



BILLIONAIRE

FAKE FIANCÉ

DADDY

ROXY REID

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AN ACCIDENTAL PREGNANCY ENEMIES TO
LOVERS ROMANCE

ROXY REID

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VIOLET

As I take the elevator up to my first day in corporate hell, I try to tell myself it won't be that bad. It was *nice* of my brother to get me a job working for his best friend. It doesn't matter that I'm an out-of-work art teacher who's never worked in an office in her whole freaking life. It doesn't matter that my brother's best friend is a famously cold-hearted, competitive, annoyingly photogenic corporate raider.

Oh, screw it. I'm looking forward to my first day working for Gage Crawford like I'm looking forward to my next pap smear.

The elevator doors open, and I step out into a chilly, gray office full of miserable-looking people hunched over desks or bustling in and out of offices. Everything is polished and expensive, from the walls to the people, but that doesn't make it any less depressing.

I smile at a frowning, balding man in a fancy suit who's approaching me. "Excuse me, could you tell me where—"

"Out of my way," he grunts, before charging into an office and slamming the door behind him.

I walk down the elegant hallway until I come to an open-plan area where several people are working. I walk over to the closest desk and give the stern, bespectacled woman sitting there a friendly wave. "Excuse me, but could you point me to ___"

She holds up a finger to silence me and answers the blinking phone.

When I look around for someone else to ask for help, it feels like the whole room avoids making eye contact with me.

Maybe it has something to do with my vintage sundress with giant daisies printed all over it. It's my most formal work outfit—I even paired it with a freaking blazer. But every second in this building makes it more and more clear that I don't belong.

Even the art on the walls is drab. It might be expensive but it's boring as hell.

A big part of me wants to turn around, take the elevator, and never come back.

But I need this damn job.

Unfortunately.

I put my hands on my hips and raise my voice like I'm projecting over a classroom of rowdy teenagers. "EXCUSE ME. I NEED SOMEONE TO TELL ME WHERE GAGE CRAWFORD'S OFFICE IS. I'M HIS NEW ASSISTANT."

"No, you aren't," a deep male voice says from behind me.

I whirl around and come face to face with ... fuck.

Gage Crawford.

The man, the myth, the legend, giving businessmen all over the world nightmares. He's got a reputation for making even the most arrogant of CEOs cry when he takes over their failing companies, strips them for parts, and sells those parts to the highest bidder. He doesn't own Crawford Investing ... yet. But once his mom Lorelei retires, everyone knows it's going to be his.

All of that would be bad enough. But it gets worse.

Gage Crawford is gorgeous. Like, old-school, heroic, lead-men-into-battle handsome. He's one of those tall, powerful men who make you understand why suits were invented. The fabric clings to his muscles in a way that makes it disturbingly easy to imagine him picking you up, pressing you against the wall, and fucking your brains out.

Not that I'm imagining anything like that.

The reporters who interview him talk about his rakish brown hair and his sharp blue eyes. But it's more than that. He's got this *presence*. And he's always had it. Even when he was a twenty-two-year-old undergrad when I met him while visiting my brother Tom in college.

And fine, I might have had a crush on him for like, a second. Then he ditched Tom and me so he could hook up with some sorority girl whose name he'd forgotten by the time he came back to his dorm room.

I decided then and there I wasn't going to pine over a guy as rude as that.

"Who the hell are you?" Gage repeats, irritated.

Everyone is staring at us. I feel myself flush under his gaze. He's only met me a handful of times—once when I visited Tom in college, once at one of Tom's birthday parties, and five years ago at Tom's wedding. But I didn't think I was *that* forgettable.

But I guess when you're a handsome billionaire, you don't need to remember pesky details like what your friend's little sister looks like.

I try not to let that sting.

"My name is Violet Miller," I remind him. "Tom's sister."

His eyes widen. And then he winces. "Fuck. I forgot you were starting today. This is the last thing I need right now."

"I'm here to help," I say. I'm trying to come off as supportive, but it might be a tiny bit sarcastic.

After all, he *did* forget I exist.

He frowns, massaging his forehead like he's got a headache coming on. For a second he looks almost ... human. Just like the rest of us mere mortals.

Then I blink, and he's back to his normal ruthless corporate-god mask. He snaps and points at the stern bespectacled woman who ignored me earlier. "Tina. You

should have had her H.R. paperwork done three hours ago. *Fix it.*”

“Um,” I clear my throat. “In Tina’s defense, I only got here about fifteen minutes ago. The website says you open at nine, so that’s when I tried to get here, but then the subway was a mess and—”

“From now on, you show up at seven-thirty every morning, or don’t bother showing up at all.”

“Seven-thirty,” I yelp.

Gage’s face turns thunderous.

“I mean ... seven-thirty it is.” I paste a smile on my face.

For a second he just looks at me, like I’m an injured animal who wandered in off the street, and he’s trying to decide whether to send me to the vet or just shoot me and put me out of my misery.

I take a deep breath and hold out my hand, trying to get us back on the right foot. “Anyway. Nice to see you again. I look forward to working with you—”

“Get her up to speed,” he tells Tina, not even bothering to look at me. “I don’t have time for amateur hour. Understood?”

Tina pales. “Understood.”

And then Gage strides onto a waiting elevator and disappears.

Everybody in the room breathes a sigh of relief.

As I glance around, I finally realize one of the reasons the place looks so soulless. No employee has a single personal item on their desk. No photos of their families. No goofy mugs. No inspirational posters. Nothing.

The whole place is tasteful and dead, and I hate it here.

“Thank you for saying that thing,” Tina says quietly. “About being late.”

“It’s no big deal,” I say, because it isn’t. “Honesty is the foundation of good working relationships, right?”

She gives me a look like I'm insane. Nice, but insane.

I look over my shoulder in the direction Gage vanished. "Is he always like that?"

"No," Tina says, and I relax.

Until she adds, "Normally he's worse."



BY 10:00 A.M., I've decided I hate Gage's phone system. So far, I've dropped not one, but two calls while trying to transfer them to Gage's office.

At least no one was there to see it since I sit alone at a desk outside Gage's office.

The phone rings again, and I jump, glaring at it like it's my personal nemesis.

"You can do this," I mutter to myself. I pick up the phone. "Gage Crawford's office. How can I help you?"

"This is Josh Peck. I need to talk to Gage *now*. I did *not* approve those changes to the deal points," a very angry voice spits out.

"One moment, please. I'll transfer you through." I put him on hold, but then I remember that Gage wants me to check with him before I transfer a call in case he doesn't want to take it.

Unfortunately, I can't actually remember how to call Gage without hanging up on this Peck dude.

I improvise.

I stand and go and knock on Gage's office door, timidly at first.

He doesn't answer. I can't tell if he doesn't want to be disturbed or if he just didn't hear.

I knock harder.

"*What?*" Gage barks from the other side of the door.

I open the heavy wooden door and poke my head in. “Um, do you want to talk to Mr. Peck? He wants to talk about the deal points. It, um, sounds urgent.”

Gage scowls. “What could possibly be urgent? We signed the deal with Shane Peck last month.”

He’s even hot when he’s grumpy, which is just unfair of the universe. Grumpy men shouldn’t be this attractive.

It’s honestly a little distracting.

“So, you don’t want to talk to him?” I clarify.

Gage sighs. “No, put him through. I need to maintain that relationship.”

I go back to my desk and, after a minute and a half of frantically consulting the manual for my phone system, I successfully transfer the call to Gage.

I smile, feeling pretty proud of myself.

It’s not my dream job, but I can figure this out.

My good mood lasts for a whole forty-five minutes.

“Violet, get in my office!” Gage shouts.

His stern voice sends shivers down my spine. I grab my notebook and head into his office.

He’s no longer sitting behind his desk. Instead, he’s pacing the room like a caged tiger.

This can’t be good, I think.

“Yes? How can I help?”

He rounds on me. “You can start by never transferring Josh Peck’s calls to me.”

“But you said—”

“I said, *Shane* Peck. You heard me say, *Shane*. But you let me go into that call without correcting me. I just wasted nearly an hour on the phone with a failed CEO whose company we’re in the process of acquiring.” His eyes are icy as he glares at me. “All communications should be handled by the lawyers at

this point, but he tried to go around them, and you helped him.”

The back of my neck heats. “I’m sorry.”

“Were you not listening to me? Do you make a habit of ignoring important details? Or did you notice, and choose to say nothing?” He demands.

I grit my teeth against the desire to tell him off. Yes, I screwed up. But it’s also my first day, and no one has bothered to teach me how to do anything. Tina from H.R. basically dropped a bunch of instructional binders on my desk and wished me good luck.

Does Gage honestly expect every employee to just wander in off the street and be perfect?

“Well?” he demands. “Answer me. Are you incompetent or do you just not care?”

“I don’t get what Tom sees in you,” I burst out.

Instantly I regret it. Gage might be a jerk, but I don’t want to sink to his level.

Also, I need this job.

Gage crosses his arms. “This is exactly why I don’t hire people I know. You think because you’re a friend of a friend, you deserve special treatment. Well, you’re not going to get it here.” He narrows his gaze. “It’s not fair to everyone else. And this isn’t a job where you can afford to make mistakes.”

“I don’t want special treatment,” I say between clenched teeth. “But I would like *training*.”

Gage frowns. “No one showed you how to work the phones?”

“No.”

He grimaces. He doesn’t look happy. But he’s not yelling anymore, and right now that feels like a win.

He pinches the bridge of his nose, thinking. Then he takes a deep breath like he’s trying to maintain control of his emotions. “Don’t make that mistake again. Ever. And have IT

show you how to use the phone system and anything you don't understand. Now get out of here.”

I turn and flee.

The day just goes downhill from there.

When I try to familiarize myself with Gage's online calendar, I accidentally delete every meeting he has scheduled in February. I call IT for help, but even they can't fix it. After staring at the blank month with growing panic, I finally decide that since February is several months away, it's a problem for February Violet to deal with.

Besides, at the rate I'm going, I'll probably be fired long before then.

After that, I try to figure out how to make a fresh pot of coffee using the giant, overly complicated coffee machine ... and accidentally flood the kitchen with coffee.

And those are just the disasters that stand out. The whole day is a string of me getting things wrong, no matter how hard I try.

Finally, I watch the clock tick over to 6:00 p.m. I feel like crying.

The thing is, I'm a *good* art teacher. I can whip up an awesome lesson plan for any level of artists, whether it's teens who desperately want to be treated like adults, or retirees who want the fun of acting like teens again. I can coach uptight suburban moms into being comfortable drawing a nude model. I can make any drawing technique accessible and useful. Before it shut down, people at my old Coney Island community center would sign up for any class I taught, just because I was the one teaching.

But here all my skills are useless. I feel like I've been thrust into a foreign country where I don't speak the language. Everything is abbreviated. COO, HRM, QC, EOD, EOM, OOO. And they keep trying to use nouns as verbs, which drives me up the wall.

I'm all for creative expression, but if someone is wearing a suit that costs more than my rent and scowling down at me,

they should know that calendar is not a verb, okay?

Part of me wants to storm into Gage's office and shout *Why did you give me this job if you don't want me here?*

But a bigger part of me wants to be able to pay my rent next month.

I'm about to go home since everything I can find in the instructional binders says our offices close at 6:00 p.m., but I don't want to make any more mistakes. I get up and knock tentatively on Gage's office door.

"Come in," he calls.

I open the door and poke my head in. "Um. Hi. I was wondering if there's anything else I can do for you. Before I go home for the day."

He arches a brow. "Haven't you done enough?"

My anger rises, and for a second I want to march right into that room and smack that mocking look off his beautiful face.

Yes, I'm bad at this job. But I'm *trying* dammit. IT can see that. Tina can see that. Gage's mom Lorelei even gave me a faintly pitying look when she saw me mopping up the flooded coffee.

Why can't Gage see it?

I remembered him being a self-absorbed jerk. I didn't remember him being cruel.

I grit my teeth. "I'm a fast learner. Sir."

"You don't need to *sir* me," Gage snorts. "I've seen you do the *Electric Slide*. Very drunkenly."

Oh, so he's allowed to mention the fact that we know each other outside of work, but if I bring it up, I'm somehow demanding preferential treatment.

I don't think so. I'll suck it up and defer to him when it comes to work stuff, but I'm not going to stand here and let him make fun of choices I've made in my personal life.

I put my hands on my hips. “People said my dancing was half the fun at that wedding.”

“Are you sure they meant it as a compliment?” he shoots back.

I purse my lips. After the community art center where I worked shut down, and I couldn’t find another art teacher job, Tom encouraged me to apply for the job as Gage’s assistant. All but guaranteeing that Gage would hire me because of some favor he owed Tom. My big brother is only four years older than me, but he’s miles more responsible than me.

When I expressed concerns about working for Gage, Tom talked about what a straight-shooter Gage is. How he doesn’t waste time with small talk or office politics. Gage says what he means, and he means what he says.

In theory, I like that in a man. In practice, it mostly feels like he’s being rude to me.

All. Freaking. Day. Long.

I force a smile. “If you don’t need me for anything else, I’m going to go home for the day.” I turn to leave.

“Wait,” Gage commands, his voice so authoritative I freeze.

“What size dress are you?”

I turn around, bewildered. “I’m pretty sure that’s an H.R. violation.”

“Your entire hiring process was an H.R. violation,” Gage grumbles. “I don’t typically offer jobs to wildly unqualified women just because of who they’re related to.”

I open my mouth to object, but he points to a designer dress hanging on the back of his door. It’s a barely-there gold silk number that clings and swoops in impossibly sexy ways. My roommate, who works at a small fashion history museum, would drool.

“Will that fit you?” Gage asks.

I blink. “Why do you have a dress hanging in your office?”

“There’s a charity auction tonight,” Gage explains impatiently. “My date had a mishap with the dress she was planning on wearing, so I had a new one delivered here since she was supposed to meet me at the office. Unfortunately, she can’t make it.” He gestures impatiently. “Will it fit you?”

I take the dress down and check the tag. Then I check the fabric. There’s some stretch there. “Probably,” I say.

“Good. I need a date for a charity auction tonight. As I said, mine canceled, and I’m not about to spend the night listening to nosy busybodies asking me why I don’t have a girlfriend or trying to set me up.”

“I ... what?” I can’t believe he wants me to go to a fancy event with no notice, wearing a dress he bought for another woman.

“Get dressed. We leave in fifteen minutes. There’s a lobbyist I need to talk to, and he normally leaves these things early.”

Gage clearly hasn’t thought this through. And I’m not just saying that because I would commit murder to be able to go home right this instant and eat my weight in potato chips.

“But I’m not ...” I try to think how to say this tactfully, before giving up and going for the blunt version. “I don’t know the etiquette for an event like that, and I don’t have time to prepare. I think I’d be more of a hindrance than help.”

Gage returns his focus to his computer. “All I need you to do is stand next to me, smile, and look vaguely like a woman I might date. Even you couldn’t mess that up.”

Now, I realize the full extent of the problem. My asshole boss isn’t just asking me to attend a work function as his last-minute guest.

He’s asking me to be his fake girlfriend. In a *very* sexy dress.

And after the day I’ve had, I don’t know if I can tell him no.

GAGE

“U m.” Violet clears her throat, her already big eyes wide as headlights. “Maybe I could call your date. The one who canceled on you. And convince her to un-cancel.”

For the millionth time today, I resist the urge to tell Violet Miller in no uncertain terms that this isn’t going to work out. I remember Violet being a shy girl with a terrible dye job. She’d worn her fake red hair in a sort of frizzy bob, plus her lack of height and giant hazel eyes always reminded me of Little Orphan Annie.

That is *not* who showed up in my office this morning.

Now she’s gone back to her natural Brunette, and she’s wearing it longer, so it falls all silky and thick, grazing the top of her breasts in that wildly inappropriate sundress she’s wearing. The daisies and full, 50s-style skirt would be bad enough—this is a serious workplace, for serious people—but I’m fairly sure she’s wearing the wrong bra for that square neckline. I keep catching glimpses of nude lace near the dress’s straps.

I can’t believe she had the nerve to talk back to me in front of the other employees and brag about showing up late. And now she’s throwing a hissy fit about something as simple and ordinary as attending a networking event on behalf of the company.

If I didn’t owe Tom so much ...

“I don’t need you to convince someone else to go to this event. I need *you* to go,” I say firmly.

She looks as alarmed as if I’d asked her to kiss a toad.

Understanding dawns and I realize why she must be so worried. Tom mentioned that Violet’s low on funds right now. “To be clear, I’m paying for all costs associated with this event, if that’s your concern.”

“Nope,” she says, her voice coming out a little strangled. “That’s not actually what I’m worried about.”

Any patience I have evaporates. “Then put on the damn dress, Violet. Your attendance at this event is mandatory. We leave in ...” I check my watch, “thirteen minutes sharp.”

For a tense second, we stare each other down. And then she flushes, grabs the dress, and ducks out of the room.

Peace at fucking last.



TEN MINUTES into the silent auction, I start to wish I hadn’t demanded Violet’s presence at the event. We’re standing in a gorgeous hotel ballroom, making small talk with some people I know. Having Violet on my arm, in that dress, has done wonders to deter those bored society dames who fancy themselves as matchmakers.

Unfortunately, she’s also driving me to distraction. That dress clings to and highlights every lovely curve of her body. Breasts, hips, ass, thighs. Add in the deep, vivid lipstick she put on in the car on the way over, and it’s enough to make me feel like a teen watching my first R-rated movie.

I shift uncomfortably, trying to focus on the Wall Street trader making small talk with me.

I don’t know why Violet’s presence is affecting me so much.

My original date, Mandy, wears stuff like this all the time. And I certainly find her attractive—we spent a few months in

a mutually beneficial friends-with-benefits arrangement last year before she went and fell in love with someone else. We're still friends, nothing more, and now the benefit is that she's my plus-one for events like these. She enjoys being fancy for a night, and I enjoy the company.

The point is, I'm no stranger to beautiful women.

But when Violet dresses like this it's ... different.

Maybe it's because I'm used to only thinking of Violet as Tom's little sister.

Yes, that must be it.

It doesn't have anything to do with the light perfume Violet's wearing, that makes me think of soft kisses and spring. It definitely doesn't have anything to do with that hundred-watt smile of hers.

No one smiles like that at events like this.

It's all polite nods, and tight lips, and fake grins.

But Violet's smile is real. She's a distracting, misplaced ray of sunshine in this cold, wintery room.

Hank, the Wall Street trader, wraps up his boring monologue about trading foreign currency as we make our way to the dining tables.

"So, Violet," Hank's wife Katarina says, clearly bored with shop talk, "How long have you and Gage been together? You make such a lovely couple."

I hold back a frustrated sigh. Apparently, even when I bring a date, I'm still stuck answering invasive questions about my personal life. I try to think of the least awkward way to correct her but then Violet jumps in.

"It's actually fairly recent. But we've known each other for years."

Wait. *What?*

Violet leans forward conspiratorially. "Actually, I used to think he was a bit of a jerk. But then we ran into each other again a few months back and he just ... swept me off my feet."

She beams up at me like I'm her damn prince charming, and my brain just kind of stutters to a halt under the brilliance of her smile.

Then my brain comes back online with a vengeance. Before Violet can add more to our fictional backstory, I pretend to see someone I know across the room.

"Oh, I'm sorry, there's someone we need to say hi to. We'll catch up more at dinner." I shake hands heartily with both Hank and Katarina, then grab Violet's elbow and steer her across the room and out into the hallway.

I scowl down at her. "What the *hell* was that?"

Her confident smile wilts. For a second she looks like a crushed flower. And then she straightens her spine and puts her hands on her hips. "Well, I'm *sorry* I'm not a better fake girlfriend. I told you this was a bad idea, but you insisted, so I did my best—"

"What are you talking about?" I demand, keeping my voice low so no one will overhear us. "I never asked you to pretend to be my girlfriend. All I asked you to do was be my fucking date."

"But you said ..." she pauses, obviously replaying my words from earlier in her head. "Oh. *Oh*. Shit."

Shit indeed.

Her eyes widen. "I'm so sorry, Gage. I'll go tell them the truth—"

"No. I have too many important business contacts at this event. The last thing I need is them finding out about this farce from Hank or Katarina."

Around us, the event staff are trying to gently herd people back into the ballroom and towards their tables so dinner can start.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, fighting back a headache.

"I really am sorry," Violet says. "But in my defense, if you'd used *slightly* clearer language—"

I snap my head up and glare at her.

She closes her mouth, looking chastened.

I could punish her luscious, lying mouth for the trouble she's caused me. I could just lean down and *bite* until she learns to goddamn *behave* ...

I yank my thoughts away from the gutter they're headed towards. "Here's the plan. We will do the bare minimum to pretend we are a couple for the rest of the evening. And then we will never speak of this again, and you will never, ever, *ever*, do anything like this again. Understood?"

"Yes, Gage." She lowers her eyes, like a naughty schoolgirl who's been scolded.

And now I'm having fantasies of taking her over my knee and spanking her.

Fuck me.

I shake out my shoulders. "Right. Let's do this." I offer my arm, and she takes it as we re-enter the ballroom.

I am never doing a goddamn favor for a friend again.

GAGE

If I thought Violet was distracting before, she's a menace now. She'll say something charmingly quirky, then wink up at me like it's an inside joke. I know it's fake, but that mischievous look in her eye gets under my skin. It makes me want to lean in and coax out every single one of her secrets.

"If you look at the economics of the situation, it's clear the proposed regulation is a terrible idea," Hank says. "All of my friends agree with me."

"That's interesting," I say, annoyed by his dumb comment, and Violet's beauty, and the whole damn night. "The only people I've seen arguing against that regulation are the ones who could be convicted of corruption if it became law."

Hank looks affronted. "What are you implying?"

Before I can answer, Violet reaches over and pats my thigh soothingly, the very picture of the supportive girlfriend.

Except her hand is way too close to my dick to be soothing.

"Nothing." I make myself smile blandly at Hank. "I'm sure your friends disagree with the regulations for entirely different reasons."

Perhaps sensing the growing tension between her husband and me, Katarina jumps in to change the topic.

"Violet, you must tell us, where did Gage take you for your first date? Please say it was somewhere fabulous."

“It was a restaurant,” I say shortly.

Katarina looks disappointed. “Oh.”

Violet playfully touches my chest. “He never tells it right. The truth is, I was supposed to meet this guy on a dating app. When what do you know, the jerk stands me up!” She gives a little, self-deprecating laugh. *I almost believe her.*

Violet continues. “It was a really popular restaurant, and the waiter was giving me a hard time about how I was taking up a table because I hadn’t ordered anything. It was so humiliating. Of course, Gage had been watching the whole thing from the bar. When the waiter starts laying into me, he strolls over, apologizes for being late, and tells the waiter we’ll need a few more minutes to make up our minds.” She sighs fondly and smiles up at me. “The next thing I knew, we’d spent the whole night talking. And I just knew. There’s no one in the world like him.”

I shift uncomfortably. Why did she have to embellish so much? To hear her tell it, I’m a damn white knight. What part of “do the bare minimum to pretend we’re a couple” didn’t she understand?

That’s when I realize what’s happening. Violet is having fun.

I smirk, amused despite myself. If that’s how she wants to play it ...

I lean over and whisper in her ear, like a lover too smitten to care about proprieties. “I know what you’re doing. And you’re going to regret it.” I trail a casual, possessive finger down the side of her neck, and she shivers.

“Ah, young love,” Sutton, an older man at our table says. He’s one of those relaxed, eccentric rich men who inherited vast sums of wealth at birth and used it to fund every random whim he ever had. He’s attending this event with an opera singer half his age. I think she’s wife number six.

“I could say the same for you,” Violet tosses back, and the whole table laughs.

That's my girl, I think, before tamping down that ridiculous thought. She's my employee, not my girl. And at the rate she's going, she might not even be my employee by the end of the week. If she weren't Tom's sister, I would have fired her the first time she screwed up a call transfer.

The conversation moves on. I lean back, retreating to my own space. Rationally, I know that was more than enough to teach Violet not to play with fire. But a part of me isn't ready to stop. I drape my arm over the back of her chair, letting my hand graze her arm.

She's so damn soft.

"Did you hear the Colorado Coyotes are being sold?" Sutton asks.

I stiffen. That was my dad's favorite baseball team. He wasn't a perfect dad, but he always made time to watch those games with me when I was growing up. While we watched, he'd tell me stories about growing up in Colorado. Mostly I don't think of my dad. He died years ago, back when I was in high school. But sometimes when I glance at the paper and see a headline about the Coyotes, it takes me back to those lazy afternoons with him.

"Isn't the Colorado team the Rockies?" Katarina says.

"That's the Denver team," I say, annoyed. Just because Denver's team is better funded, better marketed, and wins way more games than us is no reason for people to forget the Coyotes exist. "The Coyotes are in Colorado Springs."

"Does Colorado need two baseball teams?" the opera singer asks.

"That might be part of the problem," Sutton says. "The Coyotes had a good run all the way through the nineties. But then they got new management, and the team has been struggling ever since." He shakes his head sadly. "People just don't care about baseball like they used to."

"Plenty of people care about baseball," I say.

Violet throws me a curious look. Belatedly, I realize I'm showing way more interest in this conversation than I have in

anything else anyone has talked about tonight.

Sue me. A guy can have hobbies.

“I hear Scott Chaney is interested in buying it,” Hank chimes in.

I bristle. Scott is in the same line of work as I am. We both take over companies, break them up, and sell the parts for profit. The difference is, I go after companies that everyone knows are going to fail. It’s a mercy killing, and everyone involved knows the score.

By contrast, Scott lives for the hostile takeover. He’ll go after a healthy company just because it’s a rival to some other company he likes better.

I scowl. “Fucking Scott Chaney does not have funds to buy —”

“Oh, look at those people dancing,” Violet interrupts. “Come on Gage, we should go dance.” She grabs my hand and drags me away before I can explain to the Wall Street guy why he’s fucking wrong.

She’s surprisingly strong for such a short woman. Then again, that’s true of a lot of New York women. I think it comes from speed-walking down the sidewalk with their entire lives crammed into those giant purses.

Violet sways into my arms, and I grumpily put my hands on her waist.

“What was that about?” she asks.

I don’t say anything.

“I would have pegged you as a Yankees fan,” she says.

“How dare you.”

Violet snickers and the sound of her laughter makes me feel a little better, despite myself.

“My dad was from Colorado Springs,” I say, like that explains everything.

Except her expression softens. And I realize that for her, it does. We might not be best friends, but she's Tom's sister, and she probably knows the basic outlines of my life.

She moves her hand to mine and twirls out, then back into my chest. Her golden skirt spins around her legs and brushes up against my shins. I never got around to learning how to dance, but it turns out I don't need to. Violet's dancing enough for the both of us.

"If you don't want Scott what's-his-name to have it, why don't you just buy the team?" Violet asks. "God knows you're rich enough."

For a second, I let myself imagine it. Sutton is right, the Coyotes have had bad management for years. But they've got a solid bench of players and a genius assistant coach. All you'd have to do to give them a shot, would be fire the current coach, promote the assistant, restructure the debt they took on when they built that stadium ...

Violet smiles. "Admit it. You're tempted."

I look down at those scarlet lips of hers. And suddenly I'm angry. Because she has the nerve to strut into my well-run life and make a mess of everything she touches, and then smile up at me with those big eyes like she knows me better than I know myself.

"No. I'm not tempted," I say coldly. "There's no room to be sentimental in my line of work. Crawford Investing doesn't swoop in and rescue anybody. Understand?"

Her eyes spark like she wants to fight me. And for a second, some crazy part of me wants her to.

But then she presses her lips into a thin line and looks away. "Understood."

Violet doesn't smile again for the rest of the night.

For some reason, the loss of her smile is the most distracting thing of all.



MY MOM SNAPS her fingers in front of my face. “Earth to Gage.”

It’s a full sixteen hours since I took Violet to the gala, and we’re sitting in her office having our weekly meeting. And I’ve just been caught spacing out.

“Sorry.” I straighten. “You were talking about the Robertson acquisition.”

“No, I finished that five minutes ago. I’m on the Swiberg Telecom deal now.”

I feel the back of my neck heat. I hate disappointing my mom. Not because she’s a jerk about it—because she’s worked so hard to get us where we are. When my dad died, the company had just launched some big projects. Without my dad to lead Crawford Industries, everyone thought it was crash and burn, or at least sell for an embarrassingly low price.

That’s when stay-at-home mom Lorelei Crawford stepped into the driver’s seat. Turned out, her instincts and advice had been my dad’s secret weapon all those years. We made our first billion-dollar deal under my mom’s leadership, and she hasn’t taken her foot off the gas pedal since.

I learned my work ethic from her. Though apparently, I forgot it at home today. I clear my throat. “It won’t happen again.”

She closes her notebook and sets it aside. “What’s on your mind, Gage?”

“Nothing. Let’s get back to Swiberg Telecom, shall we?”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Oh my God. Is it a girl?”

An image of Violet flashes in front of me, all haughty lips and big hazel eyes as she tilts her face up to mine, challenging me.

Always challenging me.

I frown. “No. Definitely not a girl.”

“Oh, don’t look at me like that.” She sighs. “A mother can hope. Whenever you introduce me to one of your girlfriends, they’re gone by the end of the month. I want you to have a personal life, that’s all.”

I smile, affectionately. “*You* don’t have a personal life.”

She waves her hand. “I had one once. I don’t need another one.”

I sigh. My mom says lines like that all the time. I know she thinks my dad was her one great love, but I hope when I take over the company in a few years she lets herself relax and enjoy life a bit more.

She gets up to make herself a cup of tea from the ornate tea set that’s sat in the corner of her office for as long as I can remember. “If not romance, what’s on your mind? It’s not like you to be so unfocused.”

“They’re selling the Colorado Coyotes,” I say. “That asshole Scott Chaney wants to buy them.”

She stills. She knows exactly what that means.

“I’m thinking of buying them instead.” I don’t realize how serious I am about it until the words are out of my mouth. But once I say it, I know it’s true. I’ve been turning this over in my head ever since last night, trying to figure out a way to make this deal work.

It’s been kind of exhilarating if I’m honest. I’ve never bought something to try and *improve* it. Make it last.

My brain feels like a kid in candy land.

My mom sets down the teapot and turns to face me. “No.”

I scoff. “What? Just like that? Mom, I’ve run the numbers and within three seasons we could increase their value exponentially—”

“Sports teams are too risky,” she interrupts. “And even if they weren’t, that’s not what we *do*.”

I tap my foot impatiently. “There’s a lot of things we didn’t do until you took over. Maybe it’s time for some change again.”

She grimaces and finishes making herself her cup of tea. I know she’s giving herself time to think.

I wait.

She settles back in her chair. “I know why you want this, Gage. And that’s exactly why I won’t let you do it. You’re too personally invested. You already live at work. You barely make time to see your friends. I can’t remember the last time you took a vacation.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Pot. Kettle. Etc.”

She sets down her tea, frustrated. “I worked this hard so that you wouldn’t need to, Gage. I’m proud of everything you do here, of course. But you’re in your thirties. You’re supposed to be *living*. Not sleeping in your office figuring out how to save a *baseball team* of all things.”

It’s the last thing I expected her to say. But every negotiation needs a starting point.

I can work with this.

I lean forward, hands clasped loosely between my legs. “Okay. What if I promise I won’t let the Coyotes take over my life? In fact, I promise to have better work-life boundaries in general. I’ll only work forty hours a week total, tops.”

She gives me a look like she doesn’t believe me at all.

“Okay, maybe not forty,” I admit. “But definitely fifty hours. If you let us buy the team, I will cut back to only fifty hours a week.”

She laughs. “Oh, honey. That’s not going to happen. There’s just no way you add something this time-consuming to the portfolio and end up working less.”

I sit back, frustrated. “What can I do to make you say yes? The financials are solid—”

“This isn’t about the financials, this is about *your life*.” And then she cocks her head, her face alert. She looks like that whenever she’s had a big new idea.

I tense. This is either going to be really good, or really bad for me.

My mom studies me. “When is the sale happening?”

“I reached out to a contact. They’ll be taking bids at the end of the month.”

She thinks. And then she nods, decisively. “Fine. You have a month to show me that you’re serious about making a real change and prioritizing your personal life. And then you need to keep it up for six months.”

I blink. “Why six months?”

“Because I know you, and if you do something for six months, you’ll stick with it for life.”

“I don’t ...”

She gives me a look. “Darts. Coming into work early. Weightlifting. That dinner thing you do with your friends.”

She has a point. “Okay. What do I need to do to prove I’m prioritizing my personal life?”

