You've already been robbed. You're *not* running around Seattle alone anymore in this crappy part of town or anywhere else."

"God, Dad. Are you implying the robbers were homeless?" She looks at him with a brutal pout. "FYI, they weren't. They stank like cologne and there wasn't a speck of dirt on their white hoodies when they pushed me around."

"Nobody should've fucking pushed you at all," he mutters under his breath. Then he looks at me and shrugs. "She's never been robbed outside my

office or in our neighborhood. She always had Kate around, or Tom, or at least a friend.”

“You’re right to wonder, but I’m telling you, it’s not a battlezone hellscape here,” I say. “I went to that camp a few times every month until I met you— I’ve never come close to being robbed.”

“You don’t look like a target,” he snaps, looking away as soon as it’s out. My jaw drops.

“What? What does *that* mean, Cole?”

He shrugs angrily, exuding pure insolence. “Only that if I were going to rob someone, I wouldn’t expect to make a lot off of you. Don’t take it personally. You travel light with your ID and a few mason jars of coffee, maybe a water bottle. You’re not a flashy girl sporting anything valuable.”

Yeah, he’s not explaining his way out of this hole.

My blood is about to froth over.

“I’ll have you know that Dakota freakin’ Burns and her billionaire hubby are there *at least* once a month. More before they had their baby, even. Would they make better targets? Pretty sure she’s walking around with six-figures of designer jewelry glued to her now.”

“Lincoln’s built like a fire truck and he never leaves her side. Your friend probably has enough sense not to go without him.”

My lips tense into a painful line. “I’ll tell you what she has sense for. She’ll kick him in the balls if he’s ever stupid enough to think she needs him like some sad little damsel in distress.”

“Dad, stop. You’re being a jerk!” Destiny adds.

“Stay out of this!” Cole warns.

Yeah, I’ve officially had enough, short of the ball-kicking he so deserves.

I start moving to the front door, loudly unlatching it just to prove to him that I have locks, and swing it open.

“You should go. Get her home, before I lose my shit,” I say, waiting for them.

“You’re kicking us out? Christ. Maybe you should calm down.” His voice is even, calm, and ice-cold as usual. He acts like I’m the problem and he’s not being a raging dick.

I glare at him and shake my head.

“My name is on the lease, last I checked. I don’t have to do anything you say in *my* place. Now go, before I rage-barf all over Dess. She doesn’t need that after today...”

“Eliza—” he starts, but I point to the hallway, my hand shaking.

“Go! How many times do I have to say it?”

He moves back to my sofa and scoops Destiny up again, settling her on her feet. She gives me an apologetic look as he ushers her to the door.

“Cole?” I call.

He looks at me over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“Given your background, I’d think you might be more empathetic.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Not everyone comes home from the military to rich parents. You were lucky, you know that, right?”

He stares at me like he just doesn’t get it.

Of course not.

Rich guys won’t.

“A lot of the people down there we were serving coffee to came back hurt or had PTSD or both. Lincoln Burns’ best friend lived there until Linc gave him a job. But not everyone has a best friend who can hire them. So, try to be a little more understanding. Also, get the hell out of my house.” *You fucking snob*, I add in my head.

“Eliza, fuck. I didn’t mean it the way it sounded. It’s just—”

“How did you mean it? The same way you stopped just short of calling my place a shithole?” I fold my arms, glaring.

“I don’t think bad things about you or people on the streets. I just don’t need my teenage daughter taking any chances with her safety before she’s old enough to decide what she wants.” He stuffs his hands in his pockets, fixing his gaze on me.

I scoff. “Whatever. You know the biggest ways girls from affluent families get hurt is usually with an insider, right? A bad family member, a friend...”

“That’s not what I meant. She just got robbed, Eliza. Can you cool it with your smartass lectures?” He looks up at the ceiling, his jaw so tense it could pop. “I told you, I worry about you here, too. So, yeah, of course I wonder about my daughter’s safety in this neighborhood. Today is proof I’m right.”

“I don’t need to be rescued from poverty, Cole. Go use your superhero act on someone who cares.” I’ve been way more broke than this, but right now, I don’t feel like saying it. I point to the hallway again. “Bye.”

He starts walking, keeping his head down like a scolded cat.

I slam the door behind him and lock up, pressing my back to the thick

wood.

There's only one thing left to do now.

Collapse on my bed and cry.

I am so, so stupid.

I knew better than to get involved with another stuck-up suit who thinks he craps diamonds. He didn't play me quite like Derek, but did he *play me*?

And wasn't it my own fault for ever thinking he'd stoop down to care about an average, unfancy girl like me?

Why do I do it? *Why?*

I fell too hard, too fast, and with no idea how to pick myself up again.

An hour later, my phone pings.

Maybe it's Cole.

Though the logical part of my brain quickly remembers it's better if it isn't.

I tap the screen anyway, holding my breath.

Cole: Will I see you at work on Monday?

Ah, work. His precious brand. That would be what he cares about and not the glass heart he just punched into dust.

Eliza: Who cares? Your scorched line—sorry “campfire”—is basically good to go. Pat yourself on the back and call it a day.

Cole: So, you won't be in?

Oh my God. I'm about to find a way to break the laws of physics so I can reach through the screen and smack him.

Do you check up on all of your employees on Saturday nights to verify their Monday plans? I send back bitterly.

Ha. It takes him a solid minute to respond to that one.

Cole: Only the ones I love.

Oof.

Mammoth freaking *oof*.

He loves me? After all of this? And he has to say it now after slamming the door in my face?

I hate how I get all squishy inside. I guess the joke is on me after all and I'm the one who's playing myself with these men.

Eliza: How do they usually answer?

Cole: So far, they're not very forthcoming.

Eliza: I might need a wellness day. Mostly so I can get an appointment with my employment lawyer to file a harassment suit.

Cole: You're not serious?

I'm not, but the joke's on him.

Eliza: We'll see. Depends on if I survive the many horrors waiting outside my front door. Do I need a bodyguard for that?

Cole: Eliza, if you were a parent, you'd understand.

Eliza: LOL. Right. Because it's not like I care about her or anything.

Cole: I'm out. I tried to be reasonable.

Eliza: Only because your head is that far up your ass.

At least he's a man of his word.

Because he doesn't respond to that last hit.

He just leaves me alone in this chasm of silence where I wonder how much of that was hot air—and how much he ever loved me, after all.

BAD CUPPA (COLE)



The next morning, I knock on Destiny’s door, feeling like the biggest walking shitpile alive.

“Dess?”

Silence.

Swearing, I bang on the door with my fist a few times, but she doesn’t answer. I hold my ear to the door until I hear her breathing.

She’s alive in there, at least.

Eliza’s backbone must be rubbing off. Destiny was never this bad with the stone-cold silent treatment.

Worst of all, I know I deserve it after what went down.

Still, I don’t do well with games.

I’d like to un-fuck my status as everybody’s favorite villain.

“Dess, open up.” I wait another minute before I sigh and say, “I’ve got my Swiss army knife. If I don’t think you’re okay in there, I’ll pull this door right off its hinges.”

“Dad! You’re ridiculous.”

I pull out my knife for show while I hear her stomping over. I wouldn’t actually take her door off—even I’m not *that* big a prick—but it’s better for her to wonder.

She tears the door open, glaring at me with her lips pursed.

“When it’s important, I need you to answer,” I say neutrally.

She still doesn’t speak and just folds her arms, indignant as ever.

“I’m going to the Wired Cup downtown for a meeting,” I say.

“Really? You woke me up for that?” She gives me a sarcastic thumbs-up.

“Destiny, I’m not asking for the damn moon. I just need you to acknowledge me when I say I’m going out.”

“You want me to talk to you? Fine.” She strains on the tips of her toes, trying and failing to reach eye level. “You’re a sexist, a jerkwad, and a rich bitch!”

“Rich...bitch?” I repeat slowly.

“Yeah! You just—God, you think you’re so much better than everyone else! You just had to assume the guys who stole my necklace were homeless. And I thought you’d actually care a *little* about the necklace. It was Mom’s last present, wasn’t it? Now it’s gone.”

Fuck.

I clear my throat. “Dess, we’ve already been over this homeless thing. Also, your mom had lot of jewelry—”

“Also,” she cuts in, “Eliza thinks it’s strange that they didn’t take my phone or purse.”

I freeze, cocking my head.

“What?” I have to admit, that *is* bizarre.

Why the hell would anyone go after that turtle and nothing else? It’s a specialty item you can’t just pawn off as easily as a ring or a bracelet.

“Did they see your phone? Or were they scared off before they could—”

“I dropped it, Dad. But whatever. It doesn’t matter, I guess. Just go to your stupid meeting.”

I hold in a brutal sigh.

She’s right.

I’ve burned this bridge and there’s no sense in playing Hardy Boys with her right now. I have other ways of figuring shit out, anyway.

I start moving away but stop and turn back to her. “Wait. Why am I a sexist pig again?”

“Eliza’s friend, Dakota—you think she’s such a damsel in distress that she can’t go anywhere without her hot married muscle?” She rolls her eyes. “Okay, Boomer.”

“Okay, Zoomer,” I throw back, my nostrils flaring. “For a girl who gets straight As in history, you must’ve forgotten Boomers weren’t born in the 1980s.”

“What-ever. You act like you’re two hundred, Dad.”

“So I’m a vampire *and* a jerk?” My jaw tightens.

Unbelievable.

“You totally were with Eliza,” she says bitterly. “She’s the one who washed blood off my leg while you were at your dumb meeting and you didn’t even thank her. She just took care of me. She cares, Dad. Then you showed up and started barking crap.”

For a second, I’m speechless.

She’s got me there.

“Just go already,” she says with a sigh, turning her back to me. “Meetings are what you do best anyway.”

My gut sinks because she’s too fucking right.

I’m certainly not at my best right now in this house with a daughter who’s acting like my conscience personified.

I should just go before I dwell on how badly I’ve mucked things up with Eliza for the thousandth time.

How did I let my anger take the driver’s seat? How did I discard a woman who came to my daughter’s rescue?

The same way I blunder through everything else, apparently.

I am a hotheaded fool with a hornet up his ass, and regrettably, I don’t know how to be anything else.



DEALING with old demons almost seems easy after everything else.

I head inside the downtown Wired Cup store to meet an unassuming man with white hair and a brown sports jacket. He waves at me.

“Mr. Lancaster?”

I move to his table and sit down across from him. We shake hands.

“I’m not much for small talk,” I say, dispensing with the niceties. “Give it to me, please.”

“Right. There’s no easy way to say this, Mr. Lancaster, but I think your more colorful suspicions were unfounded. I’ve reviewed the autopsy report. I’ve also talked to people who knew her—the folks she spent the most time with. Everything points to suicide.”

Goddammit.

An iron fist grips my heart and squeezes it dry.

Why am I so shocked? Deep down, a part of me always knew.

“Aster was a young woman prone to bouts of severe depression and

distress. She often disappeared from family events without much notice—that’s verified by you and everyone else I’ve talked to in Hawaii.”

I nod, staring into his dark-brown eyes.

“To be clear, I’m sugarcoating it. The chief housekeeper at the Kona estate, Kalani, she told me she’d never met anyone as miserable as Aster.” He pauses like he’s making sure I won’t go to pieces. I nod firmly. “It was very late that night, as you know. Fortunately, your security detail keeps impeccable records. For a second, I thought the records might be *too good*, so I went back a few years before the incident. Nope, same excellent logs. There was nothing out of the ordinary that night—until it happened.”

I feel my hand shaking under the table and I clench it into a fist against my thigh.

“Is it possible they missed anything?” I ask.

“Possible, but not probable,” he says quickly.

Damn. I stare at him blankly.

“Given her location and the state of the body in the autopsy report, I think we have a pretty clear suicide, even without a smoking gun. I’m sorry. Weather and maritime reported a windy night. Those waters would’ve been choppy—unpredictable—and if she had a couple drinks like the autopsy said, it wouldn’t have taken much at all for her to wind up in a bad situation. The ocean simply claimed her, and she allowed it.”

Bile rises up my throat.

I’m surprised I still feel this sick when I had a feeling this was coming.

“Case closed? That’s it? No alternate theories?” I know I’m reaching, but dammit, I have to if this is the last time.

He leans back in his chair, taking a long sip from his coffee cup.

“You sent me there personally. I did everything short of exhuming the body for another look. But we weren’t looking for poison, of course.” He shrugs. “There’s no good reason to suspect murder. Based on the evidence, it’s unlikely Aster Lancaster accidentally stumbled into the ocean without meaning to be there. She was still wearing her evening attire and her heels were found a little ways away on the beach after she was found, neatly placed together. No fancy theories needed to explain that.”

The word fancy stirs a memory.

That damnable golden turtle hanging from its delicate chain.

“Yeah. Right. There’s one thing I didn’t tell you about...”

He pulls out his notepad. “What’s that?”

“While we were in Kona at the house, my daughter found an intricate turtle necklace in my wife’s old room. An old friend and employee told Destiny I bought it for Aster.” I look down, straining for any hint of recognition. “Hell, he told me the same thing. The trouble is, I don’t remember buying that necklace at all—”

“It was a long time ago. You’d just lost your wife and you had a lot on your mind. It’s common to forget small details when you’re overstressed,” he says calmly.

I press my lips together. “Hear me out. It gets stranger.”

“Okay?” The detective’s eyes are shining with interest now.

“My daughter was attacked recently, here in Seattle. Robbed. Two men off the street shoved her to the ground and made off with that necklace.”

“Ah, I’m truly sorry to hear that. Did she file a police report?”

“Yes.”

“Did you ask them what they thought?” he says carefully.

“Random robbery. Go figure. They don’t think it has anything to do with her being a billionaire’s daughter or else they might’ve done worse.”

He nods. “If the cops were at the crime scene and know the area’s crime record, I’m inclined to believe them—”

“Something bothers me, though,” I cut in.

He waits.

“Who the hell randomly robs a teenager and leaves her iPhone and purse but takes a necklace? She dropped the phone. That was easy loot. They had to get closer to grab the necklace, and a secondhand dealer would’ve paid a pretty penny for that phone. It was almost brand new.”

“Phones are traceable unless they’re totally wiped. Necklaces aren’t. Maybe at first blush they thought it was the highest ticket item,” he says.

“I don’t know, man. It just feels like the damn turtle was the reason for the theft.”

He takes a slow drink of his coffee, studying me like I’m a paranoid nut. He may be right.

“Mr. Lancaster, these old cases are always difficult. When you’re looking back on them years later, it’s easy to find patterns and synchronicities where none actually exist. Sometimes, the simplest answers are the ones you’re looking for—if you can accept them.”

“Shit. Maybe you’re right.” I fall back in my seat. “I thought a second opinion would feel better than this...”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“This just doesn’t feel like closure, you know?” I rake a hand through my hair.

“Can I give you some advice? One former sailor to another?” My shirt is unbuttoned near the collar and his eyes scan the small tattoo there.

“Sure.” Why not? I’ve been on a roll with shitting up my life lately. There isn’t much anyone could advise that could make it worse.

“Let it go,” he says coldly.

“What?”

“It was a decade ago. It won’t be easy, but you’re better off just letting it go.” He pauses, clasping his hands. “Look, if I just told you that your wife was murdered, would you feel any better?”

“No, but—”

“You’d need to track down the killer, right? You’d feel compelled to make sure you got justice. I know your type. You’re the kind of guy who thrives on clear-cut answers.”

I nod.

“You’d have a new mission, only, it wouldn’t end well for you. Not for your daughter, either. So here’s a better one—walk away. Move on with your life and help your daughter move on with hers. You’ll never have a blow-by-blow account of what happened to your wife that day, but if you accept the basic conclusion...do more details matter?”

I raise my eyebrow.

Of course, they matter.

Aster could be ice-cold no matter how often I tried to break through her wall, and harder to please, but she didn’t deserve to drown.

“Would it bring her back?” His tone says he senses my frustration.

“What?”

“If I built a time machine and took you back so you could watch every second play out—but you couldn’t change it—would it bring her back?”

“No. Of fucking course not. But Destiny and I might have closure. It’s her mother we’re talking about.”

“Respectfully, that’s what funerals are for. You and your daughter have all the closure you’re ever going to get. Honestly, Mr. Lancaster, I don’t think beating it into the ground will help.”

I sigh with a weight that tells him he’s right without admitting it.

I thought I’d put this all behind me years ago until being at the Kona

house tore open old wounds.

Did I really think I'd get closure if the investigation stated the obvious?

Fat chance.

You know why you care and it's got nothing to do with Aster, a voice in the back of my head screams.

I see Eliza, asleep on my chest, soft tufts of honey-brown hair being tossed in the breeze until I stroke them down into place again.

Is she the reason why I can't move on?

No, it's definitely more than that.

That turtle necklace felt like a curse—and maybe it's a bigger one now that it's gone.

Troy's story about how I bought it for Aster at the market still bothers me. I don't remember a goddamned thing.

Deep down, I'm sure I never did.

I went to the beach and slept off my jet lag like usual.

And my daughter's messy hair, tear-stained face, and gashed-up leg after that thing was stolen...the way the robbery seemed so deliberate.

"I know you're just sharing your wisdom, and I appreciate it," I tell him. "The robbery still feels out of place, though."

The detective nods. "It's gone, isn't it?"

I blink at him, unsure where he's going with this.

"Yeah, it's gone."

He looks at me like a chemistry teacher waiting for his student to scrawl the last line of some formula.

Aster's gone.

Her necklace is gone.

Destiny's attackers are also gone without seriously hurting her, thank God.

Is that his point? Is he right?

Should I just let everything go?

I suddenly hate that I haven't heard from Eliza since my last few bitter texts.

"Gone is gone, Mr. Lancaster," he explains. "Even if you're feeling bothered, in my opinion you'll do yourself a solid dealing with what's still here."

"Thanks for meeting me," I mutter as I stand.

I barely wait for him to wave goodbye before I'm heading for my car. I

punch in Eliza's contact on my phone from the back seat.

She doesn't answer.

"Big surprise," I say to myself, texting her instead.

Can we talk?

My phone dings a couple minutes later.

Eliza: Sure. Do you need a new drink? I'm actually off the clock right now. Why don't you send the specs to my work email? I'm not sure it's appropriate for the boss to be texting me on weekends.

Fuck. I'm surprised my screen isn't frosted over.

At least I got a reply this time. I try calling again.

"Yes?" a voice that's too frigid and husky to be Eliza's answers.

"Where's Eliza?" I growl.

"Fucking a rock star. She tells me he's way better in bed than her last snarky businessman hookup. Can I take a message?"

"You are?"

"Your worst nightmare. Did you need something, Lump?"

My teeth grit together. Looks like Eliza hasn't been shy about throwing that stupid nickname around.

"Tell her I need to talk to her. Also, I'm sorry."

"Hmm, you're funny. Because those are *almost* the right words, even if they're a little bland, but totally wrong order. She's knows you're sorry. Now apologize like a *man*."

I pull my phone back, staring at the screen in disbelief.

"Is this high school? Put her on now," I snarl.

"Meh, I guess some things never change. She can't come to the phone right now and I'm saving her the trouble."

God, the mouth on this 'friend.'

"Let me talk to her," I growl.

"Dude, if she wanted to talk to you, would I be here making you miserable? By the way, a guy from that homeless camp that freaks you out so much saved my husband's life once. He runs the mailroom at a huge company now, and he takes food back there every weekend. You suck."

Dakota Burns.

I get it now.

I should've recognized that barbed tongue sooner.

"I've donated coffee there *hundreds* of times, for your information. I was worried about my daughter and said shit I never meant." This is ridiculous.

“Okay, and I’m worried about my friend. I’m nervous she’s getting sucked in with some douchebag who’s just going to break her heart the minute he decides she’s not good enough with her Seattle-sized shoebox apartment.”

“I didn’t *mean* to cut down her place. I just meant she’d be safer at my house,” I grind out.

“Whatever. Somebody should’ve chosen his words a little more carefully.”

“Dakota?”

“Ohhh, so you do remember me. Don’t wear out the name,” she spits.

“How pissed is she?”

“Ehh, on a scale of cold shoulder to scooping your balls out of your butt with a serving spoon, I’d say she’s probably somewhere around slashing your tires—oh, wait, except it’s your driver’s car. Guess she can’t do that.”

I look down when I don’t hear anything else.

She hung up on me.

I don’t bother calling again. Not while that murder hornet of a woman guards the phone.

At home, I offer to take Destiny out for dinner.

I rattle off a few of her favorite places, even some that would mean driving downtown again. It’s worth it to have one of my girls back on speaking terms.

But at the Mexican place she picks, she sits across from me in the booth and glares at me all through the first course.

By the time our drinks arrive, I think I’d have better conversation with a pissed off cougar.

When I’m picking the last few bites off my plate, I can’t take it. I quickly pay the bill and step outside.

It isn’t until we’re home again that she finally says more than a dozen words. “If Eliza never talks to us again because of you, I’m going to be *pissed*.”

“Why do you care so much?” I have to know which reason out of a thousand matters most to her.

She crosses her arms.

“She’s my *friend*. A cool, older one. Like, she would have done things with me the way Christa’s mom does with her.”

I chuckle, rubbing my cheek. “No one’s quite like Christa’s mom. She’s

been your homeroom mom since kindergarten.”

“Yep. Christa begged her not to since eighth grade, but everyone else thinks she’s really lucky. Eliza could’ve been that badass, except *you* chased her away. All because you’re a growly, selfish grumpbutt and—and is anything *ever* good enough for you, Dad?”

“Not fair,” I flare. “My high standards have never been unreasonable.”

Also, that’s not the point.

“You’ve grounded me for solid Bs on science tests—”

“And you’re an honor student because of it. You always turn it around and ace the class, don’t you?”

She puts her hand on her hip, rolling her eyes.

“Oh, right. Because God forbid I ever pass with an A-minus. My test grades aren’t good enough. Eliza’s apartment isn’t good enough. Your dumb coffee isn’t good enough. It needs to be handpicked by flying monkeys and roasted over a volcano. *So dumb*,” she adds under her breath.

Or so she thinks.

“I heard that, Dess. It’s never bad for a CEO to bring new products into his business line. It’s an evolving industry and that’s part of the job.” I stop, wondering why I’m defending myself to my fifteen-year-old daughter.

Guilt is a powerful kind of black magic.

“Whatever. You were an epic jerk to Eliza, but this isn’t about her and you know it.” She looks away, her little face flushed red with anger.

“Then what’s it about? Tell me.”

She chews her lip. A crease lines her forehead.

“You’re kind of a control freak. You weren’t there when I got mugged. It was a random, crazy thing and you couldn’t stop it. So now the only thing you can do is criticize Eliza like a total dick.”

“Doctor Philiss, you can go to your room,” I growl, stabbing my finger in her room’s direction.

“Gladly. I’d say I won’t come out for a week, but then you’ll probably take the door off. See? Control freak.” She takes off, stomping up the staircase on her way.

I push my face into my palm with a groan that burns my throat.

It’s amazing. I’ve sealed multimillion-dollar deals and motivated whole teams in the blackest pit of a recession, but when it comes to the people I care about the most?

I’ve got a blind rattlesnake for a tongue.

“Dess?” I call after her before it’s too late, rising from my chair.

“What?” she flings back at me from the landing.

