



BILLIONAIRE

GRUMP'S BABY

ROXY REID

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AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS FAKE MARRIAGE
ROMANCE

ROXY REID

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HAZEL

I watch in slow motion horror as the coffee arcs out of my cup and lands on my white cashmere sweater. The woman who just bumped into me has already disappeared into the crowded New York sidewalk. She has no idea she just messed up my whole morning.

“Shit. Fuck.” I grab an old tissue out of my purse and frantically dab at the coffee splotch on my white sweater. But that just makes it worse, spreading the stain around.

I feel my blood pressure rise and try not to panic.

I’m supposed to meet my best friend and book agent Sarah today for a business lunch at a trendy Chelsea restaurant. Her text message was blunt, even for her. *Be on time. And wear something nice for once. I found a project that could be perfect for you until you write a new book that publishers will actually want.*

She didn’t actually say that I’m running out of professional chances, but I can read between the lines. Because we’re friends, Sarah’s gone above and beyond as my agent. I don’t know why she wants me to look nice for this lunch, but if it’s important to her I don’t want to let her down.

I look around frantically, hoping for someplace that might possibly sell sweaters, or some kind of a miracle stain remover ...

I spot a street vendor on the next corner.

Bingo.

He's selling sunglasses, hats, and—hallelujah—scarves. I race up to his table and reach for a red scarf.

“How much for this—oof!” Someone bumps into me from behind, sending me staggering forward into the table. What's left of my coffee douses half the scarves. The table wobbles, then tips over, sending sunglasses skittering across the sidewalk.

Why is Chelsea always so *crowded*? It's like Times Square, but instead of being full of tourists it's full of terrifyingly fashionable New Yorkers.

“I'm so sorry!” I apologize to the vendor. I don't apologize to the asshole who bashed into me. He's obviously another one of those guys who thinks the whole sidewalk belongs to him. I toss my empty coffee cup in a nearby trashcan and crouch to pick up the merchandise I've accidentally scattered over the sidewalk.

The man who bumped into me is doing the same thing, his phone still pressed to his ear. “No, do not approve those plans. I don't care what the board says, we are not cutting corners on this project. If they don't like it, they can take it up with me.”

I roll my eyes. Clearly the guy is one of those my way or the highway types. He's also not particularly helpful at picking up the mess he created. He's so distracted by his phone call, we keep reaching for the same things.

I'm not looking at him, not really, because this whole morning is embarrassing enough without adding eye contact into the mix. But I can tell he's tall and strong, in one of those expensive dark suits.

There's no coffee on *his* white shirt. Not that I'm looking.

His mussed dark hair completes the tall, dark, and handsome portrait.

I hand the vendor a handful of sunglasses. “Again, I'm so sorry. I'm just running late for this important lunch meeting —”

“You don't have to apologize,” the man behind me interrupts, without even bothering to hang up his phone. “Just

don't block the fucking sidewalk.”

Wait ... he thinks I was apologizing to *him*?

The nerve.

I grab as many pairs of I Love NYC hats off the sidewalk as I can hold. “Maybe if you got off the phone, and actually *looked* where you were going,” I suggest tartly. “Instead of acting like you own the whole street.”

Oh, he does not like that suggestion. Not one bit.

“I do *not* act like I own the whole sidewalk,” he blurts, before returning to his phone. “... No, not you, there's this crazy brunette ... hold on, I'll call you back.” The man shoves his phone into his pocket and reaches for a lilac scarf at the same time I do.

Our hands meet, and a jolt of electricity shoots through me. He has nice hands. Familiar hands.

My eyes jerk up at the same time his do, and I find myself staring into the brooding blue eyes that haunted my high school fantasies.

“Hazel,” he says, his voice gravelly. “You changed your hair.”

My stomach tenses. It feels like there's a string stretched tight between us, and all he needs to do is pluck it to make my body respond. It's been years since I've seen Luke Dewinter.

AKA my older brother's college roommate.

AKA total playboy.

AKA billionaire heir to the Helius Airlines empire.

If anything, time has only made Luke hotter. He's traded in his casual T-shirts and ripped jeans for a suit that lets the whole world know how powerful his family is. How powerful *he* is. His face is sharper, his body broader. And his jaw is shadowed in a way that tells me he's probably the kind of guy who needs to shave every day.

I wonder what that stubble would feel like between my legs. I squash the thought immediately, flushing in

embarrassment. Admittedly, when my brother Cooper brought Luke home for Thanksgiving my junior year of high school, it was a formative experience for my hormones. But Luke, who will flirt with practically any woman, has *never* flirted with me.

Except, the way he's looking at me now ... he looks surprised.

He noticed I cut my hair.

Why did he notice my hair?

And then any appreciation vanishes from his face. He rolls his eyes as he releases his hold on the purple scarf. "Of course you'd knock everything over. You can't even walk down a sidewalk without causing a commotion."

"Luke," I acknowledge frostily, rising to my feet.

I turn away from Luke to give the vendor the hats and scarves I've collected. "I really am so sorry, sir. I um, I can buy a scarf?"

The vendor sighs heavily, like it's been a long morning.

"Or two scarves?" I try again. I don't exactly have tons of spare funds at the moment, but I feel horrible for spilling coffee all over his stuff. "Maybe a hat?"

Luke discretely reaches into his wallet and pulls out five one-hundred-dollar bills. "My apologies for the inconvenience. And she'll take the lavender scarf. She doesn't want a hat. They look terrible on her."

Then he turns and strides away.

I gape after him. "I do too look good in hats!"

Luke doesn't acknowledge me.

The vendor hands me back the lavender scarf and grins down at the money in his hand, looking a lot more cheerful.

"Thank you, I really am so sorry—"

The vendor looks up from counting the bills and glares at me.

“Right. I’ll get out of your hair.”

I turn and jog after Luke, catching up with him while he’s waiting for a break in traffic. “I can pay you back for the scarf.” I hold out my crumpled five-dollar bill that’s only slightly coffee stained.

Luke winces. “Please don’t.”

I shove the money back into my pocket and do my best to drape the lavender scarf around my neck so that it covers up the coffee stain.

Luke watches me futilely move the scarf around in front of my chest like it’s a fashion car crash he can’t quite tear his eyes away from.

“That was generous of you,” I grudgingly admit. “To pay the vendor like that.” I can’t quite bring myself to thank him for the scarf, since he was the one who bumped into me, but I can acknowledge an act of kindness when I see it.

Luke was always smart, ambitious, and even charming when he wanted to be. But I hadn’t remembered him being *nice*. Any time you caught him doing something kind, he’d eventually reveal he’d done the “kind” thing for some totally selfish reason.

I never understood why Cooper had stayed friends with him after college. But maybe he’s grown. Maybe he really is a nice person now.

Luke snorts. “It wasn’t generous. It was self-preservation. I don’t need some story hitting the news about the mean billionaire bullying a humble vendor. This way if he recognizes me and tweets about it, I come out looking good.”

I blink. I don’t know why I’m surprised. This is Luke Dewinter. Of course, there’s a cynical motive underneath the one kind thing he did this morning.

“Aaaand there he is, ladies and gentlemen,” I say, like I’m a carnival barker enticing people to come look at a mythical monster. “The biggest asshole I know. A total killjoy who sees the worst in everyone he meets.” I shake my head

sarcastically. “Don’t ever change, Luke. I’d die from the shock.”

“I need to make a phone call,” he says stiffly, and strides off into traffic.

Because it’s him, the cars screech to a halt to let him pass. Even New York traffic knows not to mess with Luke Dewinter.

For a second, I wonder if I went too far with that comment about him being the biggest asshole I know. I never say anything that mean to anyone. But after all these years, Luke’s pessimism still manages to get under my skin, and bring out the worst in me.

Every day, the world falls at his feet. What’s he got to be so bitter about?

The last time I saw Luke, it was at my brother’s engagement party. I was crying because of the happy romance of it all. Luke handed me a tissue and told me to stop crying, since there was no way Cooper and his new fiancée were actually going to make it to the altar. I’d called him heartless.