She sits back in her chair. “That part’s up to you. But I smell bullshit, I’m yanking the rug on our deal. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” I say.

We share a smile.

She opens her notebook. “Right. Back to Swiberg Telecom.”

We go back to our meeting, but part of my brain is already whirring, trying to figure out what the hell I can do to show my mom I’m making a good-faith effort to have a life.



AS I WALK BACK to my office a half hour later, I'm no closer to an answer. I could get a dog? No, I'm at the office too much. That's not fair to the dog. I could take up a hobby?

Except I don't want a fucking hobby. And even if I did, I don't have *time*. I'm not a workaholic just for shits and giggles. This is the definition of a demanding job.

A long-term relationship would probably work, but as my mom so aptly pointed out, mine never seem to last more than a month. And even if they did, a girlfriend is even more of a time-suck than a dog or a hobby.

I turn the corner and see Violet sitting at her desk.

She startles when she sees me, accidentally knocking her slushy off the desk. The crushed blue ice is stark on the white carpet as it inches toward my highly polished oxfords.

I grit my jaw, not even surprised at this point. The woman's a walking catastrophe.

"Sorry!" Violet leaps from her desk and tries to scoop the neon-blue ice back into the cup, but it's too late. The damage has been done.

Maybe hiring Violet counts as proof of a personal life, I think. After all, she's slowing down my work significantly, and I hired her to help out a friend. She even turned a simple networking event into a fake-dating farce.

I freeze.

Wait.

That's it.

The way I show my mom I'm committed to having a personal life, without having to take any time away from work or add unnecessary complications to my life.

Violet's still at my feet, mopping futilely away at the blue liquid. I think she's using a tissue from her purse.

"Stand up," I bark.

"But I've almost got it—"

“No. You don’t. In my office. Now.”

She rises slowly to her feet, shoulders slumped, and slushy cup clutched dejectedly in one hand as she heads into my office.

I close the door behind us.

She raises her chin, which only trembles slightly. “If you’re going to fire me, you should know that it’s actually very hard to fire someone in the state of New York. I looked it up, and you need to give me written notice—”

“Jesus, Violet. I’m not firing you,” I say.

“Oh.” She blinks. “Then what—”

“I need you to be my fiancée.”

What’s left of the slushy hits the ground, splashing across my mahogany floor.

VIOLET

“**W**hat?” I blurt. Gage and I have already established that we have communication problems. And I could have sworn he just said ...

“I need you to be my fiancée,” he repeats, as calm and firm as if he were asking me to transfer a call or get him a new stapler.

It’s funny. He *looks* like the same cold-hearted, disturbingly sexy Gage Crawford. But clearly, aliens have taken over his body. Or maybe my life has turned into a soap opera, and he secretly has an evil twin.

Except in Gage’s case, his evil twin would actually be a nice, kind human.

“Breathe, Violet,” Gage says.

I do, calming down as the air hits my lungs. I twist my hands, wondering if I misheard. It sounded like he said fiancée, but maybe ... “Is that, um, a weird corporate term I don’t know yet? F.E.N.C.A.?”

Now he’s looking at me like *I’m* the one who’s been abducted by aliens.

I can feel my panic rising. “Or like yesterday, when I misunderstood you and thought you wanted me to pretend to be your girlfriend, but all you really wanted was—”

“No, I want you to be my fake fiancée,” Gage says firmly. “And I’m willing to pay.”

“Oh. *Oh.*” I collapse on his couch, relieved. “I thought you were actually asking ...” I swallow the hysterical laughter.

Gage raises an eyebrow. “Get a lot of impromptu marriage proposals, do you?”

Rude. *He’s* the one who needs a fake fiancée.

Now that I know what I’m dealing with, I know how to get out of it. “Thank you for considering me. Huge honor. All of that. But I’m going to have to decline because—” *it’s batshit insane*, “I already have a boyfriend. And I don’t want to break up with him to fake marry you. So ...” I make a regretful face and shrug.

Gage leans back against his desk. “You don’t have a boyfriend.”

Shoot. “Did Tom tell you?”

“No. But a girl like you doesn’t offer to pretend to be someone’s girlfriend unless she’s single. Also, you just confirmed it.”

Drat.

“What’s your real objection?” he prods. He’s got his making-a-deal face on. The last time I saw it was at Tom’s wedding when the venue was double booked, and Gage bribed/bullied the other wedding into relocating so that Tom and his wife could get married.

It was impressive if you could ignore how much work that poor couple must have put into planning their wedding.

“My objection? Faking an engagement is a ridiculous, irrational thing to do.”

“I assure you, my reasons are entirely rational. And professional.”

I snort. I can’t help it.

He looks irritated. “My mom will only approve a certain business move if I show her I’m investing in my personal life. So you’re going to pretend to be my fiancée for six months.

I'll pay you handsomely for your service. It's perfectly rational."

It is so obviously not rational, but I'd been warned that billionaires didn't always have the firmest grasp on reality.

I reach for another objection. "We don't even like each other. How will we convince people we're in love?"

Gage gives me a look. "Come now, Violet. Last night proved we have a certain ... chemistry."

I feel my blood heat.

He continues, "That will be sufficient to convince people."

"But can't you find someone else?" I jump up and start pacing. I feel like the walls are closing in on me. "Why does it have to be me—"

My heel slips in the spilled slushy, and my feet skid out from under me.

Gage grabs my waist to catch me, yanking me to him. I grab his arms for balance.

Shit. He's *strong*.

My heart tumbles around in my chest, disoriented. Gage is looking down at my mouth with those blue eyes of his that see everything. I part my lips, and his eyes darken.

Just like that, I feel my body start to soften. Go liquid, ready for him. Kissing him would be a terrible idea. I don't even *like* him. But the last few days have been so stressful, and it's been so long since I kissed a man, and Gage might be an asshole, but something tells me he kisses like a God.

"Think about it," he says, and for a confusing second, I think he's read my mind.

And then I realize he's talking about the fake engagement.

I blush and hastily step out of his arms. "No. *No*. I'm not doing this. You can't just throw money at me, and expect me to—"

"I'll pay you half a million dollars."

“What now?” I say, half intrigued despite myself.

Half a million dollars.

That’s ...

Wow.

Once the six months are up, I could quit and never work as an assistant again. I could take my time and find the perfect art teaching job.

Hell, I could start my *own* community art center. Hire some of my friends who lost their jobs.

Of course, I’d need to find space to rent.

Unbidden, the image of an old, empty storefront that used to be an art supply store springs to mind. It’s not too far from my apartment, and it would make an amazing location.

“Now’s the part where you give me a counter-offer,” Gage says, like we’re in some kind of bizarre college class, and he’s the tough but hot professor everyone has a crush on.

I cross my arms. “I’m not saying I’d do it. But *if* I did it, I’d want you to be a co-signer. On a lease.”

He laughs. “Violet, if you’ve got a half a million you won’t need an apartment lease cosigner.”

“It wouldn’t be for an apartment. It would be for a business location.”

“Oh?” he asked, looking intrigued by something I’ve said for possibly the first time ever.

“I want to open a community art center,” I say.

“Oh.” He looks depressed by the thought. He sighs. “Fine. If you’re determined to lose money, I’ll have one of the company lawyers talk to you about registering as a non-profit. It’ll slow the bleeding a bit.”

“Your confidence is touching,” I drawl.

He grabs a legal notebook and jots something down.

“What are you writing?” I ask, alarmed.

He looks up at me like I'm crazy. "The contract. Obviously."

"Contract?" I squeak.

Contract sounds so official.

Gage ignores me. "Looks like we have five deal points. You agree to act as my fiancée for six months. I agree to pay you half a million, cosign a one-year lease on your art studio provided the rent is within ten percent of the median rate for your industry, and throw in a consultation with one of my lawyers."

"What's the fifth deal point?" I ask warily.

"You move in with me for the duration of the deal."

"*What?*" I yelp. "No. That's entirely unnecessary."

"Calm down. I'm not asking you to share my bedroom. You'll have your own suite."

I blink, temporarily hung up on the idea of a Manhattan apartment that has *multiple freaking suites*.

Gage straightens and hands me the notepad. "To answer your other question, no one will believe the engagement is serious if you don't move in."

Unfortunately, he's right about that.

My hands close reflexively around the notebook. If I do this, I'll be stuck with Gage Crawford 24/7. It will probably be the worst six months of my life.

But those six months could get me an opportunity I'd barely even let myself imagine before.

My heart starts beating fast. "What happens if I don't sign this?"

"You'll be fired by the end of the week."

I gasp. "You *bastard*."

He shrugs, unrepentant. "You know too much now. I can't trust you to keep a secret. Also, and I can't stress this enough, *you deleted every meeting I had scheduled in February.*"

Shit. He found out about that.

I flush, trying to give him my most charming smile. “Oops?”

Gage is unmoved by my charm. “Sign the damn papers, Violet. Or figure out another way to pay your rent this month.”

He strides over and sits down behind his desk, clearly ready to dismiss me.

“Wait,” I say. “If I’m going to sign this, I need another deal point.”

He waits.

“I get to come in a half hour later, at 8:00 a.m.”

He’s already shaking his head. “No. I can’t give you special treatment. That’s unethical.”

I’m surprised Gage cares about employment ethics.

Then again, maybe he’s just using them to get extra labor out of me.

“Fine then. For the next six months, the assistants get forty-five-minute lunch breaks instead of a half hour.” I jot it down on our contract before he can argue.

“Violet ...” he warns, and goosebumps erupt on my neck at his scolding tone.

“When the elevators get backed up, it takes us ten minutes to get down to the lobby, and another ten to get back up,” I explain. “That only leaves us with ten minutes to find food, and there’s no quick dining on this block. Everyone’s grumpy here because half the time they’re starving.”

He opens his mouth, then shuts it. “Fine,” he says at last. “Why didn’t anyone tell me they didn’t have time to grab lunch?”

My eyebrows shoot up. He has to be joking.

But Mr. Gruff and Scowly looks genuinely confused.

“You’re not the most ... cuddly supervisor,” I hedge.

The corner of his mouth quirks. Like maybe he has a sense of humor after all.

“Sign it and give it here,” he orders.

I know I’m tempting fate, but I add one more deal point before I sign and date our makeshift contract.

When I pass it to Gage, he scowls. “No. I’m not letting employees decorate their desks with personal objects. This isn’t high school. It’s a place of business.”

I shrug and start to walk to the door. “Well, if you don’t need a fake fiancée that badly ...”

He swears.

Then he grumbles.

Then he signs the contract and locks it away in his desk drawer. “Call housekeeping and get them to clean up that mess on my floor. I’ll propose to you publicly at the end of the week. My mom will believe it more if this doesn’t come immediately after our discussion. And Violet?”

“Yes, dear?” I tease, just to get under his skin. This contract might be a terrible deal, but in a way, it’s turned us into equals. We both need what the other has to offer.

Being Gage’s fiancée can’t be any worse than being his assistant.

The glint in his eyes is positively evil. “You’re moving into my apartment tonight.”

Then again, maybe it can.

GAGE

By the end of the workday, Violet is throwing me looks like she wants to cut and run. A part of me gets it. On the surface, this deal we're making is ridiculous.

But a bigger part of me is determined to do whatever I need to do to buy the Coyotes. My gut says they've got something special. What's the point of being filthy rich if you can't follow your gut every now and then?

When Violet tries to sneak out at 6:00 p.m., I'm already waiting for her in the elevator.

"Gah!" Violet covers her heart with her hand. "Were you just ... riding the elevators? Lurking?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

That would have been inefficient. I had building maintenance hold this elevator for me.

I gesture for Violet to step in. "Come on," I say, my voice low. "You and I have evening plans."

She sidles onto the elevator, looking at me out of the corner of those lovely hazel eyes. "About that. I was thinking maybe we could wait to move in together until tomorrow. No one will know if we don't live together—"

"I'm not taking that risk. And that's not your real objection." I hit the button to take us down.

She throws her hands in the air. "Look, this whole ... deal ... is kind of ridiculous. Why not make it less

ridiculous where we can?”

I give her the full weight of my stare. “I once made a business deal that involved brokering the release of a peacock by my business partner’s ex-wife to a mutually agreed upon animal sanctuary.”

She blinks. “What—”

“You are less ridiculous than the peacock.” The elevator doors open. “And you’re moving in with me. Tonight. Or the deal is void.”

She grumbles but follows as I lead off the elevator, outside, and into my town car.

I try to ignore the way just having her close makes my body feel more alive.



OUR FIRST STOP is the two-bedroom apartment Violet shares with her roommate deep in Brooklyn. It’s a second-floor walk-up not too far from Prospect Park. I’ll send movers tomorrow to pick up the rest of her stuff, but tonight she’s packing whatever she needs in a suitcase.

I look around the living room/ kitchen, doubtfully. “I’ve had closets bigger than this.”

“Rude.” She wrestles a suitcase out of a cramped closet and heads into her bedroom. “I know it goes against your nature, but I need you to be polite to my roommate Maria when she gets home. Otherwise, she may report you for kidnapping me.”

I plop down on the cheap but comfortable couch and stare at the ceiling. “She sounds like a calm and rational woman.”

Violet ignores my comment, so I grab my phone and catch up on emails.

I’m sending one of my employees feedback on a proposed plan to maximize profits from one of our more recently acquired businesses, when I hear a key turn in the lock. The

front door opens to reveal a plump, pretty woman with light brown skin and hair piled high and messy on her head. She drops a bag of groceries on the floor without looking up, humming to herself.” Then she catches sight of me and whips out a wooden spoon from the dish-drying rack. “Who the hell are *you*?”

I’m contemplating how to answer that. There’s no way a roommate will believe that Violet has been secretly dating someone without her knowing. Not in an apartment this size.

Violet rushes out of her bedroom. “Hey! Maria! This is my boss, Gage.”

Maria relaxes. “Oh. You’re home early.” Then she narrows her eyes and brandishes the spoon in what is probably supposed to be a threatening manner. “Is this the boss who’s an asshole? What’s he doing in our apartment? Is he sexually harassing you?”

“*He* was invited,” I grumble. I can’t believe Violet’s been complaining about me being a bad boss. I have high standards, yes, but I’m not mean or unreasonable.

Right?

“He’s paying me half a million dollars to pretend to be his fiancée for the next six months,” Violet interrupts. “So I’m moving in with him.”

Maria’s eyes dart back and forth between us both. “You’re shitting me.”

“Nope.”

“Why can’t he get a regular fiancée? What’s wrong with him?”

I stand, starting to get irritated. “Again, I’m *right here*.” I turn to Violet. “Also, we did *not* discuss telling this secret to other people.”

Her eyes widen. “Oops.”

I massage my forehead, fighting the rapidly increasing headache. “This is going to be a long six months.”

Maria snickers.

This is getting out of hand. I point to Violet. “You. Go finish packing. And you, stop laughing. Also, give me your email address so my lawyers can have you sign an NDA.”

Maria rolls her eyes and starts unpacking her groceries. “Do you really want to tell your company lawyers you’re paying a woman to live with you for six months so you can defraud people?”

“I ... lying about a relationship isn’t *fraud*,” I sputter.

Maria shrugs. “Whatever. All I know is that if you lie and it affects the stock price, you’re in big trouble.”

“It’s *not* about the stock price.” But she’s right that the last thing I want to do is explain the situation to my company lawyers. One of whom might feel tempted to tip off my mother.

Maria grabs a beer from the fridge and opens it.

She doesn’t offer me one.

“You’re Tom’s friend, right?” she asks, studying me.

“Yes,” I say, wondering what she’s getting at.

“Tom’s good people.”

“The best,” I say.

It’s the truth. Tom’s the kind of guy who’s got a heart so big people were always trying to take advantage of it. Me and our other friend Jaylen spent a decent amount of college convincing him that he didn’t need to donate to every single person who shared a sob story on social media asking for money. He’s a smart guy, but if he thinks someone might be in real trouble, his heart takes over and his brain shuts up.

Luckily Tom married a woman who’s just as kind as him but has considerably more common sense.

Maria nods judiciously like she’s come to a decision. “Okay. I’ll keep your dumb secret, as long as *Violet* wants me to. But if you break her heart, I will make you regret it.”

I can relate to wanting to protect a friend, but that threat is patently ridiculous. She's five foot nothing, and I'm pretty sure I could buy everything in this apartment a million times over.

"You going to carve me with a kitchen knife?" I ask sarcastically.

"No," she says sweetly. "I'm going to go online and tell every fortune-hunting woman in the world that poor little Gage Crawford is so lonely he had to pay a woman to be his fiancée. If only he could just meet the right woman ..."

I think of that potential tsunami of unwanted attention and wince.

Maria goes in for the kill. "And *then* I'm going to make sure they know your home address, your work address, and anywhere else you like to hang out."

"Touché. I swear, I'll be the perfect gentleman."

Violet emerges from the bedroom with a suitcase and duffel bag. She's also swapped out her work clothes for a cropped V-neck t-shirt speckled with paint, and leggings that show off her legs.

"Okay you two," she says, "Enough sparring. Gage let's get going. Maria, I'll call you later."

The two women hug, and then Violet grabs her bags and heads past me out the door.

For a second I just stare after her, blinking. Those leggings did *great* things for her ass.

"Hey!" Maria barks, snapping her fingers in front of my face, like she can tell what I'm thinking. "Perfect gentleman! No heartbreak! You promised."

"You can't break someone's heart when they've made it very clear they don't even like you," I mutter, but I feel a flash of guilt.

If Tom knew the fantasies I was having about his little sister's ass ...

I clear my throat and follow Violet out the door. “Bye, Maria. Hope we never meet again.”

“Same, Gage. Same.”



“*THIS* IS WHERE YOU LIVE?” Violet asks as she steps out of the elevator into my apartment. It’s a glossy new building in the area south of Central Park often referred to as Billionaire’s Row. I bought it for the floor-to-ceiling windows that look out over Manhattan.

“How many bedrooms does this place have?” she asks, tilting her head up to stare at the modern chandelier in the entryway.

“Enough.” I watch as she moves around my space. Most people comment on the view, or the designer furniture, or ask for a tour. But the thing that interests Violet most is the art.

She goes from one tasteful, expensive piece to another, her face impassive. “Who picked these out?”

“Why do you assume it wasn’t me?” I say.

“Even you don’t have taste this boring,” she says.

I’m not sure if I should feel complimented or insulted.

Violet wanders out of the room and down a hallway, unimpressed with every piece of art she passes. She opens the door to my office.

“Wait, don’t go in there—”

But she ignores me and steps inside.

I follow her and see her standing in front of a simple painting of a clear blue sky. It’s the only piece of art in this entire place I actually care about.

I bristle, prepared for her snobby, self-righteous art criticism.

Instead, her face breaks out in a smile. “Oh. *This* I like.”

She checks the artist's signature in the corner. "I've never heard of this painter."

"They're from Colorado Springs," I say. "I don't know what the actual title of the painting is. But my dad always called it *Baseball Weather*."

Her face softens. "This was his?"

"Yeah." I shrug. I don't really want to talk about how much I love this painting. How it makes me think of those spring mornings when my dad took a break from work, and we'd go watch a game. Sometimes if I look at this painting long enough, I can still hear the crack of the bat and smell his aftershave.

"It's beautiful, Gage." The way Violet's looking at me, I think maybe she senses some of what I'm feeling. She reaches out and touches my arm. "Really beautiful."

I look down at her, and for some reason, my chest feels tight. I don't normally show any of my visitors this painting. It matters too much.

I know Violet thinks I'm a rich, selfish asshole. She's made that abundantly clear. But right now, she's looking up at me like maybe there's more to me than she thought.

My heart thuds, heavy and cracked in a way I don't quite know what to do with.

Her mouth looks so damn soft. Her tongue might be sharp, but I get the feeling that right now if I kissed her, she'd taste nothing but sweet.

Without thinking, I lean toward her, and her eyes darken.

Some distant part of me is aware of the sound of the elevator arriving and the door to my apartment opening, but the rest of me is fixated on Violet's soft, parted lips.

"Gage," my mom calls, her voice drifting through the apartment. "Are you here?"

Shit.

It takes me a second too long to jerk my mind away from fantasies of Violet's mouth. Because the next thing I know I can hear my mom heading through the apartment toward my office. She knows that's where I spend most of my waking hours in this apartment."

"I didn't like how we ended it yesterday," she says as she approaches the office doorway. "I don't want you to feel like I'm pressuring you into a life you don't want, I just ... oh." She stops talking when she steps into the office and sees Violet.

Violet snatches her hand away from my arm like we've been caught doing something naughty.

My mom's eyebrows shoot up. "Oh. You're Gage's new assistant. And you're ... here."

There's an awkward silence, during which I'm suddenly remembering that while Crawford Investing doesn't have a formal policy against workplace relationships, my mom tends to frown on bosses who date their subordinates.

She'll be fine with it once she knows we're engaged, but ...

Violet clears her throat and holds out her hand. "It's, um, Violet. We've actually met before. You were at my brother Tom's wedding. I changed my hair."

My mom's face clears. "Oh! Of course. I didn't realize you'd come to work for us." She shakes Violet's hand. "I didn't mean to intrude. Normally when Gage takes work home, he doesn't take his assistant with him."

She might be smiling, but there's a mild sting underneath her words that lets me know I'll be in for a scolding on healthy workplace boundaries tomorrow.

This whole thing could backfire unless I fix it.

Now.

I take a deep breath and slide my hand around Violet's waist. "Actually, Mom, we weren't working. Violet and I have some news."

I can feel Violet stiffen. But it's too late to stop now.

"Violet and I are engaged."

For a second Mom just stares. And then she blurts, "*Engaged? To be married?*"

"That's pretty much the only kind," I say dryly.

"Right. I ... oh what am I saying? Welcome to the family, Violet!" She spreads her arms and crushes Violet in a hug.

Violet shoots me a mildly alarmed look over my mom's shoulder.

"I noticed you two had chemistry at Tom's wedding," she says.

I resist the urge to snort. Clearly, my mom's memory is playing tricks on her.

Then she releases Violet and turns to hug me too. "I'm happy for you both. Really ..."

But as she steps back from the hug, I can't help noticing that she doesn't actually look happy.

For a second I wonder if she thinks Violet isn't good enough for me, and a part of me feels weirdly defensive on Violet's behalf. Sure, Violet is a terrible secretary. But she's smart, distractingly gorgeous in a formal gown, and kind. At least, she's kind to people who aren't me. Plus, she's got a spine of steel.

I thought those were the sort of things mothers looked for in a daughter-in-law.

I cross my arms. "Something on your mind, Mom?"

She sighs. "It's just ... are you sure that you're ready to get married, hon? It would be a bad idea if you ruined a good relationship by rushing to the altar because you had ... ulterior motives."

Shit.

Mom might think the relationship is real, but she basically just asked me if I only got engaged because of our business

deal with the Coyotes.

Violet frowns innocently. “What do you mean, ‘ulterior motives’ ... oh my gosh!” Her hands fly to her face. “Is that your way of asking if I’m pregnant?”

I make a choking sound. I know that’s just Violet’s way of distracting Mom from my *actual* ulterior motives, but now I’m hit with a vision of Violet pregnant with my child.

She’d look pretty pregnant, I think, and then I blink.

Where the hell did *that* thought come from?

“Because I’m definitely not pregnant,” Violet reassures her. “I mean, we’re definitely ... your son is very *generous* if you know what I mean. But we obviously use protection.”

My mom looks flustered and like she would really like Violet to stop talking. “Of course. I didn’t mean to imply ...”

Time to take control of this conversation.

I slide an arm around Violet’s waist and drop a kiss down on the top of her head. Her hair smells *good*. I linger a second more than I mean to, distracted.

When I remember to refocus on my mom, she’s looking at me with an unreadable expression.

“Violet’s special,” I say firmly. “And I am very, very happy she said yes.”

“Of course, she is,” Mom says, turning back to Violet with a soft smile. “She’d need to be, to get you to settle down.”

Violet and I both fake a laugh at the bad joke. As her eyes meet mine, I’m pretty sure we’re having the same realization.

Convincing the world we’re a real couple is going to be a lot harder than we thought.

VIOLET

The next day at work I'm staring blankly at my computer screen, still processing Lorelei's reaction to finding out I'm (fake) engaged to her son.

She bought it. Barely.

It's only a matter of time before she starts getting suspicious. If people figure out Gage and I are faking this engagement before the six months are up, I'm pretty sure I won't get that money he promised me.

And I need that money, or all of this is for naught.

But what else can we do to convince people? I try not to think of the heat of Gage's hand on my waist, as he told his mom how special I was.

Hell, there was a moment there where *I* almost believed him.

I yank my thoughts back to the present as one of the other assistants approaches my desk, a casual smile on her face. She's a tall, curvy redhead who somehow manages to make boring office clothes look like high fashion. "Hey. I'm Peggy. The gossip vine says you're the one to thank for our new extended lunch break."

I blink. I didn't realize he'd already changed the policy.

As if I needed any more proof that Gage can work fast when he decides to do something.

“Some of us were going to celebrate by going to that salad place two blocks over,” Peggy says. “Want to join?”

I feel a surprised spurt of warmth. This is the first nice thing anyone has done for me since I started working here. “Sure. Let me just make sure it’s okay with Gage if I take my lunch break now.”

I check Gage’s calendar to make sure he’s not in a meeting, then go and tentatively knock on Gage’s heavy wood door.

“Come in, Violet,” he grumbles.

I open the door. “How did you know it was me?”

“You’re the only one who knocks like you’re scared to wake a hibernating bear.”

I choke back a laugh. “Gage Crawford. Was that a joke?”

For a second our eyes lock, and there’s something mischievous and wicked in his eyes.

Then he looks away and turns back to his work. His voice is gruff when he says, “Stop wasting my time and say whatever you need to say.”

Right. I guess he’s done being human. The corporate robot has returned.

“Can I take my lunch break now?”

He sighs heavily. “Fine. But I need you back in exactly 45 minutes. I need you to take notes during a meeting. Even you can’t fuck that up.”

Any gratitude I have for how quickly he implemented the new lunch-break policy evaporates.

“Yes, sir,” I say.

He doesn’t catch the disdain in my voice. Or if he does, he doesn’t care.

Gage might tell his mom I’m special. But at the end of the day, I’m just a convenient way to solve his problem.

I need to remember that.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I'm squeezed around a table with three other assistants, laughing and gossiping over our cheese-and-chicken-laden salads.

"I caught my boss swiping through a dating app!" one of the assistants, Kay, says. She's a rail-thin woman in her twenties dressed in a bland gray suit, but now that I'm sitting next to her, I've noticed that her charm bracelet is full of references to various sci-fi shows. It's fun to get to see people's personalities come out now that we're not at the office.

She works for Wilson, an older, recently divorced man who is apparently even worse at technology than I am.

"Can you imagine Wilson trying to make conversation on Hinge?" Kay laughs. "I didn't think he could talk about anything that wasn't numbers."

"I don't know, Wilson can be sweet," Peggy says. "He seems like the type who's probably awkward in the beginning, but really good once you're in the coupled-up, I'm-in-love stage."

This leads to rampant speculation about what all the higher-ups in our company would be like in a relationship.

"I bet Lorelei's a real love-em-and-leave-em type," the third assistant, Clara says. She's a pretty Asian-American woman in her forties. "Can't you just picture Lorelei in a red dress in some old-school hotel, breaking hearts over martinis?"

The table dissolves into chaotic, friendly bickering.

Until Kay says, "You know who I can't imagine in a relationship? Gage."

All three assistants shudder.

"I mean, to be in a relationship he'd need to, you know, *leave the office*," Peggy says.

“He’s like a business robot,” Clara says, “And the only emotion he got programmed with is grumpiness.”

I had basically the same thought less than an hour ago. But for some reason, I don’t like it when Clara says it.

“It’s a pity,” Kay says. “Because the man is *hot*.”

I poke at my salad, feeling a little protective of Gage. Yeah, 95% of his life is work. And he seems determined to find new and creative ways to insult my secretary skills.

But there’s also that painting of the sky in his home, the one that reminds him of the dad he lost. And yesterday before we were interrupted, the way he was looking at me ...

I try to keep my voice light. “You know how it is. Everyone’s different when they’re in love.”

But the other women shake their heads.

Kay points her fork at me. “You’re new here. But mark my words. If Gage Crawford ever puts a ring on some poor woman’s finger, either he’s doing it to get ahead in business, or the world is about to end.”

The conversation moves on, but my thoughts don’t.

Kay put into words the thing I’ve been worrying about since last night.

No one is going to believe Gage and I are really engaged. Not once they’ve had time to actually think about it. Even his *mom* barely believed it. The only reason those people at the fundraiser believed Gage and I were dating was because they barely know Gage. He’s just another billionaire they run into every few months at rich people events.

I suppose I could try to talk about what a sweet, kind, perfect fiancé Gage is.

The problem is, people aren’t going to forget everything Gage has done in the past several years, just because of something I say.

Actions speak louder than words.

I finish my salad dejectedly.

As we're all walking back to the office, I notice a couple up ahead on the sidewalk. The guy buys a bouquet of cheap flowers from a street vendor and hands them to his girl.

I sigh. I bet everyone believes *that guy* can fall in love.

And that's when it hits me. Actions *do* speak louder than words.

That's it. That's the solution.

I walk back into the office with a spring in my step. I know exactly how to solve this problem.

Gage Crawford is damn lucky I'm his fake fiancée.



DURING THE MEETING when I'm supposed to be taking notes for Gage, I do a little online shopping.

By the time I get out of the meeting, a bouquet of bright red roses has been delivered to my desk.

Gage glances at the bouquet and stiffens.

I open my mouth to explain my plan, but there are too many other people in the hall.

Besides, Gage doesn't seem to care. He strides into his office like he always does and slams the door behind him.

Is it my imagination, or did he slam the door harder than he normally does?

Whatever. Gage is a grown man. His moods are not my problem.

I start the next stage in my plan. I make a show of grinning like an idiot as I read the card. Then I briefly hold it to my chest, so that I look like a woman happily in love to anyone passing by.

No one needs to know that I ordered the flowers myself.

Twenty minutes later I get an email from Peggy.

Um, who's sending you flowers??!! I can't believe we spent lunch gossiping about nothing when you could have been telling us about your secret admirer.

I think carefully before I write back. *Honestly, I've been dying to tell you. He's so sweet. But when I got offered a job here too, he and I decided it was best to keep our relationship a secret at work so as not to cause gossip.*

Her reply is instant. *Wait, he works HERE??? How long have you been dating?*

Honestly, good question. I do some calculations, trying to pick a believable number. I need something short enough that it's believable Gage's employees wouldn't know he has a girlfriend, but long enough they'll believe it when we announce we're engaged.

Six sexy, blissful months, I type back.

Then I close the email and click back over to the tab where I'm doing my online shopping.

I wonder what gift "Gage" should send me next. Maybe some jewelry?

Jewelry sounds good.



OVER THE COURSE of the afternoon, I continue to be a deeply mediocre assistant to Gage. But I am an *excellent* fake fiancée. I give myself chocolates, which I generously share with a few people in the office kitchen, confiding that my boyfriend sent them to me. Then I send myself jewelry, and—in front of the biggest office gossip—I fake a phone call, where I blush and giggle and whisper to my "boyfriend" that he can't keep sending me all this, it's too much, someone will figure out he works here too ...

By 5:45 p.m., I'm pretty sure every entry-level employee on our floor knows I'm getting romantic gifts from my secret boyfriend who also works here. Now all I need to do is let the gossip trickle upward until everyone else knows too.

Maybe tomorrow I'll start dropping a few hints that will lead people to suspect it's Gage. They can't be too obvious though. People will believe it more if they have to work to connect the dots.

I'm brainstorming tomorrow's gifts when Gage storms out of his office and glares at the roses on my desk.

"Damn it, who sent you those?"

I blink. Has this been bothering him all afternoon?

Why would *Gage* care that someone is sending me flowers?

Then I remember where we are. "Keep your voice down. I'll explain when we get home."

He scowls. "Why should I have to be quiet just because some asshole is sending you cheap, cliché flowers—"

I stand, grab his arm, and drag him into his office. After shutting the door firmly, I turn to face him, hands on my hips. "What has gotten into you? If I didn't know better, I'd say you were jealous."

His scowl deepens. "That's ridiculous ... I'm not ..."

Oh my God. He *is* jealous.

A wild thrill shoots through me. I'm playing with fire, and I like it way more than I should.

He storms across the office and starts shoving papers on his desk into his briefcase. "My interest in your pathetic love life is purely professional. If someone's sending you gifts, it will make our engagement less plausible when we make it public."