“I apologized to her,” I say, stopping next to the stairs and looking up.

She glowers down at me. “To Eliza?”

I nod.

“What did she say?”

“She wouldn’t take my call.”

“Oh my God.” She shoves her face into her palm, peeking out through her fingers. “You apologized over voicemail? Please tell me you didn’t.”

“Close enough.” I’m not telling a high schooler that I got my face verbally ripped off by her overprotective friend.

Destiny sighs, gripping the banister. “If this doesn’t work out, promise me you’ll never make a Tinder profile. Like, hire one of those millionaire matchmakers like normal rich guys do...”

“Why?”

“Because it’s over. I love you, but you’re as graceful as a walrus when it comes to dating.” She climbs the rest of the stairs in silence, less angry and more mortified now.

Hello, knife to the gut.

That shit smarts, even coming from my sassy daughter.

I watch my phone all night, waiting for a call, for a text to come through that gives me a chance to offer her a real apology.

And just as my little bee predicted, nothing happens.

I stare at the screen until after three in the morning with my eyes bleary and bloodshot before I drag my sorry ass to bed.

Sleep doesn’t come easy.

Especially when I can smell Eliza.

It’s all in my head, I know.

My sheets were washed since the last time she was here, but I swear they’re still tormenting me with her scent.

Heartache is a cruel visitor. It always clings the most when you desperately want it gone.

It reminds me that I’ve done the unthinkable, turning into a lovestruck fool.

Emphasis on *fool* when I floated the l-word—*by text like a chump*—and of course she didn’t return it.

My brain rewards my brooding with a feverish slideshow that tastes like

the Hawaiian trade winds and tender lips.

Eliza in my arms.

Her smile in my sunlit eyes.

Her tongue radiating passion in my mouth.

Her legs wrapped around me so tight I'm going to explode.

I wake up in the worst state—hard, angry, and exhausted.

I know she hasn't called or texted before I bother to look at my phone.

God fucking dammit, I hope she's at work today.

Because if she's not, Destiny is right.

It's over, and then my only option is some high-paid cupid setting me up with another arranged relationship. Because the first one worked out so well.

I sit up and bury my face in my hands, swallowing a groan.

Only six a.m. and I'm already fucking gutted.

Snarling, I punch her contact and call her.

Silence.

Happy Monday, I text. ***I'd greatly appreciate it if you're available this afternoon for a quick, informal talk with Gina and myself about our winter drink options. Christmas comes earlier every year.***

She doesn't respond. Hell, reading that back, I wouldn't either.

"Idiot," I mutter.

By the time I'm showered and heading into work after letting Destiny off at the aquarium, I'm so tense I wonder if I had a staring contest with a Medusa.

I check my email from the back of the car like always.

There's no resignation or nastygram from HR about Eliza yet.

Maybe she's just hanging me out to dry.

Should I intrude on her space? Or will that just upset her more?

Yeah, never mind. If I'm even asking the obvious, it's probably too late to worry.

Eliza Angelo has had enough of my shit.

I blew it spectacularly, and now I wonder if I'll ever be whole.

OVERCAFFEINATED (ELIZA)



“**Y**ou could just talk to him,” Dakota says, her eyes flashing with amusement.

I’m on her couch, boneless and staring up at the ceiling.

“How will that help again? He’ll either confirm what I already know—which is I’m not good enough for his smug, billionaire face—or he’ll just say what I want to hear.”

“What if it’s number two?” She pours a cup of tea and slides it over.

“Oh, God. You’re making tea for me now? That means it’s *really* bad.” My jaw hangs open as I lift the drink and listen to her laugh. I couldn’t count how many times I made her coffee and scones back when we were neighbors. “Anyway, you know I’ll just get sucked back in. It’s a vicious cycle. This is Derek all over again—without Derek.”

“He’s not married. I’m pretty sure he’s younger and hotter, too.”

“Bleh. I’m not sure if that makes it better or worse. I mean, I’m not his sidepiece, but at least there was an obvious reason why Derek couldn’t commit. He had a wife and a family. I’d almost rather not be good enough for a man because there’s someone else in the picture than just not be good enough for him period.”

“So, what do you want to do?” She smiles wickedly. “FYI, I still have that serving spoon ready for his balls. Or even better, I bet I could get Lincoln to snag another trained raven. How does a whole month of getting pooped on sound? Every time he steps outside, I promise.”

“Dakota, no. You’re a mother now. You don’t get to go full Edgar Allan.” I sigh. “I don’t know, but I don’t think I can keep working there...”

“Oh, crap. Are you sure? This is like your dream job—or at least a big step to your real dream. Just because it didn’t work out, it shouldn’t cost you everything.”

I shrug, wrinkling my nose. “What’s the alternative? Keep the job at the expense of my dignity? Continue to report to him every day? Half the office gossip already revolves around Cole Lancaster. I’ll have to hear about every new girl he’s with...”

“It’s too early to give up. Linc and I broke up once.”

I laugh. “How could I forget? I was ready to kill him for you.”

She hugs her knees to her chest with a far-off smile. “Funny how that works. I’m ready to destroy Cole Lancaster now. But we worked it out, you know. You guys could, too.”

“Not likely. Lightning rarely strikes twice.”

“He did apologize. Technically, several times,” she points out.

“Yeah, and never to my face. Not a good sign.”

She picks at a loose thread in her shirt, thinking before she says, “He gave up, Eliza. You wouldn’t talk to him.”

“But if I accept his apology, what’s next?”

“What do you mean?”

I sit up.

“I knew from the beginning I didn’t belong with him. I’m a total stranger in his sparkly world of Hawaiian houses and like fifty personal servants. It’s just a matter of time until it comes up again.” I stop and sigh. “Cole isn’t a monster. Even if his apology was sincere—or he gives me one that’s not so lame—I’m just not from his circle. Oh, he’s sorry now, sure, because we have fun together and things are light. We have long talks and good sex. But we can’t do serious.”

“Eliza,” she warns, but I’m not done.

“If we kiss and make up, it just doesn’t fix anything. What if a few years from now we’re planning a holiday meal, and he has some billionaire client flying in, and my parents are coming into town, but I can’t serve sweet potato pie because that’s not sophisticated enough for foreign billionaires and—ugh.”

Snickering, she shakes her head.

“Linc is such a good man. I never had to worry about this crap.” We sit quietly for a minute, and then she asks, “Have you gone to work since it happened?”

“Not much, and I’m running out of PTO fast. I have to go back soon or resign,” I say miserably.

“Big decision. What are you going to do? Don’t think, just say the first thing that pops into your head,” she tells me.

“I think...I’m finish out the week and quit on Friday. Then I’m flying back to San Diego for a while.”

“No two-week notice?” she asks, stunned.

“It’s just expected, not required. This time, I think I deserve an exception.”

She laughs. “So you’re just going to be like eff off?”

“Pretty much.” I nod firmly, even though the idea turns my stomach.

“Badass. But if you do that, you probably can’t expect to have Wired Cup as a reference, and you’ve given them an entire product line. Burning bridges that big is never a good thing. Mr. Lump doesn’t need to take away your credit.”

“...I have no idea what he’ll say about me, but I can’t imagine it’d be flattering after this. Better to just leave and pretend it never happened...”

Her face falls, worry shining in her eyes.

“Are you sure, Eliza?”

I nod. “I always manage. You know that. After Derek, I swore I’d never be anyone’s sucker again. I’ve let Cole Lancaster consume too much of my life already and it’s the only one I have.”

She nods. “I’ll support you all the way. I just hate seeing you like this. You guys seemed good together. You were happier than I’ve ever seen you.”

Ouch.

I try not to let that pain in my stomach show on my face when I smile at her.

“Who knows. As long as I’m stuck pining over Cole freaking Lancaster, I’ll never know what happiness is.”



AFTER LUNCH ON FRIDAY, I work up the nerve to talk to Gina.

I wait impatiently by her desk until she spins around to face me.

“Hi. So, I need you to come watch the campfire method with the peaberries one more time, and ask any questions. I’m not coming back on

Monday.”

“Oh, that’s no problem.” She waves me off. “We won’t need to run the next lab test before Thursday, anyhow.”

“No, I won’t be here next Thursday either.”

Her eyes narrow. “Well, whenever you get back.”

“Gina...” I clear my throat. “I’m not coming back.”

She blinks in surprise. “Oh. Oh, no, but why? You’re not jumping to a competitor so soon, are you? Mr. Lancaster would—”

“No. Nothing like that.” I set my face. “You’ve been seriously great. The whole team has, really. I just don’t think I can work here anymore.”

“Oh, Jesus,” she says, making a pained face. For a second, she looks up at the ceiling before she meets my eyes again. “This is because of Mr. Lancaster, isn’t it?”

I don’t answer. I don’t even nod.

The whole point of trying to exit gracefully was to *avoid* gossip-drama. If only I could stop my face from turning into a flushed tomato.

Gina rolls her chair back and stands. “Okay, I’ll come watch. But are you sure, Eliza? Shouldn’t you at least get your bonuses and whatever licensing fees he promised?”

“I don’t care, honestly. I just want to be done...”

I hate that I’m so transparent.

She can probably read an entire book of heartbreak written on my face.

“I gotcha,” she whispers with a friendly pat on the shoulder.

Holding back tears, I walk her through the process one last time, answering her questions as they come.

Luckily, the peaberry brew isn’t hard to replicate at this point when I’ve done it dozens of times with other lab techs.

“What are you doing for the rest of the day?” she asks when we’re done.

I hesitate. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to do one more experiment while I still have access to the equipment. Then I need to send Cole an official resignation. Quitting without notice is bad enough. I can’t just no-show. I also need to mail something I picked up for Destiny before I’m done...”

“Of course!” She gives me a sad look. “What’s next? You’re so talented. I hate to think of you leaving the industry. Is there really no way to work things out?”

“I haven’t decided. After work tonight, I’m flying home.”

“San Diego?”

“Yep. I’ll take a small breather and figure out my plan while I’m there.”

“Wow.” She sucks in a breath and lets it out slowly. “So, this is really happening.”

“Unfortunately,” I say.

She retreats to her desk while I stand over the metal countertop, wondering what to brew. Falling in love pulled me away from my own projects for too long.

I decide to try this black-and-white thing, throwing cocoa and vanilla beans together with the peaberry blend.

There’s another experience I wouldn’t have had without Cole.

When will I work with peaberry beans again? I might as well go for broke and use them while they’re here.

The brew gives off a delicate, wonderful aroma from the start. It’s sweet, almost like a fresh batch of chocolate chip cookies.

I keep inhaling because it actually makes me feel better.

Until my phone pings.

For half a second, I hope it’s Cole before I remember I shouldn’t.

And it’s not.

So much for the shrewd businessman who won’t take no for an answer. It only took him a few days to give up on me.

It’s actually my father. I open Dad’s text and smile.

Can’t wait to have you home. How about I make you all the coffee this time? It’s only fair.

A tear runs down my cheek and falls on my shaky smile. He hasn’t forgotten all the years I spent making him coffee after the salt prank.

You know what? This won’t be so bad.

I’ve always found comfort and healing in good coffee and family. That’s where happiness lies.

I spent so much time with Cole and this fairy-tale lie that I lost track of that.

Now, it’s time to reclaim my life.

It’s after five on a Friday night, so people start straggling out, calling their goodbyes and heading off on their weekend adventures.

My goodbye brew is almost ready, and then it’s curtain call.

I still have to clean up and send my resignation, too.

Gina hugs me on her way out. “It’s been a good run. I just wish it would’ve been longer. Not to be a pest, but are you *sure* I can’t talk you out

of this?”

I smile at her. “I’m sure. Thanks for everything.”

“No, thank *you* for everything you’ve done. Stick around as long as you want, but don’t miss your flight. It’s supposed to be a stormy night.”

She’s the last one out.

When I’m alone, I glance around this amazing lab, trying not to linger and trip any new emotional switches.

Ten minutes later, I kill the burner under the coffee and let it sit while I clear out my desk.

Once that’s done, I ladle my steaming black liquid into a cup and take a sip.

Oh, mama.

It tastes like one of those old-school “twist” ice cream cones. Half chocolate, half vanilla, with a hint of coffee.

But instead of being frozen, it’s warm and comforting and exactly what my heart needs.

I fill my thermos and dump the rest, clean up, and then prepare for the highlight of my day.

The end of this screwed up chapter of my life.

I plop down in my desk chair for the last time and wake my computer, then log in to my email and type in Cole’s name and CC the entire world.

MR. LANCASTER,

I HAVE COFFEE, comfort, and the best family anyone could ask for. That’s all I’ve decided I need in life. I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to several important regional beverage lines that will hopefully delight your customers for years to come.

My resignation is effective immediately. I have a flight to San Diego tonight, and I’ll no longer be checking my work email or messages after I sign off for today.

Goodbye.

SINCERELY,
Eliza Angelo

DONE.

I log off and leave my ID badge on the keyboard.

It doesn't hit me until I stand up and stretch for the last time.

Leaving this place is harder than I expected.

This lab has all the stuff coffee dreams are made of, and now I'm saying goodbye.

I cleaned up well after that last batch, but I grab a few towels and wipe down the counters again anyway for good measure.

Bad move.

A million memories flood my head like swarming bees.

Destiny's adorably awkward baby seal impressions. Her freaking out over turtles and dolphins and her eyes shining so bright the first time she was back on the beach after I showed her how to surf.

She's too sweet for life. I'll miss experiencing the world through her young eyes.

And then the obvious, everything good and bad and impossible to forget.

Cole.

His wildfire kisses.

Those searing nights in paradise that permanently stole a piece of my heart.

Cole leaning over me, tangled in his huge arms, a rough growl on his lips as he pushes his way inside me.

Cole grumping at everyone but me.

Cole telling me he loves me in the worst way possible—and then robbing me of the chance to hear it, to see it on his face.

God.

Our stillborn love darts across my mind like a violent racquetball.

Memories I wish like hell I could forget, but can't.

The sweetest memories turned sickeningly bitter.

I shake my head, pressing a palm to my mouth.

If only he'd been honest from the start, he would've spared us both some agony.

But I still hope our brief time together did them some good.

I'll never completely regret it if the trip to Kona took the edge off old tragedies. For Destiny, at least, that seems to be true.

After I grab my suitcase, I head upstairs and out the door—right into a frigid rain and a growling sky.

“Yikes!” I sputter, slinking back against the wall.

The downpour floods the gutters and drowns out the world, drenching everything in sight. The street isn't full of puddles—it's a freaking river.

“Way to go,” I mutter, pulling out my phone for the forecast I should've checked hours ago.

How could I forget what Gina said?

I barely read the words *heavy rainfall, thunderstorms, three hours* before my hair starts falling down my face in wet, clumped strands.

I race back toward the exit door and pull, but of course it's firmly locked. And in all my infinite wisdom, I left my badge inside, thinking I'd never need it again.

Brilliant.

There's a bus shelter on the curb, just a quick jog across the parking lot.

I think. In this mess, it feels like it's ten blocks away.

I can't see it clearly in the pounding rain and hazy darkness, but I know it's there.

With a deep, exasperated breath, I take off at a ground-eating run, dragging my luggage behind me.

I'm not sure how any Lyft driver sees me through this storm. I haven't even had a second in this mess to order a ride yet.

Not that it matters.

I'm an ugly, drowned rat before I'm even close to the bus shelter.

With my footsteps splashing water up my legs, I finally hit the sidewalk, just a few more mad paces from that stupid shelter.

Then a car whips past, stops, and backs up next to the curb. The passenger window powers down.

“Who invited the whole ocean into town? You need a ride?” a familiar voice asks. I see Troy Clement's leathery grinning face and let out a huge sigh of relief.

I grab the passenger door handle and hop in. He turns on his flashers while he stalks outside to grab my bag and stuffs it in his trunk.

“Oh my God. Thank you so much!” I gush once he's back behind the wheel. “Today has been a crap sundae and this is just the cherry on top.”

“Yeah, I saw your email. You okay, Miss E-lectric?” His sharp silvery eyes shine with concern.

I wince a little without showing it, shivering in the sudden blast of AC. But hearing him mention my resignation also plays on my nerves.

I didn’t expect to have to answer to anyone face-to-face after sending that email.

Water drips off my hair and nose as I tilt the vents away from me.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine,” I finally say.

“Here.” He puts his heater on full blast, which helps with the soggy chill. I just wish he wasn’t giving me that hangdog look dripping with sympathy. “What happened, lady? I hate like hell to see you go. You just taught that old hound dog some new tricks with those killer fucking drinks. I really thought you had a future with Wired Cup—and with Cole. Hell, I thought you *were* the future.”

I cringe, heat rushing to my face.

“I just...my mind is made up, Troy. It’s personal, but thank you,” I say.

He presses his lips together as the car starts moving. “Sorry. So there’s no talking you out of it, huh?”

I shake my head vigorously.

“No. I just want to get home to my family and clear my head. Any chance you could drop me off at the airport? I have a flight to catch.”

“Definitely. That gives me a good half hour to try to change your mind.” His goofy smirk says he’s only halfway serious. “You know you’re the best person we’ve had in R & D in ages, hands down. Gina Walker’s nice and all, but she goes by the book. The lab geeks assemble recipes, but they don’t *cook*, if you know what I mean.”

“Troy, I know—” I hate that he’s right.

He laughs loudly again. “And you’re so modest too. What the hell? I bet if you asked to double your pay, you’d get it approved in a heartbeat.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh, even if I feel disembodied. “Come on, now you’re just kissing butt. The pay was great, so it’s not that. I’m just...not a good fit. Not for this company...or for him.”

Whoops.

I clamp my lips shut.

I didn’t mean to say that last part out loud. In the silence, it hangs in the air like an armed grenade, ready to explode.

“Damn shame, Eliza,” Troy says slowly, inching the car forward in the

rainy traffic. “You’re mighty good with both Lancasters.”

“Both of them?”

“The big man and his princess, yeah. You broke up their old routine and believe me, they needed it,” he says, his eyes fixed on the road.

There’s that twang of guilt on my heartstrings.

I’m going to miss that girl so much.

About as much as I’m trying *not* to miss her ginormous prick of a father. He’s too good at giving me all the conflicted feelings in the universe.

“I hope they’ll be all right,” I whisper. “Destiny was so upset when those guys knocked her down and took the necklace. I felt awful for her, and I still hate that I could’ve prevented the whole thing. I shouldn’t have let her walk over to the park alone. Now, she’s lost another piece of her mom...”

“You’re still worrying about that?” His tone hardens, but then he looks over with that easygoing smile. “I mean, it was daytime. A lot of folks hang around a crowded café. She told me all about it. No reason to think she’d be shoved down and robbed in broad daylight, as shitty as this city gets sometimes. Me, I can’t wait to get back to Bali.”

I manage a thin smile. “I could’ve had her wait to meet me. I shouldn’t have let her go wandering on her own. Cole trusted me. I just wish I hadn’t ruined it.”

“She’s fifteen years old. Not five.”

True enough, I guess.

Actually, that reminds me...

I start pawing through my purse, double-checking that I have everything I need for my flight. When I see the small black box, I freeze.

“Oh. *Oh, crap!*” I moan.

“What’s up?”

I look at him. “My friend Wayne makes this amazing jewelry. I had him make a replica of Destiny’s necklace. It’s not perfect and it’s definitely made of cheaper materials, but it’s good enough to tide her over until she gets something better. I know it can’t replace Aster’s necklace, but...I hoped it would give her some comfort.” I slouch in the seat and sigh. “Except, it won’t now. I forgot to mail it. I know this weather sucks, but do you think you could swing by UPS on the way to the airport? I really want to get this to her.”

I open the box, retrieve the necklace, and hold it up, letting the black onyx turtle dangle from the chain.

We hit another touch-and-go traffic snarl.

Troy looks over as he stomps the brakes and stares, his jaw visibly tightening.

“...um, is something wrong?” I ask.

“Eliza, in my humble opinion, you ought to think twice about mailing that thing,” he says.

Whoa. I’ve never heard this hurt, oddly sad edge in his voice before.

“No? Why not?” It’s hard to get the words out.

“Not all memories are good ones, lady. Destiny’s been through enough shit with her mom and I never wished her any harm—”

“What? What do you mean by harm?” I ask, confused.

I don’t understand the weird change in his mood. It’s just a hamfisted replica of her mom’s turtle necklace. What’s the big deal?

He stares at me like he’s trying to decide if I’m stupid or cruel.

“Shit, never mind. That came out wrong.”

I cock my head, eyes still on him as he stares at the road. We’re finally moving again at a five mile per hour crawl.

“I don’t follow, Troy. Why would you say you never wished her any harm? It’s not like you had anything to do with the robbery...”

“Because you didn’t let me finish the sentence, chatterbox. Jesus,” he snaps.

My eyes go wide.

Why do I get the impression I’m riding with someone very different than Cole’s goofy sidekick? It’s like there’s another side to this silly, almost boyish best friend.

He licks his lips and continues.

“Look, I just meant there’s a silver lining to her losing the damn thing I don’t think you’re seeing. Have you ever thought that maybe she doesn’t *need* to think about her dead mom every day? Does she really need such a morbid trinket swinging from her neck? The funeral was ten years ago.”

“Funeral?” Now, I’m really confused. “But Aster only wore it when she was alive, right? I thought it was the last gift Cole ever gave her. I guess I just don’t see the harm in—”

“Shut it,” he growls, his eyes flicking over at me and then back at the mess outside. “Sorry. That was rude. It’s just a goddamned mess out here and I’m trying to focus. Give me a few.”

Holy crap.

Is it really just the storm and traffic stressing him out?

That appeasing smile he always wears is gone, and there's a hard edge to his words now. Very strange, but maybe he's had a rotten day, too.

"Okay." I try to keep my voice even.

For the next few minutes, we're quiet as we turn onto the highway. Things are moving slightly faster, but it's still like riding in a hovercraft.

His eyes narrow when he looks at me again. "Sorry about that, again. Me and my big mouth. Guess I'm just a little overprotective when it comes to Dessy and all that shit. I've been hoping they're finally moving on, is all."

Okayyy.

So, apparently, we're not dropping it.

"I'm just surprised. Back in Hawaii you seemed happy that she found the turtle necklace."

"It was Aster's last memory. I had to respect that. Plus, with how Dess behaved on the rest of the trip, I figured she could handle it. But I have to be honest with you, E—I was goddamned *glad* to see it go. Way more than finding it. In my opinion, if you care about her, you'll hang on to that thing a while longer. Maybe you'll give it to her someday years from now, or maybe you won't. Right now, not only is it a symbol of her dead mom, it's also a reminder she was *attacked*." He's quiet for a minute, his face set like stone.

I frown. I hadn't thought about it like that.

Maybe he has a point?

The rain picks up again, though, pelting the windshield and dragging us to a complete stop.

I decide he's making some sense, even if he seems weirdly pissed about it. I'm just not convinced he's right.

"Sorry if I upset you," I say, stuffing the necklace back in my purse. "I'm really not trying to rub salt in any old wounds. I just...I care about her, too. I want her to be happy."

"What do you have to be sorry for?" he asks.

Red and blue flashes spin up ahead through the gloom. Police lights.

Awesome, more traffic.

Good thing my plane doesn't leave for two hours.

"I think I've just been on edge since Destiny got mugged that day," I tell him. "I'm in constant Mama Bear mode—funny, because I've never thought of myself like that."