It’s only now that I’m thinking about it that I realize Luke was actually right about my brother’s engagement. They’d parted as friends a month before the wedding.

I shake my head, trying to put Luke Dewinter out of my mind as I hurry to the restaurant.

I’ve got a business meeting to get to. And the last thing I need is teenage fantasies of my older brother’s best friend clogging up my brain.



THE RESTAURANT IS A CHIC, dimly lit Italian place with vintage tiled floors and the scent of fresh basil in the air. Sarah waves me over to a table in the corner. She’s dressed in a yellow sweater that pops against her light brown skin, and her thick black hair is scooped up in a flawless chignon.

As I get closer, I realize she's already halfway through a glass of white wine.

I frown. Sarah doesn't drink at business lunches unless she's nervous.

For a panicked second, I wonder if she's dropping me as a client. Any other agent would. My first novel, a tragic love story about a magazine journalist who falls for the subject of one of her pieces, failed to catch the attention of a single publisher. The rejections were depressing, but bearable, when I had a day job working at a glossy lifestyle magazine. But since the magazine closed a month ago, I've been completely unable to commit to an idea for my second novel. Everything I write seems terrible.

Sarah's my best friend, but even she must have reached her limits with my indecision.

I sit down. "Sorry I'm late."

Sarah waves her hand. "That's ok. He is too."

I blink. "He?"

Sarah leans forward. "I think I know why you have writer's block on your second book. You feel stressed and insecure about not having a job, and it's blocking your creativity."

"That's ... entirely possible," I admit. Sarah's already ordered bread for the table. I take a piece of fresh bread and dip it in olive oil. "You said you had a project for me?"

Sarah nods eagerly. "A high-profile corporate type needs a writer to help him write his autobiography. It would be a bit of a rush job—they're behind schedule because he hasn't liked any of his prior writers. But you're so good at interviewing people."

It's true. I can get anyone to open up, no matter how prickly.

I chew my bread thoughtfully. "What's the deadline?"

"Two months from now," she said.

“*Two months*,” I choke. “That’s impossible.”

“The money is really good,” Sarah reminds me. “Like really, really good. Plus, you’d impress a lot of important people in the industry. It would raise your profile, which could help me sell your next book.”

I think it over. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch,” she says brightly. “You just need to impress him when he joins us for lunch in ...” she checks the statement gold watch on her wrist. “Two minutes.”

“Wait. This is a job interview?” I panic. “Sarah, I’m not prepared. I haven’t had a chance to research him. My shirt is covered in coffee.”

“I told you to dress nice,” Sarah said mildly.

I shook my head. “I don’t even know his name.”

“You sort of do,” she says, taking another sip of her wine. “In fact, you know him. Which is one of the reasons why this project is such a *great* fit for you.”

There’s a sinking feeling in my stomach. I don’t know any high-profile corporate types. No one except ...

“Oh, he’s here,” Sarah says, her voice low as she looks over my shoulder. She shoves her wine at me. “Drink this. Be nice. And remember you need the money.”

I hear the confident tread of a man’s dress shoes approaching on the tiled floor.

I close my eyes briefly. *Please. Don’t let it be him.*

“Sarah Lopez?” he inquires from behind me.

My stomach isn’t sinking anymore. It’s plummeting. Like a rock dropped out of an airplane.

Sarah beams up at him and stands up to shake his hand. “That’s me! So wonderful to meet you in person. And of course, you’ve already met your future writer, Hazel Dawson.”

The sound he makes is somewhere between a choke and a grunt. It tells me he wasn’t expecting this anymore than I was.

I can't put this off anymore.

I twist in my chair, forcing myself to smile up at him. And up. And up.

Christ, he's tall.

"Hi Luke," I say weakly. "Fancy meeting you here."

His ice blue eyes flicker down to my chest. "Nice scarf," he says dryly.

My stomach flips. I can't tell if it's nerves, or hormones, or professional desperation, but I know it's Luke's fault.

Luke stares me down, his gaze brooding and unreadable. For a second I wonder if he's going to turn on his heel and storm out, after the way I insulted him on the sidewalk.

The moment stretches.

"She's a really amazing writer," Sarah says. "Plus, Cooper will be so happy to find out you're working with her."

She leans hard on Cooper's name, reminding Luke that his best friend won't like it if he dismisses me out of hand.

Luke gives a long-suffering sigh and settles his broad body in the seat to the right of mine. When he turns and looks into my eyes, his gaze is near hypnotic. "Ok, Hazel Dawson. Tell me why you're the best writer to convince the world I have a heart."

LUKE

I watch Hazel nervously shred a piece of bread into a million pieces while she talks, taking me through her resume. All the important people she interviewed for the lifestyle magazine she used to work at. Her familiarity with my family's company. The fact that this won't be the first book she's written.

They're good points, and I don't care about any of them. I never wanted to do this damn autobiography. But my dad insisted.

Apparently, I have a "likeability" problem. Also, a "respectability" problem. Also, a "damnit, you've insulted half the board" problem.

I've been head of Strategic Planning and Performance at Helius Airlines for the past seven years. I've been working for Helius Airlines in one form or another since I was sixteen. Longer, if you count all the commercials and interviews I did back when I was a cute kid. The plan has always been for me to take over the company when my dad retires.

But now that it's finally time, my dad keeps dragging his feet.

The waiter stops by our table. "Are we ready to order?"

Hazel's agent Sarah orders a hearty lasagna. I order chicken lasagna. Hazel blinks, then panic-orders the soup of the day, which is French onion.

“You don’t like onions,” I remind her. “Order something else.”

Her eyes widen, clearly startled that I know that.

But instead of admitting I might actually be right about something, she tilts her chin up, fire in her eyes. “Maybe I’ve grown. Maybe I love onions.”

Stubborn, stubborn girl, I think.

If she were anybody else, that stubbornness would tempt me. Would she be that gloriously strong-willed with my mouth on hers? Or would she soften, and let me give her a taste of something she’d actually like?

But she isn’t anybody else. She’s Cooper’s sister. Cooper’s *little* sister. Who I’ve known since she was seventeen and blushed every time my hand accidentally bumped hers at the breakfast table.

I don’t let myself wonder about her stubbornness. Instead, I remind myself what’s at stake with this autobiography.

My dad’s planning to retire in a little over six months. And right now, he’s worried that most of the board would vote against choosing me to run the company.

Contrary to what Hazel thinks, I’m not an asshole. I just don’t have patience for stupid ideas, cowardly decisions, rampant incompetence, or business strategies that prioritize short term gains over long-term sustainability. Which explains why I don’t like most of the Helius Airlines board members.

They, in turn, dislike me because I tell them what I actually think, and because I enjoy the occasional tryst with mildly famous women.

I think if our board members don’t want to know about my sex life, they should stop clicking on gossip sites, but my dad’s face turned purple when I suggested that solution. Instead, we’re going with his solution—publish an autobiography that will hit stores a month before he retires and persuade everyone I’m respectable and likable enough to be CEO.

There are other parts to the plan, of course. I'm supposed to wine and dine certain board members, go to a few galas, hold my tongue in public.

But right now, it's the book that's causing me problems. Specifically, finding a writer. The first one my dad found was a total ass-kisser. The second couldn't write for shit. The third didn't know anything about the airline industry.

My dad told me I couldn't dismiss his fourth writer recommendation unless I met her in person. He'd had a calculating look in his eye when he said it.

Now I know why.

"What are you looking for in a writer?" Hazel asks.

She's as fresh and pretty as always. Big brown eyes, wide mouth, pert nose. She's traded the long hair she used to wear in a sloppy ponytail for a short, stylish cut that swings flirtatiously around her neck. The tips of her brown waves are now dyed gold.

It makes her look like she's been dipped in sunlight.

"Someone discreet and effective, who won't get in the way of the rest of my life," I say.

Hazel visibly represses an eye roll. "But what's the *point* of the book?"

"My dad wants someone to remake my professional image. Make me more ... respectable." I leave it at that, because no way am I mentioning the paparazzi or the women to Hazel.

She nods. "An autobiography can be a great way to take control of your narrative and share your story. Show the world the real you."