"Whatever keeps you warm at night, Gage," I tease.

His head snaps up. "I am warning you, Violet. Tell whoever it is to knock it off, or he's fired. I don't *care* who he is."

Okay, this has gone on long enough. Making Gage jealous is fun, but I don't actually want to get some poor schmuck fired.

“Actually, this whole thing will make our engagement *more* plausible,” I explain. “Because the person sending me those gifts is you. At least, that’s what people will think, after I drop some strategic clues.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Why the fuck would you do that?”

I open my mouth to explain. That’s when I realize there’s basically no way to explain my plan without calling him heartless and incapable of love.

Not that Gage is the type to care about what people think.

Except what if maybe, underneath that grumpy exterior, he does?

More importantly, since when do *I* care about hurting Gage’s feelings?

“Spit it out, Violet,” he growls.

For some reason, that growl makes me flush. “Um ... Your mom seemed like she was surprised you were engaged. And the general sentiment around here seems to be that you’re ... uninterested in long-term relationships. I think a little extra evidence might help convince people.”

Gage thinks about it. At least he says, “That’s not a bad idea.”

I smile, triumphant. He’s an ass, but a part of me likes having his approval. Maybe it’s because I know when Gage says something, he means it.

“But the gifts you’ve been sending yourself are terrible,” he says scornfully. “No one would believe I would send a woman anything so worthless.”

Ah, there’s the asshole I know and hate.

I glare at him. “Unfortunately, I don’t have your budget. If you can do better—”

“I can. I’ll be taking over the gift-giving from here on out.” He sits down at his desk and goes back to his work. “Your services are no longer needed.”

I blink. Okay then. I've been dismissed. Without so much as a *thank you*.

I turn to go.

“And Violet? The next time you get an idea, run it by me first.” He doesn't need to say *Or else*. It's implied.

I roll my eyes. “Of course, your highness.”

He doesn't say anything else. But when I close the door, I notice he's biting back a smile.

VIOLET

The next morning I'm eating breakfast when Gage walks in dressed in a suit that highlights every powerful line of his body. He looks particularly dark and growly, even by his standards.

I might be a little fucked up psychologically because it's definitely doing something for me. I'm torn between wanting to goad him into a shouting match or give him a back rub until those broad shoulders of his finally relax.

He's reaching for the coffee when he sees the necklace around my neck and visibly winces. "Christ. Did 'I' give you that?"

I instinctively touch the costume jewelry, three strands of fake pearls interspersed with fake diamonds. They're not my personal taste, but they looked very sparkly and materialistic online. I thought that was what rich guys liked.

"Fake jewels for a fake relationship, right?" I joke.

"No." He sets the coffee pot down, reaches into his pocket, and hands a small box to me. It's from a *very* recognizable jewelry brand.

"I was going to give this to you later," he says. "But if you show up wearing that monstrosity, no one will ever believe it's from me."

I open the box, curious. My breath catches.

It's a delicate gold chain that I know must have cost a fortune. Hanging from that chain is a stylized V encrusted with

orange, pink, and blue jewels. It's classy enough for his world and fun enough for mine.

For some reason, my heart feels funny.

"They're all sapphires, some quite rare," Gage says as if concerns about the stones' quality might be what's holding me back from putting the necklace on.

"They're beautiful," I say. I take off my necklace and try to put this one on, but I can't quite manage the clasp. I stand, holding my hair out of the way. "Can you ...?"

Wordlessly, Gage takes over. I can feel his heat behind me. His fingers brush the back of my neck. I have a brief and wildly inappropriate fantasy of him grabbing me, bending me over the counter, and giving me something much more memorable than a necklace.

"You know, sapphires are my birthstone," I blurt out, mostly to fill the silence.

"I know," he says, sounding mildly amused.

Gage knows my birthstone?

I don't know what to do with that information.

He finishes with the necklace. "There. Turn around so I can see it."

I do.

This necklace hangs lower, and it disappears underneath my shirt. Something about feeling Gage's gift nestled against my skin, where no one else can see, feels naughty. Like a secret, just the two of us are keeping.

I mean, *obviously* the two of us are keeping a secret.

But this feels like a fun secret.

My fingers move to the top button of my shirt. "I should make it show more, right? So people will see? That's the point."

He stops my fumbling fingers by gently but firmly grabbing my wrists and lowering them to my sides.

I feel captured and restrained, in the most delicious way.

How the hell can he make me feel like this with just a touch?

“It’s not about showing off the gifts themselves,” Gage says, his voice low and smooth. “It’s about how the gifts make you feel. *That’s* what we need to show people.”

My heart picks up.

And then he releases my wrists and steps back. He grabs his coffee and winks, pure mischief lurking at the edge of his mouth.

Then Gage is gone.

I grip the counter for support, feeling a little light-headed. I’ve got the discomfoting impression that I’m about to see an entirely new side of Gage.

And I don’t think I’m ready.



THE NEXT GIFT arrives halfway through the morning, dropped off by a delivery man who’s better dressed than me. When I open the flat, black glossy box, I gasp.

It’s a set of paintbrushes. From my favorite brand.

I take a brush out and carefully run my finger back and forth over the soft, soft bristles. I’ve never had a full set before. I just buy the ones I’ll use most in my work and wait as long as humanly possible before replacing them.

Is this what swooning feels like? I think I might be swooning.

Peggy wanders by. “Hey, do you want to do lunch again today?” Then she spots the open box on my desk and lowers her voice. “Are those from the secret boyfriend?”

Without meaning to, my eyes flick toward Gage’s office.

How did he know this was my brand? Did he check my art supplies when I wasn't looking?

Peggy's still waiting for an answer.

I nod, unable to stop my blush.

The gifts don't stop there.

There are two tickets to my favorite band, which is playing in town next week. Their show has been sold out for *months*. I'm shocked and excited but confused by how Gage could possibly know they're my favorite—until I remember a moment from my brother's wedding five years ago. I'd interrupted Tom and Gage's conversation to demand Tom come out and dance because my favorite song was playing.

That was so long ago, And Gage *remembered*?

My desk phone rings. It's Gage's line.

My heart skips a beat as I answer. "Yes?"

"The notes you took yesterday at the meeting were horrific. A drunk chicken would have taken more useful notes. Wilson's assistant was there, yes? Get her notes. And then have her teach you how to take down *relevant* information. I don't pay you to keep a record of how ugly Wilson's tie was."

I purse my lips. "I acknowledge, I could edit better, but I think you'll find all the relevant information is there—"

"It's not. Fix it. Do better."

I try not to huff. "Anything else?"

"Yes." His voice lowers. "When we go to the concert, wear something you can dance in. I like watching you dance."

It's an innocent enough sentence, but there's nothing innocent about his voice. Butterflies swarm in my stomach. The back of my neck feels hot.

And then the line goes dead.

The whole day is like that. He yells at me when I accidentally screw up the phone system again. He sends me racing across town to pick up his dry cleaning, just because he

can. He's so impossibly demanding, he makes me want to tear my hair out.

But when I return to the office, Gage's designer dry-cleaning slung over my shoulder, my favorite blue slushie is waiting for me at my desk. There's a cheeky, unsigned note tucked beneath it, warning me not to spill it on his carpet again.

I go to toss out the note, but for some inexplicable reason, I slide it into my pocket instead.

As the afternoon goes on, I almost feel like there are two Gages. The one who's my insufferable boss, and the one who's courting me. But then I'll catch the way his eyes glint after he scolds me, and those two sides bleed back into each other. He likes riling me up just as much as he likes spoiling me.

I don't know what to do with that information.

The last thing Gage sends is a bottle of stunningly expensive perfume, an hour before work ends. I skeptically take it out of its packaging. Guys always think perfume is an easy gift but deciding what scent to wear is so personal. And honestly, I don't like most perfumes. I'd rather just smell like the cinnamon shampoo I use.

I spray a bit of perfume on a piece of scrap paper and bring it to my nose.

I'm instantly hit with a scent that's warm, spicy, and comforting all at the same time. It smells like my shampoo, but a million times better.

How could he possibly know that *this* was what I wanted my perfume to smell like? *I* didn't even know.

My desk phone rings, and I pick it up, knowing without checking that it's Gage.

"You like the perfume," he says.

It's not a question.

His arrogance is annoying. But it's also really, *really* hot.

I shrug, going for nonchalance. “I haven’t tried it yet. Who knows what it will smell like on me?”

“Good point. You should wear it tonight.” His voice is low and deep in my ear. It feels intimate, like a lover whispering in the sheets.

“Tonight?” My mouth feels dry.

“I’m taking you out to dinner at Sinclair 58,” Gage says, naming a five-star restaurant so trendy even I’ve heard of it. Influencers and paparazzi flock there in equal measure, hoping to catch a glance of a celebrity.

Any woman would be thrilled to go on a date there.

Why do I feel disappointed?

Because it’s the first gift he’s given that isn’t designed to make me feel good, I realize. This one’s for everyone else, to convince them we’re really a couple.

“You can go home early,” Gage tells me. “Take your time getting ready. Pamper yourself.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to snap that I’m not actually the kind of girl who enjoys spending hours primping for a night out. It just stresses me out.

But Gage is only trying to do what we both agreed to do—Convince the world he’s in love with me.

“Violet?” he prompts, his voice torn between impatience and concern.

“Thanks,” I make myself say. “I’ll see you there.”

And then I hang up the phone and slip the perfume into my purse. As I leave, I remind myself that it’s all fake. If it feels like Gage is getting to know the real me, if it feels like he might actually *see* me better than any man has before ... Well, that’s just a means to an end.

I need to remember that.

No matter *what* he does tonight.

GAGE

Violet seems nervous as I place my hand on her lower back and lead her into Sinclair 58. It's a high-end rooftop restaurant in Chelsea, popular both for its food and its seen-and-be-seen reputation.

I give my name to the restaurant host, who leads us toward our table. I'm pretty sure we pass three actors I recognize and a failed gubernatorial candidate.

Violet is breathtakingly gorgeous in a cerulean silk mini-dress and the necklace I gave her, but she's stiff as a board.

"Relax," I murmur in her ear.

If anything, she tenses more. "Easy for you to say. I bet you go to places like this all the time."

"Actually, I avoid them like the plague."

That surprises a laugh out of her, and I feel a spurt of victory.

Since when did I start caring about making Violet laugh?

The host disappears, leaving us to peruse the menus.

"Holy shit," Violet says, real concern in her voice.

My head snaps up. "What?"

She waves the menu in my face. "Have you seen these prices?"

Her indignation is kind of cute.

"Violet, you don't need to worry about that tonight."

Or ever, when you're with me, I think.

She looks around at the glamorous people surrounding us. The whole rooftop is filled with lights and exotic flowers and enough discreet heat lamps to keep any evening chill away.

It's spectacular, but I've seen it all before.

The only person here I can't take my eyes off is Violet. She's like a wild rose surrounded by mass-produced greenhouse flowers.

I want to ask if she's wearing the perfume I gave her. If not, I could help her apply it when we get home. Dab it on the inside of her wrists, that sensitive spot on her neck, between her thighs ...

I yank my thoughts away from that direction and clear my throat. "What do you want to drink—"

"Is there something I should be doing?" Violet interrupts. "To convince people we're together. If we're here to see and be seen, should I be, I don't know, flirting? Laughing at your jokes?"

"I don't joke," I say dryly.

She rolls her eyes. "You know what I mean."

I study her. "Just relax and let me take care of it."

"But—"

"If we were in love, I'd take care of you, Violet. You wouldn't need to worry about work, or money, or being alone. I'd plan every date, and every gift, just to make you smile. All you'd have to do every day, in exchange, is just be yourself."

Her breathing quickens.

"Trust me when I say all you need to do, to convince people you're with me, is to relax. Act like a woman whose every physical, emotional, and sexual need is taken care of."

Her cheeks flush and her lips part. "About those sexual needs ..."

My pulse picks up.

Our waiter arrives. “May I start some drinks for you?”

Violet blinks and refocuses on the menu. “Um ...”

“We’ll have the Chateau Mouton Rothschild 1945 to start,” I say.

The waiter grins because he just realized how big a tip he’ll probably get from this meal. “Excellent choice, sir.”

When he leaves, I ask, “You like red wine, right?”

She nods.

There’s an electric moment when I wonder if we’re going to pick up where we left off when the waiter interrupted us.

But instead, she asks, “What do you love most about baseball?”

I blink, startled. That’s not the type of question women normally ask me. “Why would you want to know that?”

She takes a deep breath. “Because you told me I’m supposed to be myself. And normally, I’d try and get to know the man I’m on a date with.”

Her sincerity catches me off guard. I can’t remember the last time someone tried to get to know me like that. Probably in college, when I met Tom.

The reminder that this is my best friend’s little sister sends a flash of guilt through me. At least if we’re talking about baseball, I won’t be tempted to fantasize about those sexual needs of hers.

“Partly I like baseball because it reminds me of my dad,” I say. “But I also like it because it’s simple. Unrushed. Just two teams, a ball, and a clear blue sky.”

She tilts her head. “Does a lot of your life feel complicated and rushed?”

Yes. I think the answer instantly. But saying it out loud feels a little too vulnerable.

I clear my throat. “Enough about me. Let’s talk about you. What do you like about painting?”

Her face lights up, and I know I've asked the right question.

From there, the conversation just *flows*.

I can't remember the last time I've had this much fun on a date—and this isn't even a real date. Violet is smart, curious, and passionate. She loves making fun of me, but if I'm ever talking about something genuinely important to me, she instinctively turns gentle and supportive. She barely knows anything about my company or the business world I live in, but she's perceptive enough to immediately cut through the bullshit and understand whatever I'm trying to say.

Plus, it's fun to watch her talk.

Her big, beautiful hazel eyes show every emotion she's feeling, and her mouth looks soft and inviting enough to be thoroughly distracting.

I'm genuinely surprised when the waiter clears away our empty dessert plates, and I realize the night has come to an end.

As we get up to leave, Violet stops me with a hand on my arm. "Can we go over there, to the rooftop edge? That building looks really interesting from this angle. I might want to try painting it sometime."

I'm so distracted by her touch, it takes me a second to answer. "Sure."

I follow her as she weaves her way through the tables. Everyone else in this area is busy taking selfies. But that's not what Violet's interested in. She pulls out her phone and leans out over the railing, trying to get the perfect angle.

I settle my hands on her waist. "Careful."

She fumbles her phone for a second, almost dropping it. "Let go. You're distracting me."

I snort. "And explain to Tom how I let you fall? No."

She keeps shooting pictures while I keep a firm hold on her waist, trying not to think about how much I like the feel of her under my hands.

When Violet finally finishes and turns around, we're way closer than I intended.

There's a bright camera flash, and I realize we're standing a little behind a famous actor and his date who are currently posing for some paparazzi. It reminds me why Violet and I came here in the first place—to be seen.

Violet glances toward them, her thoughts clearly following the same trajectory as mine. "Oops. Looks like we're photobombing. When they post those photos, I wonder if we'll be in the background, or if they'll crop us out?"

My gaze falls to her mouth. "If we are, we might as well use the situation to our advantage."

Her breath stutters, but she doesn't back away.

That's all the encouragement I need to lower my mouth to hers. She's soft and feminine, and when her lips part for me she tastes like the chocolate dessert we just shared.

When she gives me a surprised little breathy moan, I can't help but deepen the kiss. Her hands are splayed across my chest, and I wonder if she can feel the way my heart's racing for her.

Everything about her is so *good*. Her taste, her heat, her scent. My hands tighten on her waist, closing that last inch of space between us until she's pressed against my hardening cock.

She gives a little gasp, and that's when I remember we're in public, and I'm about two seconds away from some photographer getting a photo of me dry-humping my best friend's little sister.

Shit.

Fuck.

Shit.

I raise my head and ease back, moving us around so that all the photographers can see is my back.

"What was that?" Violet breathes.

“Just selling our fake relationship,” I say. But it feels like a lie on my lips.

There was nothing fake about that kiss, or about the way her body responded to mine.

“Right. Of course.” She sounds disappointed. “Just part of the con.”

Part of me wants to correct her. But what can I say?

I'm insanely attracted to you and that might have been the best date I've ever been on, but nothing can happen between us because I don't do relationships. Also, I need your help to buy a baseball team even more than I need you in my bed.

Yeah, that's not what she wants to hear.

I let her believe the lie that's best for both of us.

She turns, and as I follow her out of the restaurant, I catch a whiff of spiced cinnamon.

She's definitely wearing the perfume I gave her.

GAGE

I spend the next few days “courting” Violet. Showering her with surprise gifts. Planning my “proposal,” when I’ll publicly give her a ring and make it official.

Or as official as a fake relationship can be.

Between that and Violet continuing to be the most inept assistant I’ve ever had, I feel like she’s always on my mind. I’m pretty sure I dreamt about her kissing me last night, except this time we weren’t in public, and we didn’t stop with a kiss. Today I was so desperate to stop thinking about Violet and get some damn work done, I sent her home an hour early.

It didn’t work.

I yawn as I take the elevator up to my apartment. I drop my briefcase on the floor and head to the kitchen to grab a beer.

When I step into the kitchen, I freeze.

Violet’s standing in front of an easel wearing giant headphones while she paints. I can see her profile, but she doesn’t notice me. The table is covered with sketches, brightly colored paints, and the paintbrushes I bought her earlier this week.

Violet is humming to herself as she works.

And she’s not wearing any pants.

Just an old, paint-splattered t-shirt worn so thin I can practically see her tits through the fabric, and bright red

panties.

Is she trying to torture me?

All I can think about is tearing off her t-shirt and stroking one of those paintbrushes over every sensitive part of her body. Then when once she'd squirming and desperate, I'd rip those panties off and lick—

“Jesus!” Violet yanks her headphones off, noticing me for the first time. “What are you doing?”

“What am *I* doing?” I ask, annoyed. “It’s my home. You’re the one who’s half-naked in my kitchen.”

“I’m not ...” she looks down and blushes. Then she looks desperately around the kitchen, like a pair of pants will just magically materialize.

If I was a gentleman, I’d offer her my suit jacket.

But I don’t want her getting paint all over my designer clothes.

Also, I like looking at her ass in those panties.

She crosses her arms over her chest. “I thought you were going out with Tom and Jaylen tonight. I saw it on your work calendar.”

I blink.

“*Shit.*” With everything going on, I completely forgot about my regular dinner with my two best friends.

Right on cue, my doorbell rings.

“That’s probably them,” Violet says. “Go have fun with your friends and let me paint in peace.”

“Paint whatever you want, just put some damn pants on,” I grumble, but she doesn’t hear me. She’s already put her giant headphones on and turned back to give the canvas her full attention.

I head to my front door, feeling grumpy and rattled and turned on all at the same time.

The doorbell rings again. I'd yell at them for being impatient assholes, but I was the one who completely forgot our regular dinner.

I yank the door open.

Sure enough, Tom and Jaylen are standing on the other side. Like Violet, Tom is short, with dark brown hair and hazel eyes. Except for Tom, those features add up to a fairly normal-looking dude, whereas on Violet they somehow become magical. Jaylen is a tall, unflappable Black guy with a penchant for funny ties. We all shared a dorm room freshman year. Three eighteen-year-olds in a tiny cinderblock room should have been a recipe for disaster, but they ended up being my best friends.

"Sorry," I say. "I had a crazy week and forgot about dinner. I was just on my way to meet you. Why didn't you just start without me?"

Tom scowls. "Well, for starters, you didn't answer our texts. Also, and this might have slipped your mind, but *there are photos of you kissing my sister all over the internet.*"

Oops.

I guess my and Violet's plan worked too well.

"Well, not *all* over the internet," Jaylen comments mildly. He's a social media manager for a cable sports network. It's literally his job to know what's trending and why.

"Is the thing between you and Violet serious?" Tom continues, ignoring Jaylen's interruption. "Because I'm warning you, Gage, if you're using her for your own casual amusement—"

"First of all, if Violet wanted something casual, that's her decision, not yours," I say, unexpectedly irritated on Violet's behalf. "Second of all, it's not serious, but I can explain."

"You bastard." Tom charges into the apartment, looking like he wants to take a swing at me.

Jaylen hooks two fingers into the back of Tom's shirt collar, yanking Tom to an undignified halt. "How about we

hear his explanation first, Tom.”

“Fine,” Tom says, looking disgruntled.

“I want my company to buy the Colorado Coyotes, but my mom won’t approve the purchase unless I show her I’m taking my personal life seriously,” I say. “So I paid Violet to be my fake fiancée for the next six months. I get to buy the team, she gets to open her own community art center thing. It’s a win-win.”

Jaylen raises his eyebrows. “Dude. That is the dumbest shit I ever heard.”

“It’s a simple business transaction,” I say, feeling defensive.

Tom doesn’t look like he wants to murder me anymore, but he doesn’t look entirely convinced either. “That photo didn’t look like a business transaction.”

“It was purely for show,” I assure him. “That was the one and only time we’ve kissed. And trust me, we’re not going to do that any more than necessary. She’s your little sister, and I’m her annoying boss.”

Tom relaxes, finally seeming to believe me.

I breathe out a sigh of relief.

I don’t care what most people think, but I hate it when Tom’s mad at me.

“Great.” Jaylen claps his hands together. “Now that we’ve confirmed Gage is just being a weird rich idiot and isn’t out to steal your sister’s virtue, can we go get food? I’m starving.”

“Absolutely.” I’m grabbing my keys out of the crystal bowl by the door when I hear Violet humming down the hallway.

A second later, Violet wanders into the living room, tape measure in hand.

And she’s *still not wearing fucking pants*.

I yank my jacket off and bundle it around her, paint stains be damned. There’s some primal part of me that doesn’t want

Jaylen to see those red panties of hers.

I hastily button my suit jacket up on her. It's long enough that it falls to mid-thigh on her.

Violet blinks up at me and lowers her headphones. "Sorry. I thought you guys left already."

"*Gage*," Tom warns, and I wince.

I turn around, forcing a smile on my face. "Did I forget to mention Violet's living with me during our fake relationship? In her own suite. Far away from me." I motion to the other end of the apartment.

Tom is back to glowering at me.

Jaylen nods to Violet's tape measure. "What's that for?"

"I've decided to update Gage's art collection. This stuff is soulless."

"Yeah, she's just updating my ... wait you're doing what?" I ask, distracted as she heads over to the nearest painting. Then she rises on her toes and stretches her arms above her to measure the height of the painting.

My suit jacket creeps another two inches up her thighs.

I cross the room and snatch the tape measure from her hands so I can measure it myself. I read off the numbers to her, and she nods to herself.

"Okay. I'll need a bigger canvas for that spot. How do you feel about pastoral landscapes?"

"You should do a portrait," Jaylen suggests. "Of Gage."

I scoff.

Violet's eyes dance with mischief. "Unfortunately, I only do nude portraits. But if that's something you're up for, Gage ...?"

The idea of being naked in front of Violet goes straight to my dick. I fumble for a thought that doesn't have anything to do with being naked, or Violet, or being naked with a thought.

"Okay," Tom interrupts. "Dinner time. *Now*."

“Yes. That.” I usher the other men out in front of me before turning back to point a finger at Violet. “Behave. And put some clothes on.”

She fiddles with the button on my suit jacket. “I don’t know. This is kind of growing on me.”

I back out of the apartment before she can do anything else to destroy my sanity.



TRAFFIC’S SHIT, so we decide to walk the handful of blocks to our favorite pub.

Jaylen’s regaling us with some near disaster at work when we pass a high-end jewelry store. I’m immediately distracted by a ring in the window. I’ve been looking for rings for Violet online, but it’s not the same as seeing them in person.

I glance at the hours posted on the shop door and see it closes in half an hour.

“Hey, I’ll meet you at the restaurant,” I interrupt. “I need to pop in here for a bit.”

Jaylen groans. “Gage, you do *not* need another watch.”

“He’s not shopping for watches,” Tom says. “He’s shopping for a fake engagement ring. Right?”

My silence is all the confirmation they need.

“Just go on ahead,” I repeat. “I’ll catch up.”

Tom sighs heavily. “For the record, I think this fake engagement is a terrible idea. You and Violet are both using each other, and I’m annoyed at both of you. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to let you buy an engagement ring by yourself. You have terrible taste.”

“Hey,” I say, indignantly. “Violet liked the necklace I got her.”

“Violet has terrible taste too,” Tom says.

“You bought a fake girlfriend real jewelry?” Jaylen asks, confused.

I open my mouth to explain the whole secret-courting thing, but somehow I don’t think either of them would understand. If my friends knew how many hours I’d spent this week thinking about how to make Violet feel treasured and seduced, they might get the wrong idea.

“Look, are you helping me or not?” I ask, feeling annoyed.

Jaylen and Tom look at each other. And then in unison they say, “Helping” and head into the jewelry shop.

I trail after them, exasperated.

“How can I help you gentlemen?” a perky saleswoman asks.

Jaylen jerks his thumb at me. “He needs an engagement ring.”

“Excellent,” the woman beams. “Would you like something that comes with a matching wedding band?”

“No,” Tom says. “They’re not actually getting married. Just engaged.”

“Okay,” the saleswoman says, looking deeply confused.

“Do you work on commission? Because if you do, you should sell him the most expensive ring you have,” Jaylen says. “Take him for all he’s worth. He’s a billionaire. He can afford it.”

“With friends like these, who needs enemies?” I grumble.

“You know, I think I have just the collection for you to pick from,” the saleswoman says, and disappears into the back room.

I WANDER around the store looking at the rings on display, trying to picture each of them on Violet’s finger. “Too big. Too boring. Too cheap. No. No. Hell no. Don’t they have any gold? She needs something that will look warm on her skin.”

I look up to find Jaylen and Tom staring at me with unreadable expressions on their faces.

“What?” I demand.

“It’s just ... it seems like you’re putting a lot of effort into this fake relationship,” Jaylen says.

“What are you implying?” I cross my arms.

“Well ... maybe your mom had a point about you needing more of a personal life,” Tom says. “Clearly there’s a part of you that likes doing the couple stuff. Buying someone jewelry. Living together. Going on fancy dates.”

“Hey. Take that back,” I order.

Jaylen rolls his eyes. “Calm down. We’re not saying this relationship is real or anything. We’re just raising the possibility that *maybe* you’re throwing yourself into it because you’re a little lonelier than you realize?”

“We’ve been worried about you, man,” Tom admits. “It was fine to have work be your whole life when you were in your twenties. But at some point, you need to figure out what else matters to you, or you’ll finally look up one day and realize all you have is work. And work can’t love you back.”

I snort. “Don’t be melodramatic. I have you guys. I have my mom.”

“And that’s a great start,” Jaylen says encouragingly like I’m a lonely kid in need of all the positive reinforcement I can get. “But maybe you could aim to add like two other people to that circle? Hell, go wild. Add five!”

“You guys are such assholes,” I grumble.

The saleswoman returns with a tray of rings, diamonds winking like stars against the black velvet box.

Tom, Jaylen, and I gather around to examine the rings, our shoulders bashing into each other as we each try and get a good look.

After twenty-five minutes of surprisingly intense arguing—Jaylen cares *a lot* about how many carats a ring should be,

while Tom feels inexplicably strongly about the setting—we finally settle on one that we all agree Violet will like.

We leave the store laughing and joking. But as I fall into step with my best friends under the night sky, I can't help but wonder if they were right earlier.

What if I wake up one day and realize that the life I've worked so hard to build is as boring, lonely, and meaningless as all the designer artwork in my apartment?

VIOLET

Gage stays out so late I have time to finish my painting. It's a loose, abstract interpretation of two figures dancing. I used yellows, pinks, oranges—fiery colors that match my mood. I don't know why I'm feeling so restless, except that this week has been weird as hell.

I never know which version of Gage I'm going to get. The acerbic, demanding boss. The thoughtfully seductive fake fiancé.

The sinfully handsome man who kisses like a god.

I carefully carry my mostly dry painting into the living room, scoping out possible places to hang it. It's too small to replace Gage's big painting, but I could swap out one of the smaller artworks. I'm making up my mind when my phone buzzes.

I dig it out of the pocket of my sweatpants and see a text from Tom.

You and I are going to have a talk about your life choices later. But for right now, can you just make sure Gage drinks some water?

I frown, confused.

Then there's the sound of keys fumbling in the lock, and Gage flings open the front door. "Lucy, I'm home," he slurs in a bad, drunken imitation from that old 50s TV show.

My phone buzzes with another text from Tom.

I haven't seen him get drunk since college.

I hastily text Tom back letting him know I'll take care of it. And then I shift my focus back to Gage, who's standing there with his hands on his hips.

"I made a joke. You didn't laugh," he accuses.

"It was a very good joke," I reassure him, trying not to smile. "Why don't you go get some water."

He doesn't listen to me. Instead, he closes the front door behind him and wanders over to the wall. He stops in front of one of the very expensive, very boring paintings he owns.

Gage tilts his head. "This one is the loneliest. We should get rid of it first." He takes it off the wall and tosses it on the couch.

I scramble to catch it before it falls off the couch and onto the floor. "Gage! That's worth a million dollars."

"Two million. I don't like it." He turns and spots my painting, propped against the wall. "I like that one."

He crosses the room, grabs my painting, and hangs it where the old one was. "There. *Those people* aren't lonely," he says, gesturing to my dancers. And then he notices the wet yellow paint smeared on his hand. "Oops."

Sober Gage is one of the most feared men on Wall Street. But Drunk Gage is completely stumped by discovering wet paint on his hand. Then he perks up, like he's figured out a solution, and reaches his hand out to his gleaming, luxurious, crazy expensive white couch.

"No!" I burst out, rushing to him. "Just ... don't touch anything, okay?"

Gage pouts.

I didn't even know Gage *could* pout.

I carefully use the bottom of my t-shirt to wipe his hand clean.

He stills. "You put on pants."

“Yeah, well, you let my brother wander into the apartment. Kind of killed the whole pantsless vibe.”

“Sorry.” He sways closer to me, inhaling deeply. “You smell so good. You always smell so good.”

My skin tingles at the compliment. “You smell like a bar,” I make myself say.

But he’s not listening anymore. He’s wandering around the room, taking one painting after another off the walls and tossing them aside like they mean nothing. I scramble after him, trying to protect the paintings. They’re boring art, but they’re still art.

“Gage, what’s gotten into you?”

Why are you drinking so much?

“I had a dream about you,” he says.

My heart stutters. “What?”

“I’m *not* lonely,” he announces as if those two thoughts are connected. And maybe in his drunken brain, they are.

Gage runs out of artwork to strip off the walls and comes to a stop in the magnificent dining room.

Then he narrows his eyes at the priceless crystal chandelier and points. “*That* looks lonely. It has to go.”

“Okay, that’s enough redecorating for you.” I grab his arm and steer him back to the living room, shoving him down onto the couch. “Just sit there, okay? I promised Tom I’d make you drink water, so you won’t wake up with a headache.”

But when I try to walk away, he loops an impressively strong arm around my waist and pulls me back to him, until I’m standing directly in front of him and he’s resting his head against my stomach.

“I always have a headache,” he murmurs, and I can feel his warm breath against my thin t-shirt. “That’s where the stress is. In my head.”

I hesitate, then gently trail my hand through his dark hair, applying just enough pressure to turn it into a soft massage. He

makes a pleasurable hum somewhere deep in his throat.

“You’re so pretty,” he murmurs. “So fucking pretty.”

“Next you’ll tell me I’m a good assistant.”

Gage laughs and pulls me down onto the couch with him so that I’m straddling his lap. His face is so close to mine, I feel breathless.

“You are a very bad assistant,” he says. “I don’t *how* you can be that bad. You’re smart. You’re trying. But you’re just ...” he makes a motion with his hand. “A disaster.”

I try to squirm out of his lap. “I liked it better when you were telling me I was pretty.”

His arms tighten around my waist and he pulls me close, tucking his face in the crook of my neck. “Don’t go. Please.”

There’s something earnest and vulnerable in his voice, and I stop trying to escape.

Also, it’s kind of hot having him hold me like this. He’s warm and strong. When he’s drunk enough to let down his guard, *I’m* the only thing in this apartment he wants to keep close.

I let myself relax against him, as his fingers slip under the hem of my t-shirt and trace the warm skin there.

“I bought you a ring,” he says, his voice thick.

“Oh?” I know it’s just for our fake relationship. But he’s saying it like it’s important, and that makes my heart beat fast.

“It’s in my pocket,” he says. When he talks, I can feel the movement of his lips against the sensitive skin on my neck. It’s not quite kissing, but it’s erotic as hell.