I try to brush it off as that. I don't dare mention stupid Cole and his stupid

emotional roller coaster stressing me out.

Slowly, we creep by the accident.

It's a newer car that slid off the road into a ditch. Small crowds of people are milling around in the rain, watching a stretcher being loaded into the back of an ambulance. We both eyeball it as we drive past, our faces set.

I'm going to need a good rom-com or something on the plane after talking about death and potentially seeing it, too.

Troy's appeasing smile returns—like the grim scene makes him lighten up—and he nods. “That’s what makes you bowing out even sadder. Dessy needs somebody to be protective of her. Someone with a lighter touch than her bear of an old man.”

“That’s Cole, all right,” I say bitterly.

“Girls need a mom, too. Or if they can’t have that, at least a badass woman in their lives.” He shrugs, his knuckles tightening on the steering wheel. “Don’t you think? Correct me if I’m wrong since I’m not a chick. I just know Destiny loved the crap out of you, Eliza.”

“Yeah.” I nod glumly, trying to smother the heartache.

Lightning blazes across the sky like broken glass and I jump. My heartbeat triples.

“Y’know, I get why you feel responsible for her losing the old necklace,” he says.

“You do?” The fact that someone else understands just confirms that I’m right to blame myself.

I feel like such a loser.

How did I ever let a teenager get robbed?

“Yeah. She got hit because you weren’t around. And now maybe that you’re taking off to live your own life—*understandably*, I’ll add—you feel a little guilty leaving her alone again. Whatever you do, don’t beat yourself up.”

“Sure,” I tell him.

The rain quickens until it’s coming down in sheets. The blurry lights cutting through the darkness aren’t nearly enough.

“Fucking hell. Can’t see *shit*,” Troy says, slowing to a stop again.

I shiver. “It’s bad. What are we going to do?”

“We’re gonna pull over for a few and wait this out. Don’t see how I can keep driving in this crap,” he grumbles.

“Got it. Whatever you think is best.” I wonder how long this storm will

last. If I have to swap my plane ticket out, I will, though flights will probably be delayed in this.

I must fall into my phone for a while. Because when I look up, Troy's silvery eyes are locked on my face, staring through me with this odd, blank expression.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"Yeah. No. Not exactly..." He inhales sharply before he says, "Eliza, listen. I keep thinking about it and I really don't think you should mail Destiny that necklace. Neither of them need that ghost fucking haunting them again. It was such a shitty, sad experience. Cole, he's spent *years* blocking it out. He couldn't even remember buying the damn thing. But ever since that thing turned up, it's been on his brain a lot. It makes him think more than he should. It isn't healthy."

"He really loved her." I pull my phone to my chest.

"He didn't," Troy snaps, his lip curling. "That was the fucking problem all along. He *tried*, but he couldn't do it. They were tossed together in crappy matrimony and they weren't a good fit. She needed a different kind of man, someone stronger and more energetic than Cole. He wasn't up to snuff, and that's why he's so damn broken up about it, even ten years later, if you want to know the truth."

What the what?

I'm floored.

Where's *this* coming from? I've never seen Troy look so unsettled, so mad, his cheeks painted splotchy red.

There's another side to this man and it's a little scary.

I don't even process that we're moving again through the downpour, darting through gaps in the traffic. He has to be guessing whether or not there are cars in front of him.

Rain slams the windshield like the entire sea crashing down on us, turning everything black.

I don't even know what to say.

I'm deathly curious about Troy's word vomit, but it feels like asking more will just make him...angrier?

Not wise in this weather.

Not wise at all.

"Umm—maybe we should pull over," I suggest gently.

"Yeah," he throws back.

But he keeps on driving, weaving the car around the back of a large truck, dangerously close to its trailer.

My heart climbs into my throat. “Can you still see here? Because I can’t...um, Troy?”

“Don’t worry, big mouth. I’ve got this.”

Big mouth?

I feel the color draining from my face.

I’m starting to worry. What exactly does Troy think he has under control?

The sky matches my feelings when it rips open again, drowning my fear in a deafening clap of thunder.

WAKE UP AND SMELL THE... (COLE)



Tom waits for me outside the office as I climb in the car's back seat.

"Straight home?" he asks.

"No. We need to pick Destiny up from her internship."

"Sir, I usually pick Destiny up by four. I do hope she hasn't been waiting on us for over an hour."

I know when to pick my kid up, I almost snap, but he's just being as loyal as ever.

Instead, I say, "I believe she had to help with a presentation on sea lion vocalizations."

"Ah. So our Destiny's going to be the one to break the language barrier with sea life. I always knew she was special."

I smile at the ridiculous joke.

We haven't made it very far when a light rain turns into a proper deluge.

Half an hour later, we pull up in front of the aquarium. We're just in time because the sky turns from a dense grey to an angry black that's determined to drown this city.

Dess spots us and comes running around the car. The rain doesn't bother her much when she's assuming that leisurely I'm-too-cool-for-this-world pace teenagers love.

As she climbs in, she whips her head around, splashing water on me like a wet dog.

"Thanks, Fido!" I say, wiping rain off my neck with a scowl. "I would have moved or gotten you a towel like a normal human being, you know."

She shrugs, fighting back a grin.

“What do you want for dinner tonight?”

Another shrug.

“Another pizza?” I guess.

Her head flops back and forth faster.

“Public Market?”

She responds with an eye roll.

“Sushi?”

“Dad, I barely like fish, not counting that stuff in Hawaii. God,” she whines.

“So you can talk? Are you planning to ignore me forever, Dess? We live in the same house and you’ll have your work cut out for you,” I growl.

She doesn’t say anything.

“Want to tell me how I get you talking to me again?” I ask her point blank, sick of the games.

“Um, maybe start by treating Eliza like a person?”

My jaw pinches together.

Only fifteen and she’s already making demands. Shame she’s set on this marine biology thing, or she would’ve made one hell of an executive negotiator.

“I told you, I tried. She wasn’t interested in hearing it. I can’t make a woman talk to me—not even a badger lady.”

She gives me a long stare.

“So, wait, somehow you stomp around like you’re king of the world and you can make everything happen, but not this? If you want something badly enough, you go after it, Dad. That’s what you taught me. That’s how you live. I’m not sure why it’s any different with Eliza.” She huffs out a heavy breath. “But you apologized over voicemail, right?”

“She wouldn’t pick up the phone,” I force out, knowing how pathetic that sounds.

Even now, I have an urge to show up at Eliza’s door and wait there all night until she talks to me.

“That’s not an apology,” Dess says, swiping a hand over her face.

“Thank you, doctor. Did those sea lions make you an expert on doling out love advice?” I smirk at her.

“Dude. You’re such a *dad*. Maybe it’s an old people thing—I don’t know—but even the freakin’ high school boys know apologizing over a voicemail isn’t apologizing at all.”

I glower, wishing whatever the hell happened with Eliza could be as simple as young love.

She shakes her head tiredly.

“Yep. Definitely an old guy thing. But Eliza isn’t *that* old. You’ve got to wizen up if you want her back. She’s younger than you and she doesn’t know what dating was like before the wall fell.”

“Good, because I never heard of anyone taking dating advice from East Germans. And you said apologizing isn’t apologizing.”

“No, I said apologizing *over voicemail* isn’t apologizing. Key difference.”

“Why not? I said I was sorry.”

She looks at me like I’m on fire and she isn’t sure if she wants to put me out.

“Right, in the crummiest way ever. You could mean it—or it could just be convenient. You didn’t even talk to her. Have you tried meeting her in person?”

“I wanted to, but it hasn’t been in the cards. And shouldn’t I simply respect her space?”

“Umm—I’ve only ever had one boyfriend—”

“Who?” I bite off.

The little prick had better hope he’s another imaginary college kid, for his sake.

I remember how I was at fifteen, and I sure as hell don’t want any boy like me chasing my daughter.

“Dad, focus. If he basically called me a loser and ghosted—sorry, ‘respected my space’—I’d just assume it was over.”

“I didn’t call her a loser. Not once,” I clip.

“No, but you implied she lives in a warzone where bikers shoot at mafia dudes every day for their drug money.”

“Hardly.” I stare at her.

“Jeez, I saw it in a movie once... Anyhow, you crapped the bed. You made her feel like less, like she was stupid for taking care of me. You came off like a big gross snob.”

“You two keep twisting my words,” I say bitterly. “You’ve known me my whole life, Destiny. Have you ever heard me shit on the homeless even once? Have you forgotten the times I brought you to my charity events, where I gladly served them coffee myself? I could’ve easily passed it off to a subordinate.”

“Yeah, well. Not until that day at Eliza’s place—”

“When I was upset—*furious*—that my beloved daughter was robbed and assaulted?” I exhale slowly. “You and Eliza can call me a Scrooge on steroids, but facts are facts. There’s no denying the fact that crimes are sharply higher there, and wherever there’s more crime, the more you’re likely to be a victim. Numbers don’t lie.”

She sighs. “You are so determined to screw this up, aren’t you?”

“I’m not,” I flare, unsure why I’m taking love advice from my fifteen-year-old daughter. I punch down the privacy screen. “Tom, take us back to the office.”

“Will do, Mr. Lancaster.”

By the time he’s turning around, the rain is moving in sheets. If I stuck my hand out the window, I’d barely see it in this mess.

“Mr. Lancaster,” Tom says a minute later.

“Yeah?”

“If this weather gets much worse, I might need to pull over for safety.”

I nod when he looks back in the rearview mirror, but I’m not feeling generous.

“Goddamned great,” I mutter. “Now I’m going to be delayed by weather.”

“Good news—she’ll be delayed by the rain too if she’s leaving,” Destiny says. “But why are we going back to the office? How will that solve anything?”

“She works fourteen-hour days. It’s a miracle if she ever ducks out before seven o’clock unless I make her. I’ll simply catch her there and apologize right now. I’ll make this right.” I pause. “And you, young lady, are staying in the car.”

“Not fair!” she hisses.

I nod firmly, holding in a chuckle.

Grinning, Destiny reaches across the car and hugs me with all her might.

At least I’ve won one of my girls back.

“What was that about?” I say.

She stays in my arms, though, just like she used to when she was a little girl. “Because. I don’t want Eliza to stop talking to me just because you were a mammoth jerk—”

“Come on. I don’t think she’d shut you out.”

“She hasn’t texted since we left her house that day...” Destiny looks

down.

“I suppose that was my fault,” I admit. “I told her you weren’t allowed to talk to her. I scared her away when she was just trying to help.”

I feel a phantom boot pressing into my gut.

She goes quiet before raking me with a slow, worried look.

“I’ve also been worried about you, Dad. Like what happens when I go off to college? You’ll be all alone. I hated the thought, but then you found Eliza and I just...I thought you’d finally be okay.”

My daughter has the heart of an angel.

I hug her, stroking her hair like I did when she was a toddler. I’m perfectly aware I don’t have many moments like this left.

“Destiny, it’s not your *place* to worry about me once you’re gone. I take care of you,” I say firmly. “*Never* the other way around. Not until I’m eighty years old and drooling from a morphine drip. Okay? I’m fine. I’ll make it right with Eliza because I care about her and it’s the right thing to do. Still, if she doesn’t want me in her life after what I pulled, that’s not your problem. I’ll survive either way. You’ll still go off to school and start your life. I’ll be here in this cloudy damn city, growling at people and running my company the best I can.”

“And you’ll never eat or sleep without someone at home to tell you to do it,” she says, laughing.

“I’ll set alarms.”

She laughs. “Whatever. Thanks for the pep talk, Dad.”

I let her go and tap my phone. I normally spend these long commutes reading office emails because it saves me time.

But there’s a message in my inbox I’m not expecting.

I’m not prepared for it. The subject line is *Resignation Notice*.

The message couldn’t be clearer.

I can take my job and go straight to hell. Eliza is already off to San Diego.

She’s already left the lab.

She won’t be checking messages.

I lost my chance to mend anything without even knowing it.

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath.

“What’s wrong?” Destiny leans over my shoulder, her eyes wide.

I still have the email open. She must catch just enough before I angrily close the app and shove my phone against my leg.

“Oh. Oh, shit,” she whispers.

The word isn't angry. It's exasperated and sad.

“Language,” I warn, sucking a breath between my teeth and releasing it slowly. “Maybe I can catch her before she leaves.”

“She's not going to talk to you now, Dad.” She slaps her thighs. “Ugh, I *hate* this.”

“I thought you wanted me to try?”

“I did. I *do*, but now it just seems hopeless. I'm sorry.”

I grind my teeth, hating that she might be right.

Unless I get my jet ready for an overnight trip to California, I've lost Eliza and I have no one to blame but my own jackass self.

“I'm sorry,” I add because I know Destiny is just as devastated.

“We'll survive, I guess. Eventually.” She sighs, flicking her hair over her shoulder in irritation. “But Uncle Troy was right.”

I look at her slowly.

When did she talk to Troy?

“About what?” I ask neutrally.

“...eh, it doesn't matter anymore.”

“You and Troy talk a lot lately.” I hope my nonconfrontational tone pulls something out of her. His name has been coming up a lot lately, and I need to understand why.

I'm not sure I'm comfortable with the attention he's been giving my daughter, even if he's just trying to be helpful.

I've known him forever, and that's the problem.

Troy might be a decent man and one hell of a workhorse, but he's not anyone who should be handing out major life advice. Not when he's a lone wolf who never fully grew up and got his own shit together.

“What was he right about, Destiny?” I work to keep my words gentle.

“*Everything.*” She locks her hands together, wiggling her fingers.

Shit.

She looks like she's on the verge of tears.

I pull the privacy screen up.

“Baby girl, what was he right about?”

“H-he's just—” She rolls her shoulders and a tear slides down her face. “He's been helping me, okay?”

Now, I definitely need to know.

“Helping you with what?”

“He—he told me I don’t have to dwell on Mom’s suicide. She was part of my life once, but that’s over and it’s nobody’s fault, Dad. What happened to her doesn’t have to ruin my life—or ours. I need to put it behind me and...and I have.” Tears stream down her face. She sniffs and wipes them away with the back of her hand. “I’ve been coming to terms with it. I just wish you would too. If you had, none of this would’ve happened.”

I blink. “What do you mean? I dealt with it a long time ago. The fight with Eliza had nothing to do with your mom.”

“Then why hire a PI—”

I stop cold.

“How did you know about the investigator?” I swallow harshly.

I always got the feeling Dess knows more than she lets on. She’s a bright kid, so it’s hard to hide anything from her, but she couldn’t have just guessed this.

“Troy told me,” she whispers.

Dickhead.

Of course, he did.

Even after I asked him not to.

“Destiny, there were a few loose ends and I wanted a second opinion. The man came to the same conclusions. That’s all.”

“What loose ends? Was it the robbery that got you so upset? You know it’s not Eliza’s fault I was attacked, right?” She stares at me, her soft-blue eyes hurting.

“I left you in her care and—”

“Hold up. You’re the one who left me at the library that morning. You’ve left me alone before and never worried about it. Something happened when we went to Kona, didn’t it?” She pauses, slowly breathing. “I’m fifteen, Dad. You were always pretty fair with me going out as long as I checked in or you knew who I was with. But you’re freaking out all the time now. It’s like you think Mom got killed by some psycho or something. Why?”

That isn’t what I think...is it?

I frown.

There may be a whisper of truth to what she said, a wild possibility gnawing at my mind, but it’s not that serious.

“Did Troy tell you that too?” I hold my breath, hoping like hell my supposed friend isn’t that stupid.

“No,” she mouths. “I think you’re just on edge. You always were about

what happened with Mom, and then with me... It sent your paranoia into overdrive.”

I start to shake my head, but stop because it’s true.

She’s right, even if I haven’t admitted it to myself.

Fucking hell.

Nothing about the last ten years of my life sits well with me, and I’m not sure why. Maybe it’s all nerves and adrenaline and paranoid delusions after all.

“Also, I’m not dumb. I didn’t need anyone to tell me all that, Dad. Uncle Troy just helped put things into perspective and like, clarified my own thoughts.”

Did he?

I’d like to clarify a few things for him—possibly with my fist.

“How did this come up, Dess?”

Her face tightens. “You’ve always said how strange it was that she was wandering around at night. You always said nobody goes to the beach in their heels—”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, so, it doesn’t take a mastermind to figure out what you’re *not* saying. You still think something happened to Mom. Something that wasn’t an accident, or—” She stops before she says *suicide*. “But you’ve let it get to your head. You way overreacted with Eliza—you were unhinged—and all because you can’t let go of this weird idea that something happened to Mom. She was crazy, Dad. Clinically depressed or whatever, yeah, but crazy. And now you’re afraid something awful will happen to me.”

I consider my next words carefully.

“Your mom was a lot of things, Destiny, but I wouldn’t call her insane.”

“She took her own life!” she whispers sharply, her eyes searching mine. “You know she did. Sane people don’t kill themselves. It hurts. I hate that she did it. I hate that she couldn’t get better. I hate that nobody stopped her. But I accept it—and I just don’t get why you can’t?”

“Your mom was no angel. Hell, Aster could be pretty self-absorbed sometimes.” My jaw tightens before I continue. “Still, this suicide doesn’t make sense with anything she ever said or did. You probably don’t remember much, but—”

“Dad, I remember *a lot* more than you think. Mom was acting weird that whole week. She fired my latest nanny and left me with the housekeeper.

Kalani and I didn't mind. She fed me Hawaiian wedding cake cookies and taught me how to juice pineapple and do laundry." Destiny bites her lip and looks away. "I feel really bad about saying this...but she was more fun than Mom."

"It's okay to be honest," I say, looking down as I throw an arm around her shoulders.

"Yeah, well, Mom was running in and out all week. Way more than usual, I think, and always saying she had some wellness class or yoga thing. Then one day she slipped out without ever slipping back in."

I study her sad eyes, trying to decide how much of this memory is real, and what parts were invented to cope with a brutal loss.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?" she asks.

"I took you to a child psychologist not long after it happened. You got so quiet on us I knew you were hurting. The doctor had you draw a lot." I pause, smiling dryly at the memory. "You drew your mother as an angel once. She gave you toys and watched you play. We tried talking about therapy and I checked her work with a few other shrinks. They all agreed you didn't have any concrete memories of losing your mother, besides her leaving and not coming back. You didn't have deep memories beyond playing with her, having her do your hair, things like that."

"I don't remember much," she agrees. "I used to think I mentally blocked her out. But when I was talking to Troy, I remembered bits and pieces of that last week she was alive..."

Why did he put his goddamned mouth where it doesn't belong?

"He stayed with us for about a week before it happened, but I don't think Troy was around enough to know all of that." I made a point to be home with my family when I wasn't working. I never knew Aster left Destiny alone with Kalani.

"It doesn't matter. The point is, the cops told you their theories. The investigator told you it was suicide, right? Case closed. Can we just cry it out one more time and move on?"

Something she just said catches my attention.

My body tenses like an arrow.

I'm almost afraid I know the answer to the next question before I ask, "Who told you that?"

"What?"

"That my PI said it was a suicide."

She stares at me. “I told you. Uncle Troy said—”

“There. Right there.” The words come out like bullets. “I never told Troy *what* the investigator found. He couldn’t have known that.”

Not without some serious underhanded fuckery, anyway.

Not unless he contacted my own PI.

“Wait. What?” She holds my gaze. “You’re serious?”

“Yep.” And even if I’d told him, Troy has no business whatsoever talking to my daughter about her mom’s death, especially without my knowledge.

What the fuck game does he think he’s playing—and why?

I’m not waiting around to find out. I find the jackass in my contacts and hit Call.

His line rings until it goes to voicemail.

“Dad?” Destiny squeaks.

I’m already dialing him again as I glance at my daughter. “Yes?”

“What did the investigator find? Talk to me!”

Gut punch.

I can’t tell her it was a definite suicide in the man’s opinion. I don’t think he had all the facts, and now I wonder if he was actually working for me at all.

With Troy creeping around behind my back, I don’t know what the fuck to think.

“I haven’t had a chance to assess his full report,” I say. Close enough to the truth.

She nods.

I call Troy again as my blood boils.

And again.

Again.

No matter how many times I try, I keep getting his damn voicemail.

Finally, I pound out a text without giving a single shit how it sounds, ***Coward, pick up your phone. Did you think I wouldn’t find out about these little therapy sessions you’ve been having with my daughter?***

I try calling again. This time, a loud ping interrupts, announcing an incoming text.

Snarling, I jerk the phone away from my ear and glance at it.

Eliza. She just texted me with the world’s worst timing.

I open it anyway and it’s just—a picture of this hellish rainfall and a mile marker heading out of town?

I can feel my face darkening as I glare at the screen.

“Dad? What’s wrong?” Dess asks nervously.

“I don’t know.” I put the privacy screen down again and lean forward. “Change of plans, Tom. I need to get to mile marker 237. Can you take me there?” I hold out my phone for him to see.

He deftly looks at my phone and then back at the road.

“I can take you, boss, but in this soup, it might take a solid hour.”

Not what I want to hear.

“Just get us there as soon as you can.”

“Where are we going?” Destiny asks, exasperated. “Will someone tell me what’s going on?”

“Nowhere,” I growl.

“C’mon. You just gave Tom new directions. We’re going somewhere and you don’t want to tell me. Are you ever not going to treat me like a kid?”

She’ll always be my kid. I just don’t tell her because I don’t have the patience for another longwinded argument right now.

“We’re going to a mile marker.”

“Where?”

“Somewhere south toward Olympia, hugging the coast. I don’t think Eliza’s heading for SeaTac International like she planned. She’s going the wrong way and I have to help.”

“What did she say?” Destiny clenches my arm, her eyes wide.

“She just sent a picture of the mile marker in the rain. Nothing else.”

“That’s it?”

I level a look on her that says *yes, and question time is over.*

“I don’t get it. Why some random sign?” Her little brows knit together.

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

I don’t care to spin theories when none of them are good. You don’t just butt dial a photo of a random sign in the rain to a man you loathe.

Then you have Troy, calling up my kid and playing with her memories. He’s not answering his phone and Eliza is sending cryptic texts.

It doesn’t make sense.

It’s probably all random acts of bullshit, but my gut screams there’s a connection I’m not seeing.

Not yet.

I’m just terrified that when the pieces snap together—when it all finally makes sense—I’ll wish like hell it didn’t.

Worse, my options are so fucking limited.

I have Tom gunning it as fast as he can in this torrential rain. All with my daughter in the car and this gut-churning inkling that something is hideously wrong.

Eliza needs my help, dammit. But if I'm right and I'm dragging Destiny into something I shouldn't?

What do I do with my kid?

I grit my teeth, staring out the window while Destiny scans her phone. I swear, I could move this ride faster than Tom is right now. You never forget dealing with water in all its forms when you're a Navy man who served on the open sea.

I also did my fair share of training with tactical driving once.

"Dad, can I ask you something?" So much for the phone stealing her attention.

Before I can answer, Tom says, "Hey, I'm sorry, Mr. Lancaster. I've got no choice but to pull over. I can't even see the road, and I'm not risking us running off of it."

Shit, shit, shit.

Not what I want to hear right now.

Sighing, I look at Destiny.

"If the PI hasn't finished the investigation, why did Troy tell me it was suicide?"

Isn't that the big fucking elephant in the room?