She sounds so agreeable, I catch myself about to nod back. I can see why Hazel gets her interview subjects to open up. There's something so fundamentally *friendly* about her. You want to trust her. You want to make her smile.

You want her to see you.

That last thing is why there's no way in hell I can hire her.

I'll do this autobiography if I have to. But it's not going to be a tell all. Hell, I don't care if it's interesting. All I care about is that it gets me the CEO job without invading my privacy.

I realize I've gone too long without speaking. The silence has turned awkward, and Hazel has started nervously crumbling her bread again.

A very, very, *very*, small part of me wishes I could hire her. I like the idea of being the white knight who gives her the big break she needs. I like it way more than I should.

But if I hired her, she'd try to get past my armor, to the "real" me. Then I'd have to fire her, and Cooper would be pissed I hurt his baby sister.

Better to end this as quickly as possible. "What would you need from me, as a subject?"

"Access," she says, immediately. "Honesty. Trust."

"Right. Then it's not going to work," I announce. "You need access, I need privacy. Those are fundamentally incompatible goals."

That pisses her off. But she tries to hide it. "Look, if you tell me something and regret it, we can always edit that part out of the book. But if you're keeping me at arm's length the whole time, the book will be boring."

"Boring is fine," I deadpan. "We're going for respectable, remember?"

"I'm not going to write a *boring* book," Hazel says, indignant.

"I'm not going to have you invading my privacy," I counter.

"Oh, look! Here's the food," Sarah interrupts, sounding desperate.

Sarah and I dig into our food.

Hazel surveys her French onion soup hesitantly.

If it was anyone else, I'd let her be, but it's Hazel, and something wicked eggs me on. "Is something wrong with your food?" I ask innocently.

Her eyes flash, and something inside me heats in response. It's always been fun messing with her.

You mess with her because you can't flirt with her, a judgmental voice that sounds like my father's says. I ignore it.

"I'm just waiting for it to cool," Hazel says primly. "Wouldn't want to burn my tongue."

"Of course," I agree. "I can think of much better uses for your tongue."

She blushes, and too late I realize that sounded way dirtier than I meant it to.

And now I'm thinking things I shouldn't.

I shift uncomfortably, trying to marshal my thoughts before they have any more of a physical effect. "Let's cut to the chase. We both know this won't work. You're a talented writer, but we've got opposing requirements for this project. And we've got a preexisting relationship that is ... not professional."

I watch a storm of conflicting emotions flicker across her face. She doesn't want to work with me any more than I want to work with her. But she doesn't like that I'm the one to say it.

Tough shit, babe, I think. I don't have time to sit around babying her feelings.

"Oh, for God's sake," Sarah says. "You two are ridiculous." She points at me. "This book isn't going to do shit for your reputation if it's so boring no one reads it. You need a good writer, and Hazel's the best. Plus, you don't have time to find anyone else."

Then she rounds on Hazel. "You need the money, and you need the recognition this job will bring."

Sarah's phone starts buzzing. She glances down at it. "I need to take this. It's a client of mine who actually *wants*

professional success.” She excuses herself and heads outside to take the call.

Leaving me alone with Hazel.

LUKE

The silence grows.

Hazel pokes at her soup.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” I signal the waiter. “She wants macaroni and cheese.”

“I do not—”

But the waiter has already disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

Hazel sits with her arms crossed, mutinous.

The silence grows between us.

The thing is, Sarah’s right. Much as I’m loathe to admit it, my dad’s plan works better if this book convinces people I’m a good person. For that, I need a good writer. And I’m running out of time.

Plus, if Hazel needs this job as much as Sarah implied, then Cooper would want me to give Hazel a chance.

“If we do this,” I say at last, “we need to find a way to work together.”

“Oh, now you think it’s a good idea.?” Hazel motions back and forth between us. “In the past hour we’ve fought about how to act on a New York sidewalk, how to write a book, and what *I’m* going to order for lunch. Do you really think we can work closely together for two months straight?” She shakes her head. “Writing a book that quickly is going to involve long

hours, late nights, intimate conversations ... we'd kill each other."

My brain is hung up on late *nights* and the soft curve of her lips, and the way her eyes spark when she's pissed at me.

Fuck.

I'm not an idiot. I know I'm attracted to Hazel. But I've always been able to shove it aside. If we're working closely for hours on end ...

This is a much worse idea than she realizes.

I take out my phone—ignoring Hazel's pointed glare at my manners—and text my dad. *I've met your writer. This won't work.*

His response is immediate. *I don't have time for your theatrics. If you can't get this book written by the deadline I don't know if I can recommend you for CEO in six months.*

I scowl down at my phone.

Working with Hazel is a terrible idea. But apparently, I don't have another option.

I've worked in difficult conditions before. I can make this work, I decide.

"What we need are some ground rules. Give me your notebook," I say.

"My ... notebook?"

"You always have one," I say impatiently. She'd been scribbling in one when I met her, and I'd seen her jotting down ideas in countless ones since. Hell, she'd brought one to Cooper's ill-fated engagement party. She'd been carrying one of those tiny fancy purses women take to formal occasions, and I'd seen her notebook poking out of the top of it.

It's kind of a cute habit. Not that I'd ever admit that.

Hazel digs in her leather backpack and produces her current notebook. This one is pastel pink, with watercolor style trees painted on it in pretty rainbow colors.

I stare at it for a second. My dad would have a heart attack if he ever saw a Helius Airlines employee using a notebook like this. We're a sober gray and black kind of company.

I reach out to take the notebook, but Hazel doesn't let go.

"You can't look at any of the things I've written," she says. "That's personal."

Immediately, I'm seized with the urge to read everything she's ever written in this soft, silly notebook.

Is it full of dreams? Story ideas? Secret hurts she doesn't tell anyone because she wants everyone to think she's tough?

"I'll resist the impulse," I say dryly.

Hazel lets me take the notebook, reluctantly.

I flip to a clean page and write *Luke & Hazel's Rules for Book Writing*.

Hazel reads over my shoulder. "You cannot be serious. This isn't how contracts work! There are lawyers, and paperwork, official signatures. You can't just make up stuff and jot it down in my notebook."

"A contract is just a deal," I say with forced patience. "And for this deal, the only people who matter are you and me. Understand?"

She blinks those big Bambi eyes at me. I hold her gaze, and for a second, it's like we're the only two people in the whole restaurant.

"Come on," I coax. "From what Sarah said, you need this as much as I do."

"Fine," Hazel says abruptly. "But afterwards we're typing this up and filing it somewhere official. In case you try to weasel out of one of the deal points."

I grit my teeth and ignore the insult to my honor, doing my best to concentrate on getting this damn deal hammered out. "You said you needed access. What's that mean in practice? An hour a week?"

She snorts. "Try ten hours."

“I can give you five,” I say. I watch her expression, waiting. When she grudgingly nods, I add the first rule to our list.

1. *Luke gives Hazel five hours a week for access/interviews.*

“What else?” I say.

She chews her lip, and I briefly lose control of my thoughts.

“If we’re doing this in two months, you can’t micromanage me,” she says. “I’ll take two weeks for research and interviews. Then I’ll turn in a rough outline for you to approve. After that, we’ll use your five hours a week to focus on fleshing out the details for that week’s chapter. Are you ok with a short book?”

“If we make it too long, no one will believe I wrote it,” I point out.

That earns me a flicker of a smile. The first genuine one I’ve gotten from her today.

It makes me feel wistful and hungry at the same time.

After I add her *No micromanaging* rule, I add a third rule. *When not working on the book, we stay out of each other’s lives.*

“We only interact five hours a week, and we keep it focused on the book. Otherwise, we’ll just start fighting,” I say.

Otherwise, I’ll just start thinking about your mouth, I think.

She purses her lips. “I know this will shock you Luke, but you don’t need to put that part in writing. Not every woman is dying for your company.”

“Too late. Already wrote it down.”

She heaves a long-suffering sigh. “Is there anything else we need to cover? Legal stuff? Pay?”

“Sarah will work out the contract details with my lawyers,” I say. “Although now that you mention pay ...”