Then he shifts me just enough that he can reach into his pocket and produce a jewelry box that he presses into my hands.

I open it and see a golden band littered with tiny diamonds swirling towards one brilliant, big, flawless one in the center.

“Oh, Gage,” I breathe.

He's watching me closely. Like he's hungry for my approval. "I got gold 'cause it's warm like you. Do you like it?"

I nod, suddenly finding it hard to speak. It's just dawned on me that when I eventually get married for real, there's no way my real engagement ring will be half as perfect as this.

The ring isn't the real problem though. It's Gage. He's larger than life, and not what I expected at all. He's not perfect by a long shot, but I'm still worried that when this is all over, it will be hard to find anyone who comes close to measuring up.

I swallow, trying to get a grip on my emotions. I need to be practical. Clear-eyed. I can't romanticize Gage, just because he gets affectionate when he's drunk. I need to remind myself of how cold and calculating he can be when he's sober.

"Gage," I say. "I need you to tell me something."

"Anything." He smooths my hair out of my face and cradles my face. He's looking at me with something approaching tenderness, and that scares the shit out of me.

"The business deal you want. The one that's the reason you need a fake fiancée. What is it?" I need him to tell me it's a ruthless deal to destroy someone's beloved company. Something that will make him billions. Something that I can use to remind myself that at the end of the day—for him—our fake relationship is only about money. Nothing else.

But he doesn't say anything. Instead, he clamps his mouth shut and looks away.

"Gage."

He shakes his head.

So I decide to play dirty. I reach up and gently massage his head, exactly the way he liked before. His hair is so thick and soft.

Gage's eyes flutter closed in distracted pleasure. He lets his head fall back against the couch. "No fair. You're too pretty."

I can't help but smile. "Tell me about the business deal, Gage."

"Baseball. I want to buy the Coyotes. I can make them better." He sighs happily over what my fingers are doing. "I don't want stupid Scott Chaney to destroy them."

My heart skips a beat. "You're doing all this with me, upending your life, paying me all that money, just to protect your dad's team. You're doing all this for love."

Gage's eyes open, and he doesn't look drunk anymore. He looks like a man focused on what he wants. He reaches out and runs his thumb along my bottom lip. "So. Fucking. Beautiful."

My stomach flips.

Is he going to kiss me again?

Do I want him to?

Hell yes.

I know it's a bad idea, but I'm tired of fighting it.

He leans forward and whispers in my ear, "Are you still wearing those red panties? Because that's what I'm picturing you in."

Jesus. Every part of my body goes liquid with desire.

I force myself to stand up. "One second. Just ... stay there, okay? I'm going to get you some water, and a snack, and if you still want to, you know ... after you're sober ..."

Gage gives me a crooked smile that heats my blood.

I rush out of the room before I change my mind. I don't quite dare let myself think about what happens if Gage still wants me this bad when he's back to normal.

He won't, I tell myself as I pour him a glass of water and dump some snacks onto a plate. He'll sober up and be glad neither of us did anything stupid.

On the other hand, what if this is how he always feels, underneath his grumpiness and bluster? What if he's genuinely

this attracted to me, and it just took the alcohol to get him to admit it?

The thought is exhilarating and hot and nerve-wracking all at the same time.

I walk back to the living room with Gage's water and a plate of snacks, not sure which outcome I'm rooting for ...

Oh, who am I kidding? I want him to kiss me senseless and fuck my brains out.

I head over to Gage, feeling breathless and giddy and turned on ...

Until I see that he's fast asleep, long limbs sprawled everywhere.

I sigh.

Just my luck.

"Probably for the best," I say to the sleeping Gage.

He lets out a loud snore.

I set the food and water down on the coffee table, then I carefully ease Gage down so that he's lying on the couch and won't get a crick in his neck. I pull off his shoes and cover him with a cashmere throw blanket that probably costs more than my rent.

I'm about to leave when the ring box tumbles off the couch and down to the floor.

For a second, I think about putting it on.

It's my ring after all.

But something about putting that ring on will make this all feel a little too real.

Right now, I desperately need it to stay fake—Because if it doesn't, I'm in big trouble.

I set the ring box on the coffee table and leave Gage to sleep off whatever it was that drove him to drink.

GAGE

At work the next day Violet avoids me until I bark at her to get into my office so we can go over my schedule for the rest of the week. I've got a lot of important things on my plate, and I can't afford for anything to fall through the cracks.

"After the Tillion meeting, I'm going to need you to block off two hours for me to review those reports. I'll need to concentrate. Don't let *anyone* interrupt me, understand?"

Violet nods and makes a note in her planner. She's unusually quiet and focused and keeps avoiding my gaze.

I wonder if it has something to do with whatever I said last night. I remember telling Violet that I agreed with her about updating the artwork in my apartment, getting her opinion on the engagement ring, and explaining that I wanted to buy the Colorado Coyotes. But some of the other stuff I remember must have been a dream because there's no way she would have curled up on my lap and let me nuzzle her neck like that.

But it was a really, *really*, vivid dream. I can still feel her soft weight pressed into me, her soft mouth mere inches from mine.

I clear my throat. "That brings us to my proposal. I think we should do it at that fancy French place near the park. I know some of the women who work here do brunch on Saturdays, so word will get back to the office quickly. I don't really want to do the ring in the dessert thing, but if you'd like that—"

“I don’t think we need to do a proposal at all,” Violet says. She tugs at the collar of her blouse, and I’m immediately hit with a vivid memory of the scent of her neck.

“Why not?” I ask, distracted.

“Everyone believes we’re really dating now. Trust me. And we already told Lorelei you’re engaged.” She taps her pen against her notebook. “At this point, an elaborate proposal is just ... inefficient. Wouldn’t you rather have Saturday free so you can read that proposal on acquiring Clapp & Rose Industries? Your team needs a definitive answer on that by next Tuesday.”

“Oh.” I look down at my own notebook, filled with half-scrawled notes about carriage rides and string quartets. The kind of things women like when you propose to them.

Then again, maybe Violet would just think all that stuff was boring and unoriginal. She’s not like any of the other women I’ve dated.

Maybe that’s why I’m strangely disappointed to realize I’ll be spending my Saturday working instead of sipping over-priced champagne with the woman I live with.

“Right,” I make myself say. “Efficiency. That’s definitely a better use of my time.” I cross out all my notes and ideas about the proposal, feeling strangely annoyed.

My phone buzzes with a text from my mom.

Are you free? I need you and Violet to come to my office.

I’m hit with a wave of foreboding.

“What’s wrong?” Violet asks, clearly concerned.

“Maybe nothing,” I say grimly. “Or maybe my mom figured out we’re lying to her. We’ve just been summoned to her office.”

“We?” Violet repeats weakly. “As in, both of us?”

I sigh. Then I reach into my pocket and toss her the engagement ring. “If we’re ditching the proposal, you might as

well start wearing this now. Also, it might make my mom a little more hesitant to call our bluff.”

Violet stares down at the ring and swallows. “You’ve just been ... carrying this around?”

Now that she says it out loud, I realize it’s a bit ridiculous. It’s the kind of thing a man in love would do because he wants to be ready for the right moment. Or because a ring like this is the most precious thing he owns.

That ring isn’t the most precious thing I own. Not by a long shot.

And I’m definitely not in love with Violet.

I clear my throat and nod to the ring. “I was just staying in character. Now put the damn thing on.”

For a second we lock eyes, and something electric crackles under the surface.

Then Violet looks away, stands, and slips the ring on her finger. When she meets my eyes again her expression has been smoothed out into a neutral, professional smile.

“Right,” she says. “Let’s go talk to your mother.”

She grabs her assistant notebook and walks out the door.

I don’t have the heart to tell her to leave the notebook behind. I don’t think this is a work meeting.



WHEN WE STEP into my mom’s office, she’s on the phone with someone. She waves for us to sit down while she finishes her conversation.

I take that as a good sign. If she knew I’d lied to her about my engagement to Violet, she wouldn’t be wrapping up a business call. She’d be yelling at me as soon as her office door clicked close behind us.

Then she notices the diamonds on Violet’s left hand, and her eyebrows shoot up. Two seconds later she hangs up the

phone and scurries out from behind her desk.

“Oh, let me see the ring!” She takes Violet’s hand and beams. “Oh, Gage, it’s lovely. I like that you went with a gold band.” She squeezes Violet’s hand before releasing it. “Warm color for a warm, sunshiny woman, right?”

For some reason, Violet’s eyes fly to mine. Then she looks away blushing. “Um. Yeah. Gage said something similar.”

Wait, when did I say that?

I mean, I definitely *thought* it, but ...

Bit by bit more memories from last night start coming back to me. Things I did. Things I said.

I definitely called her *pretty* an undignified amount. And ... Christ, I’m pretty sure I said something about her spectacular ass in those tiny red panties.

Honestly, I wouldn’t have blamed Violet if she’d wanted to break our deal after some of the stuff I said last night.

But she’s still here, beautiful and distracting as ever.

I shift in my chair, uncomfortable. “What did you want to talk to us about, Mom?”

“Oh! Right.” She plucks a business card off her desk and passes it to me. “I found the perfect photographer to do your engagement photoshoot and your wedding.”

“Mom,” I say, exasperatedly. “We’re not ready to hire a photographer for the wedding.”

“Fine then, just use them for the engagement photoshoot. She’s my friend’s niece’s cousin’s daughter’s godmother. *Very* in-demand.” She pulls the website up on her phone and hands it to Violet to swipe through.

“Wow,” Violet says, softly. “These are beautiful. They look like something out of a magazine.”

“Good,” Mom says, clearly satisfied with herself. “I pulled some strings and booked a shoot for you this Saturday morning, but you have to go to her studio because of the short notice.”

“*What?*” I blurt at the same time as Violet asks, “This weekend?”

My mom purses her lips. “Look. I’m thrilled you two decided to tell me about your engagement. But now that that paparazzi photo is out there, I need you to tell everyone else. Otherwise, it looks like Gage is using our company as his own personal dating pool, and that’s not a professional look.”

I sit back in my chair, understanding dawning. “You want us to do the shoot, so we have a new image to give the press when we announce the engagement. Something to replace the one photo they currently have.”

“Exactly,” Mom says. “I was thinking we’d send out a press release next Tuesday.”

Well, at least she believes us.

“It should be fun,” my mom adds. “I told the photographer she could be as creative as she wanted, as long as she gave you at least one that was conservative enough to send to the press.” She smiles at Violet. “I know you like artsy stuff.”

“How thoughtful,” Violet says, faintly.

We make about thirty more seconds of small talk, and then my mom kicks us out of her office to take a meeting.

Once we’re standing outside in the hallway, Violet says, “I’m beginning to see where you get your lust for efficiency.”

I bite back a laugh. “I guess I have Saturday plans with you after all.”

Violet groans, but I realize I’m not nearly as bummed as I should be. Even a photoshoot sounds interesting if Violet’s going to be there.

VIOLET

The photographer's studio is located in a fashionable Chelsea loft. She's a thin white woman with short, spiky hair and a lip ring.

She gives a friendly smile when we arrive. "Hi. I'm Natasha."

I shake her hand. "I'm Violet. And this is Gage, my boy—I mean, my fiancé."

"Smooth," Gage mutters in my ear.

But if Natasha notices my flub, she doesn't say anything.

Natasha takes our coats, then does a double take when she sees my simple blouse and jeans. "That's what you're wearing?"

I look down, checking to see if there's a paint stain I missed. But no, this outfit is entirely free of paint.

I feel Gage's warm hand at the base of my back.

"I like it," he says, his voice low.

"I'm sure you do, but the camera won't. Not for something like this. Do you mind if I put you in something else? I've got a few pieces left over from a recent photoshoot."

"Oh ... um. Okay." I shrug and let Natasha lead me into a small walk-in closet. She holds a series of flowy, flashy, expensive dresses up in front of me, eyes narrowed. Then she nods decisively and hands me a red chiffon gown. The skirt flows to the floor in a series of tiny pleats, and the bodice is a

sort of elevated halter dress, topped off by a gold chain that will loop around my neck. The front is elegant and fairly modest.

But my entire back will be exposed.

“Wear your hair down, yes?” Natasha says. “And put on more mascara if you have it. I like the natural look, but we really want those big eyes of yours to pop.”

Then she leaves me alone in the walk-in closet to get changed.

I put the dress on and examine myself in front of the mirror. The dress is about half a foot too long for me, but otherwise, it fits me perfectly.

I twist and turn in front of the mirror. It’s the kind of dress anyone would look sexy in.

I can’t wait for Gage to see me in this, I think.

Then I grimace and press my fist against my forehead. I need to stop thinking like that. It’s a good thing that Gage fell asleep the other night before either of us could do something we’d regret. It’s a really good thing that Gage doesn’t seem to remember any of the nice things he said to me that night.

It’s a really, really good thing that Gage and I will never have more than a fake relationship.

I point my finger at my reflection. “Don’t fall for him just because we’re doing all this pretend couple-shit. You’re smarter than that.”

Then I take a deep breath, hike up the skirt so I can walk, and leave the safety of the walk-in closet.

I follow the sounds of Gage and Natasha’s voices until I find them in a large, dark room with polished concrete walls and a floor that’s been painted black. The only light comes from the large lights Natasha has set up for the photoshoot. They’re aimed at an old-fashioned gray velvet couch, where Gage is already sitting, chatting with Natasha while he waits for me.

Then he spots me and his words dry up.

“Violet,” he swallows. “You look ...”

“Don’t be shy on my account!” Natasha says. “This is an engagement shoot! Tell her she looks beautiful.”

I wiggle my eyebrows. “Yeah, Gage. Tell me I look beautiful.” I strike a dramatic pose like an old-fashioned movie heroine.

Gage tries and fails to hide a smile.

“Ha! I knew Violet could get you to smile,” Natasha says. “I can always spot the people who can get everyone else to smile. Okay, Violet, go sit on the couch next to Gage. And I want you to each shift a little, so you’re angled toward each other but still facing me.”

She runs us through a few more poses, instructing us to smile, then to be serious, then to throw our heads back and laugh.

I don’t think I’ve ever spent this much time staring into Gage’s eyes without either of us speaking. It’s a weird, accelerated intimacy.

“Okay, we got the classic ones out of the way. Now let’s have some fun. Gage, I need you to look down at her mouth for me like you’re thinking about kissing her.”

Gage rolls his eyes. “We don’t need the artsy photos.”

“Humor me, okay? Worst case scenario, you spend another half hour staring at a beautiful woman who loves you while she’s wearing that sexy, sexy dress.”

I feel myself blush. “If Gage doesn’t want to—”

“It’s fine,” he interrupts. He faces me again, and his gaze slowly, deliberately, drops to my mouth.

We’re close enough that I can see the exact moment his blue eyes darken, and my breath quickens. My lips part, and Gage instinctively leans in, like there’s a thread pulling us closer together.

“Yes, yes, be in the moment together. Violet, can you take his hand and kiss it?”

I laugh, awkwardly. “Won’t that look weird?”

“If it does, we’ll delete that photo,” Natasha reassures me. “We’re just playing around, until we get that perfect, romantic shot you can look at when you’re in your eighties. The one that makes you both think, *Damn, I sure married a hottie.*”

Gage grunts, “I don’t need a photo for that.”

I know he means he doesn’t need a photo for that because we’re not actually getting married.

But Natasha says, “Awww,” like she thinks he’s saying he doesn’t need the reminder that I’m hot.

Gage lowers his head to murmur in my ear. “We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. But this will probably go faster if we just let her get the dumb shots she wants.”

I nod, knowing he’s right.

I grasp his wrist and lift it up then I dip my lips to the palm of his hand. The lights flash, but I barely notice.

I’m far more distracted by Gage’s sharp inhale.

“Good. God, the sparks are just flying between you two,” Natasha says. “Gage, I need you to kiss her. It can be sweet or hot, whatever you want, just don’t touch each other’s faces. I want to see your pretty profiles.”

My heart beats fast as Gage lowers his lips toward mine. It feels like time itself slows down.

And then his mouth is on mine, and I’m sighing in relief. As much as I tried to fight it, I’ve been missing this since the first time he kissed me.

I nip his lip, unreasonably irritated at him for ruining me for other men, and then making me wait so long to kiss him again. He growls, his hands hot and tight on my waist.

When I finally come up for air, he’s looking at me like I’m the only person in the room.

I wonder if his heart is racing as fast as mine.

“Hmmm, Violet, could you sit on Gage’s lap, facing away from me?” Natasha asks. “And then I want you two to kiss again, but this time, Gage, can you touch her back?”

I half laugh as Gage effortlessly lifts me and settles me down so that I’m straddling his lap. “Weirdest engagement shoot ever.”

“But not necessarily unpleasant,” Gage murmurs and a little thrill shoots through me.

“Hold on, just let me drape that gorgeous dress ...” Natasha runs up and fusses with the fabric, then ducks back behind the camera. “Okay, go!”

Gage cups his big hand at the back of my neck and guides my mouth down to his. Knowing that Natasha’s camera can’t catch our faces makes it even easier to slip into the kiss. I feel like I’m getting drunk on his taste. Gage’s hands roam up and down my back, hot and possessive. He presses me closer to him, and I gasp as the movement makes one thing very obvious.

Gage is hard. Like, really fucking hard.

I whimper into his mouth, trying desperately not to rock myself against his cock.

For a second, I wonder how Natasha can possibly get away with doing such a steamy photoshoot, then I remember that the other engaged couple’s Natasha shoots have actually had sex with each other. They can probably handle a little light kissing without feeling the need to rip each other’s clothes off.

“Okay, great stuff guys,” she says. “Now we have a couple of options. We can do some standing photos, or we can stay on the couch and do some more cuddly poses.”

“Let’s stay on the couch,” I call, sounding more breathless than I meant to.

The last thing Gage and I need is more physical contact. But we definitely can’t do standing photos until Gage has, well ... calmed down.

Natasha directs us until I'm lying on the couch and Gage is braced above me, every inch of his body pressed against mine. Our fingers are twined together, and he's staring intently into my face.

His eyes are hot on mine. I feel like I'm trembling with wanting him.

"Okay, Violet, turn your head to me. Yes, exactly like that. Girl, your face was made for photography," Natasha says.

If photography doesn't work out for her, she could have a career in motivational speaking. I don't think I've ever felt so beautiful or sexy.

Then again, that probably has more to do with the six-foot-something gorgeous man who's pressed against me.

"Okay, Gage, can you lower her head like you're kissing her neck?"

I gasp as I feel his lips on my neck. Because Gage isn't posing *as if* he's kissing me. He's launching a full-on exploration, finding every spot that feels good, and then lingering until I can't hold still anymore. My fingers dig into his hands as I twist underneath him, helpless and trapped and so damn turned on I could *scream*.

"Wow, you two are electric," Natasha marvels. "Okay, one more pose then we'll take a break. Gage if you could just pull her leg up a little—"

"*No*," Gage bites out, abruptly pulling away and sitting up. "We're done."

The cold air rushes in between us. I half sit up, feeling weirdly exposed. Like I was busy dreaming, and someone threw a bucket of ice water to wake me up.

"Oh. Sure," Natasha says, trying to be accommodating. "We can take a break now."

"No, we're not taking a break. We're leaving. Now," Gage all but snarls. It's like a switch has flipped. I've never seen him look this fierce.

He stands and tosses a wad of \$500 bills on the couch. “Don’t show those photos to anyone. And if you don’t delete every single file, I will sue you into oblivion. Understand?”

Natasha blinks and nods. “... if that’s what you both want.”

I open my mouth to ask that she at least send us the first few photos because we’ll need one of those for the press release.

But Gage interrupts me before we can get a word in edgewise. “It’s what we want.” He grabs my hand and starts towing me toward the door. He’s moving so fast I have to half-jog to keep up.

Natasha calls, “If you could just change out of the dress—”

“Send me the fucking bill,” Gage orders.

And then we’re out the door and blinking in the bright sunlight.

Gage drops my hand like he can’t stand to touch me a second longer.

Which is weird, because for a second there, it seemed like he enjoyed touching me. Like, *a lot*.

Gage hails a cab and rushes us in without ever once looking me in the face.

I can’t help but wonder, *what the hell just happened?*

GAGE

Violet and I are riding the elevator up to my apartment in silence when the elevator jerks to a stop.

Violet grabs my arm.

Then the lights flicker and go out, leaving us in total darkness.

“What the hell?” Violet exclaims.

A second later, the emergency lights flick on, and I can see Violet again.

She doesn't look happy.

“Hold on,” I say reassuringly. “I'll get this fixed.”

My cell can't get a signal in the elevator, so I use the emergency button to call the building staff.

“Hello?” A voice crackles over the speaker.

“Gage Crawford here. My fiancée and I are stuck in the middle elevator between floors twenty-five and twenty-six. I need you to fix this, immediately. Or there are going to be serious repercussions.”

The voice coming out of the speakers sounds frazzled. “Sir, we'll get you out of there as soon as possible. But there's been a five-block power outage.”

I swear under my breath.

“The good news is, you're completely safe. Just hang tight, and we'll get you out of there as soon as possible.”

“What the hell do you mean by *as soon as possible*—”

But the line is already dead.

“I can’t believe it,” I say, glaring at the speaker. “He hung up on me. While we’re trapped in his goddamn elevator.”

Violet crosses her arms. “Well, if it’s a power outage, he might have more important emergencies to deal with.”

There’s something weird about Violet’s voice. Like she’s trying to hold her emotions in check.

I wrap my arm around her shoulders. “Hey. It’s okay. You don’t need to be scared. We’ll get out of this soon, even if I have to bribe someone.”

She shrugs off my touch. “Oh my God, I’m not scared. I’m pissed off.”

I guess anger is better than fear. I don’t like the idea of Violet being scared. “Yeah, the situation is frustrating.”

“I’m not mad at the situation, I’m mad at you!” She turns away like she wants to storm away from me. But we’re trapped in an elevator. There’s nowhere to storm off to.

I clench my jaw, starting to get irritated. “What did I do?”

“You were unnecessarily rude to the elevator guy just now. You snapped at the taxi driver. And I don’t even know what happened with Natasha at the photography studio,” Violet throws her hands in the air. “One minute, everything was fine. The next you’re throwing money around and threatening to sue.”

I glare down at her. “I can’t believe it. You’re mad because I ended a photo shoot early? I didn’t realize you had fantasies about being a model.”

“You *asshole*.” Violet closes the already small amount of space between us and jabs her finger into my chest. “I’m not pissed about the photoshoot. I’m pissed that you’re being a jerk to normal people who are just doing their jobs. It’s one thing to act like that with other rich guys.” Her finger trembles against my chest. “But when you do it to people who work for you, *whose lives are a lot harder than yours*, it doesn’t mean

‘high standards’ or however else you want to spin it. It just means you’re being a bully.”

She moves her hand so that it’s pressed flat against my chest. Like she’s preparing to shove me away.

Except she doesn’t.

Instead, her voice softens. “You’re better than that, Gage. I know you are.” Her anger is fading, but what’s left in its place is something much more serious.

She’s disappointed in me.

I shouldn’t care about that. We barely know each other. Our fake engagement is a purely practical, professional arrangement. I shouldn’t care what Violet thinks of me.

But the truth is, I do.

And I’m rapidly losing the ability to pretend like I don’t.

“Fine. You’re right. I could work on my temper.” I move back and lean against the elevator wall, my arms crossed. “I should have been more patient with the elevator guy and the cab driver. Even though the cab driver *definitely* got us lost.”

I wait for her to argue with me about the cab driver, but she doesn’t take the bait.

Instead, she raises her chin and says, “And the photographer?”

I scowl. “I’m not apologizing for that. I had my reasons.”

“What possible reasons???” Violet exclaims. “I mean, yeah, it was a little touchy-feely, and I get that you’re not Mr. Sentimental. But you were the one who wanted to pretend to be engaged, Gage. And then you just freaked out! For no reason!”

“I had a reason,” I say between gritted teeth.

“*Then tell me what it was.*”

“I ended that shoot because if it had gone one second longer, I would have ordered that damn photographer from the room and fucked you on the couch, Violet,” I say, finally

losing control. “And I told her to delete the photos because I don’t want anyone else seeing what we do to each other. That’s between you and me. That’s ... real.”

Violet’s mouth parts. She’s beautifully flushed from our fight, and her breath is coming fast, making her breasts rise and fall in that silky red dress.

For a second, I’m back on that couch with Violet underneath me, eyes big and dark as she all but rubs herself against my cock.

We stare at each other from opposite sides of the elevator.

And then she’s in my arms, and I’m kissing her like my life depends on it.

Maybe it does. Maybe a part of me has been dead for years, and Violet’s the only one who can bring me back to life.

Our height differences are getting in the way, so I lift her and set her on the railing that runs around the edge of the elevator. My lips find the spot on her neck that makes her moan.

That spot is seared into my brain.

Her hands are in my hair, moving desperately.

I think I might love making Violet Miller desperate.

I use one hand to keep her anchored against the wall, while the other cups and teases her breast. I love the soft curve of her here. I dip my head and suck her nipple through the fabric. I’m probably going too fast, but I can’t seem to slow down. Violet has taken over every single one of my senses.

When she gasps and says my name, I decide I never want to leave this elevator.

Naturally, that’s when the elevator starts moving again.

Violet and I stare at each other, dazed, as the elevator slowly drops back down to the twenty-fifth floor. I have just enough presence of mind to help her down off the railing. Then I drape my jacket around her shoulders to hide the rather conspicuous damp spot on her dress.

I've barely finished when the door opens.

A short, friendly man who's part of the building's staff meets me and Violet. He looks nervous. When he speaks, I realize he's the man I talked to in the elevator.

"I'm so sorry you had to wait, sir. There was an elderly man with a heart condition in the other elevator."

A flash of guilt manages to penetrate my sex-crazed brain. "Ah. Understandable. Thank you for your help." I notice the lights in the hallway are out. "Is the power still out?"

He nods. "Unfortunately, yes. We were able to get you out because the elevator is programmed to drop down to the nearest floor in the event of a power outage. But you'll need to take the stairs to get up to your apartment. You're on the forty-first floor, right?"

I briefly close my eyes as it dawns on me that I have to climb sixteen flights of stairs before Violet and I can finish what we've started.

Why did I have to be so determined to have a good view?

Violet snickers.

I glare at her. "Hey, you have to climb those stairs too." But it's hard to keep my glare in place in the face of her teasing.

"I can't help it," she says. "You just look so grumpy."

"I really am sorry about this," the staff member says. "If you'd prefer, you're welcome to come down to the lobby and wait for the power to come back on."

"Yeah, Gage," Violet teases. "We could wait—"

"Not on your life. We have *very* important plans in my apartment."

Her eyes darken, and I resist to lean in and kiss her again.

Instead, I grab Violet's hand and tow her towards the stairwell. I don't care what obstacles the universe throws in my way. I'm going after what I want.

And that's Violet, coming into my bed.

VIOLET

“**W**hew. I thought I was in better shape than that,” I say as I step into Gage’s apartment. “I blame this dress. It’s harder to climb stairs in a long dress. Science says so.”

I know I’m rambling, but I can’t help it. That make-out session in the elevator was one of the hottest experiences of *my* life. But all the reasons that it’s a bad idea for Gage and me to get involved are still there.

He’s my boss.

I’m his best friend’s little sister.

We’re stuck living together—and faking a relationship together—for the next six months.

And now, to top it off, we’ve had sixteen flights of stairs to clear the fog from our brains and start thinking again. If sex was ever on the table, I’m pretty sure it’s not now.

The problem is, I don’t know how to transition into whatever happens next. Do we pretend the elevator never happened? Or sit down and have a heart-to-heart about it?

Gage takes a step toward me, his eyes dark and unreadable.

I panic and go with avoidance. “Do you want a snack? I think I’m going to go get a snack.” I turn and start to head toward the kitchen.

Gage catches my wrist. Something hot and wicked flickers at the edge of his smile. “I could eat.” Then he slowly, deliberately, kisses the inside of my wrist.

Butterflies swirl in my stomach.

I swallow, trying to play it cool. “Okay. Um. What are you in the mood for?”

He gently pulls me into the living room and leads me to the couch. Which is good, because the way he’s looking at me, my knees are feeling kind of shaky.

He’s just so. Damn. Hot.

Gage kneels in front of me and starts easing my skirt up. “I think you know what I’m in the mood for, Violet.” His voice is thick with desire, and I have to remind myself to breathe.

When his fingers reach my panties, I let out a little whimper and lift my legs to help him get me out of them. For a second we lock eyes and I wait, my heart pounding. I’ve had men go down on me before, but this feels different because it’s Gage. Everything feels different with him.

Then he lowers his mouth to kiss the inside of my thigh and I release a shuddering breath. He teases me with his mouth and his fingers, circling the place where I really want him until I’m wet and desperate.

“Please, Gage,” I beg. “Please.”

Apparently, that’s what he’s been waiting for, because a second later his mouth is exactly where I need it. When he slips two fingers inside me, I think I’m going to explode. The pleasure rushes and builds until I can’t stand it, and then I’m coming hard from his touch, from his kisses, from all the things he makes me feel.

It’s all so intense that as I come down, I shiver.

“Cold?” Gage asks.

I’m about to explain, but self-consciousness stops my tongue. What if this is just sex for him? What if there’s nothing mind-blowing about it?

“A little,” I lie. “Don’t worry, though—”

But he’s already across the room doing something with the gas fireplace. A second later, flames spring to life. Outside the world is beginning to get darker, especially with everyone’s lights out. But inside, the flames cast rivers of golden light across Gage’s skin.

My mouth goes dry. I realize as good as it was, that first orgasm barely took the edge off. I’ve wanted him for so long, and now I’m burning with the need to give him everything he just gave me.

On impulse, I stand and peel the dress off, tossing it aside.

“Is that better?” Gage asks, turning to look at me. And then he sees me, and his voice dries up.

I join him on the carpet in front of the fire and start unbuttoning his shirt. His hands find the curve of my waist and tighten. Then he lifts and, a second later, I’m straddling him.

I love how strong he is. I love the way I know he’d never use that strength to hurt me. He can be ruthless, but he knows how to be gentle when it counts.

I shove his shirt off, and my lips find his as my hands explore his chest. He’s so warm and strong as he shudders under my touch. I can feel him hard between my legs. It’s exquisitely hot. Part of me wants to linger in this moment forever.

But the rest of me is impatient.

I fumble with the zipper on his pants. He’s so focused on kissing me, it takes him a few moments to realize what I’m doing. Then we’re both shifting and fumbling to get his remaining clothes off until he’s beautifully, gloriously naked.

Normally I’m more self-conscious the first time I have sex with someone, but Gage is so casually confident, so easy in his own body, that I can’t help but feel confident in my own desires. Confident in what I can do to him.

I trail my hand down his abdomen. His breath gets more ragged the closer I get to his thick, ready cock.

I briefly touch him, then move my hand away again, just to make him groan.

“Please,” he says, the sound so rough it makes me feel deliciously feminine. Feminine and powerful.

I smile cheekily. “I don’t know. Maybe I should make you wait a little longer.”

“Woman, I climbed sixteen flights of stairs for this.”

I laugh. I can’t help it. He’s so adorably grumpy, even when we’re on the verge of sex.

I do him one better than a hand job. I move back just far enough that I can take him in my mouth.

The pleasure seems to take him by surprise.

His head falls back, eyes closed. “Fuck,” he breathes, his hands tangling in my hair. “Fuck, that’s good, baby. Just like that. Just ... oh ... *fuck.*”

After that, he doesn’t seem capable of talking.

Until, abruptly, he pulls back. “Stop. I need to ... to get myself under control.”

I smile and crawl back over him, my lips brushing against his. “Is that your way of saying you’re ready to fuck me?”

“Christ, yes. But we need a condom.” He looked around like he was suddenly remembering where we were. “Why aren’t we in the bedroom?”

“Because we have good luck with couches.”

“Ah. Right.” He grins, loose and happy. I hardly ever see that expression on him, and it snags at my heart.

Don’t go there, some self-preserving part of me says. *Keep this focused on sex.*

I duck my head and dust kisses along his collarbone. “What if I told you I’m clean and on birth control?”

His breath stills. “I’d say I’m clean too.” He tips my chin up with his finger, forcing me to look him in the eye. “But are you sure you’re comfortable with that?”

“I trust you,” I say. That’s the root of everything, I realize. I trust Gage enough to fake an engagement with him. I trust that even though he can be a demanding asshole at work, he’ll never cross a line we can’t come back from.