"When I find out, you'll know," I promise.

"Can I tell you something?" she asks quietly.

Dammit, Destiny. I've got to figure out how to move this pig of a luxury car in a storm.

I don't have time to be father of the year right now. Still, I know she's scared and confused, so I breathe slowly and nod.

"Remember what Eliza said the day my necklace got stolen? She said random robbers wouldn't have left my purse and phone." She bites her lip nervously.

"I know, little bee," I say, gently brushing her hair.

Eliza was too right about a lot of things.

When I look out the window again, Tom guides us into a parking lot for a small grocery store. He must lose control because we slide, hydroplaning across the pavement before the car comes to a stop.

“It wasn’t random, was it, Dad?” Destiny’s voice is hollowed out. My gut aches, empty and unsettled.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. You’re safe with me,” I tell her. I just have to make sure Eliza is, too. “Tom, get in the back with Destiny.”

He turns around slowly with a bewildered look.

“Sir?”

“Do it. Quickly,” I bite off.

With a shrug, he climbs out and gets in the back of the car. By the time he’s seated again, I’m behind the wheel, soaking wet from the rain.

“Mr. Lancaster, please. This storm is terrible and it’s due to last for at least another hour. We can’t drive in this.”

“We’ll see,” I say, wiping cold rain and hot sweat from my brow. “My eyes are younger than yours and I have tactical driving experience.”

“Dad...” Destiny purses her lips like she’s in awe from the back seat, her eyes gleaming.

“Sir, unless you’re part hawk—”

“No need. I’m taking us to Eliza, even if I have to drive across the whole damn Pacific.”

THE DEVIL'S CUP (ELIZA)



Go ahead and say it.
I was *wrong*.

Until about five minutes ago, I thought the biggest mistake of my life was abandoning a lovable grouch of a man plus the best job I'll probably ever have thanks to said lovable grouch and his dumb mouth.

Nope.

Turns out, my biggest mistake was getting in the car with this babbling psychopath.

How did I never notice how strange Troy Clement is?

We're outside Seattle now, and this is definitely not the way to the UPS store or the airport.

The way the rain keeps coming, it's hard to tell exactly where we are.

But that smug smile he always wears is gone and he's driving like a bat out of hell.

He keeps muttering to himself—whining about his own 'jackass stupidity'—and I'm long past scared.

I managed to send Cole a semi-clear picture of a mile marker not too far back, and then sent the same blurry image to Dakota. All while trying to hide my screen from Troy.

Everyone must be out fighting the rain on their own, though, because neither of them have responded.

"Hey, Troy, any idea how the route looks now?" I ask, trying so hard to keep my voice neutral, free from panic.

"Yeah. We'll be at UPS shortly. I know a better store out this way," he

says coldly.

I frown, wiping the condensation from the side window, peering at nothing but more wet darkness. “Oh. I thought you didn’t want me mailing the necklace? It’s okay, I can always do it from San Diego...”

“Not my choice.” He gives me a frosty, almost menacing look that chills me to the bone. “Nothing ever fucking is.”

Big yikes.

His eyes flick to my hands again, focusing on the small black turtle still dangling idly from the chain. He’s been staring at it for the last five minutes, ever since I made the mistake of fidgeting with the necklace again.

Not good. He needs to keep his eyes on the road.

“Why do you keep looking?” I ask gently.

He clenches the steering wheel so hard it’s amazing he doesn’t snap a finger.

“Doing *what?*” He flicks his eyes back to the road.

“You keep staring at my hands and the necklace... I’m not in the driver’s seat, but if you don’t watch the road, we could have an accident.”

With a nasty curl of his lip, he stomps the gas, flying into heavy sheets of rain. His eyes land on my hands again, anchored on that turtle.

“I know how to drive, Eliza. Relax,” he growls.

Oh, okay. I’ll just lie back and start Googling funeral arrangements while he rams us head-on into a truck.

I take a deep breath, trying my best not to explode.

“Please tell me what’s going on? Troy, I’m serious.”

He answers with another dull chuckle that sounds like there’s nobody home behind the silver spark in his eyes. “You want to know? Fuck it. First, what did Cole tell you about Aster’s suicide?”

Huh?

“Not much. He just told me he didn’t have all the details. Her death was strange and untimely, he said.”

Blinding headlights flash in my eyes. A long, blaring honk from a passing truck cuts through the storm.

For a second, I’m about to scream, but it whips past.

A red car swerves ahead just behind it and goes skidding off the road, sending a wave of water spraying across our windshield. The lights skim diagonally over Troy’s wild-eyed snarl.

“Oh my God,” I whisper, gripping my thigh.

“Dickheads! They should pay more attention to the storm, right?” His voice is pure ice.

You were probably in their lane, jackass.

“We should stop. What if they’re hurt?” I venture, latching on to any small reason to get away from this madness.

I’ll take my chances getting drenched.

But he’s not stopping. The car speeds up, lurching ahead faster.

“Troy!”

“Not our problem. You’ve got a flight to catch and I’m not going to make you late.” The worst part is, he almost sounds normal now.

Jesus, what have I gotten myself into?

“Troy, it doesn’t matter. I can always take a later plane. They...they slid off the road. They could be hurt, and I think it might be because—”

He snorts loudly, sending me a caustic look. “Don’t be so dramatic. There’s plenty of traffic around, and someone else will call it in. They’ll just have to wait for a tow truck, that’s all.”

I hope he’s right.

I hope something stops him before we’re a lot less lucky than the spinout car.

And his eyes are on my hand again. I know it before I even look.

“Troy, *please*,” I whisper. “You need to watch the road.”

“You know what I don’t need?” he asks quietly.

“What?”

“Directions from a twenty-something who thinks she’s hot shit because she slept with the CEO and got a job she didn’t deserve.”

My breath cuts off and my face goes hot.

He laughs again, and I finally notice how cruel that loud, obnoxious laugh of his sounds.

“You’re not going to try to deny it, huh? Or does my driving freak you out that much?”

I glance over, trying not to glare. “I had the job first. Long before Cole and I ever...”

“Ever what?” he urges.

“Jesus. I didn’t do anything underhanded to get the job. I already had it. Not that it’s any of your business,” I add, probably against my better judgment.

Again, that horrible grinding laugh echoes through the car. “Good for

you! What did he say about me?”

I stare at him. “What do you mean?”

“Cole. Old friend, old buddy, old bossman. What the *fuck* did he say about me, Eliza?”

Just when I didn’t think the eerie glint in his eyes could get crazier...

“Not much, honestly. Before Hawaii, he never mentioned you much at all.”

You’re not that important, prick.

“Did he ever mention me when he talked about Aster?”

I blink slowly.

What is he talking about?

“No. But why would he? Everyone says she was sick and killed herself. No big mystery.”

“I was there that week,” he says, his voice dropping an octave to this soft, restless rumble. “I thought my name would come up.”

“He *might* have told me you were there when it happened. I don’t remember.” I don’t have to lie about that. I’m sure this road trip with a psycho is doing wonders for my memory.

“*E-liz-ah,*” he sings my name in three eerie syllables. “Think harder. I need you to remember what your boyfriend said about *me.*”

I eye him for a minute, not wanting to, pushing down the lump of ice in my throat.

“Troy, you know how Cole is. He cares about two things: Wired Cup and himself. And yeah, to be fair, he cares about Destiny, too. He barely ever mentioned you. I’m really not sure what you’re looking for.”

When I shake my head, it feels so light it could float away.

He inhales sharply, squeezing the steering wheel a few times, pumping blood in and out of his fingers.

“What?” I force out when I can’t take the killing silence. “Troy, what is it you’re so worried about?”

“Right now, *you*, Miss Eliza. You really shouldn’t bullshit a master bullshitter.”

What the hell does that mean?

I glare at him, searching his face for any way to deescalate this total insanity.

“You really want the truth?” I whisper, racking my brain. “He says...he says you’re immature and self-centered.”

He tosses his head from side to side. “Fuck him. He always said that about her.”

“Her?” I echo dryly.

“He thought Aster was self-centered. But she wasn’t *nearly* as self-centered as he thinks. He was always too harsh on her, too serious when she just wanted to have fun. He didn’t fucking deserve her, and if he wasn’t Mr. Gold Dick, she’d have never married him in a billion years.”

I swallow again, another lump of fear scratching my throat.

It’s the first thing he’s said that sounds genuinely connected to someone else.

“You knew her well then?” I ask.

His eyes flick to the turtle again. “Never well enough. Don’t try to make it something it wasn’t.”

“I’m not trying to make it anything.”

“Whatever. Can’t say I like your tone or the way you’re looking at me like—oh, shit!” He jerks the wheel.

We’re sliding—right into the other lane with its oncoming traffic.

I brace for the bone-splitting impact that’s surely coming.

But Troy finds traction at the last second, wrenching us back into our lane.

I hold my breath. Shaking.

Maybe we’ll end up in a ditch, and if I’m lucky I can make a proper run for it.

But this stupid turtle is driving him crazy.

It’s going to get us both killed, so I pull the chain, reeling it in so I can drop it in my purse.

“Leave it out!” he screams.

I jump, nearly dropping the necklace on the floor.

“It seems like it’s bothering you.” I take a deep breath. “You know what, you can have it, if you want. I’ll leave it and let you decide what you want to do with it. Can you just let me out at the next gas station? Even a bus shelter or—anywhere, really? I can manage.”

His gaze snaps to me like he’s seriously considering it, his face set like stone.

“Troy...”

“*If* you give me that fucking curse before you get out of this car,” he whispers.

Oh my God.

I might live after all.

Still suspicious, I look at him and whisper, “Why does it mean so much to you?”

“Didn’t I tell you? We can’t let Destiny get that goddamn thing. She doesn’t need to be reminded of Aster again. She damn sure doesn’t need to go squawking to her old man, either.”

I sense the car speeding up as he glares into the rain.

Here we go again.

He has a death grip on the wheel, his hands pressed so tight his knuckles are bone-white.

“Troy, I’m in no hurry. You can slow down until we see the next gas station. It’s fine.”

“Not fine!” he roars. “Goddammit, don’t you *understand*?”

I really don’t.

So far, I haven’t understood much of this conversation at all. I just know I don’t want to set this guy off more.

“What don’t I understand, Troy?” I ask gently, holding back tears.

It’s weird how people talk to hurt animals and dangerous lunatics with the same soothing voice.

“I never meant to do it. I never meant for any of this shit to happen. And...and if I thought you could just disappear and keep your yap shut, I wouldn’t have more regrets.” His sigh sounds like a death rattle. “But you won’t, will you? You won’t just give me that piece of shit and get on with your life?”

“Whatever you want,” I whisper, gripping my thigh to keep my hand from shaking. “Troy, I—I don’t even know what you didn’t mean to do. I don’t need to know. You can drop me off and you’ll never have to think of me again.”

“Oh, fuck you, Eliza.” He’s straining to breathe, almost gasping, his huge shoulders rolling and his nostrils flared.

Holy shit.

“These goddamned things never stay buried,” he whispers. “They always surface—always!—just like that fucking sea turtle. After I tried so hard to get rid of it.”

I’m reeling.

What is he talking about?

When he looks at me again, his face is blood-red. He takes a hand off the wheel to point at my hand. “That thing. That miserable fucking thing. No matter what I do, it keeps coming back, and so does everything else—”

A loud, wet screech cuts him off.

Aaand we’re hydroplaning again.

I’m not even sure we’re on all four wheels this time.

I’m guaranteed to die tonight, I just don’t know how yet.

“Y-you can have the n-necklace, Troy,” I try, stumbling over my words. “I’ve already told you...”

“No. I’m cleaning house once and for all. Tonight, everything goes.”

“Like what? What goes?” My gut sinks.

Dread consumes me.

I’m afraid the biggest thing that’s going, going, gone is *me*.

While he drives on, no longer responding like he’s retreated fully into his own crazy brain, I text a group chat I have with my parents.

I love you.

Then I text Cole one last time. ***I hate how things ended, and I’m sorry. I don’t blame you anymore, though. You can’t help that we’re from two different worlds any more than I can. You had good reason to look into Aster again. I love you.***

The car skids to an unexpected halt, making me look up.

I let out a slow breath and look out the passenger window, but between the heavy rain and the darkness, I don’t see much.

No cars, no buildings, and only faint, blurry lights. But at least we’ve stopped somewhere.

I reach for the door, eager to get away. But where are we?

“Turn your phone off. Stay calm,” he bites off. “It’s just a marina.”

A marina? Why the hell would we go to a marina on such a stormy night?

I open the door and step into ankle-deep water.

That’s when I decide it’s now or never.

I bolt as he screams after me, hoofing it as fast as a person can through streams of water swirling around my feet.

I have no idea where I’ll go or how I’ll get away from this guy, but right now action is my only hope.

There’s a building in the distance, maybe a boathouse or a bar or something.

Please, for the love of God, let it be open. Anywhere with people.

But something hits me from the back just when I start to make out the door, slamming me to the ground.

I splash down on my hands and knees, hitting a puddle of murky water and cracked concrete face-first.

Two big, angry arms wrap around my stomach, pulling me up like a puppet. “Just *try* anything cute like that again, bitch. C’mon. We’re taking a boat ride.”

My heart sinks to my knees.

“In this weather?” I sputter.

That laugh. That ugly, maniacal, throaty *laugh*.

I cringe. If I make it out of this alive, I’ll be hearing it in my nightmares for a long time to come. But right now, even walking away feels like a big ask.

“That’s the point, sweet cheeks,” he snarls in my ear. “Who could ever deny an accident in these conditions?” He leans forward, shoving something hard into my back. “Yes, it’s a gun. Pull another stunt like that and I’ll shoot your spine in half.”

Oh, God.

Oh, God, I’m shaking and I don’t have any choice but to listen.

I look around helplessly. There’s no one through the haze.

Just flat pavement and that taunting, blinding rain, all the way to the docks.

So when he leads me down to where the boats are, I don’t fight. We stalk along rows of tall ships tied up and soldiering together on the stormy sea.

Troy pushes us forward, stopping near a small boat. When we climb on, he drags me to the main cabin, opens a tall door, and shoves me inside.

“Sit!” he barks. “Don’t move.”

There are only two seats. Shivering, I sit down on what looks like the passenger seat next to the controls.

I just hope I don’t wind up tied to this chair while the cabin floods.

“I know what you’re thinking, Eliza, but I’m no monster.” So says the guy who’s dragging me to a watery grave. “One mistake ten years ago and it balloons into *this*. She seduced me, you know. Good enough to fuck, but not to love. Cole just can’t let her go, and neither can I.”

I hug myself, the words not registering at first.

The woman Cole loved...his wife, his one and only, seduced another man? His best friend?

“What do you mean?” I ask absently.

His jaw clenches, but he doesn’t say anything more.

As much as I hate him, I should make him talk.

I just wonder if I’m buying myself precious time or only prolonging my torture.

I’m so not ready to die.

“What happened?” I force out.

His eyes flick to me, bright like boiling mercury.

“Their marriage was already a dumpster fire. That shit had nothing to do with me. The kid, she was the final straw. Aster had a ‘wicked stepmother.’” He chuckles, shaking his head. “That’s what she called her, anyway, but Aster could be dramatic. You had to know her. Anyhow, that’s why she wouldn’t cut Cole loose from a miserable marriage. She didn’t want that for Destiny, another woman butting into her life.”

I stare at him numbly as he shoves his face in his palms, stretching his skin before he glowers at me again.

“Everyone acts like she was a terrible mom. She couldn’t deal with the kid—it didn’t come naturally with her issues—but fuck, she loved Destiny. She *tried*. If she hadn’t been so jealous of the nannies, it wouldn’t have been so bad. It’s like she thought Cole had it in him to start fucking strange women behind her back.” Troy pauses and snorts. “I *wish*. It never would’ve happened if he’d just cheated. No, he had to stick around like a stubborn goddamned mule, expecting too much from her—”

“Too much?” I whisper.

Troy nods. “Just because he walks around like he’s citizen of the year doesn’t mean he isn’t a demanding cock. You already know. Every time he told her why he stuck around—because he took their marriage seriously—it stressed her the fuck out. By the end, she only stayed with Cole because she didn’t want him falling in love again. She couldn’t stand anybody else coming into the picture for Destiny.”

He sighs and then pulls a cigarette from his pocket. Flicking the lighter sounds like a gunshot.

I watch the smoke, curling from the tip like a wagging finger.

“A year before that last trip, we all spent a long winter in Hawaii,” he says, pausing to inhale again. “Let’s just say it turned into something special. Something beautiful. Something between Aster and me happened neither of us wanted to end. She wanted it too—or so I thought.”

She wanted it too. That sounds so gross and rapey it takes all my willpower to keep listening to this deranged story.

But I can't cut him off.

Not when it's the only thing keeping me alive.

"We stayed in touch after they went home to the mainland. We wrote old-school letters back and forth constantly. We texted. Shit, some nights, Cole would lie there in bed with her, dumb and oblivious. She'd be up until dawn talking to *me*." He grins like he's so proud of it.

I try not to gag, wishing I could punch him.

He flicks ash on the floor before continuing. "When we could arrange it, we'd meet up in swanky hotels and resorts on her wellness retreats. Sure, we fucked like rabbits, but it was more, Eliza. We mapped out a future." He smiles bitterly. "Cole thought she was frigid? Fuck that. She was an ice queen for *him*. And he paid so little attention to his wife, he had no clue. That last trip, it was obvious there was nothing between them. She all but hated him. He saw her as a burden—a bitchy, overstressed nuisance who just happened to live with him."

"Cole?" I can't see it.

That's not the man I know.

It's Troy's warped version of the truth.

"Yeah, yeah, I know." He nods in agreement when I haven't said a word. "The jackass didn't know what he had. But I never meant for our talk that night to get so heated. I didn't—"

He stops, flinging a look at me that's all murderous suspicion again.

"Talk? What talk, Troy?"

"Aw, fuck." His face falls. "I gave Aster an ultimatum. I told her to leave Cole for me—or else I was ending it. I was sick of the sneaking around, playing second fiddle, getting paid by a dude who kept my woman on a leash. She wouldn't leave him..."

I lean forward slightly, feigning interest in this horror story.

"And...and when I told her it was over on the beach, she *screamed*. She said she didn't care if he knew because he'd never leave her because of Destiny. And she refused to do it, too. So she said it'd be fine if Cole knew about us. Hell, it's like she wanted him to know. As if the three of us could just go along our merry, fucked up little way. She didn't care that I'd lose my job. She came from money and she didn't fucking get it."

I shiver.

“What did you do?”

“*Ifuckingpanicked*, okay?” It comes out like one rushed, awful word. “I didn’t want to be caught on the beach with my boss’ wife, but I didn’t mean to grab her. She pushed me first, tripped me over a rock. I fell in the sand. She wouldn’t stop yelling—she just wouldn’t shut the *fuck up*,” he growls, staring at the glowing end of his cigarette. “Still. I only wanted to drag her into the water to cool her off. Make her stop kicking. I damn sure didn’t mean to hold her under that long. I just wanted her to be quiet. I...I lost control.”

“Holy shit. You drowned her.”

Whoops. It’s too late to take back my words.

He looks at me like he’s about to use that gun.

“Wait, I mean, are you *sure* you drowned her, though? I heard they found her shoes on the beach, but they thought she could’ve gone off a cliff, right?”

He gives me a smile that scars my soul. “That was me. I dragged her up the hiking trail and flung her back down to make it look like an accident. The rain that morning washed away the footprints.”

Oh, God.

Oh, God.

I’m going to pass out.

He dragged a dead woman up a cliff to throw her back into the ocean, and he’s *proud* of it.

But his face contorts back into the angry, sad expression he’s worn all night.

“It was ruled an accident. Whenever anybody doubted it, I had the suicide theory to fall back on. For ten goddamn years, it worked—until you popped up. You made Destiny go pawing through her mom’s things—”

“What? Troy, no. I didn’t tell her to look for anything—”

“No? She didn’t bother until you showed up.”

I inhale sharply. “She hadn’t been back to Hawaii before then, remember? That was all her, trying to make peace with what happened...”

I’m not sure why I’m still reasoning with a rabid dog.

He balls his fists up and swings them back and forth at his sides before pounding on the ship’s cabin several times. The noise reverberates through the night.

I wince.

“Are you that stupid, witch? Just you *being* there made her more curious about the mother she’d lost. I kept everything under wraps for years, and now

it's spilling everywhere." He folds his arms over his chest. "But it won't. It can't. Just as soon as I get rid of you and your mouth, I'm back to square one. Just another well-paid nobody who doesn't matter. If Cole forgets I exist in his grief, all the better."

I stare right through him.

"Still a goddamned shame about the girl. I never meant for those guys to hurt her..." He makes a frustrated sound, shaking his head.

My stomach lurches.

After listening to this maniac's sick excuses, I knew it.

But hearing him confirm it cuts me open.

"Was Aster wearing that necklace the night she—" I can't make myself say died. Somehow, admitting she died—admitting he murdered her—feels like I'm accepting the same fate. "—the night they found her?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" He raises his fist over his head.

I flinch.

But he pulls back at the last second and the cabin echoes with his rough sigh.

"If you weren't there, they would've moped their way through the whole trope. Dess wouldn't have set one foot on the beach, much less gone pilfering through that dejected house. All of this could've been avoided. You're the reason he hired an investigator. You and the goddamned feelings you stirred up. You made them think too much. Now you want to go reminding Destiny of Aster nonstop with that ugly fucking knockoff?"

"Well..."

He lunges, stopping just short of hitting me again. "I worked *so hard!* So fucking hard to save her the pain—both of them—and you just waltz in like a wrecking ball whore." He glares at me, his eyes mean slits. "You may be good enough to be Cole's fucktoy, but you're not fit to hold Aster's tea—"

"Wait." I grit my teeth. "Hold on. You're getting this out. That's good. It must've been hell bottling it up for years." I grimace, hating that I'm pretending to have sympathy for this hideous man. "So, are you really upset because you think someone might find out what you did or because Destiny wears her jewelry?"

"Both!" he bellows, throwing his head back.

"So that's it. You're going to kill me, aren't you?" I ask flatly.

"What the hell else can I do? You go, you'll run to the police or that big, sappy idiot the first chance you get." He stares, waiting for an argument or at

least a lie. “Don’t worry, though. Cole won’t get his happily ever after. It’s his fault she’s dead. He drove her away, and he already did the same with you in record time.”

My heart twists.

Everything that drove us apart seems so petty now, so pathetic in the grand scheme.

And now I’ll never get the chance for either of us to set things right.

“If you kill me, it’s not going down like you think,” I warn, summoning my fiercest glare. “You won’t get away with this like you did with Aster. You’ll go away for life. There’s no chance my parents *ever* let it go. And neither will Cole—not without hunting you to whatever island cave you crawl back to.”

His eyes flash with cruel amusement. “I might care if I thought there was a chance he had a clue. He doesn’t.”

“I texted him,” I say, knowing it’s a huge risk. “When he finds out I’m dead and who I was with, guess what he’ll do?”

His eyes beam pure murder at me. “Then I’ll just kill him, too.”

“O-kay. Good luck, I guess. So you’ve got me, Cole—oh, and Dakota Burns. I sent her another message. And if you kill Dakota, you’ll definitely have to kill Lincoln, or he’ll kill you. You might have a one percent chance of getting through one hardass billionaire’s security, but two? I’m not liking your odds, dude.”