I add a fourth rule. *Hazel gets a 25% bonus if Luke makes CEO in six months.* “Some extra incentive for you.”

Her eyes widen. I can practically see her doing the math in her head. “I can make that work,” she says faintly.

“Good.” I sign and date the contract. Then I pass the notebook to her.

She hesitates.

I hold my breath.

“Oh, fuck it. Here goes nothing.” She leans over the notebook, and her hair falls over her face as she signs.

I can’t tell if she’s happy about this devil’s bargain we’ve struck.

It doesn’t matter if she’s happy, I remind myself. For the next two months, she’s not Cooper’s sister. She’s just an employee, like anyone else who works for you.

Our waiter emerges from the kitchen and places a gourmet version of macaroni and cheese in front of her.

It’s covered in caramelized onions.

Hazel looks at it. And then she starts laughing.

Her laugh is hearty and genuine, loud and unguarded. Like Cooper, she laughs with her whole body. But that’s where the similarity ends.

She doesn’t laugh like a girl anymore, I realize. She laughs like a woman—the kind who throws her arms open to the world and dares it to disappoint her.

She catches my eye, and my pulse speeds up.

Trouble, I think. This woman is trouble.

And I’ve just signed on for two months of her.

Sarah comes back. “Sorry, sorry that took longer than I thought. Right, now that everyone’s fed and calm, let’s order

dessert and work through your concerns. I'm sure we can come up with a solution that meets everyone's needs—"

"Send the contract to my office," I say, standing. "Hazel, we start tomorrow."

She looks at me, dark eyes wide and unreadable. And then she nods.

I head out, paying the bill when I pass the maître d.

As I step out onto the bustling sidewalk, Hazel's laugh echoes in my ears.

I tell myself I can work closely with Hazel.

I can ignore everything that makes her ... well, Hazel.

Of course I can.

I've been doing it for eleven years.

HAZEL

“Ms. Dawson? I’m so sorry to do this, but Mr. Dewinter is going to have to cancel on you. Can we reschedule for a later date?”

I stare at my cell phone in disbelief. This is the second time Luke’s administrative assistant has canceled on me in two days.

I get that Luke doesn’t want to do this. But he *said* he could give me five hours a week. He *signed his name*. He *ruined a page in my notebook*.

“No,” I say to the poor administrative assistant. I think he said his name is Joey. “No, that’s not acceptable. Please tell Luke he can’t keep rescheduling. He’s wasting my time and his.”

Joey clears his throat. “How about you tell him that? The day after tomorrow, perhaps?”

“Argh.” I make a strangled sound and hang up before I say something rude to poor Joey, who truly doesn’t deserve it. It’s not his fault he has an asshole for a boss.

I throw my phone down on the bed and pace around my tiny studio apartment. I hate working from my bedroom like this. I miss having an office I can go to. It’s harder for people to ignore you when you’ve got a shiny office, and words like *print deadline* and *my editor* and *we can interview your business rival instead if you’re not available*. And when that doesn’t work, you can just show up for the interview and pretend you didn’t see the email they sent trying to cancel.

I stop pacing. That's not a bad idea.

I'll show up at Luke's office and refuse to leave until he gives me my interview or explains to my face why he's going back on our bargain.

I hastily trade my sweatpants for dark-wash jeans, a loose blue sweater, and my cowboy boots for luck. Then I toss everything I need for the interview into my backpack and start the long walk to Luke's office in the financial district.

It would be faster to take the subway, but I need the fresh air and exercise to calm down.

Also, I need to make a phone call.

Cooper answers on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Your best friend's being an asshole," I say without preamble.

He takes that in. "Ok, I have questions. One, when did you run into Luke? And two, why do you always give him such a hard time?"

"I'm not the one being difficult!" I protest. I pinch the bridge of my nose. "He hired me to help write his memoir. Except we're on a tight deadline, and he keeps canceling our first interview."

"Ah," Cooper says. There's a wealth of knowledge in that *ah*. Like he knows exactly why Luke's doing this to me.

"I need you to tell me what to do to get him on board with this," I say. "I thought he was, but now he's ..." I trail off, too frustrated for words. "What do I do, Coop?"

I dodge around a group of tourists, waiting for Cooper's answer.

"Here's what you need to know about Luke. Not only is he responsible for thousands of people's jobs, but his division is also responsible for maintaining quality control of every plane Helius Airlines puts in the air."

"I get it, he's busy—"

“No, he’s effective. Since they put Luke in charge of Strategic Planning and Performance, not a single Helius Airlines flight has had any kind of performance issue. Do you know how insanely rare that is?”

Ok, that’s impressive.

Not that I’m ever going to tell Luke that.

“If he’s canceling on you, it’s not because he’s being a dick. It’s because he’s personally invested in making sure millions of people can travel safely to their destination,” Cooper says.

“Look, I’m glad he’s a conscientious airline owner,” I say. “Really. But that doesn’t mean he gets to hire me to do a job, then make it impossible for me to do it.”

Cooper sighs. “Yeah, that’s the second thing you need to know about Luke. He doesn’t trust reporters. And he hates being interviewed.”

I stop walking. “... What?”

“His dad made him give this interview when he was fifteen, right after his mom died. It was a shitshow,” Cooper explains. “It was supposed to be a puff piece about how Helius Airlines is a family-run company. But the reporter was a total asshole.”

Takes one to know one, I think, but then the rest of what Cooper said catches up with me.

That story means that Luke’s dad was making him give interviews when he was in high school. I assumed Luke had been in the public eye his whole life. But I never thought about what that meant in practice.

If someone had interviewed me in high school, I would have sounded like an idiot.

Luke’s made plenty of mistakes. But he’s also had his mistakes publicized to the whole world since he was teenager.

Maybe I can see why he’s avoiding our interview. *Maybe*.

“How do I get him to open up?” I ask.

Cooper laughs. “Fuck if I know. But don’t be afraid to show up at his office and drag him out into the sunlight. Sometimes you need to remind him there’s more to life than work.”

“Says the man who’s about to go on a month-long scientific expedition to the heart of the Amazon rainforest,” I say. My brother is a cheerful, deeply nerdy environmental biologist—pretty much the opposite of his grumpy billionaire best friend. But both men clearly share workaholic tendencies.

We chat about his upcoming trip, until I get to Luke’s offices.

I look up at the glass and steel building towering above me and swallow.

“Wish me luck,” I say.

“Nah,” Cooper chuckles. “He’s the one who needs luck.”

HAZEL

I sit outside Luke's office for an hour and a half, refusing to budge. Joey, a deceptively organized frat bro in a pastel polo shirt, keeps shooting me looks that are half terrified, half impressed.

"No one's ever tried to force Luke to meet with him when he doesn't want to," he says, like I'm the eighth wonder of the world.

I'm trying to decide what to say to that, when Luke's office door finally opens, and I'm faced with the man himself.

He's wearing gray slacks, a white button up with the sleeves rolled up, and a tie he loosened at some point during the day. He looks sophisticated and powerful, a man at work.

He looks like a man who can keep planes from falling out of the sky with the sheer force of his will.

His eyes darken when they see me.

I scramble to my feet.

"Hazel. I told Joey to reschedule you." He narrows his eyes at Joey.

Joey cowers, as much as one can cower while seated behind a massive desk.

I raise my chin. "Joey delivered your message. But I refuse to accept it."

He glowers at me. "Hazel. I don't have time for this. I can't fit five hours into my schedule at the drop of a hat—"

“Then we won’t do five hours today,” I say. “We’ll just do however much time you have.” I turn to Joey. “How much free time does he have today?”

Joey consults the calendar on his laptop. “He has a thirty-minute lunch break. Well, 27 minutes. We’ve talked through three minutes of it.”

“Thank you, Joey,” Luke says, forebodingly.

Joey winces, realizing too late he probably shouldn’t have said anything.

“27 minutes it is,” I say, heading into Luke’s office. “Joey, order Mr. Dewinter something he can eat while he’s being interviewed.”

“Joey do *not* listen to her,” Luke growls.