I trust him to give me possibly the best sex of my life. And I trust him to keep treating me the same after we sleep together.

Gage nods. “Okay, then,” he says, his voice soft and seductive. He kisses me, and then we’re falling together, our hands memorizing each other. And then he’s rolling us until I’m beneath him, stretched out on the carpet like some kind of luxurious offering. The firelight dances across Gage’s face as he slides into me, and I gasp.

For a second we just stare at each other.

And then we start moving, finding our rhythm together.

His hands find mine, pinning them to the ground beside my head. I can feel his fingers in between mine as I feel his cock thick and hard inside me. The pleasure builds and builds. Then he shifts the angle, and I’m making sounds I’ve never made before as I come long and hard and good, saying his name over and over again.

It *does* something to Gage. His thrusts turn wilder, until he tucks his head into my neck, stiffens, and comes in one glorious shudder.

For a long while afterward, we just lie there and hold each other in the flickering firelight. Like we both need time to come back to earth.



“WHY A COMMUNITY ART CENTER?” Gage asks.

The power is still out. We’re sprawled in front of the fire, partially dressed, and snacking on all the fancy cheese I found in Gage’s fridge. I’m wearing Gage’s dress shirt, and he’s wearing a pair of sweatpants that do *great* things for his body. Between the two of us, we’d make one fully dressed person.

“What?” I ask, distracted by his abs.

“You said you wanted to use your fake engagement money to open a community art center. Why not invest in yourself, instead?” He nods to my painting on the walls. “You’re good enough. Why not take the world by storm?”

I smile. That’s such a Gage way of putting it. He says *Why not take the world by storm?* The same way someone else might say, *Why not take a vacation?*

He’s that fucking confident in his own abilities. I don’t think he knows how sexy that is.

And now he’s casually extending his confidence to include me under his umbrella.

“Maybe. But I’m not interested in having painting be my full-time job,” I say. “If I did that, I’d have to paint every day, whether or not I felt like it. I’d have to follow the market, at least to some extent, and paint things that customers want.”

He takes a swig of his beer. “Don’t you paint every day if you’re teaching art classes?”

“It’s not the same,” I say. “In class, I demonstrate skills or how to do a particular assignment, but I don’t have to sit down and crank out original paintings on demand. Besides, there’s something special about teaching.”

He tilts his head, studying me intently. Like he’s trying to understand me. “You don’t get bored? Teaching the same things over and over?”

“Nope.” I cut a slice of fancy cheese and pop it in my mouth. “Oh my God. This is really, *really* good. Where do you buy this?” I ask, thinking I could make more of an effort with the grocery shopping if it leads to things that taste like this.

“France,” Gage says.

Or not.

“What if you have, like, a really bad art student?” Gage teases. “Someone who absolutely can’t be taught?”

“I can teach anyone,” I say. “More importantly, I can teach them to *like* making art.”

Gage tries not to look skeptical and completely fails.

I stand up and head down the hall to the closet where I’ve got my art supplies stored.

“What are you doing?” he calls.

“Proving I’m right.” I return with two sketchbooks and a box of colored pencils. I plop down next to him and hand him one of the sketchbooks. “Pick anything in this room you think is beautiful or interesting and draw it.”

He half laughs. “This is silly. I get it, you’re a good art teacher.”

I hold up a finger to get his attention. “I’ll bet you that if you do what I say, you’ll like drawing more and be better at it by the time the power comes back on.”

His eyes sharpen. Gage never can resist a win. “What do you get if I lose?”

I think. “A year’s supply of that fancy French cheese.”

“And if I win?” he prompts. There’s something deliciously wicked in his voice.

“What do you want?” I ask.

His dark gaze looks me up and down. Like I’m a delectable menu, and he’s deciding what to order.

“A favor,” he says at last. “To be determined and given at the time of my choosing.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “You want me to give one of the most feared men on Wall Street an unlimited I.O.U.? In exchange for some cheese?”

“No, in exchange for making a fool of myself trying to draw,” he says indignantly. “Also, for the record, that cheese is *very* expensive.”

“Fine,” I allow. Although now I’m more determined than ever to win.

“Good,” he says, a competitive spark flashing in his eye. He opens the sketchbook and grabs a colored pencil. “Do your worst.”

Unfortunately for him, I do my best instead.

VIOLET

“Okay, so let’s start with what you did well,” I say an hour later. I may have been a little over-confident in my teaching abilities. Gage is as bad at drawing as I am at being his assistant.

Part of the problem is that when I told him to pick one thing in the room to draw, he picked me. Figure drawing is normally pretty advanced.

Of course, Gage would be overly ambitious in everything he tries.

Gage snorts. “Nothing. I did nothing well.” He sounds bitter.

“That’s not true.” I point to the way he drew my mouth. “It’s out of proportion with everything else, but you got pretty close to capturing the actual shape of my mouth. The same with my eyes. You didn’t get caught up in what generic mouths and eyes should look like. You actually drew what you saw.”

He leans in, his lips brushing against mine as his hand toys with the buttons on my shirt. “Bet I could do even better with your breasts.”

“*Gage*.” I laugh into his mouth as I swat his hands away. “Is this your way of welching on our bet?”

“Consider it a draw,” he says. “You get your cheese, and I get my favor.”

“I don’t think that’s how draws work,” I say. But he’s guiding me back down onto the carpet, and I’m rapidly losing interest in arguing with him. Not when there are so many better things we could be doing.

His face is mere inches from mine, my heart beating fast.

When suddenly the power comes back on.

The overhead lights come on, washing us in too-bright white light. Outside, lights in other buildings come back on. And to top it all off, my phone chooses that moment to start buzzing with an incoming call.

It feels like the outside world is rushing in.

I’m not ready for that.

Gage must be on a similar wavelength because he stands and quickly turns the lights off, so we’re cast in firelight once more.

I reach for my phone to reject the call, until I see it’s from Tom. And he’s sent me thirteen texts.

I answer, immediately worried. “Tom? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m calling about *you*,” Tom says. “The news said your neighborhood had a giant blackout. And neither you nor Gage were answering your phones.”

I glance guiltily at the spot of carpet in front of the fire. Gage and I definitely haven’t been paying attention to our phones, that’s for sure.

“Sorry,” I say. “It’s been an ... unusual day. But we’re both fine. More than fine.” My eyes find Gage. He sits down on the floor across from me. I try to hold in a giggle as he tugs one of my feet into his lap. Then he starts giving me a foot massage, his gorgeous blue eyes closely watching my face.

I try to ignore the rush of pleasure and focus on what Tom is saying. “Sorry, what was that?”

“I didn’t say anything. Violet are you ... giggling?”

“No,” I protest.

The silence on the other end of the line reeks of skepticism.

“Gage is just being ... distracting,” I say, as Gage grabs my calves and yanks me closer. I hope Tom spits out whatever he needs to say quickly. Because I’m not sure I can keep up my half of the conversation when Gage is looking at me like that.

“Violet,” Tom starts, then stops. “Never mind.”

His voice is serious enough that it cuts through my fog of lust.

“What?” I say, frowning. “What’s wrong?”

Tom sighs. “Just, don’t fall for Gage, okay? I love him, but he’s not a relationship kind of guy.”

Gage stills.

I wonder if I’m close enough for him to hear Tom’s half of the conversation too.

I wonder if it hurts that one of his best friends doesn’t think he’s capable of a relationship.

Or maybe he’d just laugh. After all, if Gage wants something, he finds a way to get it. If he wanted a real relationship, he’d have it already, and I wouldn’t be here.

The thought is oddly depressing.

“Violet?” Tom presses.

“I heard you,” I say. I roll my eyes for Gage’s benefit. “I promise, nothing is going on between me and Gage.”

Gage’s hands tighten on my calves. There’s something on his face I can’t quite read.

“Hey, I need to go. But thanks for calling, Tom. Love you.” I hang up before he can say something else to fracture this magical, snow-globe day Gage and I have been having.

“Sorry about that,” I say. “Tom wanted to make sure we were okay because of the power outage.”

“Sure,” Gage says. Then he stands and holds out a hand to me, all smooth confidence. “Come on. Let’s take this to the bedroom. I promise, my mattress is even nicer than this carpet.”

I try to smile. But for some reason, I can’t.

I want to say yes. Desperately. I want to let Gage sweep me away and pretend the rest of the world doesn’t exist for a little bit longer.

But I keep hearing Tom’s voice in my head. *He’s not a relationship kind of guy.*

I keep thinking about how I said *Pick something beautiful or interesting to draw* and he picked me. And then got frustrated with himself because he couldn’t get it the way he wanted it.

I keep thinking about how easy it would be to fall for him, for real. To start off having casual sex, and somehow slide into making love.

Gage is waiting for me to take his hand and stand. His grin is confident, but there’s something almost vulnerable in his eyes.

Slowly I get to my feet, ignoring his outstretched hand. “Gage ... I think maybe going back to your bedroom is a bad idea.”

“Fine, let’s do shower sex.”

“Gage.” I cross my arms. “You know what I mean. This was great. More than great.” I swallow. “But we have to keep living together, working together, and fake dating each other for another six months. If we keep sleeping together, that could be ...” *really wonderful* “really messy.”

Gage’s jaws tighten. For a second I expect him to fight me on this, the way he’s been fighting me on everything since the first day I walked into his office.

But all he does is scratch his jaw, where the rough prickles of his five o’clock shadow are coming in. “If that’s what you want,” he says casually.

As if he doesn't care one way or the other.

Why does that hurt so much?

"Right." I gather my art supplies and the leftover food. "I'm going to clean this up then go to bed. Good night."

"Good night, Violet." His voice is low and husky as I head to the kitchen

I know I made the right decision.

But that doesn't make it any easier to walk away from him.



ON SUNDAY I flee to Brooklyn, taking refuge in Maria's company. We meet at the Brooklyn Museum and wander through a post-modernist exhibit about the evils of capitalism. Weirdly, I think Gage would like it. None of the art is boring. And there's a photo of a wide-open sky I think he'd like. It takes up almost the whole wall so that you can't help but feel free when you stand in front of it.

Don't think of Gage, I tell myself.

But it doesn't do any good. It doesn't matter which exhibit we wander through or what topic Maria brings up. Every other thing we pass seems to make me think of Gage.

"Okay, spit it out," Maria says as we step outside into the sun and wander over to Prospect Park.

"Spit what out?"

We half-jog through the bicycle lane to avoid getting run over by a middle-aged man in spandex.

"What is it like to live with *Gage freaking Crawford*?" Maria blurts out. "Is he as much of a jerk as he is at work? Or does he secretly watch *The Great British Bake-Off* and sing in the shower?"

"Thankfully, I can't hear anything he does in the shower," I try to joke. But I'm hit with the memory of Gage suggesting

shower sex last night when I tried to put the brakes on ... whatever we were doing.

Is it possible to feel turned on and sad at the same time? Because I think that's how I feel right now.

"Okay, something weird is going on with your face right now," Maria says as we step into the park. She pulls me over to the nearest bench. "Spill."

I sigh. "Tom said this thing last night about how Gage doesn't do relationships, so I shouldn't get attached. And he's right. I know he's right."

"But ..." Maria prompts.

"But I-kind-of-already-had-sex-with-him," I say in a rush.

"You *what*?" Maria shrieks, delighted. "Damn, girl. Was it good?"

"God yes," I sigh, slouching into the bench.

"I can see that," Maria nods. "That confident asshole thing is annoying in real life, but it can be hot in bed. Evolution really screwed us over on that one."

I know what she means, but ... "Actually, he wasn't an asshole yesterday. I mean, he was for a bit, but then we fought about it while we were trapped in the elevator—"

"You were *what*?"

"And it turned out he was mostly being a jerk because he was trying not to jump my bones, so then we jumped each other's bones, and after that it was just ... nice." I smile at the memory. "The power was out, so we just laid in front of his fireplace and ... talked. He really wanted to know why I like teaching. I even convinced him to let me give him a drawing lesson." I can't help but laugh. "He got so damn grumpy, but he kept trying."

Maria tilts her head. "You're falling for him."

My smile fades.

A runner jogs by us. Watching shirtless guys exercise used to be half the reason Maria and I liked to hang out in Prospect

Park. But compared to Gage every guy who jogs past us just seems sort of ... washed out. They lack that fire that's always burning inside of Gage.

"Yeah," I admit at last. "I'm falling for him. Which is why I told Gage we couldn't have sex again."

Maria winces in sympathy. "How'd he take that?"

"He basically just shrugged and said, 'If that's what you want.'" I throw my hands up in the air. "Impossible man."

"Wait, is this your engagement ring? I haven't seen it yet." Maria catches my left hand and holds it up for inspection. "Damn. This is gorgeous. He was smart to let you pick it out."

"He didn't. He picked this one out for me, with the help of his two best friends." The damn ring twinkles in the sunlight, a reminder of how embarrassingly fake my relationship is. "It was weird, he came home so drunk that night. He stripped every piece of art I'd complained about off the walls and hung up a painting I'd just done instead."

Maria studies me, an unreadable expression on her face. "Huh. Has he done anything else romantic?"

"I mean, there was the whole wooing thing, but that was just for the sake of the fake relationship." I launch into an explanation of all the gifts he got me, and how annoyingly perfect they were.

Maria blinks. "Hold up. He remembered a band you said you liked several *years* ago? Long before you started this fake relationship thing?"

I shrug. "He's got a good memory. You should see him in the boardroom. He remembers everything about everyone."

"Orrrrrrrr," Maria says, drawing out the word, "You're not the only one who's falling."

My stomach pinches with nervous hope. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, it sounds like, fake relationship or no, Gage pays a *lot* of attention to what will make you happy. Including, when you told him it would make you happier if you guys

stopped having sex.” She pops open the top of her water bottle and side-eyes me while she takes a drink.

“I didn’t say it would make me happier,” I protest.

“But it sounds like that’s what he heard,” Maria points out. She closes her water bottle and drops it back in her tote bag. “Look, I’m not necessarily Gage’s biggest fan. If you don’t want to fuck him, don’t fuck him. All I’m saying is you made a decision because you thought there was no possibility he’d ever fall for you too. But what if he already is?”

For a second I let myself imagine it. Gage and me against the world, teaming up to help each other achieve our goals. Convincing him to let his guard down so I can keep getting to know him, and then letting my own down so he can get to know me too. Earth-shattering sex whenever we felt like it. Sharing meals and sharing a bed.

It sounds fucking amazing.

It also sounds too good to be true.

I know a fairy tale when I hear it.

“He’s not falling for me,” I say firmly. “That means I need to get over him.”

Maria shrugs. “Well, in that case, I’d start filling up your social calendar for the next six months. Because spending your nights playing house with a hot guy you’re trying not to crush on is a recipe for disaster.”

I nod. “Yeah. On that note, what are you doing this Friday?”

Maria cackles. “Sorry, girl, I can’t help you. My work crush asked me out.” She wiggles her shoulder.

“Wait. Tall Brian who knows how to fix the copier?” I gasp.

“Yes! It’s just so sexy the way he just ... fixes that copier.” She bites her lip like she’s savoring the memory, and I laugh.

I’m happy for her.

But I'm also envious. Why can't I have a simple, uncomplicated office crush?

Why the hell did I have to fall for Gage Crawford?

GAGE

I t's been a week since Violet called me on my bullshit, fucked my brains out, then told me we should just be friends, all within the span of a few hours.

I still haven't quite figured out why the whole thing bothered me so much. I'm no stranger to the one-night stand. If Violet is good with us being a one-time thing, then so am I.

Absolutely. Completely. Fucking. Fine.

I step into the sports bar where Jaylen and I are meeting for our regular dinner. Tom had to cancel tonight because he's out of town with his wife for a few days visiting her parents. It's honestly kind of a relief that Tom's not here. I don't like keeping secrets from him, but I can *never* tell Tom I had a one-night stand with his little sister.

The bar is dimly lit with a bunch of heavy wood tables and large-screen TVs playing various games and local news channels. I spot Jaylen already camped out in a booth where he can see every TV. He's got a basket of untouched wings in front of him, and he's typing something into his phone.

"Are you working?" I ask. Social media jobs sound fun until you realize that it basically requires always being on the clock.

"Just jotting down some ideas for tomorrow's content. Did you see that last play?" He makes an *eek* face and shakes his head.

I steal a wing and take a bite. "These are terrible."

“No, they’re normal. Not all of us have a personal chef.”

“I don’t have a personal chef. Anymore.” My last one quit a few months ago. His complaints included that I was never home for dinner on time, never hosted dinner parties, and was unnecessarily prejudiced against kale.

I haven’t gotten around to replacing him yet.

The waitress stops by, and I order us beers, burgers, and fries to wash down the terrible/normal wings.

“So,” I say, desperate to think about something that isn’t Violet, “What’s the stupidest thing someone said on sports social media this week?”

Jaylen groans and launches into a story so batshit insane that I actually get sucked in. Soon I’m clutching my sides and laughing.

“Does Crawford Industries have a job for me?” Jaylen deadpans. “Because I don’t think I can take this shit anymore.”

My smile fades as I think of the last time I hired someone I knew.

Jaylen grabs another wing. “Speaking of work stuff. How’s it going with your assistant slash fake-fiancée?”

I groan.

Jaylen laughs. “That good, huh?”

“I mean ... It’s fine,” I say. “She’s avoiding me when we’re not at work. And she’s not making as many mistakes at work.”

Jaylen looks confused. “That’s good, right?”

I sigh, frustrated. “At least when Violet was ruining my life by being incompetent, I could yell at her about it. Now she’s ruining it by being competent and ... practical. I live and work with the woman, and yet somehow, I never see her.” I press the heels of my hands against my eyes. “When I do see her, she’s taking over my kitchen and painting in those damn red panties. I’ve never known a woman who owns so many pairs of red underwear.”

Jaylen looks intrigued. “I always liked red.”

I jab a finger at him. “No. Don’t even think about it.”

He smirks. “Dude, you’ve got it bad.”

I straighten, insulted. “I do not.”

“I have never seen you obsess like this over a woman. And you’ve dated supermodels. Plural.”

“I’m not obsessed.” I down my beer and order another one.

Jaylen sits back and taps his fingers together like a circus ringleader. “Let’s play a little game. I’ll say a thing, and you say the first word that comes to mind.”

I sigh. “Fine.” I know the fastest way to get him to drop this ridiculous theory and move on is to just play along.

“Crawford Industries,” he tosses out.

“Responsible.”

“Personal chefs,” he says.

“Overrated.”

“Tom,” he tries.

“Guilty.” *Fuck.*

Jaylen’s eyebrows shoot up. “That was just a warm-up question. Why the hell do you feel guilty about Tom?”

I scowl.

Jaylen waits.

I grit my teeth. “I hooked up with Violet. But it was casual. Just a one-time thing.”

Jaylen whistles. “You told the girl who’s faking a whole-ass relationship for you *and living with you* that you only wanted a one-night stand? That’s cold, man.”

I stare at my beer and brood. “The one-night stand part wasn’t my decision.”

“Oh. *Oh.*” Jaylen’s expression shifts from judgment to sympathy. “Basically, for the first time in years, you have a

crush on a girl. But she only wanted you for sex.”

I scowl. “That’s not what happened. She just said she didn’t want it to get complicated, so it was better if we didn’t do it again.”

“Uh-huh. And how many times have you used that line on girls you can tell are starting to want a relationship?” he prompts.

I open my mouth to protest, but I can’t. He’s right. That is absolutely a line I’ve used on women when I can tell they’re catching feelings.

I cross my arms. “Why would she think I wanted a relationship? I never said I wanted a relationship. *I don’t do relationships.*”

Jaylen shakes his head over his beer. “My dude, that line works a lot better when you didn’t *literally* buy the woman an engagement ring.”

“For the millionth time,” I say, starting to get pissed, “the engagement is a business necessity. It’s not like I have *feelings* for Violet. I’m not pining over her. I sure as hell don’t want to be her knight in shining armor. The last thing I want is a serious relationship where I have to drop everything in my life just because some woman needs me ... What are you staring at?”

He points wordlessly to the TV behind me.

I twist to see. It’s the one playing local news. There’s a breaking story about some idiot woman who got stuck up a tree in Central Park off 5th Ave and East 78th.

And then I see the face of the woman up the trees.

Big hazel eyes in a familiar, frightened face.

It’s the fear that gets me.

I leap to my feet. “I’ve got to go.”

I don’t wait for anything, including Jaylen’s response.

All I know is that I need to get to Violet.

VIOLET

I'm sitting in a tree twenty-five feet in the air with a wiggling cat, regretting my life choices. I never should have climbed this dumb tree. Except I met a tween girl who was trying not to cry because her cat was stuck in a tree and wouldn't come down. I'd asked the girl if she wanted to borrow my cell phone to call someone for help, but she just shook her head and said there was no one she could call.

She'd seemed so lonely and forlorn.

The thing is, I *know* what it feels like when you feel like you're all alone with a giant problem no one else can help you solve.

I cracked. I climbed the damn tree.

It hadn't seemed so high up when I was climbing. And I'd captured the cat easily enough.

The problem was that as I was coming down, I put my weight on a branch that just ... snapped.

I managed to scramble back up onto the branch above it. But now there's too big of a gap between branches for me to get down.

Also, I'm low-key terrified that if I put my weight on another branch it will snap too, and I'll fall and break my neck and be paralyzed for life and ...

Breathe, I tell myself.

There's a crowd of people gathering at the base of the tree, all shouting helpful, contradictory tips about what I should do. I'm pretty sure I saw a news camera at one point. Someone yelled up that they called the fire department.

Or maybe they called the parks department.

To be honest, I'm not listening to them too closely. The ground feels so far away. There's a roaring in my ears.

Oh God. What if I faint and *fall* out of the tree?

I'm going to be one of those terrible New York Post headlines. *Local Idiot Dies Trying to Rescue a Cat That Probably Would Have Been Fine Anyway.*

I grit my teeth and force myself to breathe deeply.

I am *not* going to be a headline in the fucking New York Post.

"Um, can someone get me a ladder?" I call down to the crowd below.

"Way ahead of you honey," a guy calls. He's the kind of square, sturdy guy who always seem to work in bodegas or hardware stores. He waves to someone I can't see, and then they get closer, and I see a beautiful, wonderful, *amazing* ladder.

I feel a rush of relief as they set it up.

Unfortunately, it stops about ten feet below me.

The crowd confers again.

"Maybe you can jump?" someone suggests. "If someone gets her a mattress ..."

I take a deep breath, beginning to face the fact that jumping might be my best option.

The cat meows.

"It's all right for you," I say. "You've got nine lives."

"I think she has to jump," the same person says again, stubbornly.

“No,” an authoritative, masculine voice cuts through the din. “She is not fucking jumping.”

Just knowing Gage is here helps me relax. Once I’m out of this damn tree, I’ll probably feel embarrassed that he witnessed this fiasco. But right now, I just feel relieved.

Gage won’t let anything bad happen to me. He’ll fight gravity itself if he has to.

He makes his way to the front of the crowd, faintly out of breath, like he raced to get here.

God, he’s beautiful. With his dark hair and his flushed cheeks.

For a second I’m light-headed for an entirely different reason.

“Violet, honey, are you okay?” he calls up.

I nod, my tongue thick in my mouth.

“Just stay there, okay? I’m going to fix this.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “Where would I go?”

He smiles up at me. “I would never make assumptions about your schedule.”

Despite everything I smile back, and for a second it’s just us, locking eyes under a tree as the stars come out above us.

At least I think the stars are out. It’s Manhattan. There’s too much light pollution to see actual stars.

Gage turns away and within five minutes he’s bribed an off-duty parks worker a thousand bucks to go to a storage shed and get one of the big ladders they keep on hand, and another two men five hundred each to help him carry it.

Soon enough they’re back. The park worker sets the ladder up at the base of the tree. This time it’s tall enough. Several strong people brace the bottom to make sure it stays steady once I start to climb down.

It’s the perfect solution.

The only problem is, I can't seem to let go of the tree branch. It's like my muscles have fused around it. I blow out a shaky breath.

"Okay, Violet," Gage calls. "It's sturdy. You can come down now."

I nod. But I can't quite bring myself to meet his gaze.

"Just a sec," I call. "I'm trying to figure out how to do this while holding the cat."

Gage scowls. For a second I think he's going to yell at me to stop being sentimental and leave the damn cat behind.

Instead, he wordlessly shrugs out of his designer suit jacket and hands it to someone. Then he starts climbing up the ladder to me. Once he reaches the top he gently reaches out and takes the cat from me. The cat has been fighting me tooth and nail, but she curls up against Gage's chest and starts purring.

Traitor.

"Thanks," I say. "You can go down the ladder now. I'll follow."

"Not until you show me you can let go of that branch," he says firmly.

I roll my eyes. "I'm not an idiot."

"I never said you were. But I think you might be scared. That's a good thing."

My eyes flash to his. "How?"

"It means you understand how serious this is. But that's why I need you to be brave," he says, and for a crazy moment, it feels like maybe we're talking about more than my being stuck up a tree.

"Take a deep breath," he says, "and move one finger off the branch at a time. You can hold the branch with your other hand."

I take a deep breath and do what he says.

Slowly, I relax enough to feel my limbs again. When I give Gage a nod that I'm ready, he starts moving down the ladder to give me room.

I follow him. Slowly. Cautiously. With lots of fumbling and clutching the ladder in a death grip.

Through it all Gage is a few feet below me, patiently reassuring me as I move down the ladder.

My feet touch the ground as Gage hands the cat to its wide-eyed owner.

“Thank you,” she whispers to Gage like he's some kind of superhero.

Part of me is indignant. *I'm* the one who got stuck in a tree for her damn cat. But another part of me understands.

When he's taking control and saving the day like that, Gage does kind of look like a superhero.

He turns back to me, his scowl back in full force. “Now, why don't you tell me what the *hell* you thought you were doing up there—”

I throw my arms around Gage and hug him tight.

For a second Gage freezes.

And then he hugs me back, tight. He blows out a shaky breath. “Don't *ever* do that again, Violet.”

It dawns on me that maybe Gage wasn't quite as calm as he seemed this whole time. It's a reminder that he's better than me at hiding what he's feeling—especially if something he cares about is at risk.

His big hand cradles the back of my head, tucking me tightly against his chest.

For the first time since that branch snapped, I stop feeling like I'm about to fall. Gage has me. I'm safe.

“I won't,” I promise, “I won't.”

Gage blows out a deep sigh of relief. Like maybe he finally feels okay too.

“Come on,” he says gruffly. He steps back and takes my hand. “Let’s go home.”

I nod and let him lead me home.



ONCE WE’RE BACK in Gage’s apartment, I begin to feel a little silly about how freaked out I was about being stuck in a silly tree. It doesn’t help that Gage is both unusually grumpy and unusually considerate. He keeps scowling, tossing his phone aside, and muttering scornful things about damn fool women with no sense of self-preservation.

I’m pretty sure I’m the damn fool woman in question.

At the same time, he keeps finding excuses to touch me. Brushing against me in the kitchen. Helping me into one of his sweaters when he notices me shivering. Tucking a loose strand of hair back behind my ear. And he keeps asking if I need anything. A glass of water, a blanket, a house call from his doctor.

When he asks if I need to take a day off work tomorrow, I’m officially freaked out.

Gage Crawford is encouraging me to work less.

I make my excuses and head to bed early. A good night’s sleep will fix everything. He’ll go back to being a work-obsessed ass, and I’ll go back to being vaguely annoyed by him. It’s exactly what we both need.

I change into my pajamas and slide into the softest sheets I’ve ever felt in my life. Even the bedding is luxurious at Gage’s place.

I’m about to fall asleep when my phone buzzes with a text from an unfamiliar number.

Hello Violet, this is Natasha from your engagement shoot. I just wanted to reach out and apologize if there was anything about the shoot that made you or Gage uncomfortable. I always strive to create a safe, positive environment for my

clients. Per Gage's request, I've deleted my copy of all the photos I took. But I thought you might want your own copies, in case you and Gage change your mind. Congrats again on your upcoming wedding and let me know if you're ever looking for a photographer. Full disclosure, you're one of the most electric couples I've ever shot.

She's included a link at the bottom of her text.

Part of me is a little scared to tap on that link. The last thing I need is memories of that day coming back. How badly Gage and I wanted each other. And how *good* it was when we finally gave in.

But the other part of me is curious. I've never had a formal photoshoot like that, and I can't help but wonder how the photos turned out.

I type out a quick message to Natasha reassuring her that Gage's bad mood at the shoot wasn't her fault and thanking her for sending us the photographs.

Then I click the link.

The first photos are about what I expect. Gage and I looking like a beautifully lit—but incredibly awkward—couple. But as the photos go on, the awkwardness falls away. The photos look artsy, expensive, and glamorous.

But they're also incredibly sexual.

In the shots where he's kissing me, Gage doesn't look like a man who's faking it. If anything, he looks like some old-fashioned romantic hero who's finally returned from the wars to lay claim to his woman. He's that kind of beautiful.

I can hardly believe that the woman he's kissing in that photo is me.

Because I look gorgeous too. Between the dress, the lighting, and the angle of the photo, I look like ... well, like the kind of woman a man like Gage would fall for.

Then there's the ones of us kissing with our backs to the camera. Somehow the anonymous nature of these photos makes them even hotter. I find myself staring at Gage's hands,

first on my bare back, then tangled in my hair. I can't help remembering all the things those hands did once we got back to the apartment.

I scroll to the final photo. The one where Gage is braced over me, kissing the side of my neck while my face is tilted toward the camera. My eyes are dark, my cheeks flushed, and my mouth parted. Gage looks like some kind of powerful sex god, and I'm his willing sacrifice.

I shift under the sheets and suddenly realize how turned on I am.

What would Gage think if he saw these photos?

Why the hell did I tell him we should only be a one-time thing?

There's a soft knock on my bedroom door.

I sit up, heart racing. "Yes?"

Gage opens the door, frowning into my dark room. "You were asleep."

"No. I was looking at ..." I trail off as my courage fails me. "I wasn't asleep. What's up?"

He studies me like he's deciding whether or not he wants to press for details.

In the end, he looks away. "The Colorado Coyotes are inviting potential buyers to tour the facility and meet the team's leadership. We're going this weekend."

"We?"

"We. Unless you have objections?"

You rescued me tonight like a knight in shining armor, I'm pretty sure I might be falling for you, and I'm embarrassingly close to masturbating to photos of you, I think. The last thing I need is forty-eight hours traveling with him, pretending to the whole world we're a couple.

But I can't say any of that. Instead, I smile and say, "What objections would I have? I've never been to Colorado. It will be fun."

“Good,” he says, firmly.

But he doesn't leave.

For a second we just stare at each other. Suddenly I'm very aware that I'm sitting in bed, bra-less in threadbare pajamas.

If I invited him into my bed right now, would he do it?

And if he did, would it mean anything to him? Or would I eventually be just one of the dozens of women Gage Crawford has fucked and forgotten?

“Goodnight, Violet,” Gage says, softly.

Delicious prickles of awareness slide over my whole body. It takes everything in me not to throw out practicality and beg him to kiss me. “Good night, Gage.”

For a heartbeat, neither of us move.

And then he closes the door behind him, leaving me alone in darkness, my phone glowing with the evidence of how desperately he once wanted me.

I groan and toss my phone aside, scrunching my eyes closed against the memories of Gage and me.

The sooner this trip is over, the better.

GAGE

From the moment we land in Colorado, Violet is distractingly enthusiastic. She's even wearing a team jersey. It's big enough on her it falls to her thighs. She's wearing it with leggings and ankle boots and ...

Wait a minute. I blink.

"Is that *my* jersey?" I ask as I follow Violet to my private plane's exit.

"I didn't have time to get my own. And one of us should be wearing team gear. How else will they know how serious you are about buying this team?" she asks.

The idea of letting anyone but Violet know how badly I want to buy the Coyotes makes the bottom of my stomach fall out. I'm used to making business deals to acquire companies I don't give two shits about.

The Coyotes are different.

"Have you ever heard of playing it cool?" I argue. "It's a highly successful negotiation tactic. You should try it."

"Have you ever heard of telling the truth about how you feel?" she counters. "I promise, it's more successful than you think."

For a second, I imagine telling Violet an entirely different truth. I imagine saying how cute she looks in my jersey. How much I like that she's trying to help me with this deal. How fucking good it would be to have her in my bed, wearing nothing but that jersey, dark hair spread across my pillow.

Yeah, I can't say any of that.

Not after Violet made it very clear we were a one-time thing.

"Telling the truth is overrated," I say. "Come on. Let's go buy a baseball team."