“How many people did you text?” he flares, his fists trembling at his sides.

“As many as I could?” I smile.

“What the *fuck* is wrong with you?”

One day, I hope I’ll laugh at the irony of his question.

“At first, I thought we were going to have a wreck. I had no idea you were a full-blown psycho killer, but hey, it’s almost like insurance. If you kill me, you’ve got a whole laundry list to deal with. Or you can just let me go and hightail it out of the country while you still can,” I say hopefully.

“Goddamn,” he mutters. “Do you *need* a reminder your life is hanging by a thread?”

“Is it?” I spit at him.

“And Cole had the nuts to call Aster stubborn! You’re one dumb uppity cunt,” he snaps.

I shrug. “Hey, if I’m dumb and alive... Whatever, though. If I’m going to

die anyway, I might as well get my zingers in while I can, right?"

He cocks his head like he's considering it.

Christ on a cracker.

He's so deranged we're actually having a mundane conversation between his casual comments about slaughtering me.

I've got to keep him talking, though. If his mouth is running, he can't just shoot me.

"Do you have chocolate, Troy?" I ask.

"Chocolate?"

I offer a wry smile. "You know, something sweet, a last meal sort of thing."

He pauses, considering it before shaking his head. "Whatever you ate for lunch will have to do. This isn't prison, lady. What the hell do I look like?"

I laugh loudly.

"What's so funny?"

"I'm just lovin' the irony here. You're a funny, funny guy, Mr. Clement. Criminals get last meals, but I don't. And besides accidentally meeting Cole and Destiny, I've done nothing wrong."

He turns away and stomps out the door. I watch his silhouette through the rain. It looks like he's pulling up the anchor.

When he comes back inside, he's reaching into the waistband of his pants.

Ugh. Do I even want to know? "What are you doing?"

He turns back to face me, but before he's even spun around, I can tell from his shadow there's something in his hands.

I gasp, forgetting how to breathe.

Looks like I won't be talking my way out of this.

I'm on a boat, heading out to sea, with no one around for miles.

Cole, I'm so flipping sorry, I think miserably. I wish I could've been the one to love you like Aster never did.

Whatever dumb things you said aside, I wish you'd let me be yours.

BROKEN CUP (COLE)



Turns out, a business-class Lincoln is *not* a good rescue car.

It's a clunky, meandering heap of metal and leather, hardly suited for hard slumming through this damn endless rain.

"Dad, what are you doing?" Destiny cries, her voice high-pitched.

"Nothing you need to worry about. Stay buckled, baby girl."

She gives me a stricken look.

It's been the same ever since Eliza called.

For a few seconds, I listened in frigid silence while she asked Troy what they were doing at a marina. Then the call cut out.

There's only one marina out that way I know of.

With traffic grinding to a crawl with what looks like two nasty accidents ahead, it would almost be faster on foot. If only I had a ship big enough to handle the mess, I could—

Wait. Hold the fuck *up*.

"On second thought, reach up here and find my phone," I tell her.

"Why?"

"Let's play a game."

"A game? Are you serious?" Her eyes are huge marbles, swirling with worry.

"Yep. I'm the captain and you're a seaman. You follow orders, but you don't ask questions," I say tightly.

"This game sucks already."

"Destiny, get my phone."

With her nose wrinkling in protest, she reaches into the front seat and

gropes around until she has my phone in hand.

“Now find Brock Winthrope in my contacts, call him, and put it on speaker,” I say.

It only rings twice before I hear, “Winthrope.”

“Brock, it’s Cole Lancaster—any chance you’re still in town?”

“I am,” he says cautiously.

Thank God. I don’t have time to sugarcoat anything tonight.

“Listen, you’re on speaker because I’m driving in this crap. I’m with my daughter and driver. I hate to ask, but I need a favor.”

He pauses before he says, “If I can, I’ll help. What’s wrong?”

“Rumor has it you rented a good-sized yacht since arriving in Seattle.”

“Yes, but you’d have to be an absolute jackass to take it out in this weather. I never had you pegged for stupid,” he says sharply.

“I know, it’s garbage. Traffic is even worse, and that ship is my best bet at getting across the Puget Sound on a night like this.”

“...you can’t wait to cross until after the storm clears?”

Fuck, how do I say this?

Do I just tell him my girlfriend’s in trouble?

Also, how weird is it that I’m chasing a woman who wants nothing to do with me through the storm of the century?

I don’t want to tell him that Troy could hurt her.

I don’t want it to be true. And I definitely don’t need a reactive pack of cops swooping in and pushing him to do something drastic.

All I want is Eliza leaving that marina in one piece.

Before I can say anything, Destiny cuts in. “Our sourcing guy went crazy. We think he’s kidnapped Eliza—or maybe not like kidnapped-kidnapped, but he’s taken her to some creepy marina and she doesn’t want to be there. My dad’s in full Navy man mode. He’s gonna tear this dude a second ass.”

“Eliza, the coffee girl?” Brock asks, and then with some amusement says, “If it involves ass-tearing, why didn’t you just say so?”

“Yes. The same brilliant woman behind the drinks for your resorts,” I say.

“Damn. She was such a sweet girl. I hope she’s not in real trouble?”

“I’m worried she is,” Destiny says anxiously.

“And I’m afraid my daughter’s right.” I growl into the phone. “Brock, can I use the yacht or not?”

“Of course. You don’t deserve to go through this again,” he says gently.

“To go through what again?”

“Back in Hawaii, at the signing, I overheard... No man deserves to have a woman he loves ripped away twice.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

I didn’t say I *loved* her.

Still, it’s plain as day I do. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have my heart in my throat, throbbing with murderous intent the second I find Troy Clement.

“She isn’t going anywhere as long as we’re quick,” I promise. “I’m turning around and heading for your pier now.”

“Should we call the police and give them the location in case you’re not fast enough?” Brock asks.

Tom holds up his phone in the back seat, signaling he’s already on it.

“Yes, but in this soup, who the hell knows how long it’ll take them to get there? I’m going either way. Can you have the boat ready so we can take off as soon as I get there?”

“Will do. I’ll have it staffed and ready. I’m not far, I’ll be there too.”

With a lucky break in traffic heading back into the city, I speed toward the dock where Brock keeps his infamously lavish rental alongside several other sleek, classy vessels only reserved for visitors with serious money and prestige.

Still, this is taking too long.

I keep glancing at my screen, hoping Eliza will call again.

Hoping for some sign Troy hasn’t fully snapped, that he hasn’t done anything to silence her.

Goddamn, I hope we make it in time.

I have to.

Twenty minutes later, I skid through the parking gate at the pier, flashing my ID and a black credit card for the bewildered, cold-looking parking attendant.

Once I jack the car into a space, I turn and look at Tom. “Stay in the car with Destiny, will you?”

“Absolutely, Mr. Lancaster.” The older man nods.

“Dad, no!” She whips her ponytail, shaking her head. “You have to take me. I have to help Eliza.”

“Destiny, we’ll be lucky to even get out of port on a night like this. There’s also no telling what Troy’s intentions are, his mental state, or even if he’s heavily armed. It’s not safe,” I warn.

“So, what? You’ll just go off and leave me an orphan then? Thanks, Dad.

I love you too.” She sighs.

I snort pure frustration.

“Destiny, this is not the damn time.” I get out of the car and jog through pooling water to the boat.

Despite Tom’s best efforts, she’s right behind me, rushing through the puddles as fast as her pink Chucks will carry her. “Dad, hold up! Listen. I already lost one parent. I’m not waiting around to lose you, too. I can’t do nothing while you and Eliza are...” She trails off.

When I turn around with a burning sigh, I see heartbreak and terror etched on her face.

I don’t have time to argue, so I hoist her up and resume my run, carrying her onto the boat ahead of me.

“If you make me regret this—” And I’m sure I will. “You’re grounded for life, young lady. You stay on this ship with an adult at all times if you’re coming.”

“Deal!” she chirps happily.

Brock meets me with several crewmen as soon as I’m aboard. “We’re all set. Any last details I should know about?”

“Yeah. She was at the south marina off two fifty-three last time I heard from her.”

He nods. “We’ll be there as soon as we can. I haven’t been on a mission like this in a long time.” He grins, combing back his dark, rain-slicked hair with his fingers.

He’s more excited about it than I am. I suppose I can’t blame him.

“Same, but I wish I wasn’t. The stakes are too goddamned high,” I mutter.

“You love her, don’t you?” he asks gruffly.

“She’s—” *Everything*, I almost say, but then I remember she resigned from the company and me. “She was an excellent employee and she damn sure doesn’t deserve this. That’s the long and short of it.”

“Got it,” he says, a doubtful edge to his voice.

“He’s lying. He’s over the freaking moon with her,” Destiny whispers. “I think she’s pretty cool, too.”

Brock smiles at her and looks at me, his eyes piercing through the gloom. “Are you sure you want the kid aboard?”

She glares at him. “I’m not a *kid*, hotel guy.”

Winthrop smiles, his face tight with laughter.

“She wouldn’t stay behind and I don’t have time to argue. She’s a brave little brat, but she cares about Eliza. Thanks for helping find her,” I tell Brock sincerely.

There’s the throaty grind of an engine spooling to life and then motion as the ship begins backing away. Once I make sure Destiny heads inside the lower deck cabin with Tom, I follow Brock up to the bridge.

Even with the conditions being what they are, travel by sea is faster and safer than anything on land tonight.

There’s no manic traffic to fight and we’re close to our destination in less than an hour.

As Olympia’s lights materialize off to one side, Brock steps out and leans over the railing, peering far into the night.

“Captain says we’ll be there in another fifteen minutes or so.” There’s an eagerness to his voice I don’t like.

I hope he’s not so glory hungry he plans on coming with me. Sure, he’s a military man like me, but this is my problem alone. My life to risk.

The last thing I need is to worry about keeping him alive too.

“Is this little marina even equipped for a ship like this?” I ask, already knowing the answer before he shakes his head. “Let’s get a lifeboat ready. I saw they’re motorized. I’ll disembark and go straight for Eliza.”

“Are you going to lead or am I?” he asks coldly.

Fuck. If I have my way, he’s not coming at all.

“I need you to stay behind, Brock. Backup, in case anything goes sour in the scuffle. I’ll grab a radio and you can listen in.” I hold his gaze and decide he deserves the full story, considering the giant favor he’s doing me. “Troy and I were in the Navy together. I have some idea what makes him tick, even if he’s gone goddamned crazy. There’s no chance anyone else is going to talk him down from what he’s up to. My best chance of doing that is if I show up alone. I don’t want anyone getting hurt tonight—not even that asshole, if I can avoid it.”

After a heavy second, Brock nods. “I’ll man the ship. Just watch your ass, Lancaster. Good luck.”

“Thanks. I’ll need it.”

We shake hands and share a quiet, calm moment as the ship churns closer to land, anchoring safely offshore.

Soon, I throw on a heavy raincoat and a couple of his crew help me into the lifeboat they already have waiting in the water. I power up the engine and

plow over lashing waves toward a hazy row of docked fishing boats.

I can't guess which one I should aim for—if it's any of them at all. They could easily be in the boathouse or bar or whatever it is I faintly make out in the distance.

Then I see a light moving in the cabin of one of those small boats. It's almost like a flashlight or lantern, sputtering into the water as it sways back and forth.

The ship isn't docked, I realize, though it's barely pulled away from the marina. It looks more like whatever reckless idiot is at the helm is trying to bring it home and failing miserably.

Odds are I know exactly who that idiot is.

Several tense breaths later after climbing over furious waves, I'm as close as I'm going to get.

It's now or never.

I push the lifeboat right up against the hull of the other vessel and jump.

My hands barely catch the rusted metal edge. I haul myself over the top, landing on the wet, hard deck with a bone-rattling *thud!*

But the second loud *thud* exploding in my ears isn't me.

I turn and find an axe stuck in the deck just a few inches away from my neck—and two big, angry arms fighting to pull it out again.

Troy leers down at me as he growls, "Asshole, do you *always* have to be the big goddamned hero? You just can't let anything go!"

Anything?

I shudder. It's all too easy to hear the word *Aster* instead.

"Badger bitch isn't dead yet, my dude," he says. He's wearing his usual grin—only in the wet, cold darkness, it looks downright psychotic. Especially as he tumbles backwards with the axe free.

"Troy, stop. Consider this fair warning. You don't have to—"

"I don't, do I?" he asks absently, looking at the axe in his hands before he slowly raises it above his head. "I don't, but I will. You fucking killed her, Cole. You and your pride and your neverending expectations—and now you *made me* do this again!"

Shit.

I twist out of his way as he charges and sweeps the weapon down again. This time, it bounces off the deck and doesn't get stuck before he rocks back.

"You ruin everything!" He's swinging wildly, blind with rage.

I'm moving from side to side, dodging the axe each time, grateful I

haven't skidded onto my ass while I try to keep my footing on this tilting, slick deck.

The whole world keeps shifting around us as the rain picks up again, dumping a bucket of water on our heads every five seconds.

Goddamn.

I've got to get that thing away from him. I've got to—

Troy stumbles as another sharp wave tips the ship, holding the wooden handle with both hands. He spins, working with the inertia, still swinging as close as he can to my throat.

A second later, I see my chance.

I go in for a low snap kick, trying to stay under the damn axe without the rocking ship tossing me on my back.

I've stayed in lean shape, but I'm not the man I was in my Navy days.

My foot lands square in the center of his chest and he fumbles, but the asshole doesn't fall over.

He totters, sways—and it's all the opening I need.

Another kick, this time to his knees.

He stumbles forward, groaning, and his grip on the axe loosens. When the ship bows again, it falls, sliding just out of his reach and spinning toward me through a couple inches of water.

Doubled over, Troy glares at me, his eyes sharp pinpricks of boiling mercury in the night.

“Lay down, goddamn you,” I snarl, turning the axe around and holding it like a baseball bat. “You don't have to be stupid, Troy. Just stay down and tell me where you've got her. The police are coming. Turn yourself in.”

For a second, his nostrils flare in the deadly silence. I wonder if he's actually considering it.

But the sneer that cuts across his face like lightning reveals his answer.

“And what? Let you get away with it? Let you get away with *everything*?” He stands again, his fists flexed into rocks, trembling furiously at his sides. “Fuck that and fuck you, Cole. I gave you *all* an easy way out—you and Destiny and that mouthy badger bitch who *never* shuts up.”

If he weren't planning to crack my skull open, I'd smile at how he describes her. Because that's my Eliza, my love, my everything—a woman who still wouldn't take one speck of his shit, even when he threatened her.

“I gave it to Aster—I gave her an out—but fuck.” He's breathing ragged, entirely consumed with pain and anger. “What is it with you people? Why are

you all too stupid to fix your lives?”

I have no answer, just my gut dropping.

This isn't the time to process his vicious, slurring words.

He looks at me darkly, his mind made up, death flashing in his dark eyes. It's not just the lightning overhead.

Snarling, I grab the ax handle, making it an extension of my body as he drags himself up, plants his feet, and charges like a brazen bull.

I hold my breath, counting slowly.

One.

Two.

Three.

Now!

I lurch aside just as he blows past, his fists flying, punching and swearing at the air.

One strong swing is all it takes.

A sickening *crack!*

The wooden handle connects with the back of his head.

There's so much force it vibrates up my arm.

When I regain my balance, I look down. Just in time to see the jackass slumping to the ground, hissing like a deflated balloon into unconsciousness.

Fuck.

Lightning cracks across the sky in a web. The thunder booms so loudly it shakes the entire boat, and then there's just this eerie silence, everything falling still except for the drumming rain.

Thud.

I almost miss the sound the first time.

It's buried in the rain's white noise. But then I hear it again, it's rhythmic and not coming from the sky.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Shit. That's somewhere on the boat.

I tighten my grip on the axe and start moving toward the cabin, calling, "Eliza! Eliza are you here?"

Thud-thud-thud.

The back of the ship.

I move toward the sound as fast as I can through this mess. As soon as I turn the corner, I find several massive fishing chests, the kind that can hold at least a hundred pounds of fresh meat.

Shit.

If he threw my girl in a stinking coffin of a fishing chest, I might just stalk back to his worthless carcass and kill him all over again.

I have no idea which one she's in, but I just know.

There aren't many other places to hide her on a ship this small.

Thud! The banging sounds more urgently than before.

The center chest.

Using the axe, I position myself carefully.

"Eliza, hold still!" I yell.

With a savage swing, I hack through the lock and tear the lid off.

Eliza comes up coughing, sticking her head up into the rain with a deep, gasping breath of relief. She's a mess, red-faced and slick with sweat and ocean rain, sobbing so hard she's quaking.

I don't even hesitate.

I'm just grateful as hell she's alive.

Fucking alive.

Reaching down, I haul her out of the chest, cradling her so close to my chest it hurts. "Oh, shit. Eliza. I'm sorry. I'm so goddamned sorry, sweetheart."

She wraps her arms around my neck weakly, still sobbing and straining for air.

"Just breathe. Nice and slow," I urge, kissing the top of her head again and again.

Go ahead. Ask me if I care that she smells like three-day-old octopus moldering in the sun.

She's too stunned, too hurt to speak.

She doesn't need to.

I cling to her like a second shadow, hot fury and relief storming my blood, running my fingers through her wet mop of hair.

I need her to stay with me.

Almost as much as I need to remind myself that she's here, she's safe, and it's a miracle when she's always been too fucking gorgeous and softhearted for this world.

Seeing her like this hurts a hundred times worse than if Troy hurled that blade through me, but having her arms around me—it's like feeling my soul come home.

I'm about to try helping her to her feet when we're both blinded. A

blaring spotlight rakes over us and a booming voice speaks through loud helicopter blades, “US Coast Guard! Come out with your hands up.”

“We’re getting off this ride,” I whisper, kissing her head again. “Can you walk?”

For a second, she just looks at me, her eyes big and glassy like she can’t decide if she likes what she sees.

“Eliza?” I urge.

But she sucks in a breath and releases a final hitched sob. Then she’s limp in my arms.

I stand, panicked, feeling for her pulse, her breathing, her vitals.

They’re all there, thank God.

The second I scramble off the boat, carrying her, I hand her off to the EMT, who lays her out on a stretcher. A second team rushes past me to Troy, who’s apparently still alive—a fact I couldn’t have imagined feeling so indifferent to an hour ago.

“You want to ride to the hospital with her?” he asks.

Fuck.

After that parting look, I wonder if she’ll want me there.

Still, I’d drown myself in this storm before I let anything keep me away.

I have to make sure she’s okay—and if she’s not, I have to tell her parents. Troy may have made up his mind to murder her, but her winding up in this mess is entirely my fault.

There’s barely time to tell Destiny to stay with Brock through her machine-gun questions before I ride to the hospital with Eliza.

The whole way there, I lace her fingers through mine, kissing her knuckles.

“Please be okay. Please wake up so I can apologize for the clueless asshead I’ve been.” My voice cracks as I push my lips to her ear. “No matter what happens, Eliza, I’ll always fucking love you.”



AFTER I’M able to tear myself away from her with multiple warnings from the medical staff, I find Destiny and Brock waiting for me in the lobby.

Dess stands and throws herself at me, a little cannonball looking for a hug. “Are you okay? Is Eliza...”

“I’m fine and so is she,” I say.

“Holy crap. That’s great news. But you don’t look fine.” She studies my face, her brows knit together.

“Just a little banged up from the scuffle. It happens when you’re wrestling an axe away from a maniac,” I grumble, realizing too late I shouldn’t be spilling too much to Destiny without considering the consequences.

Until he went insane, Troy was an estranged uncle reunited. That has to be hard on her, one more disappointment in a family as tattered as ours.

“Sorry, Dess. I didn’t mean to—”

“You can say it, Dad. I don’t care about Troy. He tried to hurt her. God, he wanted to kill *you*,” she whispers angrily. “I hope they nail his butt to the wall. Like a hundred life sentences.”

I smile. “Only a hundred, huh?”

“How’s Eliza?” she asks eagerly.

“Stable. Sounds like she’ll be fine in a day or two. I’m not family, so I couldn’t pry much out of the doctors.” I sigh. “It’s been a long night. We’re going home now, okay?”

Brock stares at me. “You’re sure you don’t need a checkup yourself, Lancaster?”

“I’ll live. Eliza had it a lot worse than I did and she’s the one worth fussing over. Thank you again, Brock, for everything.” I grab the hand he extends, shaking it with both of mine.

He gives me a tired smile. “Happy to help. I’ll leave you folks to your business.”

We watch him head down the corridor, and I wonder if I’ve gained a friend to replace the lunatic frenemy I lost tonight.

“We can’t just leave her here.” Destiny folds her arms and stares at me, her bottom lip jutting out.

“What do you mean? We’re not family, Dess, and privacy laws are pretty strict.”

“So? I don’t care if we wait all night. We can’t leave Eliza *alone*.”

“Destiny, she’s a grown woman. There won’t even be visiting hours until tomorrow. I just got off the phone with her parents and I owe them another update soon. I promised.”

“Fine, Dad. But she’s gonna be pissed at you again if she wakes up and you’re not here,” she flares. Her eyes are sad, accusing me of high crimes I haven’t committed yet.

“I’m sorry. I can’t rewrite the rules of the world, however much I wish I could,” I say bluntly. “When we see Eliza again, it’ll be on her terms, little bee. Understood?”

She looks at me angrily before releasing a loud sigh. “Really, Dad? You’re just going to give her space? How well did that work out last time?”

I don’t answer, I just start heading for the lobby.

On the long drive home with an exhausted Tom at the wheel, I realize Destiny is right.

I can’t let Eliza wake up alone, even if I’m stuck in a waiting room.

Once we’re home and I’ve got Destiny fed and off to bed, I call Lincoln Burns.

“What’s up, Lancaster?”

“Any chance I can speak to your darling wife without her wanting to kick me in the balls? I don’t have her number.”

He chuckles. “Dakota wants your balls crushed? What did you do?”

“It’s about Eliza.”

“Oh. Oh, shit.” I hear soft chatter and a baby laughing in the background. “If you guys are busy—”

“No, it’s fine,” he clips. “What happened? Is she okay?”

“She’s in the hospital.”

“Damn. I’m sorry to hear—”

“Hello? What did you *do* to her, you lump of numbnuts?” Dakota answers sharply, no doubt jerking the phone away from her husband.

I grit my teeth.

I explain the situation, ending with, “She’s okay minus what looks like a few bruises, just resting and under observation. I don’t want her waking up alone—”

“And you left her?”

The accusation is as clear as it was when Destiny flung it in my face.

“I’m on my way back there now. I had to get my teenage daughter settled for the night with a housekeeper to watch the place.” I pause. “I’ll be there when she wakes up. I’m just not sure I’ll be the person she wants to see when she opens her eyes, and if I’m not...” I trail off.

“You want me as a backup.” She’s silent for a long while before she says, “Holy crap. Maybe you’re actually a decent guy after all and you *do* deserve her.”

“I’ll see you in a few,” I say, hearing my phone click off.

She already hung up on me.
I wonder if Dakota Burns is right.
Do I deserve her at all?

My past nearly got her slaughtered tonight, and I left her vulnerable because I wasn't man enough for a heart-to-heart before she wound up in a fishing chest.