But he follows me into his office and shuts the door behind him, which I think means I won.

I settle into one of the gray upholstered chairs across from his imposing desk. This office feels like Luke, I realize. Sleek, luxurious, and totally impersonal.

“Don’t you want to order lunch?” I say. “It sounds like you have a full day.”

“I normally work through lunch,” Luke says shortly. “Let’s get this over with.”

He settles behind his desk, looking like he owns the world.

Or maybe just the skies.

I set my audio recorder on his desk and turn it on. “I’m recording this interview, but it’s only for my own notes, to make sure I quote you accurately. I won’t share the recording with anyone.”

Luke grunts.

I take that as consent.

I pull my notebook out of my leather backpack and flip to the questions I wrote down for him. “Let’s start with an easy

one. You've been working for Helius since you were in high school. What's that like?"

His eyebrows shoot up. "What's that *like*? Do you know how many jobs I've had here? How many teams I've worked on?"

"No," I said, gritting my teeth. "That's why I'm asking."

"I spent at least a month as an administrative assistant for every director level position, getting the lay of the land. In college I worked in marketing for a bit." He represses a shudder.

Interesting, I think.

"You didn't like marketing?" I smile, encouraging him to fess up.

Instead, he withdraws behind a wall of professionalism. "Our marketing team is excellent, as are all the teams at Helius Airlines. I was an unnecessary addition."

"Oh. Sure." I consult my notes and try again. "What was the first team where you really felt like a necessary addition? Where you flourished?"

"It's not about me," Luke says stubbornly. "It's about what's best for the company."

I groan. "Luke, with all due respect, it's your memoirs. This time it is about you."

His jaw clenches, mulish.

I sigh. "Look, this book is supposed to make people like you, right? Well, it's easier to like people when they're talking about something they're passionate about."

Luke doesn't say anything. But his jaw does relax slightly.

I wonder what else I could do to get him to relax, I think, and then clamp down on the thought.

"Show me," he says, and for a breathless moment I think he's read my thoughts.

But then he continues.

“Tell me something you’re passionate about. Then I’ll tell you what I like about the work I do,” he clarifies.

I purse my lips. Part of me thinks he’s dragging out the clock so he can avoid my questions. But if this is what he needs to trust me, I can do it.

“I like writing profiles of people. But I *love* writing fiction. There’s something about creating a whole world in your head and filling it with characters you love ... anyway.” I look at my lap, feeling self-conscious. “Sometimes it feels like trudging up a hill. But when everything clicks into place, and the story is flowing, it’s magic. It’s the closest I’ve ever felt to flying.”

When I look up, he’s watching me, an unreadable look in his dark blue eyes.

Is he going to say something caustic? Make fun of me?

He scratches the side of his jaw absently. “Why aren’t you doing that then?”

Because no one wanted my book, I think.

I shift in my chair, uncomfortably. “That wasn’t the deal. Your turn. Tell me your favorite part about working at Helius.”

He leans back in his chair and laces his hands behind his head, surveying me. “Do you know what Strategic Planning and Performance does?”

“Cooper says you keep the planes in the sky,” I say.

He arches an eyebrow sarcastically. “We all do that. But yes, I’m the person in charge of figuring out what success looks like today, and what it will look like in the future. And then I give my people everything they need to make it happen.” He leans forward, his excitement creeping towards the surface. “For example, the airline industry is at the mercy of fuel prices. If regulation passes to limit drilling, if a war or natural disaster restricts our access to oil, we have no choice but to jack up prices, whether that makes sense for customers or not. But imagine we could reduce how much fuel we needed per flight.”

“How?” I ask, curious. I didn’t know much about airplanes, but I was pretty sure things like gravity and physics couldn’t be changed, even by Luke.

“Hybrid planes,” Luke answers, his eyes alight. “Like hybrid cars, they’re more practical than going completely electric, while still offering many of the same benefits.”

“And they’re better for the environment,” I say, thinking that Cooper would like that.

Luke waves aside that point. “Yeah, yeah, we’ll get good P.R. for it. But the point is, it will save us money in the long run, and give us more control over our business model.”

I sigh. God forbid he do something just so kids with asthma can enjoy better air quality.

“Some airlines have already dipped their toes into the waters,” Luke continues. “And as soon as I’m CEO, Helius Airlines will be next.”

He smiles, fierce, like a warrior about to charge into battle.

My breath hitches.

I look down, focusing on my notebook. Luke’s clearly passionate about this project. I make a note to research hybrid airplanes, so I can do a follow up interview with him and ask better questions.

I glance at the clock and realize we’ve only got ten more minutes.

I start my next question. “Your bio said you started working at Helius the day you turned sixteen.”

Luke nods. “It was my dad’s birthday gift to me.”

I blink. “Your dad’s gift to you was a part time job when you were a minor, answering phones for his friends. While you were still a full-time student.”

“Is there a question coming?” Luke grumbles.

“Yeah.” I tap my pen against my notebook, trying to think how to phrase this. I’d read his mom’s obituary for research, and it sounded like she’d done her best to let Luke be a normal

kid while she was alive. “That’s a lot to put on any teen’s shoulders. Was everyone in your family on board with that decision? Or did anyone have ... other opinions?”

Luke tenses.

And then he says, “Get out.”

“What?”

He turns off my audio recorder and hands it to me. “Our time is up.”

I stand, my journalistic instincts perking up. There’s a real story there, even if he’s not going to tell it to me today

I feel frustrated and full of energy, like a woman who’s been thoroughly kissed to the brink of orgasm and then left alone on her doorstep, unfulfilled.

I stand and pack up my things. “Fine. But we’re doing this again tomorrow.”

He glowers at me.

I cross my arms.

He stands slowly, so I can feel the full effect of his height. I’m not a short woman, but there’s something about Luke that takes up all the space in the room.

“No more personal questions,” he orders.

“Sure,” I nod. “No more personal questions.”

Then I scurry out of his office before he can change his mind.

It’s not exactly a lie, I tell myself. I won’t ask any more personal questions *tomorrow*.

But sooner or later, I’m going to get him to lower his guard. And then I’ll find out what makes Luke Dewinter tick.

LUKE

I'm running laps around Central Park at 6.00 a.m., trying to burn off the restless energy I've had since Hazel sat down in my office yesterday in that soft blue sweater that showed the lace of her bra and the soft swell of her breasts every time she leaned over.

I tried not to look. But fuck, I'm only a man.

If it was anyone else, I'd think she was toying with me. But this is Hazel. Sweet, single-minded Hazel who just wants to bombard me with the kind of questions that have made me avoid therapy my whole life.

Why poke at the past?

My phone buzzes with an incoming call from Cooper. I close my eyes in guilt, trying not to think about Hazel or her lace.

I swipe to answer. "What's up?"

"I'm at the airport. I'm about to fly out on a remote research trip, and I wanted to talk to you first."

"Who are you flying?" I ask out of habit.

"LATAM Brazil."

"Traitor," I say without heat. LATAM is fine, but the truth is I like it better when the people I care about are on one of my planes. When I was fourteen, my dad made me memorize every commercial plane crash in recent memory and what could have been done to prevent them.

I step off the trail to stretch. “What did you want to talk about?”

“My sister.”

I fall out of the stretch. I’m on the verge of protesting that I didn’t *do* anything, looking doesn’t *count*, when Cooper continues.

“Stop being an asshole to Hazel. If you said you’d do the interviews, do the fucking interviews,” he says.

Oh. Right. That.

I start stretching again. “We worked out an arrangement yesterday.”

“Good,” Cooper says. “If you make her professional life hell, I swear I’ll ...”

I grin. “What, kill me?” Cooper is the most even-tempered man I know. He doesn’t even kill spiders, just gently carries them outside. It was something of a sticking point for his ex-fiancée.

“No,” Cooper admits. “But I’ll be very disappointed in you.”

“Ouch.” I wince. I think I’d genuinely prefer it if he tried to kill me.

“Also,” Cooper says, warming to his theme, “I’ll tell Hazel tons of embarrassing stories about you for her book.”

“It’s *my* book,” I remind him.