WHEN WE ARRIVE at the stadium, we're greeted by the current owner, along with the head coach, the assistant coach, and a handful of lackeys in suits. As we tour the stadium, they shower me with stats about revenue, growth potential, and how important the team is to the community. I respond with pointed questions about their debt, their streak of losses, and various bad management decisions.

In short, I do a very good job of acting like I don't care.

But the closer I get to closing this deal, the more I want this team. The fact that the Coyotes are underdogs almost makes it better. I could *build* something here. Help them be the team my dad always knew they could be.

"Do you have any more questions?" the current team owner asks. His name is Kevin, and he's got the smarmy look of a guy who wants to be a winner without ever putting in the hard work to be one.

We've wound our way out onto the baseball field. The grass is fresh and green, and the sky is impossibly blue. It's the kind of weather that makes you long to hear the crack of a bat in a crowded stadium.

"I think we've taken enough of Mr. Crawford's time," the head coach, Darryl, says. He's friendly but in a weary kind of way. It's clear he doesn't get along with Kevin, but he's decided it's better to shrug and implement Kevin's bad ideas, rather than fight for what's actually good for his team. It's sad because I remember a time when he was a decent coach. But it's clear his heart's not in it anymore. His team's about to get

bought, but he spent most of the tour making small talk with Violet about our upcoming (fake) wedding.

Not that I can blame him for that. She's like a bloody ray of sunshine, walking around in that jersey and smiling at everyone and everything. I'm pretty sure the assistant coach, Pete, already has a crush on her.

"I don't have any more questions," I say. "My people will be in touch if Crawford Industries decides to place a bid."

"I have a question," Pete says, speaking up for the first time in this entire tour. He was one of the Coyotes' best players before an injury took him out two years ago. "How do we know you won't destroy this team and sell it for parts? That's what you do with all the companies you buy."

"Pete," Darryl scolds. "Don't be rude."

"Am I the only one who cares about this team's future?" Pete asks.

Finally, I think. Someone who's as passionate about the Coyotes as I am.

I nod approvingly at him. "Tell me, Pete. What do you think the Coyotes need to do to win next season?"

"Sure. As soon as you tell me why we should trust you to put this team above your own profits," Pete says stubbornly.

"If we do this right, there's no conflict between what's best for the team, and my profits," I say. "Successful teams make their owners more money in the long run. And I always do things right. Only a fool gives up on a team like the Coyotes."

Kevin frowns like he's trying to figure out if that was a dig at him.

Pete looks unconvinced. "You're dodging the question."

"No, he's not," Violet says. She appears at my side and slides her hand into mine. "You can count on Gage. I've known him since he was in college. He's the smartest, hardest-working person I know. He expects the best of everyone who works for him, but that's only because he's got such high standards for himself."

My breath catches. I didn't know Violet saw me like that.

"Yeah, he's made a career of breaking companies down. Shouldn't it mean even more that *this* is the first thing he wants to invest in and build up?" She looks up at me, and something tightens in my chest. "He won't say it, but he *loves* this team. This is more than a business deal for Gage." She turns back to look at the other men. "And he's more than a random buyer to you. He's the man who could save your team."

She's so radiant, that for a second none of us can take our eyes off her.

Or maybe that's just me.

I clear my throat, trying to get control of the conversation again. "Any more questions?" I ask Pete.

"Just one." He raises an eyebrow. "If you've known Violet since college, why did it take you this long to put a ring on her finger? That doesn't speak well of your judgment, man."

Everyone laughs.

I instinctively wrap an arm around Violet's waist, tucking her up against me. "She's my best friend's little sister. I had to be sure before I made my move."

My answer is supposed to be a lie, but it doesn't feel like one. It feels like I'm following Violet's advice and, for once, telling people the truth about how I feel.

Something in Violet's eyes shifts, and my heart beats faster.

Pete grins. "Fair enough. I guess your judgment passes muster."

As we all head out of the stadium, Pete launches into his strategy for how the Coyotes could win next year. It mostly aligns with my strategy, although he's got a few brilliant ideas that never would have occurred to me.

By the time we all part ways, I've decided. If they sell this team to me, my first move will be to make Pete head coach.

And Kevin has all but promised to sell me the team, as long as I submit the highest bid.

“Right,” Violet says as she and I settle into the sports car I rented for the trip. “That’s over. You probably want to go back to the hotel and do some more work. I think I’m going to take a swim in the hotel pool. Or maybe go see some sights—”

“I don’t feel like working,” I interrupt. “Come on, let’s go get some dinner, somewhere special. I owe you for helping me back there.”

“You really don’t.”

But I’m already punching in the address for a place my friend recommended.

I don’t know why, but I’m in the mood to spoil Violet.

And no sensible, practical thing she says is going to change my mind.



COLORADO SPRINGS SITS RIGHT at the base of the Rockies, so the restaurant we go to has a gorgeous view of the mountains rising up in the distance. Violet is definitely underdressed in my jersey, but she’s still the most beautiful woman in this place.

She’s stiff at first, maybe tired from all of the day’s travel. But a few glasses of wine in, and she and I have found our way back to being comfortable with each other. The way we were that night when the power went out, and she tried to teach me how to draw in front of my fireplace.

Before I know it, I’m telling her a story about the time Dad and I flew out to see a Colorado Coyotes game for my twelfth birthday, and I got hit in the head with a fly ball.

“No! Oh, you poor thing!” Violet’s hands fly to her mouth like she’s trying to hold her laughter in.

I grin. “Don’t feel too bad. The team medic had me and my dad come back to his work area so he could check me for

concussion signs. I had a mild one. The player who hit the ball felt so bad that after the game, he and his girlfriend popped in to visit me.”

“You got to meet your hero,” she says.

“To be honest, I was a bit preoccupied with his girlfriend. I thought she was the prettiest woman I’d ever seen. I think I might have asked her to marry me?”

She laughs, delighted. “And here I thought I was your first proposal.”

“You’re the first woman I’ve asked post-puberty and un-concussed,” I say dryly.

Violet tilts her head, looking mischievous. “This girlfriend. Was she wearing a Coyotes jersey?”

Her mouth looks so soft in the dim restaurant lighting, that I’m having a hard time focusing on the words coming out of it. “What? Oh. Yeah. I think so.”

“That explains it,” she says, sipping her wine. The movement draws my gaze to her throat, and I lose a few brain cells thinking about the sounds she made when I kissed her there.

“Explains what?” I ask, trying to pretend I’m not fantasizing about fucking Violet right here in this restaurant.

“The way you’ve been looking at me. You’ve got a thing for women in jerseys. You imprinted young, poor thing.” She smiles, teasing.

Suddenly I’m hit with a vision of her standing in front of her easel, wearing nothing but my jersey and those little red panties of hers.

Her smile fades under the weight of my silence.

“I’m not looking at you any more than I normally do,” I say, my voice gruff and hungry.

She looks away. “I know. I’m just teasing. I know you don’t want ...”

You have no idea what I want, I think.

As the waiter sets our food in front of us, Violet clears her throat and changes the subject. “That’s a nice story about your dad. Did he always do something special for your birthday?”

“Every year until he passed,” I say, cutting my steak. “I think he felt bad that he wasn’t around more. But running Crawford Industries took up a lot of his time.”

“Still. It’s nice that he made time to take you to games.” She lifts her glass of wine in a toast to me. “Just think, when you buy the team, you can take your kids to watch the game with you.”

For a second, I’m hit with an image of taking a small child in a baseball hat to a Coyotes game. Except the kid in this scenario has dark brown hair and very familiar big hazel eyes.

“I’m not having kids,” I say firmly. I loved my dad, but I don’t want to bring a kid into the world just to spend most of my life too busy to spend time with them. And if something happened to me, I *definitely* don’t want to leave another fatherless son behind to pick up the pieces.

“Oh.” Violet looks down at her food.

Does she look ... disappointed?

I clear my throat. “It’s not that I don’t like kids—”

“No, I get it,” Violet says. “I want kids, but I absolutely agree that if someone doesn’t want kids, they shouldn’t be pressured into having them. It’s hell on everybody.”

I set down my fork. “It sounds like there’s a story.”

She smiles wistfully and shrugs. “It was pretty obvious my dad didn’t want kids. My mom did her best to make up for it, but kids can tell when their dad doesn’t actually like spending time with them.”

I feel a spurt of rage. Violet and Tom are two of the best people I know. I hate the idea of either of them growing up feeling unwanted.

My dad didn’t always have time to spend with me. But he never *ever* left me with any doubt that I was loved and wanted.

Violet makes herself smile. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to get all serious. I just meant, good for you for knowing what you want. It’s better for everyone that way.”

I nod.

Part of me wants to track down Violet’s dad and beat him up for being a crappy dad. But a bigger part of me is selfishly glad that took Violet’s dad so long to figure out what he wanted.

Because I can’t imagine a world without Violet in it.

She looks sad right now, and I hate that. I decide I can sacrifice my dignity a little if it will make her give me a real smile.

“Did you bring your painting supplies?” I ask.

“No, why?” she asks.

“I’m having this fantasy about you wearing nothing but my jersey while you paint. Or we could do a role-play thing, where you wear that jersey and nurse me back to health. Preferably without a bra on.”

She laughs and throws her napkin at me.

I duck, grinning.

At least she’s smiling again.

The conversation moves on, and I spend the night carefully steering it toward topics that will keep a smile on her face.

I don’t know when it happened, but at some point, making Violet smile turned into a biological need. I lean into it and have one of the best dinners I’ve had in a long time.

GAGE

Back at the hotel, Violet and I retreat to our respective rooms. I'm in a surprisingly good mood for someone who's looking at roughly another five months of blue balls.

Yes, I wish Violet and I were still sleeping together.

But I also just like talking with her. Spending time with her. Having her at my side as I put myself out there and try to buy the Coyotes. I'm not sure when it happened, but at some point, I started trusting her opinion as much as I do Tom and Jaylen's.

You have a crush on her, Jaylen says in my head.

I shove the thought aside and change into my pajama pants. Whatever this is, it's not a crush.

I'm answering some work emails on my phone when I notice a particularly annoying board member wants a meeting on Monday. I could open my laptop and check my calendar, but it's just as easy to go ask Violet what my Monday schedule looks like.

I don't bother to put on a sweatshirt. I normally sleep without a pajama shirt on, and it's nothing Violet hasn't seen before. When I see that Violet's left her bedroom door open, I wander in without knocking. She's sitting on her bed staring at her laptop.

"Hey, do you know if I can squeeze in a meeting with Ward Davis on Monday?"

She slams her laptop closed and looks up at me, blushing. “Um ... I’m not sure. But I can check and come let me know in five minutes.”

There’s no way Violet needs five whole minutes to check her work calendar. She’s just trying to get me out of the room.

And I’m pretty sure it has to do with whatever’s on her laptop.

“Looking at something naughty online, Violet?”

“No! Of course not.” But she’s blushing, hard.

I can’t believe it. Good girl Violet is actually watching porn.

If I was a gentleman, I’d leave her alone. A lady has needs, after all.

But I’m not a gentleman. And suddenly I’m desperate to know every single fantasy that gets Violet hot and bothered.

“You’re saying whatever is on that laptop is totally innocent,” I say.

“Absolutely.” She nods way too enthusiastically.

“Then you won’t mind if I take a look,” I say, grabbing and opening the laptop before she can stop me.

It takes me a second to realize she’s not looking at porn.

She’s looking at the photos from our engagement shoot.

“Don’t be mad,” Violet says. “Natasha deleted all her copies like you wanted. But she gave us these in case we changed our minds and wanted them.”

“Did she just give them to you?” I say as I scroll through the photos. I’m annoyed that Natasha didn’t follow my instructions, but at the same time, I can’t take my eyes off them. Violet looks flawless. She’s fragile and gorgeous and strong and sexy and I’m remembering all the reasons I had trouble controlling myself during that photoshoot.

“... No,” she admits. “She gave them to me earlier this week.”

“And you what, look at them every night before bed?”

She doesn't deny it. Just blushes harder.

“It's okay to like looking at gorgeous photos of yourself,” I say because I like teasing her, but I don't ever want her to feel like I'm laughing at her. I *want* her to know how stunning she is. “You're beautiful. Breathtakingly so. These could hang in a gallery.”

“That's not ...” Her voice comes out strangled. She looks up at the ceiling. “That's, um, not why I'm looking at them.”

For a second I'm confused.

And then it dawns on me.

Oh. *Oh*.

Violet's not looking at these photos to pump up her self-esteem. She's looking at them because they turn her on.

And knowing Violet's turned on is getting *me* turned on.

“You know,” I say, sitting down on the bed and handing her the laptop, “You don't have to limit yourself to pictures. You can have the real thing. Again.”

She swallows, her fingers running restlessly over the laptop as her eyes take in my bare chest. “The real thing is ... complicated.”

“It doesn't need to be,” I say. Even I don't know if that's a lie or the truth. I just know I'd say damn near anything if it means she'll let me touch her. “We're friends, right?”

Violet hesitates, then nods.

“Then we'll be friends who fuck, until one of us decides we want to stop, then we'll stop,” I say. “It's as simple as that.”

She wets her lips. “That's easy for you to say. You'll be the one who gets bored first.”

I highly doubt that.

If I'm honest, I can't imagine *ever* getting bored of Violet.

“I can’t do complicated,” she says, and there’s a crack of desperation in her voice.

I stop pushing.

But I’m not entirely capable of being selfless. Not with her. “Fine. I’ll drop it. If you’ll tell me one thing.”

She looks at me warily. Her eyes drop to my mouth. “What do you want to know?”

“What’s your favorite photo of us?” I ask.

Violet swallows. “Don’t make fun of me, Gage.”

“I’m not.” I reach for her but stop myself just in time. My hand clenches and unclenches on the bedspread.

I’m torturing us both, and I don’t entirely know why.

I just know that I want to know everything I can about Violet, including which of these photos gets her so hot she needs to look at it every night when she’s by herself.

“Why do you need to know?” Violet asks.

My breath has gone rough. “You don’t want me to answer that.”

Violet raises her chin. “If you don’t answer me, I don’t answer you. We’re equals, Gage.”

I clench every muscle I have to keep myself from reaching for her. “I need to know your favorite, so if you ever give me another chance, I can give you the exact moment you’re fantasizing about. Only it won’t be just a moment.”

Violet shudders, and for a second I worry I’ve gone too far.

And then turns the laptop and says. “It’s not just one photo. It’s the progression.”

“The progression?” I ask, fascinated.

“The way you start by kissing me like you’ve been, I don’t know, waiting for me.”

She has no idea how long I’d wait for her. “Yeah?”

Violet swallows and nods. “And um, then you touch my hair in another shot?”

Without meaning to, I lean toward her, the laptop entirely forgotten. “I remember. How did that feel when I did it?”

She closes her eyes. “Like you were desperate. But still in control.”

“Give me one more,” I breathe, my mouth inches from her. “One more thing you like.”

For a second I think she’s not going to give me even that. She’s going to shut me out when I’m starving for her.

Then her eyes flash open and meet mine. “The one where you’re on top of me, pinning me down, and I can’t do anything but let you make me feel good.”

Jesus, she’s killing me.

“Have you been touching yourself?” I mean to ask, but it’s more of a demand. “Wishing it was me making you feel good?”

“I ... just last night,” she admits. “I was so tired of falling asleep horny.”

I give a bark of laughter. I can’t help it. She’s this unexpected mix of frankness and innocence that just *does* things to me.

“Right,” I say, and make myself move back to the edge of the bed.

If I don’t leave now, I know I’m not going to. And I gave her my word I’d drop it.

“Let me know if you want something more ... complicated,” I say.

I’m about to stand up when she reaches out and trails her hand down my spine.

“Violet,” I warn, my voice as thick as my cock. “Don’t touch me again unless you want me to pin you to that bed and fuck you *hard*.”

Her breath goes ragged. I can feel the heat of her body drawing closer to mine.

And then she very deliberately drops a kiss at that sensitive point where my neck meets my shoulder. It's heaven and hell and everything I crave.

I last about five seconds before I turn and lunge, pinning her to the bed beneath me. I find her soft, soft lips and kiss her like it's what I was made for.

And who knows, maybe it is.

I think I could spend a lifetime kissing Violet.

When I come up for air, I say, "Are you sure? You said—"

"I'm sure," Violet interrupts. She smiles up at me, eager and nervous. "You're the one who said it doesn't need to be complicated. It's just sex and friendship, right?"

"Sex and friendship," I agree. "Nothing else."

I sit up just enough to strip the jersey off her and toss it aside.

"What happened to your fantasy?" Violet laughs, breathless.

"We'll do it tomorrow," I promise, as I yank her leggings off and toss those aside too, so she's only wearing a bra and panties. They're both barely there lacy things that make my mouth water.

I crawl back over her, caging her beneath me. Remembering everything she told me, I stretch her arms above her head, using one hand to capture her wrists, while I use the other one to stroke her clit, and then slip inside her. Keeping her pleased and helpless, just the way she likes.

When she's on the verge of coming, I pull back.

"Gage," she begs.

"Hold on, sweetheart," I say. "Hold on." I get rid of my pajamas and her panties, and a second later I'm buried in her the way we both need. I tangle my hands in her hair and tug as

I thrust into her. She arches and makes sounds that aren't entirely human.

"You like that?" I mutter. "You like getting me hard? Making me need you?"

She moans something that sounds like *yes* and *please* and *more*, and I'm happy to give her all those things. I fuck her until I'm out of control and delirious with how good she makes me feel. How good I can make her feel.

"Oh God, Gage," she moans, and I nearly come right there.

I frame her face and kiss her. I love that it's Violet under me. Violet who's burning up with a fever only I can quench.

"I'm here," I say against her lips. "I've got you. I'm going to give you everything you need."

I shift just enough that I can slip a hand between us and play with her clit as I rock into her. She jerks and cries out against my mouth.

I'm pretty sure I'll carry that sound with me until the day I die.

And then she's clenching around me and arching against me and coming apart in my arms.

I think it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life.

For a second, I have a vague idea about trying to figure out a way to make our fake engagement last longer. Because there's no way I'm going to be done with this in five months.

And then my own orgasm rushes through me, hard and unstoppable, and I can't think of anything at all.

I fall asleep in Violet's bed, her steady breathing the best lullaby I've ever heard.

VIOLET

I'm sitting at my desk, shooting the breeze with Peggy while Gage is upstairs meeting with Lorelei.

It's been almost a month since Gage seduced me in a Colorado hotel room. Or maybe I seduced him. I can't quite tell anymore.

All I know is that I can't remember the last time I felt this *happy*.

I wake up in Gage's arms. I laugh with him over breakfast. I've gotten good enough at my job that I actually have some free time during my workday, and I spend it sketching out ideas for the community art studio Gage is going to help me open. After work, Gage and I swap stories over whatever five-star gourmet food he wants me to try. It's the best part of my day.

Okay, maybe it's the *second-best* part of my day. Because after dinner, we inevitably fall into bed with each other. Normally there's incredible, mind-blowing sex. But even when one of us is too tired for sex, I still fall asleep with Gage's arms wrapped around me, his strong, steady heartbeat soothing in a way I can't fully explain.

I know there's no way this can last.

But for once, I'm not worrying about the future.

I'm just living in the moment.

And with Gage, there are a lot of moments worth living in.

“I’m just saying, whatever you’re doing to him, keep doing it,” Peggy teases, hip propped against the edge of my desk. “I’ve never seen Gage Crawford in such a good mood. And it’s making everybody’s workday easier. Did you know, I caught him whistling the other day?”

I roll my eyes. “You’re exaggerating. Gage doesn’t whistle.”

Right on cue, the sound of someone whistling cheerfully drifts down the hall.

Peggy holds up a finger to indicate she’s won the argument.

I shake my head. “There is no way that’s ...”

But the words die on my tongue as Gage rounds the corner, whistling cheerfully to himself. He nods to me and Peggy and then disappears into his office.

I blink.

Okay, maybe Peggy has a point. Gage didn’t even bark at us to quit chatting and get back to work.

Is it possible I make Gage as happy as he makes me?

No.

Well.

Maybe?

“I’m just saying,” Peggy says, “I’ve worked here for seven years. And I’ve *never* seen him like this before.”

My chest feels all warm and glowy.

“Don’t dump him at the altar, or we’re all screwed,” she teases.

My stomach twists with guilt for lying to someone who’s quickly becoming a good friend.

My desk phone rings and I reach for it, grateful for the distraction. “I should get back to work. Want to do lunch tomorrow?”

“Absolutely,” Peggy says. She straightens and leaves to go do her own work.

I answer the phone, “Mr. Crawford’s office, how can I help you?”

Then I recognize the Colorado area code, and my stomach swoops.

Gage put in his formal bid to buy the team two weeks ago. He’s confident they’ll sell to him, but I can tell that underneath all that well-earned confidence, he’s nervous too.

When you want something this bad, you’re never completely confident, no matter who you are.

“This is Kevin Henry, owner of the Colorado Coyotes,” Kevin says. “I’d like to talk to Gage.”

“Please hold while I see if he’s available,” I say, doing a pretty good imitation of a perfect assistant who would never drop an important call. I put Kevin on hold and transfer the call to Gage’s office. Then I grab my notebook and scurry into Gage’s office.

He’s looking at his ringing office phone, exasperated. “Violet, I told you to check if I want to take a call before you transfer it. I was in the middle of—”

“You’re going to want to take this call.” I settle into the chair across from his desk to take notes. “It’s Kevin. He’s calling about the Coyotes.”

Gage straightens, his eyes locking with mine.

It’s like I can see the restrained energy racing through him.

He blows out a breath. “This is it.”

“This is it,” I agree.

Gage squares his shoulders and answers the phone, putting it on speakerphone. “Kevin. Hey. I hear you want to talk about the Coyotes.”

“Well, that was conjecture on the part of your secretary,” Kevin chortles. “I didn’t actually tell her that. Women, huh? Always thinking they know more than they do.”

I fantasize about stabbing him with my pen.

Gage rolls his eyes at Kevin's attempt to play it cool. "Kevin, it looks like I have another call coming in. If you could get to the point, or you can let my assistant know what you'd like to talk about, she can schedule a formal meeting for us."

Kevin clears his throat. "Oh. Well. Right. In this particular case, she was right. This is about the Coyotes. We've looked through the bids of everyone interested in buying the team."

"Oh?" Gage sounds downright bored, but under the desk, his knee is going up and down like a jackhammer.

My own heart is pounding just as fast. I don't give two shits about baseball, but Gage's whole heart is in this deal.

Apparently, that means mine is too.

"Your bid was quite impressive. The most impressive, in fact."

Gage freezes. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, with a few adjustments to the deal points, the team is yours."

I silently pump my fists up and down in the air, smiling so hard it feels like my face will crack.

Gage grins at me, but he holds up a hand to signal he's not done focusing yet. "Kevin, those deal points were worked out with both your lawyers and mine. And you've already admitted that no one is going to give you a better deal than me. Take it or leave it."

My eyebrows shoot up. I can't believe what I'm hearing. I write *WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING* in my notebook and hold it up for him to read.

I don't want him to lose the team he desperately wants because he's too proud to cave on a few deal points.

But Gage confidently takes my notebook and scrawls a note of his own, then tosses the notebook back to me.

I'm winning.

On the other end of the speakerphone, Kevin blows out a huge sigh. “I don’t know, Gage, we had some pretty good bargains ...”

“Your fourth-place bid wants a two-year payment plan. That’s because he’s on the verge of bankruptcy and in denial,” Gage interrupts. “Your third-place bid is going to pull out because he was buying the team to get back at his estranged wife, and they just reconciled. That leaves your second-place bid, Scott Chaney. I’m not saying he’s about to be arrested for securities fraud, but ...” he trails off pointedly.

“You’re lying,” Kevin blusters. “You can’t possibly know all of that.”

“Maybe,” Gage says. “But do you want to take that risk? You could sell to me and get out with your pride and a nice chunk of change. Or, when you realize I’m right, you can settle for that paltry fifth-place bid. Your brother-in-law made that bid, right?” He *tsks* in mock sympathy. “I heard you don’t get on that well.”

“You smug bastard,” Kevin says.

The insult doesn’t faze Gage. “Do we have a deal, Kevin?”

“Fine,” Kevin mumbles.

“What was that?” Gage asks.

“I said yes, we have a deal,” Kevin all but shouts, sounding like a man who’s been thoroughly and embarrassingly beaten.

You’d never know from his attitude that he’s getting way more than the team is actually worth. I saw the proposal myself. I guess some men are just greedy.

“Good. I’ll tell my lawyers to make the sale official. And Kevin?”

“... Yes?” he says sullenly.

“Those deal points you didn’t get? That’s because of that crack you made about my assistant.”

My stomach flips.

Gage meets my eyes as he says, “She knows a hell of a lot more than you. As do most of the women you work with. Start showing some damn respect, before it costs you even more money.” And then he hangs up the phone.

My mouth feels dry. “That was reckless, Gage. What if he’d walked away?”

Gage shrugs as he stands and walks around his desk. “I knew I had him. And he was being an asshole.”

“Oh, so only you can call me an idiot?” I ask as he takes my hand and pulls me to my feet.

Something bleak flickers in Gage’s face. “I’m not ... I’m never *that* bad. Right?”

I should make him sweat more because he really could stand to be more polite to people, but Gage looks so worried by the comparison I gave. “No. You’re not nearly that bad.” I squeeze his hand, doing my best to look stern. “But don’t risk something that matters to you like that. Not for me.”

He studies me, his own face unreadable. “What if you matter to me?”

My heart skips a beat.

What is he saying?

Is he saying I matter as his friend, or as something ... more?

But before I can gather the courage to ask him, Gage shakes his head. “Forget it. We shouldn’t be fighting. We should be celebrating. You just won me a baseball team.” He dips his head and kisses me, quick and fierce. I clutch the lapels of his jacket. I feel a little like a princess who just watched her knight win a jousting match for her, and I like it more than I should.

Gage breaks away and smiles. “Go tell my lawyers the news. And Violet? Reschedule any plans you have for tonight. We’re celebrating.”

There’s enough heat in his eyes to make my pulse speed up. For once, I can’t think of something quippy and sarcastic

to say.

I just nod and leave.

It's not until after I give the lawyers all the information they need to start processing the deal, that I look at Gage's calendar. That's when I realize tonight is the night Gage normally goes out with Jaylen and Tom.

But he's ditching them to celebrate his victory with me.

What the hell does *that* mean? And why is my heart racing?



GAGE IS WAITING at my desk at 5:55 p.m. with a mischievous look on his face. "Come on," he says. "Time to go."

I double-check the time. "It's five minutes early," I say, aghast.

But Gage just grins down at me. I'm powerless in the face of that grin.

And it isn't as if I actually care that much about being an assistant.

"Fine," I allow primly, grabbing my purse and coat. "Just don't tell my boss. He can be a cranky bastard."

Gage laughs and sweeps me out of the office and down to his town car. I expect him to take us to a restaurant, but instead, we pull up in front of an art supply store in the Village. I do a double take.

"What are we doing *here*?" I ask.

"We're getting whatever you need to paint a portrait," he says.

We get out of the car and head into the store. I don't entirely understand what he's up to, but I'm never going to turn down an arts-supply shopping spree. I make a beeline for the canvases. "Who am I painting a portrait of?"

“Me,” he says, dropping a kiss at the base of my neck.

I shiver.

“Call me old fashioned,” he says, his voice low and gruff in my ear. “But if you’re going to do nude portraits, I’d rather you paint me.”

It takes me a second to figure out what he’s talking about. And then I remember that night Jaylen and Tom stopped by the apartment, and I told Gage I only painted nude portraits.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him I was just messing with him, but then I think about painting Gage, naked and powerful.

It’s such a striking image my fingers itch to pick up a brush.

Gage looks down at my face. “Did I say something wrong? I’m just joking. You can paint whoever you want. Although it’d be great if you stuck to women and really ugly men ...”

I laugh. “You didn’t say anything wrong. I’m just excited to start painting.”

We buy everything else I’ll need for the portrait and head home.



“So,” Gage says, standing buck naked in the living room. “Where do you want me?”

I struggle to set up my easel, thoroughly distracted by the curve of his ass. Then he turns around to face me, and that’s distracting too.

“You know,” I say, “Normally models wear a robe until it’s time to start.”

“Why Miss Miller,” Gage teases, a cocky look in his eye. “Am I distracting you?”

He knows he is, damn him.

To get back at him, I shimmy out of my pants and toss them aside. I follow that up by wriggling out of my bra until it slides out from under my shirt and falls to the ground. Then, because I really do need to get comfortable to paint, I scoop my hair up into a bun, roll up the sleeves, and grab a bit of charcoal, ready to sketch the rough outline of him.

“Why don’t you sit in that chair?” I suggest, nodding toward a big winged-back chair. The setting sun will hit the side of his face, highlighting him in interesting ways.

Gage settles into the chair. Every line of him is proud, powerful, and gloriously alive. He looks like a fantasy masculine beauty come to life.

I give myself a shake and start sketching him. I thought I knew Gage’s body, but there’s something about giving myself permission to stare at every inch of it that leaves me even more entranced. I notice the way the setting sun glints in the hair on his forearm. The faint scar above his knee from when he jumped out of a window in college. The dark hair at the base of his ...

I swallow, realizing one fairly significant difference between Gage and the only other times I’ve worked with a nude model.

Gage is noticeably hard. It’s hot as hell, but maybe not something he wants me immortalizing in painting.

“You’re beautiful when you paint,” Gage says, interrupting my focus. “I mean, you’re always beautiful. But I love watching you when you’re focused like this.”

Something warm and glowy flutters in my stomach. “I thought it annoyed you when I painted you.”

“It drove me crazy seeing you like this when I couldn’t have you.” He gives his cock a casual stroke, and my mouth goes dry. “Now I know I’m going to make you come as soon as you set down that brush.”

“Painting takes three or four hours. You sure you can last that long?” I tease.

“Maybe not when you’re looking at me like that,” he admits, and I feel a surge of feminine triumph.

I finish sketching him and reach for my paints. I’m painting in loose, fast strokes because I want to capture Gage’s rough, electric energy.

And, fine, partly because I don’t want to wait three hours either.

With every stroke of the brush, I feel a little more alive, a little more turned on.

“Where are you going to hang this?” I ask.

“I don’t know.” His voice is low and gruff. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I’m coming up on the part where I paint your ... you know. If this is going up somewhere public, we should probably grab a tasteful blanket and you might want to ... you know.” I trail off, feeling unaccountably flustered.

We’ve been fucking for about a month, but there’s something about adding an easel and paints to the mix that turns me back into a blushing schoolgirl.

He smirks like he enjoys making me nervous. “I don’t know, Violet. You’re the artist. You choose.”

We lock eyes, and for a second it takes everything I am not to toss my brushes aside and go kiss him with everything I have.

His eyes are a dark, hungry mirror of mine.

And that’s exactly how I want to capture him.

“No blanket,” I decide.

“Good girl,” he says, and I’m annoyed by how much that turns me on.

“Have you ever painted a man you wanted to fuck?” he asks, his voice low and seductive.

“Once, in college. I had a crush on one of my drawing partners. But he was wearing clothes.” I glance back between

Gage and the painting, deciding to add more color. More shading. More texture. I want him to be so carnally alive that he leaps off the page. “I don’t normally paint nude portraits.”

I wash my brush and dip it into a new color.

“*What?*” Gage says.

And that’s when I realize what I just admitted to.

“Oh. Um. I was just messing with you when I said I only painted nudes.” I can feel my cheeks heat. “But then you suggested this, and it sounded fun ...”

Gage launches himself at me. I barely have time to set my paints aside before a very indignant, very naked man throws me over his shoulder and marches us to the bedroom.

“But your painting!” I squeal.

“You can finish it when you’re done paying for lying to me,” he says and gives my ass a playful smack.

I gasp, surprised, and turned on in equal measure.

Then he opens the door and tosses me on the bed. A second later his beautiful, arrogant mouth is feasting on mine, and I lose myself in the pleasure.

“I should teach you to behave. Make that pretty, lying mouth of yours suck my cock until you learn your lesson,” he growls.

I laugh, breathless and impossibly turned on. I love it when he gets all growly like this.

I love him.

The realization feels like getting caught in a sudden rainstorm on a bright summer day. Surprising, and breathtaking, and deeply, deeply inconvenient.

“Violet?” his hand cups the side of my face. “What’s wrong?”

The words hover on my lips. *I love you. I love you, Gage.*

But if I say them, he’ll gently tell me he doesn’t feel the same. And then this wonderful, impossible thing between us

will be over.