Troy was right about one thing in his psychotic, babbling attack.
I could have lost her.

My pride, my moodiness, my refusal to face the past on anyone else's terms nearly got her killed.

I see my life without her for a moment, spinning through one desolate, cold scene after the next.

Fuck.

Without Eliza, life is *bleak*.

After tonight, I'd lay down my life for that woman in a heartbeat ten thousand times.

Regardless, it's her choice.

If she wants to walk away from me, I have to let her.

She has a right to peace from my toxic shit storm of a life.

Technically, my mangled past shouldn't be a problem anymore with Troy behind bars, but what if he left behind scars? What if she decides all too fairly that my bullshit just isn't worth it?

The stakes are so high it hurts.

This is what I get for falling in love with a bright, whip-smart angel who deserves so much more than I can ever give her.

And that angel rules my head all damn night after I make it back to the hospital and collapse in a chair.

I dream of her in that fluttering island dress she wore in Kona, the salty, sassy taste of her lips, the fragrant orchids mingling with her own scent of coffee and mischief.

When a heavy hand on my shoulder wakes me up in the morning, I look up and see Lincoln's amused face staring down, a baby balanced in his other arm.

"Hey. She's awake now," he tells me. "Nurse said she started asking for Dakota first thing."

I stiffen.

Dakota. Not me.

I stand, grabbing the light jacket I've had draped over myself like a sheet all night and head for the hallway.

"Wait, you're leaving?" he asks.

"Eliza needs a friend and I won't get in the way of that," I say dryly, my throat parched. "The second she's ready for me, I'll be there."

I storm out of the hospital, wondering how badly I've boned my entire life. All because I couldn't talk to her like a normal human being.

I turn around twice, second and triple guessing, but ultimately head for my car.

Indecision doesn't suit me.

Neither does causing this broken cup of a woman even another second of pain.

If and when she's ready, I'll see her.

And whether she ever gives me the chance or not, my entire heart and soul will forever belong to Eliza Angelo.

PERFECT BLEND (ELIZA)



Almost a week since the craziest night of my life and the world won't stop.

It's still spinning.

I've been crashing at Dakota's place ever since I left the hospital. It was just easier, especially when I started hyperventilating at the thought of spending a night alone in my apartment.

I can't be alone with these nightmares.

The ones where that sneering, leather-faced lunatic gets out of jail and comes to finish me off.

Dakota's place has a gate and awesome high-tech security, being a billionaire's place and all. I just wish it wasn't such a pitiful substitute for the man who left that day before I worked up the nerve to ask for him...

Then again, after the way we stomped on each other's hearts, I might not want to see me either.

He put his life on the line.

He saved mine.

Isn't that enough?

Dakota knocks on the guest room door. I jump as she pushes it open.

"How are we feeling? Less like death warmed over today?" She smiles brightly.

I moan, propping myself up on a couple pillows.

Seriously. I'd rather have whiplash than this monster crick in my back from spending God knows how long crushed in that suffocating box.

"My back still hurts, and I need coffee. Like now."

“Easy, lady. They were pretty clear about caffeine interacting with your painkillers,” she says.

I glare at her.

“Caffeine *is* my painkiller and it makes me less stabby. You know the risks.”

She laughs. “I had a feeling you’d say that, so I brought you something.”

She lifts her hand from behind her back, revealing a tall cup with a familiar black-and-white logo.

Wired Cup.

I gasp, reaching for it excitedly, and immediately wince when my back reminds me I’m moving too fast. “You’re really going to let me have it?”

“It’s decaf.” She bites her lip. “Um, sorry. It’s all you get until you’re off the drugs.”

“Decaf is for wimps.” I roll my eyes.

I’m pouting, but I hold my hand out anyway, accepting it like the precious nectar it is.

Even decaf fit for a mouse is a step up from the lemon-water I’ve been sucking down like a desiccated cactus.

She places the cup in my hand and sits in the chair beside my bed.

I bring the cup to my lips and take a drink that strokes my entire soul.

“Oh my God! I haven’t had a good cup since I wound up in a thriller movie,” I say, going in for a second loud slurp.

Dakota beams like the sun. “I tried to get your campfire brew, but it’s not quite available yet.”

When I manage to unhook the cup from my lips, I say, “That’s okay. This is awesome. I love the Colombian-light stuff, even if it is de-crap.”

“Ah, now I know you’re getting better. You can still tell exactly what it is with two sips. So, how are you doing with—” She pauses, turning a hand in the air. “Everything else?”

Everything else meaning *Cole*.

We’ve been doing this carefully coded dance for the last few days.

It usually ends in my heart dumping out on the floor without even using his name.

Yes, I’m that sad.

Just saying it will *break me*.

Oh, Dakota offers all the advice, support, and whatever else without using his name. Just like the nicest happily married bestie you could ever hope for.

I sigh, turning the cup in my hand.

“I should’ve known better, Dakota. I mean, I’ve been burned before, right? Once bitten...I guess I’ll get over it. Someday.” I hope. “I think I’m going back to San Diego. I’ll work a day job until I can save enough money to open a small coffee shop on the Pacific Coast Highway. I didn’t realize how much I missed home until we were in Hawaii.”

“No way! You can’t leave me. Don’t move back to California. You’ve built a life here—and you’d better collect your licensing fees for that coffee, whether or not you let Crankyface back into the picture.”

“Like he’d want back in? I’ve been nothing but trouble. Before the whole saving my life thing, I lived in a studio apartment he was scared to let his daughter visit. There isn’t a lot holding me here. You have Lincoln and a cute baby girl. I have bills and blew my chance at love.”

I slump back, suddenly boneless.

“You have your best friend no matter what.” She points at herself cheerfully. “With your experience, you could get into any big coffee chain. Apply to the Mermaid’s R & D if you need something to do. They’re right here in Seattle. Or hell, see if you’ve got enough when the Wired Grump pays out to start up Liza’s Love.” She pauses again. “Also, if you’re dead set on leaving, it might make sense to work *everything else* out. If only for closure.”

My pout returns. “He hasn’t even called me since it happened...”

“No, but he called me to make sure you were okay. He waited for you all night. Lincoln said he looked like a kicked puppy when you didn’t ask for him.”

“I was so messed up in the head. And kind of afraid to talk,” I admit, staring down. “How could I even look at him after the way I cussed him out? After he went and saved my flipping life?”

Guilt jabs me in the stomach.

“Yeah, well, he definitely got the impression that you don’t want to talk to him. Not that I blame you,” she says with a sigh.

“But he’s not willing to find out why I’m afraid, is he? If he still cares—”

“Eliza. Pause.” Dakota takes a deep breath. “This dude borrowed another rich guy’s yacht and sailed it across the Puget Sound during the worst storm we’ve had in twenty years. He battled a man with an axe and rescued you from a giant fish chest. He told Lincoln he just wanted to kiss you even while you still smelled like a cat food factory. Um, it’s safe to say he *cares*.”

Dang.

She's definitely convincing.

A faint smile pulls at my lips. "That sounds like the Lump I know, hero complex and all. He thinks he can save the world."

"Not the world. *You*. He does feel responsible, but not in the way you think," she points out.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, based on what little Linc pulled out of him, he's about as miserable as you. He's feeling wicked guilty about the whole thing, beating himself up. It was his friend and his past that almost made you swim with the fishies forever..."

That stupid man.

That stupid, kindhearted, heroic *freak* of a man.

I swallow the rock in my throat, blinking back tears. "I'll be thankful to him forever for what he did. I have to be. But we're still worlds apart—do you really think we have a chance at any kind of relationship? Saving me from a lunatic doesn't instantly fix the deeper issues."

"He loves you enough not to pursue that relationship, if you don't want it. Because he can't stand the thought of hurting you more." She pauses, a thin smile appearing. "I just write sappy poems, but that sounds like a hell of a foundation to work with. I'd call it love, Eliza."

I snort, my inner pessimist rising up. "Love? You think he loves me?"

"Eliza, Eliza...hold still." Her hand hovers over my face.

Then she flicks me between the eyes.

"Ow, what the hell?" I jerk back. "What was that for?"

"That's me, waking you up. You're welcome. And not to be the pushy, overbearing best friend from every bad rom-com here, but he loves you, silly. After Derek, I know this scares you," she lays her hand on my shoulder. "On paper, Cole seems similar, but we both know he's not. He's proven it a thousandfold. If you'd just be honest with yourself for one minute, you'd know I'm right. You'd have to admit you love him, too. There's also something else to consider."

"What?"

"Well, until he hears from the police or reads your statement, he can't know everything Troy said, right? Don't you think he deserves that closure?"

Oh, crap.

A hot tear escapes my eye.

Why am I even crying?

Because Dakota *is* right. I might just be the dumbest, most stubborn woman in Seattle.

“Closure, yeah. Everything else...maybe,” I whisper. “But if he loves me enough not to pursue anything, then maybe I love him enough to let him.”

“That’s stupid,” she clips.

“What can I say? We’re People of Inaction. So full of love we’re too paralyzed to actually make each other happy.”

“I think you need another brain scan. I can’t believe what I’m hearing.” She gives me a skeptical look.

“Yeah, yeah. I know.”

“When you’re on your feet again without your spine falling out, you need to find him, Eliza. Talk, before this gets even more ridiculous and one of you starts training messenger ravens or something.”

That wins her a laugh. “Oh, no. You’re still the only woman ever who gets a guy groveling with a trained raven.”

A huge smile stretches across her face and she blushes. “It was nice. But I want you to stop being your own worst enemy. Go get your happily ever after. Do *not* mess this up, Eliza, or I’ll brick you up in the nearest wine cellar.”

Big words when your best friend is a Poe and a poet.

My stomach flips over. I’m woozy and dizzy and I can’t even blame it on the painkillers.

I don’t want to lose Cole.

I don’t want to lose Destiny, either, and they’re a package deal.

But what if they’re already gone?

What if I make the effort and Cole decides I’m not worth it? If he tells me to get lost?

“Eliza, are you okay?” Dakota asks.

I drain my coffee and set the empty cup on the nightstand beside my bed.

“Whatever. I guess I’ll call him.”

“Nope.” She smiles so sweetly I almost die. “This is a conversation you’re having in person.”

“But—”

“No buts, Eliza. We both know you’d never forgive me if I let you do this over the phone.”

God, she’s right. But I can’t just up and do it in person, either.

“Dakota, I’m scared,” I whisper.

“I know, honey. But I don’t think you need to be.”

I grit my teeth, imagining something awful. “What if he tells me to get lost?”

She snorts. “He won’t, but you’ll never know if you don’t try.”

I shake my head.

“I’ve already told my parents I’d move home. They totally freaked out after—” After Troy tried to kill me, I’m about to say, but I can’t find the words. It makes it too real again. “After the incident. And maybe he should call me first?”

“Too easy. He’s waiting on you, girl.” She sighs, looking up at the ceiling before she glances at me again. “Look, if one of you doesn’t make a move ASAP, you’re both going to lose. Guaranteed. I’m not his best friend, so I can’t advise him. You’re the only one I can talk any sense to—is it getting through?”

“His best friend can’t get bail at the moment,” I say glumly.

“Good, neither of you have anything else to worry about then. I vote you’re going to have to listen to your friend this time.”

“I’ll take the leap, but if this ends badly, I’m blaming you, Dakota.”

“Ends badly?”

“Meaning, if I humiliate myself and he’s as uninterested as we think—”

“If that happens, I’ll sign over Evermore to you. Lincoln might be kinda pissed—but I know there’s nothing to worry about. One thousand percent.” She stands. “Speaking of Evermore, I’d better go squeeze in some writing while she’s down for her nap, but I’ll be back for lunch.”

“Thanks.”

She grins. “What are friends for?”

I look down at my arm, still in the sling. “Hey, Dakota?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re going to have to help me get decent. I have a hard time imagining myself as something any man wants to see right now.”

She laughs. “Oh, stop. To him, you’re Cleopatra and Marilyn Monroe rolled into one. But I’ll help you get ready...”

Later, after she’s done with her words for the day, we go shopping and buy a sundress that matches my sling.

A few more nerve-racking texts with Destiny, and my chariot awaits.

She’ll send Cole’s driver over and say he’s picking up one of her friends.

Kind of important because he knows the code to their gate.

It's easy enough to joke about our secret mission and Dess' bright laughter helps.

At least this way, if I'm utterly humiliated by Cole Lancaster, I can pretend it was all just a bad joke.



DESTINY OPENS the door with a squeal before I can knock.

She stares at me and lunges, curling herself around me like a scared kitten.

“Eliza, oh my God. Are you okay? I was so scared. I thought you—”

I hug her with my one good arm while she clings to my neck. “I’m fine, honey. It’s great to see you again. I would have called sooner, but I figured your dad didn’t want to see me anymore. I didn’t want to make this more awkward.”

She pulls away, tossing her head with a lopsided teenage grin.

“No way! He’s pretty much having Eliza-withdrawls—for realies—but promise me something?” She waits until I nod. “If you guys ever break up for real, can we still be friends?” The kid bites her lip.

“I love you, sweetheart, no matter what happens with your dad. Don’t you ever worry.” I pat her cheek lightly, loving how her smile lights up her face.

“Awesome. Thank you.”

“Okay, now I need your help. Can you show me to the kitchen? And make sure the coast is clear. The best conversations always happen over a steaming cup of coffee.”

“Right! I’ll grab everything you need. Oh, but Dad doesn’t drink the kind of coffee you do... He’s surprisingly basic with his morning cup. All we have now are regular old Wired Cup beans.”

“Pedestrian tastes for the CEO of a whole coffee chain, huh?” Leave it to that lunk to make me smile. “I came prepared, Dess. Don’t worry about the beans.”

And I’m as good as my word.

Once I’m in a kitchen that’s only slightly less impressive than the lab, I brew up a very simple blend. Toasted vanilla beans and cacao with a mix of peaberries I’ve brought, plus the standard coffee on hand in the house. It’s

my latest black-and-white experiment, customized to Cole's liking.

A little while later, when he comes home and heads to his balcony, he finds the steaming cup of coffee waiting.

I hunker down behind a patio couch, taking deep breaths so I don't hyperventilate. My heart feels like a hummingbird behind my ribs.

God, if this doesn't work...

But I watch his handsome silhouette as he lifts the cup and takes a slow sip that ignites those sky-blue eyes. He stops and looks around.

"Eliza?"

I don't answer.

Cole takes another pull from his cup and when he lowers it, he's wearing a smile that melts my heart.

"Eliza, show yourself. I know damn well Dess didn't make this."

Heat throbs under my cheeks.

Okay, deep breath.

This is what I came here for, right?

I stand up quickly and walk out from behind the couch, keeping my eyes trained on the ground. I just can't bring myself to look at him yet.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, slowly moving toward me.

I force myself to meet his gaze, trying not to choke on my next breath.

Cole's eyes glow like diamonds with the magic power to send me to heaven or hell.

"Destiny let me in," I say, shifting my weight shyly.

He smiles wider than before, his eyes twinkling.

"Good Dess." His eyes roam my body, and he's silent just long enough to make me well aware of it. "Shit. You're still in a sling."

He sighs, something protective and hurt in his expression.

"It's on the mend. All thanks to you, Cole."

"Bullshit." His face falls. "You're in that thing because of me. Because I had my head so far up my ass I couldn't see the danger right in front of me. Goddamn, I'm so sorry. If I'd just come to my senses sooner—"

"Cole, can you sit?" I ask softly. "Before you go off on yourself, Troy told me a few things you should know."

He motions to the sofa and we sit together.

Between quick sips of coffee that ground him, I relay everything the monster told me about what truly happened to Aster Lancaster.

His face works through every emotion imaginable.

Anger.
Sadness.
Betrayal.
Disgust.
Relief.

Finally sweet relief.

But I also see something else every time he looks at me. And I can't let myself get too wrapped up in it—too hopeful—or I'll never finish my story.

It's a little surreal, like I'm describing a movie rather than a nightmare that actually happened.

"Fucking shit," he whispers when it's over, sinking back against the couch. "Ever since he showed his real face, I knew it was something like that. But to have all the missing pieces, thanks to you..."

He shakes his head fiercely, reaching out, urging me closer.

"It's the least I can do, giving you some closure," I whisper.

"I needed it, Eliza, but there's something else I need a whole hell of a lot more than the gritty details about that backstabbing cock." He inhales sharply.

My eyes search his. My blood runs so hot my goosebumps feel like tiny mosquito bites.

"What?" I whisper.

"I'm looking at it now. You, woman, were always my missing piece. Always the right shape to fill the gaping hole in my life. I'm just sorry as hell it took me so long to come to my senses," he rasps.

His soulful gaze is determined to burn me down.

With shaking fingers, I cup his face with my good hand.

"Don't. Don't apologize, Cole. I'm only here—*alive*—thanks to you. You can't blame yourself for what Troy did."

He leans closer, his breath hot against my lips.

"I blame myself for a lot, Eliza. Not making sure he got put away after killing Aster. Not noticing his peculiarities. I hate myself for the bullshit I said to you. If I'd thought harder about my words, he never would've hurt you. You wouldn't have been in his car that night. There's no way to slice this where it isn't my fault. You almost got killed because of me, and I'm so fucking sorry. About as sorry as I am for ever hesitating to say how much I love you."

Oh my God.

Butterflies swarm my stomach in force.

It's hard to look at the fraught honesty etched on his face without going to pieces.

"Cole, stop. You weren't too late. You...you saved me," I whisper roughly, tracing my finger down his jawline. "And I know you said some things you shouldn't have. So did I. You were worried about Destiny and knowing what Troy did now, you were right to be. You don't have to tell me how much you love me. You showed it. You risked your life...for mine." I bite my bottom lip, hot emotion scratching my throat. "By the way, you can't do that ever again. You know that, right?"

"Like hell." He blinks at me and his brow furrows. "Why not? I can't live without you, Eliza."

"Because you can't leave Destiny an orphan, and I love you a lot, too, crazyman."

His arms lock around my waist and his lips brush mine.

"Goddamn. You realize it's taking every ounce of self-control I have not to kiss you right now?"

"Do it."

"But—"

"Do it," I whisper again, grabbing his shirt.

His hands sweep lower, stopping on my butt for a delicious squeeze before skimming up again.

Then he takes my face in both of his huge, worn hands. His lips claim mine with a low, sweeping growl like a desert storm announcing rain to the starving earth.

I gasp.

I tremble.

I fall for him a hundred more ways as our mouths go to war, desperate and hungry and so eager to be one.

When he tears himself away, he stands, taking my hand. "On my lap. Now. I'm afraid I'll fucking break you."

"I'm not that brittle," I promise.

"No, but with that arm..."

I laugh.

He pulls me down on him in one movement. My hips love the heat of his thighs. Almost as much as my face appreciates the roughness of his hands, his stubble, every time his skin rakes mine.

“I don’t deserve you,” he snarls in my ear. “I can never make up for the torture I’ve put you through.”

My heart sinks for a moment.

“This better not be the ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ speech?”

He shakes his head, his other arm holding me tighter.

“No. I’d have to be a hell of a lot dumber to let you go again. This is the ‘I’m afraid I’ll hurt you again, or you’ll realize I don’t deserve you and run away speech.’”

I purse my lips. “That’s so not happening.”

“Yeah? Why are you so sure?”

“You know why.”

He smiles. “I have a good idea, but I want to hear you say it.”

I lay my head on his shoulder, turning so my lips brush his earlobe. “Because I’m madly in love with you, Cole Lancaster. I could probably live without you, but it would suck too much to try.”

With a satisfied growl, he shifts me sideways in his lap and locks his arms around me, taking extra care to keep pressure off the sling. “I am not hurting you, am I?”

Too dazed for words, I shake my head.

He’s definitely not hurting anything when he claims my lips again.

The kiss starts so gentle, so tender, but grows urgent with every hungry stroke of his tongue, a dark preview of his deepest wishes, thrusting in and out.

I’m already so wet it’s appalling.

This time, when I break away with a ragged breath, he curses sharply. “Fuck. Eliza, I’ve missed that so goddamned much. Stay with me tonight.”

His eyes search mine, bottomless blue oceans wild with demands.

“...I wish I could. But all of my pain drugs are at Dakota’s.” I wince. “Damn, I’m sorry. I didn’t expect we’d pick up right where we were before —” Before *everything*.

“We’re not.”

I look at him, feeling confused.

“Did you forget? You resigned, Eliza. You’re not my employee anymore. That means no BS with HR or worries about people in the office running their mouths. No more shadow romance. I can take you to dinner and to Destiny’s turtle talks whenever I damn well please—if you’re willing to sit through a two-hour PowerPoint on sea turtle mating habits.”

This time when I laugh, I can't stop.

That sounds so nice.

I think I'd happily listen to Destiny geek out about sea animals forever because it means she's in my life—and so is her gorgeous grump of a dad.

Before I can form words again, he continues. "Fair warning, we're not picking up where we left off. I'm a million times more committed now. Nothing comes between us again, sweetheart. I won't let it."

My breath hitches.

My heart soars.

I've fallen into a dream and I never want to wake up.

Honestly, I might not even need my pain meds. This man makes me weightless and giddy and high.

And he shifts me from his lap onto the seat beside him before he stands, gently pulling me up into his arms.

I raise an eyebrow.

"Call Dakota now. See if we can pick up your things," he growls.

"Um, but actually, I don't—"

"I know. I should have asked you first. I want you here with me that badly, woman," he whispers, pressing his forehead to mine. "Don't make me spend another night without you. I can't be alone in that bed—even if all I get to do is hold you all night."

Sweet baby Jesus.

He could've stopped five minutes ago because my heart is already wrecked.

Happy tears sting my eyes.

"Okay!" I whisper.

And he pulls me into another sticky sweet kiss, stealing my breath even when I'm a sobbing mess.

His lips find mine over and over, and soon he picks me up like a bride and carries me into the house, again so careful of my injury with every step.

"Where are you taking me?" I giggle as he brings me over the threshold.

"Where do you think?"

"But what about—"

"I'll lock the door and deal with the inquisition from Destiny later. But if she's on her phone, she's preoccupied. I promise."

"What about the coffee? You didn't finish and it's a really good one."

He grins until his face screws up.

“You’ll make us both more in the morning,” he says, and he’s as good as his word.

Just like that, we’re upstairs in his massive bedroom. He kicks the door shut behind him, stopping only to lock it.

He drops me on the bed, smothering my face and neck in frantic kisses, coming back to my mouth every so often to rake his teeth across my lip or caress my tongue.

I’m a ball of nerves.

It’s not just the heady anticipation of what comes next.

It’s knowing what it was to lose him and win him back.

It’s coming *home* to a man who cherishes me.

The way his warm tongue flicks across my hard nipples once he’s laid me bare.

The way he carefully undresses me, and then rips his own clothes off in two frenzied movements before sliding into bed on his back and guiding me over him with a dizzying squeeze of my ass.

“On top? You never let me—”

“Can’t risk hurting you again.” He ends that fierce statement by pressing his lips to mine.

Oh, right.

The way his eyes brighten tells me it’s a promise—a vow he means to keep. I spread my legs slowly, careful to find my balance, taking him in more than just physically.

God, my body missed this.

The challenge of engulfing a man so enormous, my walls hugging his thick, angry head. I can feel him pulsing inside me, this bestial thing that’s been deprived of its prey for too long.