“Remember that time senior year when I felt bad about embarrassing myself in front of that girl I liked? And to make me feel better you told me about that time when you were in high school, and a cute cheerleader kept saying the word ‘erection’ during her presentation about the history of New York Skyscrapers and you got a hard-on in front of the whole class?”

“I will *end* you, Cooper,” I threaten.

He laughs. “Just be nice to Hazel, ok?”

He knows better than anyone that I'm not *nice*, but I grumble something that sounds like agreement.

"It'll be fine," Cooper promises. "Hazel's a compassionate writer, you know? She gets straight to her subject's heart, and then shares it with the world."

That was exactly what I was afraid of.



I'M in the middle of a phone call talking one of our lead engineers off a cliff when Joey knocks on my door.

"*She's* here," he whispers.

My pulse leaps.

I keep my expression bored. "Tell her to wait five minutes." This call will wrap in two, but it doesn't hurt to remind Hazel who's the boss here.

I turn my attention back to my phone call.

"They're not going to cut your funding," I tell my lead engineer for the millionth time. He's brilliant but neurotic, and the assholes in accounting like giving him heart attacks. "Stop going to finance meetings. It always freaks you out. Send your assistant instead. She's better at office politics than you are, and I need you finishing that project by next Thursday."

I hang up on his protests, feeling a headache forming.

I do *not* have a half hour to spend chatting with Hazel. But if I want to be CEO, this is what my lunch breaks are going to look like for the foreseeable future.

I cross my arms and steel myself for Hazel's arrival.

I miss my P-51 Mustang. Whenever I get an afternoon of free time, I drive to an airfield upstate and take my favorite plane up in the air. There's something about being up in the air, just me and the sky, that settles me. Unfortunately, I haven't had a free afternoon in over a month.

There's a timid knock at my door, and then Hazel opens it without waiting for an answer. "Joey said I could come in?" She smiles and steps into the office. "I was hoping we could start over after yesterday."

I grunt. "Fresh starts are for people who already failed."

Hazel's smile sharpens. "Did your father teach you that?"

He did, but I'm going to give her the satisfaction of saying that.

Today her sweater is a tight maroon V-neck. A delicate butterfly necklace flirts with her cleavage. It's ridiculous, and somehow perfectly her.

I'm distracted enough by her necklace, it takes me a moment to notice that my office now smells like ... Chinese takeout?

Hazel sets a plastic bag on my desk and starts unpacking takeout containers. "I didn't know what you liked, so I bought a few things. This is going on my expense account by the way, so don't thank me."

I stare at the food, confused. "You ... brought me lunch."

"You said you always skip it. It's probably why you're so grumpy." She opens each of the white cardboard cartons, and the sweet tangy scent of General Tso's chicken and fried rice fills the room. Hazel tosses me a plastic fork. Then she selects her own food and settles in the chair across from me.

"Is this to get me to lower my guard?" I demand. "Because it won't work. No personal questions."

Hazel rolls her eyes. "It's because you're human and deserve food, you idiot." She shoves fried rice into her mouth. "Are you always so suspicious?"

Yes, I think. For good reason.

I can't remember the last time someone made sure I ate.

I can't remember the last time someone did something nice for me, with no ulterior motive.

“Let’s get this over with,” I say gruffly, reaching for a carton of dumplings.

She nods and pulls out her recorder. “Let’s start with something fun. You went to Harvard, right? Tell me something fun you did. People love stories about rich people being human.”

“Nice to know my humanity was in doubt,” I said.

“Come on,” she coaxed. “Cooper said you guys did something with the a cappella group?”

I bark out a laugh. I’d forgotten about that. “My dad will *not* like it if you put that in the book.”

“Let me be the judge of that,” she says. “Come on, tell me the story.”

I mean to tell her to move on to the next question, but she’s smiling at me, wide and generous, and what comes out of my mouth is, “There’s two things you need to know to understand this story. A student a cappella group was supposed to sing the school fight song at an upcoming football game. And Professor Wagner was a massive dick.”

She bites her lip. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“He fucked with Cooper’s GPA just because he could, and Cooper almost lost his scholarship,” I say. “Also, he made a girl I was dating cry. I didn’t like him.”

“Understandable,” Hazel says.

“I knew he was going to be at that football game. He loved football. So Cooper and I rewrote the school fight song to make fun of him. And then I bribed the a cappella group to sing it at the game.”

“You didn’t!” Hazel says, her eyes wide.

“You should have seen how red his face got. It matched his jersey.”

Hazel laughs, delighted. “How much did you have to pay the a cappella group?”

“Not as much as you’d think,” I say. “A couple of the guys hated Wagner so much they did it for free.”

Hazel shakes her head at me, mock scolding. But I can tell she likes what she just heard.

Her approval warms my chest in a way I don’t want to examine too closely. “What’s next on your list of questions?”

“I heard a rumor you ran track but got kicked off the team when you skipped a big race to hook up with a girl on the rival team,” she says.

“I can neither confirm nor deny,” I say, straight-faced, and she laughs again.

It goes on like that, her asking questions about college, and my friendship with Cooper, and stuff that doesn’t really matter. Stuff that’s surprisingly easy to talk about.

When Joey pops his head in to remind me I have a meeting, I’m surprised to feel regret that our interview is over.

“How is any of this helping you write my book?” I ask Hazel, as she packs up our lunch. There’s not much left over. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was. “People can’t be interested in this stuff.”

“I’m in the research stage. I’m learning your voice, how you tell stories. But I’ll also mix in some of these details when it’s time to write about more important stuff.” She waves her hand vaguely. “For example, if you have a story about standing up to a bully at work, I might start that chapter with the story about you being the one to stand up to a bully the whole school hated.”

“No one has ever bullied me at work. I’m a *Dewinter*.”

She heaves an exaggerated sigh. “I forget how literal you corporate types are. It was a hypothetical example.” But she’s smiling while she says it.

“Come to dinner with me,” I say on impulse.

Her eyes widen.

Shit. Did that sound like I was asking her out?

Was I asking her out?

“You can interview me more,” I say, making sure to sound like I’m dreading the process. “Might as well get this over with.”

“Oh. Right. For the book.” She nods. “That makes sense.”

Does she look disappointed?

My eyes drop down to her mouth. For second, I’m hit with the urge to press her back against the wall and kiss the disappointment away. I wonder if she’d make that little noise of satisfaction in the back of her throat, grinding against me helplessly, searching for the release she’s too shy to ask for.

She’s Cooper’s sister, I remind myself. Your employee.

“Eight p.m. Gray’s tavern,” I say abruptly. “Now get out of my office. I have a meeting.”

Hazel blinks, startled from her thoughts, and I’d give more than I should to know what she was just thinking about.

“Eight p.m. Gray’s tavern,” she repeats. “I’ll be counting the hours,” she adds sarcastically, as she heads out the door.

The undignified truth is, I think I might *actually* count the hours until I get to see her again.

Fuck.

HAZEL

I show up at the restaurant out of breath. I'm running late after changing into and out of three different outfits. In the end, I kept the outfit I was wearing earlier, but I swapped out my cowboy boots for high-heeled midnight blue ankle boots embroidered with silver moons and stars, and freshened up my makeup.

It turns out Grayson's tavern is basically a high-end pub. English Tudor aesthetic meets minimalist menus and \$30 cocktails. It's busy enough to feel comfortable, but quiet enough you can actually hear the people next to you. I glance around the room, assuming Luke isn't here yet. He probably got sucked into something at work.

But then I spot him. He's sitting by the front window. The city lights flicker across the sharp angles of his face, and his restless fingers tapping the table.

He looks like something out of a movie.

In five months, people are going to buy a book telling the story of this man's life. And I'm the one who's supposed to write. To show the world the real Luke Dewinter.

Do I even know the real Luke Dewinter?

I've gotten so used to thinking of Luke as a rich, cynical asshole. But I noticed a thread running through every story he told today. They were all about sticking up for someone more vulnerable than him.

Not that he noticed that. No, to Luke those stories were all about him playing pranks and goofing off and getting into trouble.