I'm not ready for this to be over, I realize.

I flash a smile. "Nothing's wrong, you weirdo." I nip at his earlobe, and he groans. "I was just thinking, sucking your cock isn't much of a punishment." I reach down and stroke him, just the way he likes. "It's a treat."

And then I kiss my way down his body and proceed to distract us both.

If I don't tell him I love him, then maybe this thing between us never has to end.

VIOLET

The next day I'm at work playing scheduling Tetris with Gage's calendar when I get a text from Peggy.

This is probably TMI, but do you have a tampon? My period just started, and I don't have time to run out and grab something.

I check my purse and type back, *Sure. Meet me in the bathroom and we'll do a hand-off.*

She sends back the prayer hands emoji and *THANK YOU* in all caps.

It's only when I'm on my way back from rescuing Peggy that it dawns on me, that I haven't had my period in a while.

I start doing mental math and realize I should have had my period ... two and a half weeks ago.

My heart speeds up. I'm *never* late.

I go back to my desk and try to focus on work, but I can't get the thought out of my head.

What if I'm ...?

What if Gage and I are having ...?

When Gage heads out for a lunch meeting, I ask one of the other assistants to cover his desk. And then I race down to the corner store to buy a pregnancy test.

Twenty-one minutes later I'm standing in the Crawford Industries bathroom holding my answer, in the form of a

positive pregnancy test.

I'm going to be a *mom*. Gage and I are having a *child*. This isn't how I planned it, but now that it's happening, it feels like the best gift in the world. For a few seconds, my heart soars with joy as I imagine a future of family dinners, baseball games, and finger painting in the kitchen with a little boy who has Gage's smile.

I already know I love Gage. If he loves me back, if we can turn this fake engagement into something real ...

And then I remember. Gage doesn't want kids.

It's like a bucket of ice water dumped on my dreams. If Gage doesn't want this kid, and I do, then there's no future for us. I don't want any kid of mine growing up feeling like one of their parents doesn't want them. It will wreck to walk away from Gage, but that's non-negotiable. I'm not putting my child through all the small and constant heartbreaks Tom and I experienced growing up.

On the other hand, sometimes people change their minds about wanting kids as they get older ...

If there's a chance Gage will change his mind, or if it's possible I misunderstood him the last time we talked, then I want to take my time telling him. Wait for the perfect moment.

But if Gage definitely doesn't want kids, then I need to tell him as soon as possible. Rip off the band-aid, before I talk myself into a situation that will be bad for everyone in the long run.

I stare down at the pregnancy test, thinking.

And then I remember. I have someone who knows Gage even better than I do.

But I need privacy for this conversation. The last thing I need is one of Gage's employees overhearing me in the bathroom.

I head back to my desk and then, since Gage is still at his lunch meeting, I slip into his office and close the door behind me.

I figure, under the circumstances, Gage will forgive me for using his space without permission.

I pull at my cell phone and call Tom, nervously pacing the room until he answers.

“Hey, Violet. What’s up?”

That’s when I realize I absolutely am not ready to tell Tom I’m pregnant. It’s too fresh. And I want to figure out what Gage and I are going to do before I start telling other people.

I think fast and lie my ass off. “Nothing much,” I say. “I just need some advice. About men. Specifically, my friend’s boyfriend.”

“... okay,” he says, sounding confused but game.

“A friend of a friend got pregnant, and she’s nervous about telling her boyfriend because he said he didn’t want kids the last time they talked about this. But guys can change their minds, right?” I chew my thumbnail nervously while I wait for his answer, something I haven’t done since I was a kid.

“Is your friend okay?” Tom asks, immediately focusing on the wrong part of my hypothetical scenario. “That’s a lot to be going through. Maybe you should be focusing less on predicting what her boyfriend’s going to say, and more on figuring out what kind of support she needs from you and her other friends if the guy turns out to be a dick.”

“*Tom*, focus. The boyfriend’s not a dick, he’s just, um ... like Gage.”

“Gage?” he repeats incredulously.

“You know, great guy, great friend, but not necessarily someone who’s been interested in relationships, historically speaking. The kind of guy who would be a really, really, great dad, except he said he doesn’t want kids, so ...” I pick up a small statue off Gage’s bookshelf absently. Then I spot the signature scratched into the statue’s base and realize it’s a priceless original from a very famous artist, and hastily set it down.

“Violet,” Tom says, his voice growing increasingly more concerned. “Who exactly is this friend of yours? And how much like Gage *is* this boyfriend?”

“No one you know,” I say quickly. “Actually, this was silly. You obviously can’t give advice about someone you don’t know.” I force a laugh. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I’ll let you go.”

I start to hang up.

“Hey Violet, where’s Gage right now?” he asks, a little too casual. “I, uh, need to return a book I borrowed.”

“Right now?” I ask, doubtfully. “That sounds like something that can wait until the next time you see him.”

“It’s a very important book,” Tom says. He’s being stubborn enough that I know there’s something else going on here. But there’s too much drama in my own life to get involved in whatever guy drama Tom and Gage are having right now.

“He’s got a business lunch at Fig and Olive,” I say. “But if you swing by the office and drop the book off with me, I can give it to him when he gets back.”

“Thanks,” he says. “And Violet? If you or your ... friend ... ever need anything, you know I’m in your corner, right? I’m here to help you with ... anything that might be going on.”

I feel a rush of affection for Tom. He really is a good man. He’s going to make a great uncle.

I swallow past a bittersweet lump in my throat. “Thanks, Tom. I’ll, um, let her know that.”

I hang up before he can say something sweet that will make me spill out the whole messy story.

I look at the empty office surrounding me. Everything in it reminds me of Gage, from the expensive art and designer furniture to the piles of paper on his desk. It’s probably the place where he’s spent the vast majority of his adult life.

The question is, does he want something more? Or is he happy living 90% of his life in a gilded, corporate tower?

I'm a little scared of the answer. But talking to Tom reminded me that the only way I'm going to find out is to tell Gage the whole truth. And I need to do it sooner rather than later.

I leave Gage's office and head back to my own office to think.

GAGE

I'm an hour and a half into the business lunch that will not end. I would have wrapped it up sooner, but my mom is here and she and one of the other CEOs have known each other since high school. Every time someone else tries to end the lunch, my mom or her friend order another round of drinks for the table, trapping everyone else for another thirty minutes.

At least Violet will think the whole thing is hilarious when I tell her about it.

I smile down at my phone as I shoot Violet a text letting her know she'll need to rearrange this afternoon.

"What are you smiling about, Gage?" my mom's friend Janet asks. She's a power-suit-wearing woman in her late sixties who looks like a kindly grandmother but will cut you like a knife if you cross her in business.

"Probably texting his fiancée," my mom chimes in, beaming at me with obvious pride.

It's on the tip of my tongue to say something cutting in response, but she looks so damn happy.

And hell, I am too. My mom's not wrong. These days if I'm sneaking a glance at a phone in a meeting, it's not to check the stock market or the progress on an upcoming sale. It's because I'm texting with Violet. It's like my brain is addicted, and nothing else can give me the high of finding out what she's thinking, what she's doing, how her day is going.

"Guilty as charged," I admit, and the whole table laughs.

Then I spot a familiar figure charging through the restaurant toward our table.

It's Tom. But instead of his normal easy-going smile, he looks like he wants to punch somebody. When he comes to a stop in front of our table, conversation grinds to a halt.

"Gage," Tom grits out. "I need to talk to you. *Now.*"

I grit my jaw. I'm pretty sure this means he's found out Violet and my relationship is a little more than fake. But instead of feeling guilty, I realize I'm getting pissed. I make Violet happy. I take care of her, as much as she'll let me. It might not be a conventional arrangement, but Tom knows me. He knows I wouldn't hurt Violet. Where does he get off acting like I'm some villain who's out to ruin his sister's life?

"Tom. I'm going to need you to wait until I'm done with this meeting." I send him my most withering gaze.

But Tom doesn't wither. If anything, he looks even more determined. "No, I'm not going to wait until it's *convenient* for you, you asshole. You knocked my sister up and now she's freaking out because she thinks you don't want the kid!"

My mom drops her fork, and it clatters loudly in the silence.

The whole room is staring at me, but I barely notice.

All I can think is, *Violet's pregnant? With my kid?*

It's so improbably I don't quite dare believe it, but Tom's right. We need to talk. Now.

I stand, grab his elbow, and steer him out of the restaurant and onto the sidewalk. "What the hell was that about? Violet's not ... I didn't get her ..."

Understanding dawns on Tom's face. "She hasn't told you yet."

"Hasn't told me *what?*" I demand, my heart racing.

"She called me today freaking out. She had this whole fake story about a friend of a friend, but it was pretty obvious who

she was talking about. She's pregnant with your kid, and she's worried about how you're going to react," Tom says.

I feel lightheaded.

Violet's pregnant. With my kid.

I'm going to be a dad. Violet's going to be a mom. And she wants me to be part of her kid's life—which means staying part of her life. Forever.

Excitement, fear, and relief rush through me in equal measure.

My throat feels thick. I didn't realize how badly I wanted a future like this when it's suddenly so close I can reach out and grab it.

Tom runs a hand through his hair. "I honestly want to punch you out right now. But apparently, she wants this kid, and she wants you to want it too. The question is, what are you going to do?"

Tom's question brings me back to earth. I meet his eyes squarely, as everything in me realizes that there's only one answer, and it's the best answer in the world.

"I'm going to marry her," I say. "I'm going to marry Violet and take care of our kid and spend the rest of my life making her happy."

Tom blinks.

And then he gives me a lopsided smile. "Well okay, then." He slaps me on the back. "Welcome to the family. If she'll have you."

"She'll have me," I say determinedly.

I've spent the last two months learning exactly how to make Violet happy.

Now it's time to prove to her that I'm all in.

I'm not worried. I've won every important thing I've ever gone after.

I see no reason to stop now.



I GO BACK into the restaurant just long enough to say goodbye to my colleagues and tell my mom I'll be out of the office for the rest of the day. I have some personal business to attend to. She doesn't ask questions, but I'm pretty sure she can tell from my good mood that there's a grandchild in her future.

Then I text Violet and tell her to cancel all my meetings for the day, take the afternoon off, and meet me at the Empire State Building at 7:00 p.m. It's going to be nearly impossible to get the top deck reserved at such short notice, but when Violet and I were watching TV the other night she mentioned that she thinks it's one of the most romantic spots in New York.

And if Violet wants romance, I'm going to get it for her. No matter how much money and how many favors it costs me.

I spend the rest of the afternoon bribing and bullying in equal measure to make logistical miracles happen. But by 7:30 the top deck of the Empire State Building is closed to the public and full of so many flowers you can hardly walk. It will open back up to the public in twenty minutes. But twenty minutes is all I need.

As long as she shows up.

The wind whips and whistles around me, scattering flower petals as the sun sets. And for the first time, I'm nervous.

What if I got this wrong? What if Violet doesn't want to marry me? What if I don't have it in me to be the kind of dad I want to be?

My gut twists with a fear I can barely name. *What if I lose her?*

The doors open, and Violet steps out onto the deck with me. Her hair whips in the wind and her navy-blue coat is buttoned up tight against the chill. She's so beautiful, it takes my breath away.

As I look at her, my fear fades away, replaced by determination.

This is too important to screw up.

So I won't.

Violet looks around at all the flowers and the city lights glimmering at our feet, her lips parting in wonder. "Gage. What is all this?"

I cross to her and slowly, deliberately, go down on one knee. "This is a proposal. Marry me, Violet Miller. For real."

VIOLET

I look down into Gage's blue eyes, my heart racing with hope and fear and a million other things I can't name.

Gage takes my hand and squeezes it. "Normally I'd give you a ring at this point, but you're already wearing mine. I'm hoping that's a good omen for me." His smile is cocky and mischievous, and my heart flips.

I want so badly to say yes to everything he's offering.

But I can't. Not until he understands how much more complicated my life is about to get.

I pull him to his feet. "Gage, I need to tell you something. I know I said I was on birth control, but something went wrong, or, I don't know, something went really, really right. Depending on your perspective. Sorry, I'm babbling."

He cups my cheek with one of his hands and smiles down at me. "It's okay, Violet. I know."

My heart stumbles. "You know?"

"Tom figured it out and announced it at my business meeting."

"He *what*?" I jolt backward. "I am going to *kill* him. He had no right to do that."

Gage catches my hands and tugs me back to him. "Don't be mad at Tom. He was just worried for you. Besides, if he hadn't told me, I wouldn't have been able to put all this together."

I look at the private rooftop full of flowers as understanding dawns on me. “You’re asking me to marry you because you found out I’m pregnant.”

Gage’s hands tighten on mine. “I *want* this kid, Violet. I want to be there for both of you. I can give you everything you want. I promise I can make you happy.”

I don’t doubt what he’s saying, and my chest tightens with relief so profound it’s almost like joy.

Gage wants to be a dad. My kid is going to grow up with two parents who want them.

“Oh, Gage,” I breathe.

His hand tangles in my hair and he kisses me. It’s soft and wonderful and desperate, all at once. As I kiss him back, I realize I could spend the rest of my life kissing Gage.

All I need to do is say yes.

But still, some instinct holds me back.

I break the kiss. “Are you sure?”

His smile is rakishly confident. “Absolutely. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life, Violet.” He loops his arms around the small of my back and guides me closer so that the heat of his body protects me from the wind.

“I can’t stop imagining it,” he admits.

“Really?” I smile shyly. “What are you picturing?”

“Well, first we get married. I’m thinking a small, intimate ceremony next week.”

My heart pounds. “That fast?”

“Why wait?” he laughs.

I smile past a growing sense that something about this is wrong. “What else? What happens after we get married?”

“A long, private, luxurious honeymoon. I don’t really care where. I’m not planning on letting you leave the bed.” He drops a kiss on my neck, and I shudder. Something is missing

from the picture he's painting, but it's hard to tell what it is when he's touching me like this.

"And after the honeymoon?" I ask.

"We build a life together," he says simply. "You'll quit working and focus on being a mom. Our kid is going to be so lucky to have you."

The sweet words tug at my heart, but ...

I lean back so I can see Gage's face clearly. "Do you mean I stop working for you, or do you mean I stop working entirely?"

He laughs. "Violet, why would you want to work? I have more than enough money for us both."

"But what about the community art center I wanted to start?" I ask. "That's important to me. People deserve an affordable place where they can have a community and build art."

He brushes my concerns aside with a wave of his hand. "If it's important to you, we can fund as many community art centers as you want. You don't need to slave away teaching art classes to have an impact anymore."

I step out of his arms and almost trip over a bucket of roses. Gage reaches out to catch me, but I hold up a hand to stop him. I wouldn't need him to catch me if he hadn't filled the whole damn roof with things to trip over.

"Gage, I *want* to work. I like teaching. You know that."

"You can teach our kid," he says stubbornly.

I cross my arms. "Why do you have such a problem with me working?"

He runs a hand through his hair. "I guess ... I just think it's important for a kid to have at least one stay-at-home parent. My mom never worked until she had to. That was the best part of my childhood, when my dad was alive and my mom was always home."

He sounds so wistful it makes my heart ache. Part of me wants to rush into his arms and agree to everything he's offering. Sure, his version of Happy Ever doesn't match up with mine. But what he's offering is so much better than most women get.

Unfortunately, there's a stubborn voice inside of me that I can't quite shake. "If you think it's so important for a kid to have a stay-at-home parent, why don't you quit *your* job? You've got more than enough money to retire if you want to."

Gage gives a sharp, surprised bark of laughter. "You can't be serious."

But he can see from my expression that I am.

He takes a step toward me. "Violet, that doesn't make any economic sense. Art teachers barely make any money. That's how you ended up working as my assistant." His voice lightens. "And it's not like you're particularly good at that."

I know he's teasing me, but it still stings.

Gage doesn't think what I do is as important as what he does.

He doesn't understand why I might like working as much as he does, if only I could do the kind of work I *want* to do.

He doesn't know me as well as he thinks he does, and he's too arrogant to *listen* to what I'm trying to say.

My heart is pounding in my throat. "Gage. Why do you want to marry me?"

He scowls. "I just told you. So we can raise our kid together."

"Is that all?" I ask desperately.

"Isn't that enough?" he counters.

We stare at each other over a rooftop of flowers, as the sun sets over the greatest view of the greatest city in the world. It should be the most romantic moment of my life. But everything about what's happening feels so fucking hollow.

“No,” I say slowly. “No, it’s not enough.” It breaks my heart to say it, but as soon as I say the words, I know I’m right.

He reaches for me. “Violet—”

“You asked me to marry you, but you never said you loved me, Gage,” I say. “I thought the worst thing would be if you wanted a future with me despite me being pregnant with a kid you didn’t want. But it turns out you only wanting to get married *because* I’m pregnant isn’t actually that much better.”

He looks like I just socked him in the stomach. “Violet, I ... you know I care about you.”

“Do I? Or are you just willing to say anything you need to, to get what you want? You lied about an engagement to get what you wanted before.” My voice cracks. “How do I know I’m not just another thing for you to win?”

He grits his jaw and looks away.

I know I should stop. I know I’m hurting him. But I need him to understand what he’s doing to me. “I love you, Gage. You’re smart, determined, loyal, and incredibly kind when you let down your guard. But you don’t know how to be in a relationship. You only know what one is supposed to look like from the outside.” I gesture to the rooftop around us. “This looks like the perfect romantic gesture. But it’s all wrong on the inside. And I think we both know it.”

Abruptly, he turns away and strides to the edge of the roof. He’s highlighted by the setting sun, the city at his feet. He looks like some kind of immovable, implacable god.

But I need him to be human for me. And he’s not interested in showing me his softer side.

Maybe Peggy and the other assistants were right. Maybe Gage *can’t* fall in love.

Or maybe he just can’t fall in love with me.

Still, he looks so lonely right now.

I take a step toward him. “Gage—”

“It sounds like you’ve made your decision. I suggest you leave. My lawyers will be in touch to work out a joint custody agreement.”

The words are cold and final in a way I should be grateful for. We’ve both made our decisions, and there’s no going back.

I do the hardest thing I’ve ever done.

I turn and walk away from the one man I don’t think I’ll ever get over.



AN HOUR later I emerge from the subway in Brooklyn and walk up to mine and Maria’s old apartment. I’ve only been gone two months, but it feels like a lifetime ago.

I slide the key into the lock and step inside.

Maria’s flopped in front of the TV shoveling Thai food into her mouth. She looks up, startled. “What are you doing here? I thought you had plans with Gage tonight.”

I open my mouth to answer.

Instead, I just start crying.

Maria leaps off the couch and wraps me in a hug. “Oh, *honey*. I don’t know what happened, but it’s going to be okay. Eventually. Even if right now it doesn’t feel like it. You’re resilient as fuck, and you’re going to be okay.”

I bury my face in her shoulder and try to believe her.

Intellectually, I know she’s right. I’ll be okay one day. So will Gage, and so will our kid.

But I don’t think I’ll ever be the same.

GAGE

I don't entirely remember how I make it back to my apartment. Everything feels like a miserable blur as I step out of the elevator and head down the hallway to my door.

The only reason I got so close to Violet was because of this damn fake engagement. And now the engagement is exactly why she believes I'm not ready to be her husband.

There's some fucking irony for you.

I open my door and step inside, knowing without knowing that Violet won't be there. She's probably run back to Brooklyn by now. All I want to do is find some whiskey and drink myself into oblivion.

Then I hear the sound of footsteps upstairs, and my heart lifts.

If she came back, maybe she's willing to talk.

Maybe I can still change her mind.

I race upstairs and follow the sounds to the kitchen.

But when I get there, it's not Violet.

Instead, Tom and Jaylen stand in my kitchen, arguing about whether it's better to put the champagne in the fridge or an ice bucket. There's a pile of decorations on the table. A handful of *Congratulations!!* balloons float and bob above the table in cruel mockery.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

“Shit,” Jaylen says. “I knew we should have started sooner.”

Tom gestures to the decorations. “I felt bad about how this afternoon went down. And you gave us spare keys for your place that one time. I just wanted to show you that I support you both.” He smiles hesitantly. “If you and Violet make each other happy, that’s good enough for me.”

I know he means well, but his optimism is like a knife to the heart.

“Where’s Violet? If you guys go out for dinner, we could finish decorating,” Jaylen suggests.

“She said no,” I say bluntly. “No need for decorations. You can go.”

I turn on my heel and stride out of the room. I’m not sure where I’m going. I just know I can’t talk about this right now. I need to get drunk and hit something, and stop *thinking* about her. Not necessarily in that order.

If she loves me, why doesn’t she want to be with me?

I hear hurried steps as Jaylen and Tom follow me through the living room and into my home office.

“Maybe she just needs more time,” Jaylen says, clearly trying to be supportive. “Sometimes people need more time to, you know, fall in love.”

“She said she loves me. She just doesn’t want me.” I grab the whisky from the bar cart in the corner and pour myself a glass. Then I top off that glass for good measure and gulp it down until it burns. “She doesn’t think I can be the kind of husband she wants.”

Tom and Jaylen both wince.

“Dude. That’s rough,” Jaylen says.

Tom pats my shoulder tentatively. “Sorry, buddy. I really thought she wanted ...”

“Yeah. I did too.” I settle into my desk chair, which feels strangely appropriate. I finally tried to have a life like

everyone told me to, and I end up back in my office miserable and alone.

Well. Not entirely alone.

“You guys should get out of here,” I say. “I’m going to be shitty company tonight.”

Actually, I’m pretty sure I’m going to be shitty company for the next few months. Possibly for the next few years. Maybe forever.

The reality is slowly sinking in that I’m going to spend my life co-parenting with Violet. On the one hand, the guarantee that I’ll have her in my life no matter what feels like water in a desert. On the other hand, I’m going to have to stand by and watch while she gets over me, and falls for some perfect, boring guy who can give her what I can’t. I’m going to have to respect her choices and tell her I’m happy for her because that’s what civilized men do.

My hand tightens on the glass. This hypothetical guy doesn’t even exist yet, and I already want to beat the shit out of him. But not if that would upset Violet.

I groan and drop my head on my desk. “How did I fuck this up?”

The question is rhetorical, but Jaylen jumps in to help. “Maybe if you explained what she said when she turned you down, we could figure out what you can say to convince her.”

I sigh and slump back in my chair, resigned. “It doesn’t matter. She’s convinced I only asked to marry her because she’s pregnant. She said I only know what a relationship is supposed to look like, and I don’t know how to be in one. She thinks marriage to her is just another deal for me to win.”

Tom shakes his head. “That doesn’t make sense. If she loves you, she wouldn’t walk away unless there was a reason. You sure there’s not something you disagreed about that started her on the fear spiral?”

I sigh heavily. “I told her she didn’t need to work, that I’d take care of her. Women like that, right?”

“Normally,” Jaylen says.

But Tom’s already shaking his head. “Gage, as the only one here who’s married, let me give you some advice. Violet’s like you. She *loves* her work. You haven’t seen it because she hasn’t been teaching art since that community center closed. Did you tell her she didn’t need to work, or that she *shouldn’t* work?”

I turn that over in my head. “Um. Both.”

Now Jaylen’s wincing too. “Gage, never tell a woman she *shouldn’t* do something. Ever. It will not end well for you.”

“But we’re having a kid! Someone needs to be there for them—”

“Yeah, but why does that person always have to be Violet? Why can’t you share that responsibility?” Tom says pointedly.

I look back and forth between them. The expression on their faces tells me I’m definitely in the wrong on this one.

“You’re saying you agree with her,” I say woodenly. “I should quit my job and abandon my parent’s company.”

I try to imagine it. It feels like trying to imagine living with half as much oxygen. I *like* my job. I like providing jobs for hundreds of people and carrying on my dad’s legacy. I like working with my mom.

I’m chomping at the bit to help guide the Colorado Coyotes toward a winning streak that will make everyone else see how great they are.

But if it’s Violet or my job ...

I don’t know. Maybe.

I think of her laughing in my bed, and that *Maybe* tilts into *Yes*.

I wouldn’t like it. I wouldn’t be happy. But I could do it for her. I could do it for our kid.

“I’m not saying you need to quit your job,” Tom says exasperatedly, cutting into my fantasies of martyrdom. “I’m saying that you could just work *less*. Hire as many extra

people as you need to, to make sure you're always home in time to have dinner with your kid and help tuck them into bed. Plus, you know, you could spend your weekends with the people you love, instead of your laptop."

For a moment my heart lifts. I could do that. I could definitely do that.

But then I remember everything else Violet said. I shake my head. "It wouldn't be enough. She didn't just turn me away because of the job thing."

"What else could you have fucked up?" Jaylen asks. "As long as you told her you told her you loved her ..."

I don't say anything.

Slowly Tom and Jaylen's faces transform into horrified understanding. It would be kind of funny if they weren't gaping at the smoldering wreckage of my life.

"You didn't," Jaylen says. "Tell me you didn't propose to a woman without *telling her you love her*."

"I ... I told her I could make her happy. And I wanted to raise a family with her," I say. Those words had sounded good at the time, but now they seem woefully inadequate. "That's basically the same thing, right?"

"No," Jaylen says. "It's really fucking not." He turns to look at Tom. "We failed him. This whole time, I thought he was single because he wanted to be. I never imagined he was such an emotional disaster."

I want to defend myself, but then I think about the last twelve hours.

I'd really thought that just because she was pregnant and I was rich, a woman as fundamentally breath-taking as Violet would settle for a man who didn't love her.

Oh God.

I drop my head into my hands. "Fuuuuuuuuck. I'm an idiot."

"Maybe. Maybe not," Tom says.

I look up through my fingers to see him studying me calmly.

“Do you love her?” he asks.

For a second, my world stops.

And then I think of Violet, and the world starts moving again.

I hadn't let myself think of it, because some part of me had decided a long time ago that relationships weren't for me. Having a family wasn't for me. Grief and heartbreak weren't for me.

But of course I love her. It's Violet. She's beautiful and inconvenient, and she challenges me. She's creative, passionate, and kinder than I'll ever be. She stands up for people all the time, but she's shocked when someone finally stands up for her. Being in her arms feels like ...

Well, it feels like home.

I've lived in this apartment for years, but it was never more than a building until Violet moved in.

I stare at my friends in wonder. “I love her. I love Violet.”

Tom claps Jaylen on the shoulder. “There you go. He's not such an emotional disaster after all. Now the question is, how does he get her back?”

Jaylen snorts. “I disagree. Now that the therapy part of the night is over, I think the real question is why does Gage have an unfinished naked portrait of himself propped against the wall?”

“I've been trying not to look at it,” Tom admits.

I glance toward the canvas Violet started the other night. It might be a picture of me, but all I see when I look at it is Violet. Her talent, her passion, her wide-open heart.

I think of how much fun she had trying to teach me to draw when the power was out, even though I was objectively horrible. Then I think of how determined she was to open her own community art center.

Fuck.

I can't believe I asked her to give that part of her life up and expected her to thank me for it.

I really am an idiot.

But as I look at the painting—at the evidence of what makes Violet feel alive—the beginning of an idea forms.

“I think I know how to convince her I love her,” I say.

“Hallelujah,” Jaylen says. “What do you need from us?”

I turn to Tom. “Violet talked about this old building in Brooklyn once. She said it was the one she wanted to buy with the money for the fake engagement. Do you know which one she was talking about?”

A smile spreads across Tom's face. “Yeah, actually. I do.”

Jaylen rubs his hands together. “All right. Let's go get Gage a wife. But first, pizza.”

I laugh.

For the first time since Violet walked away, I think everything might be okay after all.

Hope hurts. But it's all I have.

VIOLET

A week after I walked away from Gage, our fake relationship, and my job as his assistant, I'm lying in bed half-watching bad TV when my phone buzzes.

For a second my heart picks up because even after a week of moping, some part of me wants to believe in Gage. I want him to figure out that he loves me, and that it's worth trying to figure out our differences.

But it's not Gage.

Instead, it's a text from Peggy.

Hey, I don't know what happened, but I just wanted you to know we miss you around the office. Want to grab a drink tomorrow night? I'd like to transition from work friends to regular friends if you're up for it.

I feel a swell of gratitude. I'd love to stay friends with Peggy. But the idea of putting on real clothes and trekking into Manhattan just so I can decide whether to keep lying to Peggy about my relationship with Gage or tell her the depressing truth sounds way too exhausting.

Rain check? I text back. *I absolutely want to grab a drink, but I don't think I'm up for socializing yet.*

She sends me a heart emoji then tells me to take care of myself and promises to reach out next week.

I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling.

At least I got a new friend out of this mess. A friend and a child.

I spread my hand over my stomach. It still doesn't entirely feel real. I've spent the last week oscillating between grief over losing Gage, joy about the kid I'm going to have, and fear that I'm going to mess it all up.

Maria knocks on my door. "Violet? You up?"

I don't say anything. I love Maria, but I don't have it in me to nod through another pep-talk. If she thinks I'm asleep, maybe she'll leave me alone.

I hear my door creaking open.

Maria sticks her head in. "Ha! I knew you were awake."

I groan and pull the blankets up over my head. "Just let me wallow and be pathetic in peace."

"See, I did that for a week, but at some point, you gotta get out of bed, babe."

"Who says?" I mutter.

She rips the blankets off my bed, leaving me cold and exposed.

"Hey! Give those back!"

"Not until you take a shower and go on a walk with me. You need to leave this apartment." She marches out of my bedroom, trailing my blankets behind her.

I scramble after her to get them back, but she tosses them into her bedroom and locks the door before I can get them.

I glare at her, hands on hips. "You know, no one roots for bullies."

"You'll thank me later." She shoves me toward the bathroom. "Go take a shower. I'll grab some clothes for you. I'll give you your blankets back once you've had some fresh air."

"Maria," I protest.

“I bet it’s good for the baby,” she says, arms crossed. “You’re not just taking care of yourself anymore, you know.”

It’s the one thing I can’t argue with.

I go take a shower, grumbling the whole time.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m dressed in a cute sweater dress Maria picked out and strolling through our neighborhood toward Prospect Park. She also insisted I wear make-up and my favorite earrings. She said something about the positive psychological benefits of dressing as a way to improve your mood.

Honestly, I wasn’t listening that closely. I was just too tired to argue.

But when get to the entrance of the park, Maria steers us away. “You know what would be fun? Walking the border of the park. I always like seeing all these old buildings.”

“You don’t give a shit about old buildings,” I say.

She shoots me a mischievous look. “I’m evolving. Doesn’t the fresh air feel good?”

I blow out an annoyed sigh. “Yes,” I admit.

We’ve been walking for about ten minutes when she points to an empty storefront in an old Victorian building. It was clearly one of those places back in the day where a family had a shop on the first floor and lived above it.

“Wasn’t the place you wanted to buy for your community art center?”

“Yes,” I say. I’m pretty sure Gage will still give me the money he owes me for our fake engagement if I ask. But I don’t have the heart to bring it up. The last thing I want to do is take his money.

“Would you look at that? The door is open. Maybe we should go in and look around.” Maria breaks away from me and jogs across the street.

“Maria! What are you doing?” I call.

But she’s already ducking inside the open door.

I chase her across the street and follow her inside. “You can’t just walk into random buildings,” I hiss.

“Who says it was random?” I deep, familiar, masculine voice says from behind me. Every hair on the back of my neck stands up.

I’d know that voice anywhere.

I look at Maria, eyes wide with panic. I’m not ready to face Gage yet. I’m not strong enough.

She smiles encouragingly. “I’ll be outside if you need me.”

“But—”

She takes me by the shoulders and turns me around, so I’m forced to face Gage.

I’ve seen a lot of amazing artwork in my life, but in this moment Gage’s face is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. He’s got dark shadows under his eyes like he hasn’t been sleeping, and his suit is a wrinkled mess. But he’s *here*, and despite everything, that’s enough to make my poor heart start sparking back to life.

Maria squeezes my shoulders and whispers, “I’ve got your back, whatever you decide. But just hear him out, okay?”

Then she releases me. The room sounds with her retreating footsteps, and the door closing behind her.

And then it’s just me and Gage, standing alone in an old, empty storefront. It’s a far cry from the flower-filled top deck of the Empire State Building.

“Violet.” He breathes my name like it’s a prayer.

“Gage.” I wrap my arms around myself because I want so badly to run to him and jump into his arms. Even if it doesn’t solve anything. Even if it leaves me hurting even worse than I am now.

He clears his throat. “Violet, I thought a lot about what you said. And I realized I need to tell you—”

“I can’t do this,” I decide, and abruptly turn to leave. I don’t know what Gage told Maria to get her on his side, but I

can't stand here and let him throw more useless, tempting arguments at me.