This is it.

Everything we lost reclaimed in a hot fusion of flesh.

I can’t be closer to him than I am right now with his body connected to mine. He’s already pumping slowly, his hips rising to meet mine, plunging his cock in to the hilt.

“I-I can’t lose you again,” I whisper. “Oh!”

With a feral look, he pulls my hips tighter against his, craning his face up to kiss me. He holds me up so I don’t have to put pressure on my bad arm.

I’m gliding all over Cole Lancaster.

Even when I’m on top and theoretically in control, he shows me who’s

boss.

His kisses come so intense, so rough, so full of teeth that mean to mark me, I can't decide what's better. The way his tongue chases mine or the way he moves, owning me so deeply.

"Eliza, fuck!" He throbs again in my depths, growling my name, and breaks away from my face to plant his lips on my shoulder.

No, not just his lips.

He's sucking, biting me, aiming to leave a secret mark on my skin I'll enjoy wearing.

I clench around him, secure in his arms, riding the hottest sex-high of my life and relishing the fire building in my core.

He senses it, too.

The heat. The sweat beading on my skin.

The way I whimper when he drives deeper—*oh God, deeper*—when he molds my throat to his palm, when he sends the other crashing against my ass in a blistering smack of white-hot sweetness just before I go cascading over the edge.

"Go, sweetheart! Come your pretty head off," he orders, eclipsing my lips with his.

My body obeys him effortlessly.

This time, when I come for this glorious man, he has my entire body, mind, and soul.

He has my heart forever—and I want to prove it as my senses return.

I fixate on riding him.

A messy smile pulls at my lips as I watch the stunned heat in his eyes. I'm on the attack, and I'm going to make this man give me every freaking drop in his balls.

The tempo rises as we crash together.

Just several blinding minutes of chaos tangled together, his thrusts pleasing and punishing and racing me to the finish.

"Eliza! Shit, I'm—" His loud groan chokes off the last word.

I know, baby. I want you to break inside me, Cole.

It's all I can think, wishing I could say those words, but I'm already breathless.

The instant his cock roots deep inside me, swollen and seething, I'm gone.

We come together in a grinding, violent collision.

Nails and kisses.

Curses and prayers.

Sin and souls.

I don't even realize I've left several long red scratches on his shoulder until my face falls against it. I kiss the parts of his skin I've savaged.

His breath keeps me so turned on as he pulls out with a parting kiss, ragged and satisfied.

When it's over—as if this isn't just round one—he holds me so tightly I can feel his heartbeat against mine.

“It's never been that good, Eliza. *Never*,” he whispers, kissing my forehead. “Holy fuck. Loving you should come with a warning label.”

I smile at how awestruck he sounds.

“What? Like a prescription? Like 'may cause grumpy bossmen to come so hard they can't walk for twenty-four hours'?”

“Brat.” He smacks my ass, chuckling loudly. He looks at me with his eyes warm and narrow. “That'd be a good start, anyway. I'm sure it'd be longer than a novel, though.”

“Liar! No way.” I playfully slap his arm.

Just like that, we're lost in each other's smiles again. Why does it feel so easy?

Maybe because this time, it's crystal clear.

It's lasting.

Later, he texts his driver to go to Dakota's house and pick up my things.

When I wake up in the morning after two more rounds of gravity-defying makeup sex, I expect him to be getting ready for work.

But he sits on the edge of the bed, stock-still, gazing at me. “I decided I'm working from home until you're fully recovered,” he tells me.

“What? That's totally not necessary, Cole.” Oh, but there's no hiding the overwhelmed quiver in my voice.

He leans down and kisses me. “I want to be here with you. Already had a set of keys made for you this morning.”

“What? So, I'm like—” *Living here now?*

He shrugs nonchalantly.

“Keep your apartment if you want to, but I'd feel better with you here full-time so I know you're safe.” He holds up a hand. “I don't mean to rush anything. Hell, after Troy, I just think we'd both feel better. I have security. Nothing would ever happen, but if someone ever got stupid enough to try,

I'm here to rip their throat out."

Wow.

For the first time ever, I don't mind him doting on me, being a little overpossessive.

I definitely don't mind feeling like I *belong*.

There's no place I'd rather be than in Cole's world.

There's no life I can imagine without him.

MORE ESPRESSO, LESS DEPRESSO (COLE)



Three Months Later

Wired Cup couldn't have rolled out these goddamned splendid fall drinks with Eliza gone, so I made her a consultant.

Honestly, she likes it better this way. My girl has access to the lab for experimenting to her heart's content, plus she helps us dream up new pastries on the side.

With the creeping Seattle chill and incessant rains moving in last week, we took off for a breather in Kona. I don't think either of us are eager to relive memories of Troy every time the sky rips open and pours like that dark, stormy night.

It takes time to get over, even though the maniac's trial was brief and he'll be spending his days behind bars.

This time, it's a different air in Hawaii, lighter than before.

Maybe because she's only here as my girlfriend now.

I find her sitting on the bamboo couch outside, sipping a fragrant coffee and playing on her phone.

"Let's go for a walk on the beach," I say.

"Okay! Let me get ready."

I snort. "You need to get ready for a walk?"

"Yeah, I want to bring some things with me."

"What do you need to bring to the beach?" I glare at her. "It better not be

another damn brew pipe. You know I love your quirks, sweetheart, but that thing—”

“Cole, don’t worry about it. Just stuff.” Her eyes shine, cryptic as ever.

I sigh affectionately.

“Woman, no amount of time I spend with you ever prepares me for your randomness, does it?”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” she teases, craning her neck to gaze up at me.

“It’s a thing. Good or bad, I don’t care. You know there’s nobody I’d rather spend time with.” I tilt her chin up with my fingers for a kiss.

“Ew!” I don’t see her until she moves. Destiny stands behind the couch to the side, just out of Eliza’s sight. She makes a face like she’s gagging. “Guys, get a room. How much time do you need to get ready for the beach, anyway?”

“About twenty minutes or so,” Eliza says. “And sorry-not sorry, you wanted this too, Dess. The cost of having me around is seeing your dad make kissy faces.”

I nod, biting back a laugh. “Go on, get the hell ready, so we can get out of here.”

Destiny gives me an awkward thumbs-up. Pain in the ass or not, she’s a little more grown-up every day.

When Eliza leaves the room, she asks, “How far are you walking?”

“We’ll make the rounds. Probably stop where you found your turtles before,” I tell her. “It’s almost whale season. If we’re lucky, there might be a couple humpbacks showing up early.”

“Oh, wow!” For a second, I think she’ll insist on coming with, but then she remembers. “Right. So, what are you gonna say to her? Did you practice?”

“I’ll improvise, Dess,” I say tightly.

“Daaad, don’t tell me you’re unprepared?” She sighs and facepalms. “This is going to end really well...”

“Destiny, you’re in luck. I don’t need your help with this part.”

She rolls her eyes. “Then why’d you ask for it, Romeo?”

“I don’t need your help with the logistics, I mean. Just your approval.” I smile warmly, remembering our conversation yesterday while Eliza was out by herself exploring the coffee farms.

She damn near tackled me like an overactive puppy when it was over.

“Way to get specific, Dad. But good luck.” Destiny stomps off, muttering

to herself.

“Hey, hold up. You’re still—”

She spins around on one heel. “Why? You said you don’t need my help.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it. Some things a man has to do without his meddling daughter.”

She laughs. “Fine. I’ll be there when you’re ready, Daddy. Don’t worry.”
Shit.

This is really happening, isn’t it?

What *will* I say? I only snapped at her because I still don’t know.

Where do you start when you’re asking for forever?

Fool.

On second thought, maybe I should have let Destiny help with this part...

I’m about to race after her when Eliza walks in, stunning as ever in a strapless island dress and long chestnut-brown tresses framing her bright face.

She has a matching bag thrown over her shoulder.

My throat goes tight.

Her round tits are almost spilling out, making my tongue ache to taste them.

“Forget the walk. You’re more beautiful than any view out there,” I say gruffly.

She grins. “Thanks, brown-noser. I just want to be comfy at the beach.”

Fuck, this woman.

The only thing that would be more comfortable for us both is if she was wearing nothing. It’s a good thing Hawaiian law prevents me from making a small part of this shore my own private nudist beach.

“Right. Let’s go.” I offer her my hand.

She closes the space between us, locking her warm fingers in mine.
“Should we ask if Destiny wants to come?”

“No. She’s working on her TikTok channel. She’s still got at least a dozen seal videos to upload from the week before we left,” I say.

“Adorable,” Eliza says with a laugh.

I lead her downstairs and outside, then through the evergreen trail bursting with emerald-green all the way to the sparkling sands.

“Gotta admit, it’s been an interesting three months,” I say.

She smiles, releasing a content sigh. “The best three months of my life, you mean. But we had some good times before we became official, too.”

“We did, and you’re stuck with me now.” She leans up to kiss my cheek. How does she do it? Even a chaste peck makes my dick steel.

“I came so close to losing you. I’ve never been so scared of anything. Eliza—”

“Wait,” she cuts in. Panic washes over her face. “He’s not getting out of jail, is he?”

I hate that she’s still terrified. The color drains from her face. It’s the same look I see some nights when she’s tossing and turning next to me.

I always kiss her awake, pulling her away from those nightmares, back into my arms.

“Never!” I whisper, squeezing her hand. “That shithead went down for life. I made sure of it. I hired the whole A-list of lawyers for you, for Destiny, and for Aster. He’ll rot when he’s got assault stacked on manslaughter, plus armed robbery of a minor. I didn’t mean to scare you when—”

“Oh, man.” Her hand flutters to her chest. “Oh, thank God, Cole. I was afraid that’s why you brought it up, even if it’s kinda unlikely...”

“Didn’t mean to scare you. I only mentioned it to say if I ever lost you, I’d lose my mind. I won’t, Eliza. You are mine, tonight and forever.”

She smiles so wide I break into a grin.

“I am. Want to stop for a minute? I brought something new for you to try.”

I gaze out at the ocean. We’re not quite to the turtle beach yet. I turn around to look up the big hill behind us, but I can’t see Destiny.

“Let’s go a little farther first. It’s such a nice evening,” I say.

As if on cue, the island wind blows on us.

“Sure. Where do you want to stop?”

“Let’s find Destiny’s turtles.”

“You’re spoiling her. Surely, she doesn’t own the sea turtles?”

I smile. “Try telling her that. They’re always the first and last thing she wants to see when we get here.” We keep walking through paradise before I slow down and ask, “Eliza, have you been happy with everything?”

“You mean with us?” She pauses and looks at me.

“With us, with living with me. You’ve basically turned into a co-parent the past few months. I didn’t know if it would be too much.”

“No way! Having you and Destiny around rocks. Co-parenting is only an issue if it is for you or her.” She beams like the sun. “Sometimes, I think ending up in that fish chest was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“You can’t be serious?” My mouth drops.

“It got me you, didn’t it?”

Damn her logic.

“I was already yours. I never would’ve let you walk out of my life,” I growl, taking her hand and kissing it, grateful it’s long healed.

“Maybe I just wanted you to chase me.”

I stare down at her. “I chased you across the whole damn Puget Sound, all right.”

“I know.” She throws her arms around me, breathing me in.

The bag over her shoulder slides down to her wrist. She pulls a thermos out, screws the top off, and pours black liquid into it.

“Try this,” she urges.

Her concoctions are always delicious, so I take a big swig—and instantly regret it.

Miraculously, I force myself to swallow.

I’m not sure if I’m fake grinning or grimacing, but it’s so sour I can barely close my mouth. “Uh, what is that?”

At least someone’s having fun.

Eliza laughs so hard she almost falls over.

“You look like you sucked a lemon,” she sputters, wiping at her eyes. “It’s fine. That’s supposed to be guava and Hawaiian blueberry. Looks like the fruity flavors were a little loud.”

Big-ass understatement.

I swipe my tongue around, trying to erase the taste. “They can’t all be hits. I think that’s what I love the most about you—”

She’s still laughing, wiping her eyes. “What? That I can make you gag with sour coffee?”

“You don’t quit. You’re a honey badger after all, and you’re so fucking mine. I can’t imagine life without you in it.”

For a second, I glance up the big hill at a flash of movement. It’s Destiny, watching and waving to me.

It’s now or never.

I fall to one knee, taking the small, precious object from my pocket.

“Eliza Angelo, I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you. I can’t live without you, and now I need to know this is for life. Preferably without any big flowery speeches because with you, I’m always impatient. Will you marry me?” I slide the ring on her finger before she can answer, staring up at

the woman I desperately want to make my wife.

For a few brutal seconds, she's a pillar.

Frozen. Staring. Breathless.

Then she throws herself into my arms, screaming, my ears ringing as her voice softens to a high-pitched "Yes, yes, holy crap yes!"

I stand there, smiling like a madman as I wrap my arms around her, crushing my mouth on hers.

We spend the next few minutes tangled and devouring each other.

"Okay!" Destiny yells, clapping her hands as she closes in. "That's enough old people kissing. You're going to gross out my followers."

I glance over. She holds up the phone and taps the screen.

Eliza pulls away with her mouth hanging open. "Oh, God. You livestreamed it?"

"No, I just took a video and sent it to your parents. But I had to say something to make it stop sometime this century because—no offense, guys, but—" Dess shakes her arms. "*Gross.*"

"My parents know?" Eliza asks, blinking up at me.

I nod. "I had to talk to your dad before I proposed. I know a lot of girls don't feel like someone should talk to their old man before them anymore, but in this case, I almost got you killed. All I could think about was some loser putting Dess in the same predicament and then deciding he'd marry her before he had the nerve to tell me about it. I'd tear him limb from limb. I figured our married life would be hell if I didn't smooth that over first."

"What did he say?"

"He said it was your decision—and that if I ever hurt you again, he'd give me a pair of concrete boots to the bottom of the Pacific." I grin.

"What? He's usually so mild."

"I hurt his little girl," I point out. "Never again."

Destiny bounces between us and grabs Eliza's free hand. "So, when and where are we doing this wedding?"

I side-eye her hard. "She just got engaged a minute ago. Give her a chance to think, Dess."

"Oh. Well..." Eliza pauses, her tongue between her teeth in thought. "I've actually had my wedding planned since the seventh grade."

"You have?"

"Yeah. It might've been eighth grade, but still..."

"Then how come you don't know when and where your wedding is?"

Destiny asks.

“Oh—I met this jerk before your dad and thought for a while I wanted nothing to do with men or weddings. All of those ideas feel tainted now.”

“I’d better not be your rebound,” I joke, wrapping my arms around her.

“You’re just my soulmate,” she whispers, looking intently at Destiny. “I know one thing I’d still like to keep for sure.”

“What?” Destiny asks breathlessly.

“I want a mocha fountain.”

“Mocha fountain?” I repeat, trying to wrap my head around it.

“Like a chocolate fountain, but better because it’s chocolate coffee,” she explains.

“People are going to think our wedding is one big PR stunt,” I say, laughing.

“Then don’t invite anyone. I’m fine with eloping.”

“I’m not!” Destiny squeals. “I need to see you say 'I do,' Dad.”



A FEW DAYS LATER, our engagement announcements happen by accident.

We walk into a local coffee shop and order drinks. Eliza mentions to the barista that we’re getting hitched. Instead of writing our names on the cups, the barista writes *Mr. Lancaster* and *Future Mrs. Lancaster*.

A giddy Eliza snaps a picture with her phone and starts tapping furiously at the screen.

“Don’t tell me you’re posting that?” I say.

“Yep. It’s our announcement.” Then her eyes go wide and her mouth falls. “Oh! Hold up...”

“No,” I whisper, already sensing what she’s thinking. “Eliza, don’t you dare.”

“C’mon, Cole. You dared me once and now it’s my turn. We totally should—”

“No,” I bite off.

“Bad news. It’s opposite day and no means yes,” she says, walking her fingers up my arm. “We’re getting married at the Wired Cup on Seventh Street.”

Fuck my life.

Worst of all, she's serious.

I breathe in before I say, "Sweetheart, hold up. You have unlimited resources at your disposal and you want to tie the knot at a retail coffee shop?"

"We'll need some of those resources to shut it down for the day..."

My groan vibrates through my bones. "We can come up with a better venue. I promise."

"Yeah, right. You can't improve on perfect."

"It's a store," I growl.

"It's where we first met. That's crazy romantic."

"We're not getting married in my damn shop," I grumble, staring up at the sky.

When I look back, she's still smiling.

It's all I need to see to not instantly veto the idea.

If I'd give this woman the entire world on a silver platter, can't I give her one memorable day in a barista line?



Three Months Later

I STAND in the men's room, fussing with my tie when there's a knock at the door.

"Dad? Are you decent?" Destiny calls.

"Yeah."

She opens the door and walks in, all dolled up in her finest. "See? I knew it. You need help with your tie. Come here."

Usually, I'd try to deny it with my bruised pride, but today is too important to bicker with my daughter and my own dumb hands for never getting it right.

In ten seconds, Destiny has it adjusted perfectly, the warmest smile hanging on her face. "Mocha-brown looks good on you. It doesn't match your eyes, but it fits the theme."

"Thanks," I huff out, rolling my eyes.

“What? Dad, you’re getting *married*. Lighten up. You can’t possibly find anything to grump about today.” Her awkward laugh spills out.

“I still can’t believe you let her talk me into this.”

“Um, because it’s sweet as pie, Dad. This is—”

“Yeah, yeah. The first place we met,” I finish. “Like I could ever forget.”

It wouldn’t be half-bad if I didn’t have to use the men’s room to suit up. The shop is the perfect size for our small group of family and close friends, sure. It’s also easy to shut out anyone who just wants to gawk at the billionaire and the beauty too.

“You remember your promise, Dess? You agreed to a media blackout. You won’t post anything online until it’s over for twenty-four hours.” I stare at her.

“Oh, yeah! I wouldn’t dream of ruining this.” She gives me one of those teenage grins that seems so grown-up.

I smile back at her. “It’s probably too late to ask, but you’re still okay with this, aren’t you?”

“Dad, stop. If you’re getting cold feet, you’ll have to scrounge up a better excuse than me. And if you walked out on Eliza, I’d probably never talk to you again.”

“Not even a thought.” I hug my daughter. “I’m walking out of here with a wife. I just realized I never checked in with you since the day I proposed. Time flies.”

“It’s a godsend. Someone needs to take care of you when I move away.” She smiles softly. “I’m just glad it’s somebody you actually love. I would’ve had to like rent you a friend or something if Eliza hadn’t shown up.”

“Hell, I’m not that high maintenance, but I appreciate the thought.” She turns to go as I call, “Hey, Dess?”

“Yeah?”

“Have you given any thought to where you’re moving when the time comes?”

Her eyes flare with excitement. “Honolulu! Where else? With my grades, I’ll moonwalk into the U of Hawaii.”

“You’re serious about this marine biology gig, huh?”

“Yeah.” She shuffles her feet and nods. It’s cute how shy she is every time I remember that I’m not the only one who let fate in this past year. “Hey, Dad, one more thing...”

“What?”

“Don’t think you’re getting off this cheap whenever I get married.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” My laugh bounces off the walls as she walks out.

A few minutes later, she’s at the door again, tapping lightly and cracking it open. “You need to come! They’re about to get started.”

“On my way.”

With one last look in the mirror, I’m as ready for forever as I’ll ever be.

I march out the door and don’t stop until I’m standing beside the modified front counter that now sits behind an arch of fully bloomed white orchids.

Destiny strolls down the aisle alone in her coffee-tinted satin dress with the dark blue belt.

Lincoln and Dakota Burns are next with their daughter.

Then Mr. Angelo appears with Eliza on his arm and goddamn, she’s so bright I regret not having shades.

She looks like the world’s tastiest three-tiered cake in her strapless white dress with cascading ruffles. Every movement accents her curves through the fabric.

I’m already throbbing at the thought of pulling it off her later.

Lyle Angelo, my future father-in-law, puts her hand in mine, gives me a death glare, and says, “Take good care of her, Lancaster.”

“You have my word,” I say, squeezing his hand firmly before I lock eyes with Eliza.

It hurts how beautiful she is.

All soft eyes and glossy smile.

I see the woman who saved me as much as I saved her, the face of my future, and God, the sexiest woman alive—the one and only—the treasure I’ll cherish hard and often.

With a dumbstruck smile for my wife-to-be, I turn to another familiar face. Katelyn Storm moonlights as an officiant when she isn’t working for me.

She would have skinned me alive if I hadn’t agreed to let her do the ceremony.

“We’re going to begin with a special unity ceremony,” she announces for our little audience.

Destiny leaves her spot as maid of honor, moving to the vials and burr grinder on the other side of us. She picks up the vial of toasted vanilla beans and pours it into the grinder before returning to her place.

Misty Angelo, Eliza's mother, moves to the unity station next.

She picks up the first vial on Eliza's side with a tearful smile—cacao beans.

My turn comes next. I walk over and take the peaberry vial, uncapping it and dumping it into the grinder.

Next, Eliza comes over and empties the vial with our standard Sumatra beans.

As soon as it's in, I crank the grinder slowly with Eliza's little hand over mine.

With the beans ready, I pass them back to her, watching intently as she sets up a pour over drip on top of a wide-mouthed decorative mug.

Wayne the barista hands her a small goosenecked kettle from behind the counter, already steaming at the perfect temperature.

She brews the coffee quickly and then picks up the mug.

Love grounded me, it says on the side with today's date under it.

She holds the cup out for me with both hands like an offering.

Slowly, I bring it to my lips and take a sip.

I swallow, turning the cup around like we practiced so I can offer her the same.

Those honey-sweet amber eyes watch me the entire time she drinks deeply.

I'm so messed up by her smile that I can't even breathe.

We set the cup down a minute later and return to our places.

When we planned everything out, we decided these would be our vows, acted out rather than spoken in our second favorite ritual that still involves being clothed.

We're just about to be proclaimed man and wife when Eliza says, "Wait."

My heart stops.

"Yes?" Katelyn's face is questioning.

Eliza swallows audibly. "I know we didn't plan this, but there's one more vow I need to make..."

"Go right ahead." Kate nods at her, smiling.

Eliza turns to Destiny. "I can never replace your mother, but you're family now. This day needs to be about you, too, honey. I just want you to know that I promise I'll always love you."

Here comes the waterworks.

Destiny wipes a tear off her cheek as she runs over and damn near flattens

Eliza. “Thank you, thank you!”

If we’re having a coffee-themed wedding, it must be laced with so much sugar it’s practically syrup.

Eliza strokes her hair and turns to me again. “Sorry. I just felt like I had to —”

I don’t let her finish.

I just sweep her into my arms, attacking her with a kiss that says there’s no way I could love this woman more.

“I now pronounce you man and wife!” Kate says cheerfully.

I barely notice. I never take my mouth off Eliza’s, tasting her sweetness down to her soul.

I think I taste my own luck, too, realizing she’s mine forever. And I think she also realizes it when she shudders in my embrace.

It’s just a kiss—the happiest of our lives—but this kiss has a weight.

When I finally break away, she sighs, laying her head on my chest.

Applause bursts around us. It’s amazing how much noise even a small peanut gallery can make when they’re amped up for your entire future.