I'm beginning to wonder if maybe there's more to Luke than I thought.

Why does that thought make me feel strangely breathless?

I head to the window table and slide into the seat across from Luke. "Hey."

He raises his eyebrows. "Such an articulate greeting. I can tell you're a writer."

"Shut up," I say.

A waiter sets a glass of dark beer down in front of him, and a glass of red wine in front of me. I'm about to give Luke crap for ordering for me, but when I sip it, it's delicious.

Damn him for remembering what kind of wine I like.

"Are you ready to order?" the waiter asks.

"No," I say, at the same time Luke says, "Yes."

Luke hands me the menu. There are four pricey entrees on the simple menu, three of which have onions.

Luke smirks. "She'll have the schnitzel. I'll have the bratwurst and potatoes."

"Very good." The waiter takes our menus and disappears.

"It must be hard," Luke says, "having such a sensitive palette. Maybe you'd have more options if you ordered off the children's menu."

I flip him off.

He grins, wolfish, and my stomach flips.

A stray comment I read on social media today when I was researching Luke floats through my mind. *He obviously likes his women feisty.*

Someone had left the comment under two grainy photos of Luke with some soap opera actress I vaguely recognize. In the

first, they're arguing. In the second, he's kissing her passionately, and she's melting into him.

The photos are at least five years old, and as far as I know Luke hasn't seen that actress since.

But I still feel a wash of heat thinking about those images of Luke. The way he just ... controlled her. Took what they both wanted.

Normally men who boss me around are *not* my type. But there's something about Luke that keeps throwing me off my game.

I clear my throat and fumble in my purse for my audio recorder and notebook. I set them both on the table and hit record. "Ok. Tell me about your earliest memory of Helius."

Luke sips his beer, thinking. "My grandpa's office. I think I was four or five. My mom was talking to my dad about something, I think. I escaped and found my grandpa's office. He had model planes in his office, with the Helius Airlines logo on them."

He smiles now, remembering. "He stopped his meeting to pull me onto his lap and show me the airplanes."

I make a note to research more about his grandpa. "He founded Helius, right? What was he like?"

"Total salesman," Luke says without hesitation. "He could make friends with anyone. He was whip smart and wasn't afraid to take business risks nobody else would. He flew planes in WWII. Won the medal of valor." Luke looks out the window. "I think after that, running one of the fastest growing airlines of the twentieth century felt like a fun, low-stakes game to him."

"He sounds amazing," I say. "It must have been hard to follow in his footsteps."

Luke frowned. "I never really thought about that. If it was hard for my dad, he never let on."

I wasn't talking about your dad, I think, but I don't push it.

“What about you?” Luke asks. “What’s your earliest memory of writing?”

The question catches me off guard. I sip my wine, letting the rich taste fill my mouth. “I’ve got this one memory, from before I knew how to write. I wanted to make a picture book about our dog, so I made Cooper write it down for me. I made him draw the pictures too, since he was better than me. I wanted it to be good.”

The corner of Luke’s mouth quirks. “What I’m hearing is, you’ve always been a bossy perfectionist messing up other people’s schedules.”

“You say bossy, I say project manager.”

“Touché.” He lifts his glass in salute, his eyes laughing.

For some reason that makes me flush.

I turn back to my notebook. “Um, do you have any hobbies?”

“You mean with all my free time,” he says pointedly.

“Ugh, you’re such a martyr,” I complain. “Everyone needs to do something for fun.”

The waiter returns with our food. It smells rich and decadent, which, come to think of it, also describes the man who ordered it.

“I run,” Luke says. And then he takes a massive bite of his food.

This is the thing I’ve noticed about Luke. He appreciates what he puts in his mouth. And he’s not delicate about it. He’s got manners, obviously, but he eats with gusto.

I wonder if he eats pussy like that. I frantically squash the thought and reach for my glass of wine.

“What about you?” Luke asks, licking sauce off his thumb.

“What?” I ask, setting my wineglass down too hard. It sloshes over the edge, and I hastily fumble to mop it up with my napkin.

“Hobbies,” he prompts. “I hear even martyrs have them.”

“Um, writing,” I say distractedly.

“That’s your job,” he says. “What would you want to do for fun?”

You.

I mentally slap myself in the face. I’m going to horny jail.

I drag my mind back to the conversation. “Um, sometimes I babysit my neighbor’s little girl. I like kids.”

It might be my imagination, but I think his face softens a bit. “I bet they like you too.”

Wait. Was that a compliment?

I take a large swallow of wine, feeling flustered. I know this is just another interview. No different than any other interview I’ve done over the course of my career.

But it doesn’t feel like an interview.

It feels like a date.

“That day at lunch. Sarah said you needed this project,” Luke says. His eyes are sharp, evaluating. “What did she mean?”

I toy with my necklace, feeling uncomfortably exposed under his gaze. The last thing I want to do is tell this cutthroat, sarcastic man that absolutely no one wanted my first novel. So I give him a half truth. “Some of us need to work for a living. And the magazine I was working for closed.”

“Bull. If you’re as good as Cooper says, you could get a job somewhere else. Why do you *need* me, Hazel?” Luke presses. He’s not going to let me get away with dodging the question.

“I’m the one doing the interviewing,” I remind him.

“I’m your boss,” he counters. His voice drops, low and commanding in a way that slides across my skin. “Come on, Hazel. Give me what I want.”

The last thing I want to do is give him more information about my private life to wield over me, but he's right about two things. He's the boss. And I need this project to be a success.

Still, I try one last dodge. "Why could you possibly care about the details of my life?"

His eyes rake me up and down, in a way that makes me very aware of my body. "Idle curiosity," he says at last, which isn't actually an answer.

This is the difference between writing for someone's autobiography and magazine writing, I realize. The people I interviewed before had no real power over me. The worst thing that happened was that I filed a boring story and moved on to my next interview subject. With Luke it's different. He could fire me. Or he could freeze me out, so that I can't write an interesting book. And if I write a dud of a book that no one buys, my opportunity to improve my reputation with editors and publishers goes up in smoke.

I need him, even when he's being arrogant and demanding.

He waits, knowing I have no choice but to answer him.

I raise my chin, refusing to let him know he's getting to me. "I wrote a novel. I thought, when the magazine folded, maybe it was a sign to shift my focus to becoming a fiction writer. But nobody wanted it."

His mouth tightens, almost imperceptibly. Like he doesn't like that answer.

Well, fuck you, I think. If I can handle being rejected over and over again, you can handle having a writer someone else rejected.

I stab my fork into my food with unnecessary violence. "Working for you gives me the financial security to write my next book. Plus, working on a high-profile project like this, especially given your insanely fast timeline, gives me the opportunity to impress important publishing people."

"Who rejected you?" Luke asks, and there's something dark in his voice.

What's his problem? I think. Does he get off on knowing the details of other people's humiliations?

"Never mind," Luke says. "I'll find out from Sarah."

I grit my teeth. Unfortunately, Sarah probably will tell him if it keeps him using me as a writer.

Luke sips his beer. He's on his second glass. "What was your book about?"

Oh, no. He will give me *way* too much crap if he finds out the plot of my book. "That's none of your business."

"Why would it be none of my business ...?" Luke's face lights up with sudden glee. "Hazel. Did you write a dirty book?"

"No," I say, flushing. "I mean, there's a sex scene or two. But it's very artistic."

"Sure, sweetheart," he winks. "Your fantasies are safe with me."

"They're not ... That's *not* why I didn't want to tell you," I snap, and then immediately want to slap a hand over my mouth.

Because his eyebrows snap up. He leans in, a bloodhound going in for the kill. "Then what's it about?"

With a sinking feeling in my stomach, I realize there's no way I'm getting out of this with my dignity intact.

"Hazel, who signs your paychecks?" Luke says, and there's that commanding tone in his voice again. The one that *does* things to me.

"You," I say, feeling cornered and helpless.

Does he know the effect that bossy tone has on me? Or have so many women fallen at his feet over the years that he's stopped noticing?

Luke waits, cocky with the knowledge that he's won.

I cross my arms, and give in.