It hurts too much.

“Stop. You owe me,” he calls.

I whirl to face him, outraged. “I *owe* you? How dare you —”

“The day the power went out. You bet you could teach me to be a better drawer before the power came back on. Well, I won, and I'm calling in my favor.”

I cross my arms, exasperated affection welling up inside of me. That's Gage. Fighting with everything he has, until the bitter end. “What's the favor? Do you need me to play fake fiancée for one more event?”

“I need you to listen to me,” he says, something raw and desperate in his face. “I need you to listen to me and believe I'm telling you the truth. If you still don't want me—us—after I've said my piece, I won't bother you again. Just listen to me.” He swallows and repeats. “You owe me.”

He's right, I realize. I do owe him, though not because of a silly bet. I owe him because I love him. He's going to be the father of my child. And whatever he has to say is important enough he went behind my back to talk to Maria to arrange it.

At least she made me wear something cute, I think.

I back up until I can lean on the wall for support. “Okay,” I say. “Talk.”

He nods. Opens his mouth. Closes it. Then he shuts his eyes and frowns slightly, his mouth moving silently like he's practicing the words in his head.

“Oh, just spit it out,” I say, because I can't stand the tension.

He glares at me. “This is important, okay? I need to get it right.”

It occurs to me that I've never seen him this careful with his words. I have the uncanny sense we're standing on the

edge of a cliff together. And if either of us says the wrong thing, we'll both plummet over the edge.

Gage takes a deep breath. "Right. Well. First things first." He takes a set of keys out of his pocket and tosses it to me.

I catch them on reflex. "What are these for?"

"This building. You said it was your dream location for that community art center of yours. I bought it for you."

"You *what?*"

"I also started a trust for you. To fund the arts center. It will last somewhere between ten years and a hundred years, depending on your organization's expenses." He shrugs like his unimaginably generous gift is no big deal. "I looked into the financial needs of nonprofits, and they kind of run the gamut. If you need more in ten years, we can talk about it then."

I swallow. My heart is beating so fast it feels like a wild bird caught in my chest. "Why are you doing this?"

Gage takes a step toward me. "Because you were right. You wouldn't be happy if you gave up teaching art. It was wrong of me to ask you to. And no matter what you decide ..." He works his jaw like he's struggling with his own emotions. "Whether you want a relationship with me or not, I want you to have a place where you can teach art so you can be happy. I *need* you to be happy."

The way he says it makes my heart ache. I instinctively place my palm against my chest, trying to rub the pain away. He's trying so hard to do the right thing. And he's so close to saying what I need him to.

But ...

"Why do you need me to be happy?" My voice is so hushed it's practically a whisper.

He smiles softly, studying me like he's memorizing me. In case this is the end. In case I walk away from him again.

"I love you, Violet," he says. "And I'm not saying it to win you, or because it's convenient. It's really, really not. I can't

sleep without you, Violet. My new assistant is the best in the entire company, and it's horrible because she's not you." He runs a hand through his hair. "There was a company I could have bought this week, but the owner looked so upset about having to sell that I gave a loan instead. I knew that's what you would have wanted me to do. I carry you around in my head everywhere with me. And I want to make you proud, even if you're not actually around to see it."

"Gage ..."

He closes the gap between us and cups my face. "You changed me, Violet. I don't know if it's enough for you to want me as your husband. But I'll keep trying. I promise. I'll give you and this kid everything I have." He searches my face, desperate to be believed. "I'll come home on time every night, and I won't work on the weekends."

I smile as I blink back tears. "Even if you lose a deal, or your stock price takes a dip?"

"Screw the stock price," he says. "I want you. I'd quit entirely if you asked me to. I'd rather not. It would make me even grumpier than I am now, and I don't like the idea of making my wife work while I sit on my ass. But I'd do it if you asked me to."

Now I'm actually crying.

"Please don't cry, love." He kisses my tears away, his voice rough. "Please don't cry." He closes his eyes and gently rests his forehead against mine. "Just tell me if I still have a shot with you."

He reaches for my hand, and his fingers twine with mine. "You haven't given me back my ring yet. I've been telling myself that's a good omen."

I laugh through the tears. "It is."

His eyes fly open. "Are you serious? You'll come back home to me? You want a relationship?"

I nod, smiling through the tears. "I am. I will. I do."

And then he's kissing me, hard and true and wonderful.

I kiss him back with everything I have.

When we come up for air, his eyes are dark with desire and his face is full of emotion. He spreads a possessive hand across my stomach. “This is probably pressing my luck. But I’ve never been one to hold back.”

I tilt my head back, smiling up at him. “Oh?”

“Will you marry me, Violet Miller?” He smiles back at me, joy dancing in his eyes. “I’ve been told I’m an emotional disaster. I have no idea how to do any of this. But I’m in love with you. And I think I will be until the day I die.”

My heart catches. And then it takes a leap and flies.

“That’s convenient,” I say, looping my hands around the back of his neck. “Because I love you too. I loved you when you were a jerk to me, and I loved you when you were being emotionally obtuse. It’s kind of unconditional. I think I can handle you trying to make me and our kid happy for the rest of our lives.”

A thousand emotions flicker across Gage’s face. “God, I don’t deserve you.”

“Yes, you do,” I say. And then I rise up on my toes and kiss him the way I’ve wanted to all week. The way I’ve wanted to for the past two months. Maybe longer than that.

The kiss is on the verge of turning into something much hotter when the front door swings open and Maria pops her head in.

“Oh. Good. You’re kissing. Do you need me to hang around, or are you good now?”

I laugh and hide my face against Gage’s chest, blushing.

“We’re good,” Gage says. “How do you feel about coming to a wedding next month?”

I whack him in the arm. “We’re not having a shot-gun wedding, Gage. I want something nice. And I don’t want to be visibly pregnant.”

Maria laughs. "I'll let you two work it out. But I will happily attend whenever you pick a date. Just don't elope. Your friends have earned this wedding almost as much as you have." And then she makes her exit, the door swinging shut behind her.

I look around the empty room. "I can't believe you bought this for me. It's perfect."

"Mmm-hmm. And you haven't even seen the upstairs." He steps back, takes my hand, and pulls me toward the stairs.

He's got a mischievous look in his eyes that makes my blood heat.

"What's upstairs?" I ask.

"A floor. And a fireplace. I know that combination gets you horny."

I laugh, too happy for words.

He stops walking just long enough to grin down at me. "See. It won't be so bad being married to me."

"I disagree," I say. "It's going to be goddamn wonderful. Because it's us."

"Because it's us," he agrees.

And then we go upstairs and start our Happily Ever After.

EPILOGUE

VIOLET

On the one-year anniversary of the day Gage tossed me that set of keys, I officially open my community art center. It's everything I've wanted, and more. I was able to hire some of my favorite colleagues from the last arts center I worked at. And thanks to the generous funding of Gage and his various rich friends, I can offer classes at practically no cost. We've already got a waiting list going for people who are interested in classes.

I glance around the front lobby. It's full of excited students milling around and chatting about the class they've just finished. They're joined by a collection of people who have spent the last year cheering me toward the finish line. Maria's over by the champagne, flirting with Pete, the Coyotes' new head coach. The team has really turned around under the joint powers of his and Gage's leadership. Gage flew him out this weekend so they could start strategizing about the changes they want to make for next season. But based on the way Pete is looking at Maria, I wonder if he might develop an entirely different reason to start visiting New York.

Lorelei is on the other side of the room, chatting with a group of older women who just finished their first art class. I think they're trying to convince her to join them next time. Lorelei wasn't exactly thrilled to find out Gage and I had lied to her. But when she saw it had led to us falling in love, and a thoroughly adorable grandchild, she forgave us. Especially since Gage actually has a life outside of work now.

Tom and Jaylen are here too. Jaylen got a promotion at work that's keeping him busy in the best possible way, and Tom's hovering over his newly pregnant wife. They've only told a few people, but Tom's so bad at being subtle about it, that I'm pretty sure the whole room knows by now.

"Oh my God! This place is amazing!" Peggy exclaims as she steps into the door. She ended up taking over for me as Gage's assistant. She's twice as good as me, and she charges him twice as high a salary as I did. She also makes sure he actually leaves work on time. And if he ever gets too grumpy with his employees, she reins him in by threatening to tell me about it.

All in all, a perfect assistant.

I grin as I take in the space with her. "Yeah. It's pretty amazing."

"Who would have thought you'd end up here?" she says.

I have to agree.

Of course, the biggest change of all is the three-month-old baby in my arms. It's almost bedtime, but he's lifting his head and looking around at the chaos wide-eyed. We named him Jack, after Gage's dad.

He is, in my unbiased opinion, the best baby in the whole wide world.

And his father agrees with me.

Peggy makes silly faces at Jack until he starts giggling. Then she checks her watch. "I hope Gage left the office on time. Normally I kick him out at six, but I had that dentist appointment."

"He'll be here," I say confidently.

He knows how important this is to me. Neither of us is perfect, but ever since we've started being honest with each other about what's important to us—and what isn't—we've gotten a lot better at showing up for each other. Both literally and figuratively. We haven't gotten around to getting married yet, but that's only because I didn't want to plan a wedding

and launch a business at the same time. Gage spent a few months reminding me that wedding planners existed for a reason, but he finally accepted the idea of taking our time.

Why rush when you have forever?

Peggy's making me laugh with the latest office gossip, when I catch sight of a familiar tall, broad figure on the other side of the glass door.

"See," I beam. "There he is."

Gage steps into the cheerful chaos, and his eyes lock on mine. In a second, he's by my side. He drops a kiss on my lips, and then he steals Jack from me. Jack wraps a tiny hand around Gage's thumb, and my heart melts a little.

It's one of those days in life where every single moment feels perfect.

Peggy spots someone she knows and wanders off to say hi.

Gage shifts Jack into one arm so he can wrap the other around my waist and pull me into him. "Sorry I was late."

"You weren't," I reassure him. "You were right on time."

For a heartbeat, we just look at each other, and it feels like I'm talking about more than just tonight's art center opening.

"Speaking of time," he says. "I was thinking we could set a date." His smile is rakish. "Come on, Violet. Make an honest man of me."

My heart leaps. It's been a year since we got back together, but my body still responds when he looks at me like that.

I almost give him some practical excuse about why it's not the right time, out of sheer habit.

And then I realize I don't want to put this part of my life off anymore. My art center is officially open. Jack is happy, healthy, and growing bigger by the day. And Gage has more than proved that he's the man that I need him to be.

"How about next month?" I ask.

"Next *month*?"

I bite my lip. “Too soon.”

“Hell no. Next month is perfect.”

I almost comment that if he can book the top deck of the Empire State Building with less than five hours’ notice, he can plan a wedding in a month. But the Empire State Building is still a bit of a sore spot for Gage. Maybe I can make that joke after we’ve been married for a year or two.

“How do you feel about Saturday the 30th?” I ask instead.

“I think it’s my new favorite day.” He dips his head and kisses me, soft and lingering. We don’t part until Jack starts fussing.

Neither Gage nor I can seem to stop smiling.

For the first time, Gage seems to take in the rest of the room. By this point in the night, most of the students and donors have left, leaving just our closest friends and family.

Gage looks back at me. “Is this pretty much who you want at the wedding?”

I glance around. “I mean, there’s a few other people. But pretty much.”

“Excellent.” Gage turns to the room at large, covers Jack’s ears, and raises his voice. “Everyone! Violet and I are getting married on the 30th of next month. You’re all invited. Details to come.”

“Finally!” someone shouts. I think it’s Lorelei.

People laugh and cheer. Someone presses glasses of champagne into mine and Gage’s hands.

Gage lifts his glass in the air. “To Violet Miller. The love of my fucking life. Thanks for reminding me how to live, and then making that life immeasurably better.”

People make *awww* sounds as they clink their glasses. I’m blushing, but I’m smiling too.

I clink glasses with Gage and take a tiny sip before setting it aside. I rarely have more than a sip of alcohol since I’m still

nursing. “You know, you make my life better too. Every damn day.”

Gage tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “To all the days to come then.”

I rise up on my toes and kiss him, feeling effortlessly, ecstatically, gratefully happy.

To all the days to come indeed.

**Keep reading for a sneak peek of Billionaire Next Door
Daddy.**

BILLIONAIRE NEXT DOOR DADDY SNEAK PEEK

Who's the hot grump next door with the adorable kid?

My new boss...

And he just fake proposed to me.

Seeing my billionaire boss in sweatpants and nothing else,

Is not how I envisaged our first meeting.

His bicep flexing as he leans on the doorframe,

His ripped abs and chiseled chest begging for attention.

He's a stubborn, cocky, demanding grouch who never backs
down,

And working for him makes me want to tear my hair out.

But he's devoted to his little daughter,

Seeing him make pancakes with her,

Makes me want to play house for real.

Our fake engagement is only for two months,

Then he's leaving for good.

But the secret growing in my belly,

Means he's going to be a daddy again.

Keep reading for a sneak peek of the first two chapters...

BROOKE - CHAPTER 1

It's after 3:00 a.m. and I'm contemplating murder. Someone above me has their music cranked *way* too loud. I've been trying not to make waves while house sitting for one of my bosses at the architecture firm I work for, who's on an extended vacation. But this is too damn much.

I can't think, let alone *sleep*.

The high, expensive ceiling above me is literally rattling.

Enough is enough.

I roll out of bed and throw on a lightweight bathrobe to cover my camisole and sleep shorts. Then I shove my feet into sneakers and storm upstairs to ask—no *beg*—the upstairs neighbor to turn the music down.

I jab the elevator button and wait. I thought the apartment above me was empty. This is the worst possible time for someone to move in and start making a racket. I desperately need to be on top of my game tomorrow. Mason West—aka the head of West Inc., the giant property development firm that bought the boutique architecture firm I work for, is coming into town to oversee a project. And I've been assigned to work as his personal assistant. His normal personal assistant is on paternity leave or something.

I step onto the elevator, and the closing doors briefly block out the wailing guitar music. The sudden, blissful silence is enough to make me feel a little more optimistic about tomorrow.

Maybe Mason West won't be as much of a grumpy asshole as everyone says he is.

Maybe he'll sincerely appreciate that I'm stepping in to help him.

Maybe we'll even build a rapport, and he'll ask what someone with a master's in architecture is doing working as a personal assistant. Then I can use it as an opportunity to network and ...

The elevator door opens, and the painfully loud electric guitar music drowns out my optimism.

Mason West isn't going to suddenly notice my potential when no one else has so far. Realistically, the best I can hope for is that if I do a good job working for him, he won't get pissed and derail my architecture career even further.

But I can't do a good job if I can't *get a single minute of sleep*.

I step off the elevator and march toward the door where the music is coming from.

There are only three apartment doors on this floor, which means their floorplans must be truly massive.

I guess my sonic torturer must be insanely rich, even by the standards of this building.

I take a deep breath and try to calm down. I might be exhausted, and pissed off, but as the saying goes, you get more flies with honey than you do with vinegar.

I paste a smile on my face and knock politely.

No answer.

I knock harder. "Excuse me? You might not have noticed, but it's kind of late and your music is a bit loud?"

Still no answer.

I pound harder, banging on the door with all my might, until the door abruptly swings open. I stumble forward, my fist crashing into a man's bare chest.

A very firm, muscled chest, sprinkled with dark hair.

I look up and find myself staring into a face that might be the pinnacle of masculine beauty, if it weren't for the grumpy scowl. He's got dark messy hair, piercing blue eyes, high cheekbones, and a five o'clock shadow highlighting a sharp jawline. I'm guessing he's the kind of guy who spends the whole day looking flawless in designer suits that cost more than the monthly rent on my old apartment.

But right now, he looks gloriously ruffled, like sex incarnate. The only thing he's wearing is black sweatpants slung dangerously low on his hips.

There's something familiar about his face. Maybe he's an actor or something?

He looks down, pointedly, and I realize my fist is still resting against the warmth of his chest.

I yank my hand back. "Um, hi. I live downstairs. Well, I don't live there, I house sit. Not that it matters." I swallow, trying to ignore the fact that he's indecently beautiful. I try to focus on the fact that if he doesn't turn down the music, he's going to ruin any chance I have of making a good impression on my new boss. "Could you turn down your music, please? Or maybe use headphones?"

He stares me up and down, his blue eyes unreadable. "No."

He starts to close the door, but I catch it, desperate. "Sorry, let me rephrase that. I *need* you to turn the music down. I can't sleep."

He shakes his head. "The guy who lives downstairs never complained. You're being overly sensitive—"

"The guy who normally lives downstairs turns off his hearing aid whenever he gets bored in meetings. I, however, can actually hear your music," I argue. "And I can't be the only one." I gesture to the other doors across the hall. "I'm sure your other neighbors would also appreciate it if you kept the noise down. Since, you know, *it's three o'clock in the morning ...*"

His lips press into a thin line, clearly irritated. “It’s my apartment, I can do whatever the fuck I want. Besides, I wasn’t even listening to music.”

He looks so smug as he says it. As if he can convince me to doubt my own ears, just because he’s hot, confident, rich, and male. He’s probably surrounded by people more than willing to believe that up is down and down is up, just because he says it.

And something in me just *snaps*.

I am so tired of busting my ass to get ahead, while people like him skate ahead.

“You are such a liar,” I say, putting my hands on my hips. “*I can hear you.*”

He rolls his eyes. “What you heard—”

“People like you are so selfish! It doesn’t even cross your mind that some of us need to sleep, because *some of us* have to work tomorrow.”

“I work tomorrow,” he says indignantly.

“Oh, sure,” I scoff. “I’m sure it’s very hard to roll in late to a job you got with daddy’s connections and have some overworked secretary hand you an overcomplicated coffee order. You look like someone with an overly complicated coffee order.”

He looks faintly amused. “Is that the best insult you can come up with? That I have a dumb coffee order?”

“I’m *tired*,” I say, practically ready to pull my hair out. “If we can reschedule this fight for the morning, I promise I’ll say something much more cutting. Like how you probably think walking around shirtless makes you look hot, but it just makes you look vain. We get it, you go to the gym.”

“Wow. You really are bad at insults.” He crosses his arms, which only highlights his aforementioned arm muscles. And from the look in his eyes, he knows it.

“Argh! That’s not the point.” I’m so mad, I’m practically vibrating. “The point is, I need to impress my new boss

tomorrow, who is a famously demanding, grumpy hardass. And I get it, you're a rich jerk who doesn't need to worry about things like hard work or office schedules. But that doesn't mean you get to make *my* life harder."

The amusement fades from his face. He looks genuinely pissed off now.

Good. It's about time he started taking me seriously.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he says.

"I think I do. Turn down the damn music or ..."

"Or what?" He laughs, sharply. "You'll storm up here in your lingerie and yell at me some more?" He raises his arm and leans it on the door, something about the gesture driving home how much taller than me he is. He makes a point of letting his eyes drop down to where my bathrobe has come undone to show the lace-edged sleep shorts and camisole underneath. "Honey, don't threaten me with a good time."

"How dare you," I say, snatching my robe closed as my face—and other parts of me—heat.

He glares, clearly done with the conversation. "You want some free advice on how to put your boss in a better mood? Just wear something like that to the office. It'll perk him right up."

I gape.

What is *wrong* with this man?

I asked him to turn down the music. He said no.

I explained why it was a problem. He tried to gaslight me and say he wasn't even playing music.

I insulted him, and he told me I was doing it badly.

And when I finally explained why I needed sleep from a professional standpoint—which *I shouldn't have even needed to do*—he brushed off my concerns and basically told me to sleep with my new boss to get ahead.

I've tried every tactic I possibly can with this man, and every time he's found a way to beat his previous record of

rudeness.

I turn on my heels and stride to the elevator. Clearly, this is not an argument I'm going to win. And I'm not going to wait around to see what new ways he discovers to insult and belittle me. Besides, he's right about one thing.

It's his apartment, and there's nothing I can do to *force* him to turn down the music. I jab the elevator button and wait.

Behind me, he heaves a heavy sigh. "Look, I didn't mean ___"

I hold up a hand to stop him. "You are the most monstrously rude person I've ever met. I don't want to hear anything else from you ever again. Goodbye."

The elevator doors open. I step inside, and out of view of my inexplicably hot neighbor.

I make my way back to my apartment. Lock the door behind me. Kick my sneakers off. Get in bed.

For about five minutes, it's blissfully quiet.

Then the rock music starts up again.

I picture his smug, gorgeous, face as he cranks up the volume on the stereo. Either he's doing this to torment me on purpose, or he's genuinely the rudest person I've ever met.

I bury my face in a pillow and use it to muffle my frustrated scream.



PREDICTABLY, I'm utterly exhausted by the time I get to work the next day. The music didn't stop until well after 4:00 a.m., but the asshole upstairs did eventually switch to a playlist that sounded less like an angry battle cry, and more like a melancholy lullaby for insomniacs.

Maybe that was his version of compromising.

As I step off the elevator onto Gates Architecture's floor, I can already sense the office is buzzing with excited energy. It's

only 8:25 a.m., but my new boss Mason West must be here already. My best friend Stephanie, who works in accounting, catches my eye over the top of her cubicle. She discreetly jerks her head toward the women's bathroom.

I meet her there. One of the few perks of being one of the few women in a company dominated by men is that the women's restroom becomes an ideal space for trading intel.

"Mason West is here already, isn't he?" I demand. "He wasn't supposed to get here until 10:00 a.m."

"Apparently he was waiting in the lobby when one of the admin assistants got here at seven-thirty to open up the office, already typing away on his laptop." Stephanie checks herself out in the mirror, adjusting her orange sweater and fussing with her brown curls. "His pictures don't do him justice. I didn't know men that hot actually worked in offices. I thought they only played them in movies."

"I don't care what he looks like," I say.

There's no way he's hotter than my new neighbor upstairs. Not that I'm comparing the two.

"What's he like? Is he as grumpy as people say?" I ask.

Stephanie reapplies her lipstick, thinking. "Not exactly? He hasn't been outright mean to anyone yet. It's more that he seems like a perfectionist who demands the best of everyone around him. And he's definitely jet-lagged."

"A winning combination," I joke, but my stomach twists with nerves.

"You'll be fine," Stephanie says. "All the architects agree you're one of the best assistants at this firm."

That would probably be a lot more encouraging if I wanted to *stay* a personal assistant.

"I should go introduce myself," I say.

I give myself one final glance in the mirror. I'm wearing gray slacks, black high heels, and a soft white blouse that looks a little Victorian, while still being appropriate office

wear. I've got my unruly red curls tied back in a low ponytail with a black velvet scrunchie. I look professional, but also like someone who can easily blend into the background.

Because that's what my job is right now. Blending into the background.

All I have to do is keep my head down, be helpful, and focus on the job.

"You're right. It'll be fine," I tell myself, trying to believe it.

Stephanie checks her watch. "You should get out there, or you'll be late. They set him up in the empty office at the far end of the hall."

I nod, roll my shoulders back, and stride back out into the hallway and off to meet Mason West.

When I get to the end of the hall, his door is open, and the masculine voices of various important people at the firm spill out. I hesitate outside the door, unsure whether it's appropriate to interrupt.

One of the older lead architects spots me and waves me in. "Brooke, come in."

I step into the room, ignoring my nerves, glancing around for the man who must be Mason West. And then I see him and my heart stops.

No, I think. It can't be.

"Mason," the architect continues, "We've set you up with one of our best assistants to help make your time here run as smoothly as possible. This is Brooke Anderson."

Across the room, Mason West raises an eyebrow. His face is perfectly shaved, not a speck of stubble in sight. His black suit is impeccably fitted. Not a hair on his head is out of place.

And yet I'd know those sharp, judgmental blue eyes anywhere.

It's the man from last night. My new neighbor. The one I yelled at, when I told him he'd never worked hard in his life,

and I called him the rudest man I'd ever met.

I think I'm going to puke. Either that, or just turn and walk out of the building and never come back.

That seems like the only acceptable way to deal with the situation at hand.

"Brooke." The way Mason says my name slides over my skin like a hot shower. "We should talk."

I wonder if the architects in the room can hear how loaded those words sound.

The unspoken challenge from Mason strengthens my spine. Yes, our initial meeting was ... not ideal.

But I've sunk two years of my life into this company. I can fix this. Just like I fix every work challenge I run into.

I pull out my notebook and pen from my purse and meet Mason's eyes squarely, ignoring the way that sends a prick of awareness racing through my whole body. "Absolutely. What would you like to talk about? I'm ready to get started at your earliest convenience."

The corner of his mouth tightens at my perky politeness. It might have been a suppressed smile, if I thought for a second he was the kind of man who smiled.

He casually dismisses the heads of Gates Architecture with a wave of his hand. "Gentlemen. I'll see you at the meeting."

They shuffle out, obviously unsure whether they should be insulted by his abruptness.

Mason never takes his eyes off me.

The door clicks shut behind them, leaving me alone in a room with the man who could decide my entire professional future at Gates Architecture.

"So, Brooke." His voice is dark and wry. "Do you have any last words before I ask you to find me a new personal assistant?"

MASON - CHAPTER 2

The woman standing in front of me, pen hovered over her notebook, brown eyes big and wary, is even more distracting than she was last night, braless and yelling at me in a silk robe that couldn't seem to stay closed.

I'd been jet-lagged and restless, and it had taken more self-control than I'm willing to admit not to invite her into my apartment and seduce her out of her anger. Normally I'm not into women who yell at me, but there was something about her fierce anger that made me wonder what it would be like to get her all flushed and worked up with a different kind of passion. When she utterly failed to insult me by telling me I looked like I went to the gym, I'd been more than willing to use those gym-toned muscles she claimed to dislike to give her a different kind of workout.

Then her insults shifted, becoming more pointed, and my fantasies shifted too. All my life, there's been someone standing by to call me lazy, my successes undeserved, just because of my last name. I don't let it get to me anymore. But for some reason, when Brooke said them, those old insults still rankled.

I wanted to get under her skin the way she'd gotten under mine. I wanted to make her beg for mercy, make her admit she'd never underestimate me again.

A part of me still wants that if I'm being honest.

Then the reality of our situation intrudes.

Shit, I think, remembering that I basically told her to show up to work in lingerie to get in good with her new boss.

Does it count as sexual harassment if I didn't know *I* was her boss yet?

Either way, this is too damn messy.

I run my work like I run my life—clean, simple, without unnecessary complications.

Brooke Anderson is an unnecessary complication.

Plus, it isn't like she *wants* to work for me. She said as much last night.

She bites her lip, and for some reason, that action goes straight to my dick.

Unnecessary complication.

“About last night,” she says. “I’m sorry if I insulted you ...”

I raise an eyebrow. “Do you mean when you said your new boss was a grumpy, demanding hardass? Or do you mean when you called me a monster?”

“I didn't call you a monster,” she protests.

I wait.

She shifts uncomfortably under my gaze. “I, um, may have called you monstrously rude. But that's not the same thing. Sir.”

“See, that's the kind of attention to detail that will help you find me a new personal assistant,” I shoot back. I take a seat behind my desk and return my focus to my work. “Find me someone to replace you by eleven.”

“Please, I can do this job—”

“Brooke, a million people could do your job,” I interrupt. “None of us are irreplaceable. Find me a new assistant and assign yourself to someone you haven't yelled at. We can all start fresh and move on with our lives.”

Her shoulders slump, and she looks down at the ground.

She looks so defeated. I feel a rare prick of guilt.

Part of me wants to tell her that it isn't her fault. Not entirely. Our paths crossed when they shouldn't have, and we saw glimpses into each other's personal lives we shouldn't have, and there's no coming back from that.

I can still remember the way she lost her balance when I opened the door, and her fist slammed into my bare chest, right over my heart. She didn't pull away. Not at first.

I can't ignore my attraction to her. And she's not going to be able to ignore the fact that some part of her sees me as the rich asshole who ruined her sleep.

I shake off the memory. I've been in a weird, restless mood since yesterday. I blame it on the city. I might have grown up in New York, but it's been almost a decade since I've spent more than a handful of days here. If I didn't fly out every month to see my eight-year-old daughter Avery that number would be even lower. I wasn't planning on having kids, but I'll never regret that a casual hookup before I moved to L.A. led to such an amazing kid. In a perfect world, she'd live in L.A. too, but Avery's mom doesn't want to leave New York, and I can respect that. We're never going to be more than friendly co-parents who hooked up once, but that doesn't mean I expect her to uproot her whole life just because I wish I could see Avery more often.

The point is, I'm about to spend two whole months in New York, and it's making me restless. That has to be the reason this random woman keeps getting under my skin.

I pointedly nod to the door. "You're dismissed, Brooke."

For a second I think she'll leave.

But then she raises her chin and rallies. "Look, maybe there are a million people who can do my job," she says, "but it will take you time to find them and get them up to speed. There's no one else in the company available to tag in as your personal assistant right now, which means you'd be going through a temp agency."

Unfortunately, she's right about that. Not that I'm about to admit it.

She presses on, nervous but determined. "You'd be working with an assistant who knows nothing about you, nothing about Gates Architecture, and absolutely nothing about property development."

She takes a step forward, and I try not to notice that there's something erotic about that high-necked, virginal blouse she's wearing. It makes a man want to see what's underneath.

Especially if he's seen it before.

"Plus, the fact that we'll be neighbors while I'm house sitting is actually an advantage," Brooke insists, desperate. "It will be much easier for me to assist you if you need something after hours."

She doesn't mean anything dirty by it. But that's exactly where my mind goes.

Which confirms my instinct that letting her work under me—no, not *under* me, *for* me—will make things unnecessarily messy.

I've been attracted to people I work with before. But it's been easy to shut that attraction in a box and put it aside for the sake of the family company.

Maybe it's because of the way we met, but it's already hard to do that with Brooke. Every time I try to dismiss her—from my apartment, from my office, from my mind—she somehow pops back up again, stubborn, innocent and sexy as hell.

"No," I say gruffly, resigning myself to spending the next two months assisted by some incompetent temp who doesn't know anything about the business, and who will probably slow me down at least as much as they help me.

Damnit.

"Find me a replacement, Brooke. *Now*," I order.

But she doesn't leave my office. Instead, she sinks into the chair opposite my desk, and leans forward so that she can look

me in the eye. There's a naked honesty in her expression.

"Please," Brooke says, desperate. "I've spent the last two years proving myself, so that when a junior architect job finally opens up here, they'll trust me enough to actually take my application seriously and look at my qualifications." She gestures, frustrated. "Instead of giving it to some Ivy League guy they know from the country club."

Ah. So that's why she's fighting this reassignment so hard.

It also explains why she's got a chip on her shoulder about rich guys who get jobs through family connections.

I hesitate. I've always had a soft spot for hard workers fighting to get their foot in the door.

Brooke takes my silence as encouragement. "If you reassign me and ask for a new temp, all that hard work I've done goes down the drain."

"I'll tell them it doesn't have anything to do with you," I say.

She doesn't say anything.

"What?" I demand. "Why isn't that good enough?"

"They won't believe you," she admits, with the weary, defeated air of a woman who doesn't have anything else to lose. "They'll think the man who owns Gates Architecture doesn't like me, and they'll never give me another promotion again."

I scowl. I'm not used to having any employee, let alone a lowly personal assistant, question my business decisions. "That's not my problem."

It's the same thing I said last night when she asked me to turn the music down. Her response rings, unbidden in my ears. *You're the most monstrously rude person I've ever met.*

I never make work decisions based on the personal needs of one employee.

But I do believe in investing in the people who can make a company great. And if someone's willing to spend two years

proving her worth in a job she doesn't want, just for a shot at the job she *does* want, that's probably someone worth keeping around.

Plus, she probably will be more efficient than a temp. And hopefully, she'll be less distracting once I get used to her.

I mean, she could hardly get *more* distracting.

"Fine," I grumble. "You can stay on as my personal assistant for the duration of this project. But only on the condition that our personal lives never intersect again. This is a work relationship only. Understood?"

"Understood." She beams, relieved. "You won't regret it."

I already regret it, but it's better than the alternatives.

I return to my computer.

She doesn't budge.

"Brooke?"

"Yes?" she leans forward eager, pencil poised over her notebook.

"Get out of my office."

"Oh! Right." She fumbles to her feet. "I'll be at my desk. If you need anything."

She leaves, shutting the door behind her.

I wait for the newfound silence and peace of the room to relax me. But I still feel restless, hungry.

It's her damn perfume, I realize. The scent of roses lingers in the air behind her.

Keep reading Billionaire Next Door Daddy.