I move my head to her ear, keeping her safely tucked against me. “Hold the fuck on. I’m going to give you another reason to shake tonight, and we won’t have to worry about interruptions.”

She shudders before she says, “We still have a whole reception to make it through. Careful what you promise, Lump.”

“Oh, hell.” I pull back to look at her, wearing a shit-eating grin. “Call me that again and I’ll double down on what I said. If you still think there’s anything lumpy about me, Mrs. Lancaster, then it’s my duty to clear that up.” I bring my mouth closer so I can whisper, “Preferably by leaving you so sore for our honeymoon you’ll need me to carry you.”

I love the stunned flash of her eyes and the way she forgets we’re supposed to be moving until I lock my arm around hers, leading us down the makeshift aisle.

I love that we’ll always have this banter—the very thing that brought us together in this shop.

From Wired Cup, we all head to a historic hotel attached to a vineyard for the reception. The fires in the hearths glow brightly against the winter chill, painting our special day in orange light that mirrors the embers in my chest.

I watch Eliza and her old man dance to “Stealing Cinderella.” He still occasionally glares at me, but I think we’ll be friends. Someday.

Every time I glance over at Destiny, she smiles, even if she barely looks up from my wife being spun around by her father.

The next dance is mine.

Finally.

We move with one rhythm, swaying more to our own pulse than the music.

Every time she smiles, looking over my shoulder, I turn to see what remains of the magnificent eight-layered coffee cake. It's topped with two mugs with our names on them and decorated with espresso truffles and sea salt.

"Do you wonder if we took the whole coffee theme too far?" I ask.

"Never. It's totally us and everyone loves it."

"There's a first time for everything," I say with a snort. "I'm just glad you put the coffee down long enough to have some champagne with me."

"Yep." Eliza smiles playfully. "Do you remember the party favors? They're just about to bring them out."

"Damn, do I want to?"

She smiles, mischief gleaming in her eyes. I can't wait to see it again later when we're alone. "Little burlap bags of chocolate-covered beans tied with lace. The bag says—"

"Ah, shit. Thanks for reminding me," I grind out. "'Thanks for bean' here.' Right?"

Giggling, she pushes her face into my shoulder.

"We get it. I married a little nerd," I say, brushing her hair with my hand until she looks at me. "And she's the sexiest, sweetest nerd alive."

When it's time for the bouquet toss and I'm eyeing the time on my phone impatiently, so goddamned ready to make our grand escape, Destiny scurries toward the crowd.

Until I catch her by the shoulder with a wary look. "Where do you think you're going, young lady? This family's not getting another wedding for at least seven years."

"Dad!" She grins at me. "Not fair. Give me a chance."

"You'll have your chance at other weddings, little bee. I'm too young for you to give me that much grey hair if you catch that thing."

She pouts, but lingers at my side as the handful of single ladies cluster around her.

When the moment comes, Eliza throws the bouquet like a catapult—and

Destiny still lunges for it as it sails over our heads—but when I turn around to look where it landed, everyone’s staring in quiet shock or screeching laughter.

“Oh, hell.” Brock Winthrop looks up, red-faced, the flowers pinned against his shoulder. “Can we have a do-over?”

A couple hours later, the guests are on their way out. Eliza gives her parents an emotional goodbye. Once they’re gone, she and Destiny go to the bathroom and come out wearing matching brown velour jogging suits and aqua t-shirts.

Destiny looks down, rolling her eyes in horror. “Big yikes. We look like we just escaped the nineties. I can’t *believe* I let you talk me into this.”

“Just you wait. It’ll be comfortable on the long flight,” Eliza promises with a grin.

“Leggings are good enough. This screams old people club—and not the cool kind.”

Eliza eyes her warily. “On your wedding day, we’ll wear whatever you want, okay?”

“I’m holding you to it.” Destiny points at her stepmom.

I stand there and try not to cringe, grateful that Eliza’s outfit won’t be staying on for long.

I put a bedroom on my jet for good reason.

“Are we ready for the honeymoon?” I ask, linking my arm with hers just as Tom pulls up, working his way through the exiting wedding traffic. “Flight leaves in about an hour.”

“You’re kidding, right? Cole, just name any day of the week and I’ll follow you to the ends of the Earth.” Her eyes glisten.

Eliza looks at me like it’s the first time she’s truly seeing me.

Goddamn, I can’t wait to make that sparkle in her eyes a whole lot brighter.

While I wait for Tom to park along the curb next to us, I bring my woman—my *wife*—home to my lips.

This is our moment.

Our special drink of forever.

I don’t even look back at Destiny, knowing she’s turning ten shades of green behind us.

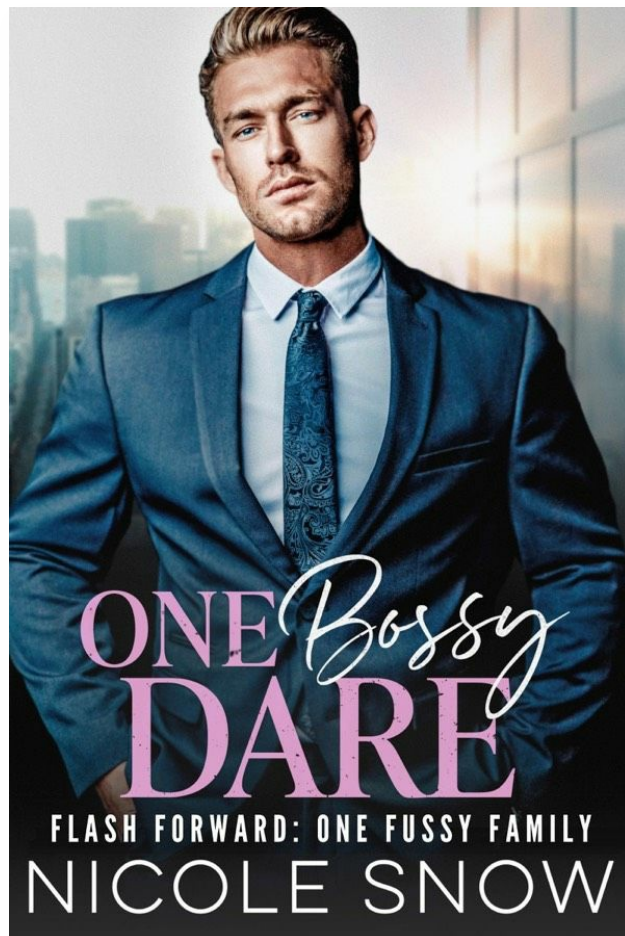
We trade champagne kisses for the next five minutes, fully lost in each other, laughing with hungry tongues and heat and heart.

Who knew one little dare with a spitfire would finally set me free?
Who the hell knew I'd fall so hard for this woman?
With Eliza, I'll always be dizzy, coming off a permanent caffeine high.
And I wouldn't trade this spectacular woman for another cup of anything
else in this life.



THANKS FOR READING *One Bossy Dare!*

Want to see how family life shapes up for the Lancasters long after the
Happily Ever After?



Check out their future in [this special flash forward story.](https://dl.bookfunnel.com/4ruwstx6rl) -
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Then keep reading for a preview of another fierce and grumpalicious boss-hole as Lincoln Burns claims Dakota Poe in One Bossy Proposal.

ONE BOSSY PROPOSAL PREVIEW

While I Pondered (Dakota)

The spring sun shines down on Seattle like a sword aimed at my own personal gloom.

I'm sad and hungry—a dangerous combination.

It's been a year to the day since I buried my heart—and the utter scumbag who dragged it through the mud, doused it in kerosene, and burned it to a blackened crisp—and it feels like an eternity.

Some things, you only sort of get over.

Some things, you don't forget.

Hold the pity party, Dakota. You're better off without him. You're a thousand miles from home, smack in the middle of a whole new life, I tell myself.

Eyeballing the gluttonous offerings in the bakery case helps.

It's true. I have rebuilt. Kind of.

I left that small-town dreariness and its regrets behind. I have an interview next week for a job that slaps, and if I don't get it, I'll keep applying until I land something with big-girl pay and a real opportunity to flex my writing muscles.

Without my great escape last summer in a halo of tears, I wouldn't be here in Seattle, practically *drooling* at the sugar-rich delicacies that all seem to have my name on them.

I'd have less time to focus on my writing, too, and I'd still be interning in that one-room closet masquerading as a marketing agency.

Yay, heartbreak.

Yay, Jay Foyt.

His stupidity gave me a whole new life.

“You hungry or did you just come here to admire the goods? Can I get you something?” The barista appears behind the bakery case with a girlish laugh.

“Huh? Oh, sorry—” *Dammit, Dakota, get out of your head.* “Can I get a Regis roll and a small caramel nirvana latte?”

“Coming right up!” She smiles and uses tongs to grab a huge cinnamon roll drizzled in icing. It’s so fat I think it crosses time zones. “Lucky lady, you got the last one today! We’re a little short. Cinnamon shortage in the morning shipment—go figure.”

Lucky me.

If only my luck with pastries would rub off on other things. Like winning lottery tickets or cigar-chomping big shots in publishing ready to snap up my poetry. I’d even settle for a decent Tinder date who doesn’t have a fuckboy bone in his body.

Nope. I’m asking for too much.

Today, Lady Luck grants bargain wishes. She delivers the very last mound of sticky cinnamon sweetness in the case and point-three more pounds on my thighs.

I mean, it’s a start, right?

I move to the cash register and pay.

“Glad I got mine before you ran out,” I say, swiping my card. “I’ll be sure to savor the flavor—”

“What do you mean you’re out?” a deep voice thunders behind me. “I’ve been here at exactly this time three times a week since Christmas. You’re never *out*.”

Holy crap.

And I thought I was having a bad day...

I look back toward the bakery case to see what kind of ogre crawled out of his swamp to rant and rave over a missing cinnamon roll.

“Sorry, sir. The lady in front of you just bought the last roll,” the barista says, wearing a placating frown. “There’s a bit of a weird cinnamon shortage going around—”

“Are you telling me there isn’t another goddamned Regis roll in the entire shop?” The man is tall, built, and entirely pissed off.

“Er, no. Like I said...cinnamon shortage.” Barista girl flashes a pained smile. “The early bird got the worm, I’m afraid. If you’d like to try again tomorrow, we’ll save one for you.”

Barista girl nods at me matter-of-factly.

The ogre turns, whips his head toward me, and glares like his eyes are death rays.

Red alert.

So, he might be just as bad-tempered as the average ogre, but in the looks department, this guy is the anti-Shrek. If the green guy had abs that could punish and tanned skin instead of rocking his Brussels sprout glow, he might catch up to Hot Shrek in front of me.

My breath catches in my chest.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen eyes like amber whiskey, flashing in the morning light.

If he weren’t snarling like a rabid wolverine, he *might* be hotter than the toasty warm roll in my hand. The coolness of his eyes contrasts deliciously with dark hair, a furrowed brow, a jaw so chiseled it shames mere mortals.

He might be in his early thirties. His face looks young yet experienced.

The angles of that face match the cut of his body. He’s toned like a former quarterback and dressed like he just walked off the set of *Suits*.

He is a Gucci-wrapped cocktail handcrafted for sin.

Every woman’s dark vampire fantasy come to life—or maybe just mine.

When you’re a Poe—distant, *distant* relation to Edgar Allan—it comes with the territory.

I definitely wonder if he woke up with a steaming mug of rudeness this morning to plaster that scowl on his face.

I’m starting to notice a pattern in this city. What is it with Seattle minting grumps who look like sex gods?

Is it something in the rain?

Worse, he towers over me, the picture-perfect strongman with a chip on his shoulder that entitles him to roar at the world when it doesn’t fall down at his feet.

Although he’s annoyingly gorgeous, and his suit probably costs half my yearly salary, I wonder. What gets a man this fire-breathing pissed over missing his morning sugar high?

Sure, I’ll be the first to admit that Regis rolls are almost worth losing your mind over. *Almost*.

While Hades stares, I roll my eyes back at him and follow the curve of the counter to wait for my drink.

Precious distance.

After grumbling for a solid minute, he swipes his card like a dagger at the cash register and follows me around the counter.

Uh-oh.

Surely, he's not going to confront me.

He *wouldn't*.

Oh, but he's right next to me now.

Still glaring like I murdered his firstborn.

He pulls out his wallet, opens it, and plucks out a crisp bill, shoving it at me like it's on fire.

"Fifty dollars," Hot Shrek growls.

"Come again?"

"Fifty bucks. I'll pay you five times its value for the trouble."

"What?" I blink, hearing the words but not comprehending them.

He points to the white paper bag in my hand holding my little slice of heaven. "Your Regis roll, lady. I'll buy it off you."

"Wait, you just...you want to buy my cinnamon roll that bad?"

"Isn't that what I just said? And it's a *Regis roll*," he corrects sharply. "You know, the kind worth dying over? The original recipe cooked up in Heart's Edge, Montana, and approved by a scary burned guy who's been all over the national media and keeps getting cameos in movies?"

I laugh. That's exactly what Sweeter Grind's ads promise about the otherworldly Regis roll, a creation of Clarissa and Leo Regis, two small-town sweet shop owners made famous by some crazy drama a few years back.

"*Never mind*," he snaps. "You want to make this sale or what?"

"You should do commercials," I tell him with a huff. "Is that what this is? Some strange guerrilla marketing thing?"

I hold my breath. At least that would explain Mr. GQ Model going absolutely ballistic over something so trivial.

Also, it's the one-year anniversary of the most humiliating day of my life.

I need this roll like I still need to believe there's a shred of goodness in this world. What kind of psycho tries to buy someone's cinnamon roll off them for five times the price, anyway?

"Do I look like a comedian?" he snarls, his eyes rolling. "Fifty dollars. Easy money. Trade."

“Dude, you’re insane,” I whisper back.

“Dudette,” he barks back, slightly more frantic. “I assure you, I am not. I need that roll, and I’m willing to pay you generously. I trust you need the money more than I do.”

I scoff at him so hard my face hurts.

Rub it in, why don’t you? I guess I should up and be amazed you’re deigning to talk to us ‘little people,’ your pastry-obsessed highness.

“It must be nice, oh Lord of the Pastries. What do I get for an apple pie? A laptop?” I shake my head.

His *done-with-your-bullshit* glare intensifies.

“Dakota!” A male barista calls my name and plunks my drink on the counter.

Awesome. There’s my cue to exit this asylum and head back to the springtime sanity outside where birds tweet and flowers bloom and nobody goes to war over cinnamon shortages.

I grab my drink and start for the door.

“Wait!” Hot Shrek calls. “Dakota.”

Ughhh.

My name shouldn’t sound so deliciously rough on a man’s lips. Especially not a man offering exorbitant sums to strangers for their baked goods.

Knowing I’ll regret this, I stop and meet his eyes.

“What?” I clip.

“We haven’t finished.”

“Right. Because there’s no deal,” I snap, turning again.

Okay. Before, I was just looking forward to stuffing my face with sticky goodness. Now, I *need* this flipping cinnamon roll like oxygen.

If I spite the hottest freak who crawled out of the ogre swamp, I’ll have something to laugh about later.

True to the promise I made the barista, I’ll savor the flavor while wallowing in a little less of my own misery and reminding myself I’m living a better life now—which apparently includes handsome stalkers begging to throw cash at me.

“Wait. I need it more than you do. I swear,” he says harshly, grabbing my shoulder and spinning me around.

I bat his hand away, doubly annoyed and taken aback.

“You’re insane. Touch me again and I’ll press charges for robbery. It’s a

cinnamon roll, dude. Calm down and come back tomorrow when they're replenished." I panic chug my latte and walk out the door.

Hot Stalker Shrek is undaunted.

He trails me outside as I stroll into the Seattle sunshine, taking a deep breath.

"Seventy-five!" he calls after me.

"What?"

"Seventy-five dollars."

"Um, no." I speed walk to the bike rack and unlock my wheels with one hand, balancing the Regis roll and the latte in the other.

"One hundred dollars even," he belts after me.

Holy Moses. How high will he go?

"One fifty!" he calls two seconds later.

There goes my jaw, crashing to the pavement.

A chill sweeps through me. I'm worried we're leaving eccentric waters for clinically crazy.

Part of me wants to keep him talking just so he doesn't carry me off to his evil lair. I imagine a storage shed stacked to the ceiling with crumpled cinnamon roll boxes.

"Did you really just offer me a hundred and fifty dollars for a cinnamon roll?" I place the latte in a cup holder on my handlebar and climb on the bike.

He gives me an arctic look, like he knows he's got me now and I've already accepted his bizarro deal.

"You're welcome. You can Uber and still have a nice chunk of change."

I scan him up and down, purposely glancing at his polished leather shoes a second too long. In another time and place, I'd take a nice big sip of my latte and spray it on his shoes but...that's not how I roll.

I have my dignity. I plan to have a little more of it when I'm safely away from here, too.

"This may come as a shock, but not all of us worship money, King Midas," I say.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he says with a snort, squaring his hulking shoulders.

"You're a nutter. Like actually insane." My eyes flick to his wrists for good measure, legit wondering if I'll see a hospital band.

"I am not. Have you ever tasted a Regis roll? Seattle's top food critic described them as—what was it? A category ten mouth-gasm?"

My lips twitch. I try like hell not to burst out into a blushing laugh.

“Man, I am *not* discussing mouth-gasms with you,” I say.

“You’re missing the point,” he says sharply. “Help me and help yourself, Miss Dakota. We never have to see each other again and you’ll be three hundred dollars richer.”

“Three...hundred?” I say slowly, my mouth falling open.

“You heard me.” His eyes flash with hope and triumph, and he starts reaching for his wallet.

Stay strong.

Invisible crucifix.

Latte holy water.

Do not be tempted by Lucifer.

“See, you’re not making your case. Just further proving your insanity.” I eye him warily. Maybe there’s some wild story behind how he stole this suit and he really did just escape some mental institution.

That would be the most believable explanation for what’s happening.

Honestly, a lot less scary than thinking guys who look like billionaires want to spend their time reverse robbing strangers for their pastries.

“Five hundred dollars, damn you,” he rumbles. “Final offer.”

My jaw detaches from my face.

Five hundred flipping smackers?

That’s more than my student loan payment this month. Almost half my rent. I’m tempted to sign my soul away, but my fingers clench the bag tighter, demanding me to be brave.

Not today, Coffee Shop Satan.

A smile that’s almost comically pleading pulls at his lips.

Damn. Somehow, he’s even hotter when he smiles and makes those puppy dog eyes. A face like his should come with a warning.

“I see that got your attention,” he whispers.

“Did it?”

“Your mouth dropped,” he says, making me keenly aware his gaze is fixed on my lips. I don’t even know what to do with that.

He closes the space between us and reaches for my bag, trying to get the drop on me.

“Hey—no! I told you it’s not happening, crazypants.” I don’t like the way he so casually invades my space. I also have a pesky habit of not taking a single speck of crap from anyone. Especially this past year.

But there's also this tiny thought nibbling at the back of my brain that screams this man is no different from Jay.

Just richer, stronger, better-looking, and possibly more arrogant.

Keeping this Regis roll out of his grubby paws is a little win for Dakota Poe against mankind. Against every swinging dick who brandishes his selfish ego like a club.

"I'm perfectly sane. I simply need that roll, and I can't walk away empty-handed," he tells me.

"Y'know, I woke up inspired to write today. But I wasn't planning on getting real-world inspiration shoved in my face from someone so ridiculous."

"I have no idea what the hell that means, but I need the roll and you need money. Do we have a deal?"

"Why am I not surprised you can't follow simple English? Are you one of those guys who paid five hundred dollars for some poor geek to boost your grades too?"

He glares at me like an angry bull.

"Watch your step, Big Mouth. You know nothing about me. Let's make a trade and be on our merry way for the sake of our blood pressure." He gives me a slow, assessing look, his eyes sliding up my body with a weight that makes me shiver. "You're on a bike. Don't tell me you couldn't use a few hundred bucks."

"Orrr I could be so loaded I run a green power company and need to look the part," I throw back. "Plus, biking helps blow off some steam. You should try it sometime."

Scowling, he grabs at my white paper bag again.

I shift away at the last second, slapping his big hand away.

Yeah, I've had it.

Narrowing my eyes, I glare back at him, reach into the bag, and pull out the warm roll. In slow motion, I bite off a massive chunk.

I chew it as loudly as I can, smacking my lips like war drums.

The most mouth-gasmic "*Mmmmm-mmm-mmmm!*" I've ever mustered in my life rips out of me.

Then I drop the bite-marked roll back into the bag, lick my fingers, and wipe my hands unceremoniously on the front of my jeans.

"See? Not everything is for sale. No deal."

God.

I've seen my share of selfish men, but this one takes the cake—or rather, he doesn't take the cinnamon roll I won't let him have. The tantrum brewing in his face when I make it crystal clear he's not getting this roll would scare the best kindergarten teacher pale.

His jaw clenches.

His bearish brown eyes become brighter, hotter, *louder*. I can hear them cursing me seven ways from Sunday.

It's not fair.

When he's majorly pissed off, he's a hundred times hotter than he was at first glance.

His eyes drop to my lips and linger for a breathless second.

His gaze feels so heavy I hug myself, trying to hide from the intensity of his scorned-god look that feels like it could turn me into a salt pillar.

I want to say something, to break the acid silence with a joke, but I'm not sure it's possible.

Should I remind him he's an entitled douchebag?

That he's pretty freaking lucky I didn't spit fifty bucks' worth of roll at his stupid grumpy face?

It doesn't matter, though.

I don't have time to come up with the perfect f-you before he's turning his massive back to me and stomping off, muttering quietly.

He rounds the corner of the coffee shop and keeps going without a single look back.

Jeez Louise. Shouldn't a guy with that much money and even more ego have a ride?

Whatever.

Not my problem.

I need to get to work.

Rent won't wait for my one-year anniversary personal hell, or encounters with strange men who get in my face about giant pastries.

I take off for the office with three quarters of my Regis roll remaining. I'll enjoy it for its baked perfection, but keeping the precious cargo from Hot Shrek gives me just as many endorphins as the sugar rush.

Captain McGrowly and his mantrum pissed me off so much that I pedal like my life depends on it. I reach the office with time to spare, devouring all the frosted cinnamon goodness before I force myself to deal with the rat race inside.

Just a few more weeks and you'll be out of here. You've got big plans. You can do this.

Later, I repeat the mantra over and over when someone who earns twice my salary makes a mistake that throws the whole project into chaos.

Typical day at my overworked, underpaid copywriting position.

I'm at work past sunset in a desperate bid to fix it.

I wish Cinnamon Roll Luck and the high of my little victory would've lasted longer.

Instead, I'm back in my craptacular reality where the only poetry I write is an ode in sweat to fixing everybody else's problems.

Want to read more? Get One Bossy Proposal [HERE](#).

ABOUT NICOLE SNOW

Nicole Snow is a *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* bestselling author. She found her love of writing by hashing out love scenes on lunch breaks and plotting her great escape from boardrooms. Her work roared onto the indie romance scene in 2014 with her Grizzlies MC series.

Since then Snow aims for the very best in growly, heart-of-gold alpha heroes, unbelievable suspense, and swoon storms aplenty.

Already hooked on her stuff? [Sign up for her newsletter here](#) for exclusive offers and more from your favorite characters!

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Thanks for reading. And please remember to leave an honest review! Nothing helps an author more.

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