HAZEL

“It’s a tragic love story about journalist who falls in love with her interview subject,” I say.

Luke’s eyebrows shoot up. “Writing from experience, Hazel?”

“No,” I spit out. “I never fell for any of my subjects.”

Luke smirks. “Maybe that’s the problem. You needed ... inspiration.” His gaze drops to my mouth, and my pulse picks up.

I bite my lip self-consciously, and Luke’s eyes darken. For a second, time stops, and everyone else fades away.

Is Luke messing with me, like he always does?

Or has he finally realized I’m more than Cooper’s little sister?

Do I want him to?

A cell phone flashes at the next table as someone takes a picture of their friend. The bright light jolts me out of the moment.

I clear my throat. “Anyway. Let’s get back to you. What does it mean to you that Helius Airlines has always been run by a Dewinter? How does that set you apart from your competitors?”

His eyes make a slow, leisurely journey from my mouth to my eyes.

Why the hell does that feel *more* intimate?

For a moment I'm terrified he won't answer my question. He'll keep forcing me to talk about myself, or—worse—he'll call out this growing attraction between us.

“Luke?” I prompt.

He shakes his head abruptly, like he's returning to earth. “Right. What was the question again?”

I repeat it, and he gives a rote answer that sounds like it was approved by his P.R. team.

After that, I do my best to stick to business questions, and he rewards me for it by dropping his interrogation of me.

But that spark is still there between us, no matter how many times I try to smother it. I find myself noticing the movement of his throat as he swallows his beer. Noticing the masculine elegance of his fingers as he drums them on the table when he's bored by a question. Noticing the way he stiffens when we order dessert, and the chocolate mousse is so delicious I accidentally moan.

His eyes are dark again, and he's not looking at me like I'm his employee, or his best friend's little sister.

He's looking at me like he wants to make me moan again.

My stomach flutters, and I feel so off-center that when I set down my fork, I accidentally knock my phone off the table.

“Shit!” I duck under the table, grateful for the moment of privacy away from Luke's gaze. My cheeks feel hot.

So what if Luke has finally realized I'm a grown woman?

It doesn't mean anything.

I'm not going to make a move on him, because a) he's my boss and b) I have no intention of being another one of his one-night stands. That's fine for the women who can enjoy the best sex of their lives and then waltz out of his life the next morning without looking back. But Luke's Cooper's best friend, which means if I ever let Luke seduce me, I'd be

reminded of my momentary weakness every time our paths crossed for the rest of our lives.

No thank you, I think to myself.

“Hazel? You lost down there?” Luke’s voice mocks from above.

“No, just looking for ... there it is,” I say, finally spotting my phone. It skittered all the way over to Luke’s foot. I crouch under the table and reach for it, but I lose my balance and need to grab Luke’s thigh for support.

Luke’s leg jerks. “What the hell?”

“Sorry! Lost my balance ...” I trail off, realizing I’m basically eye level with his crotch.

Maybe he realizes it too because I feel his thigh tensing under my hand.

For one truly insane moment, I wonder what it would be like to kneel at his feet for a different reason entirely. To be the kind of woman who could make *him* lose control for once.

Who am I kidding? Luke probably doesn’t even lose control during blow jobs. He probably tangles his hand in his partner’s hair, using her exactly as he wants, the bored king accepting his right to be worshiped.

Fuck, why is that image hot too?

There’s a flash again, from the people taking selfies at the next table, and I hastily grab my phone, before fumbling back to my seat.

I can’t interpret the exact look on Luke’s face, but he must think I’m an idiot.

I hold up my phone with its dark case, defensive. “Blended in with the floor. I couldn’t find it at first.” *I definitely wasn’t thinking about your cock.*

Luke shifts his broad body, restless. “Let’s get the check.”

I eye my dessert mournfully. Clearly, I need a break from Luke. I’ve always known he was hot, but I hardly ever spend one on one time with me and it’s obviously getting to me.

But that dessert was *good*.

“Stop making horny eyes at your chocolate, Hazel,” Luke says dryly. “You can take it home and make X-rated sounds over it in the privacy of your apartment.”

“I wasn’t ... I wouldn’t ... God, you’re an ass.”

He laughs, and that should be insulting too, but there’s something about his laugh that lets me in. That tells me we’re in this strange, electric situation together.

He pays, gets to-go boxes for our deserts. He hasn’t touched his giant caramel whiskey cookie, so I get that too.

We head toward the door, my arms full of dessert boxes and my giant purse. The restaurant’s entrance way is narrow, and when a large group of people come in at the same time as we’re leaving, Luke touches the small of my back, effortlessly guiding me through the bottleneck and out onto the sidewalk.

His hand feels big and warm, and normally I hate men who try to steer me through crowds. It always feels simultaneously macho and insincere, like they’re trying too hard to play a role. But with Luke it feels effortless, natural.

He takes control of everything else in his life. Why not the body of his woman?

Not that I’m his woman. The night air feels thankfully cool against my overheated skin.

He drops his hand as I turn around to face him, but he doesn’t step back. I’m uncomfortably aware of his height, his sheer physical presence.

I realize I don’t know how to end this interaction. If he was just a normal interview subject, I’d give him a brisk handshake and thank him for his time. If he was just a guy I was into, I’d thank him for a nice night, and linger a bit to see if he was brave enough to try for a kiss. If he was just my boss, I’d give him a casual wave and say I’d see him Monday at the office.

But somehow Luke’s all those things, and it’s leaving my social instincts in a tangled mess.

Maybe that's why I try, one more time, to get to know the man under the mask. "I told you why I needed this project. Why do you need it?"

He frowns. "I told you. Reputation improvement so I can become CEO."

"But it's a family company, and you've been training for this your whole life. Surely if your dad tells the board to nominate you, they'll listen, even without this book. Right?" I ask.

Something in his expression shutters.

That's when I remember he never said he wanted to improve his reputation. He said his *dad* wanted him to improve his reputation.

"Wait. Is your dad not going to name you as his successor unless you do this book? Even with everything else you've done for this company?"

Luke's jaw clenches. "It's a business decision. He's doing what he believes is best for the company." His words are calm, but his tone is like a door slammed in my face.

He clearly doesn't think this topic is up for discussion.

But my journalist instincts are perking up again, sure that understanding the relationship between Luke and his dad will help me understand how and why Luke became the man he is.

A smarter woman, one with self-preservation, would have stopped talking by now.

But sometimes getting the story means taking a risk.

"He's your *dad*," I point out. My parents don't entirely understand my career, but if it was in their power to help me succeed, they'd do it in a heartbeat. "Don't you think your happiness should matter more to him than the company's profits?"

"That's *enough*," he growls.

"My job is to understand you," I say, stubbornly. I can practically feel any goodwill I've earned today going up in

smoke. But I can't stop pushing. "I can't understand you if you won't answer my questions."

"I don't give a fuck if you understand me," Luke says, his voice cold and disdainful. "It's a book, not rocket science. Write the damn thing, stick to the approved topics, and *stop asking me personal questions.*"

"But—"

"From now on, we stick to interviews in my office," Luke snaps. "It will help you remember your place."

I feel like I've been slapped.

Remember your place.

Who *says* that?

He's acting like he's the lord of the manor, and I'm some uppity servant who dared to think I was his equal.

I grit my teeth, trying to stay professional. "If you won't talk about anything personal, it's going to be a boring book."

"That's not my problem," Luke snaps.

"You short sighted *idiot*—"

"Maybe I should say this in a way you'll hear." He grabs both dessert boxes out of my hands.

"Hey!" I gasp.

He looks at me. Then he very deliberately drops my dessert in the trash.

Well, technically his dessert since he paid for it. But I'm not in the mood for technicalities.

"That is so *juvenile*," I say.

"No, what's juvenile is your inability to follow simple guidelines." He scowls. "Rewards are for employees who follow my directions. So show up on Monday with a better attitude or I swear ..."

"What? You'll send me to bed without dessert?" I mock. "Spank me for being naughty?"

Luke's eyes flare, and a hot thrill races through me.

Have I pushed him too far?

Why is that idea so exciting?

For a heart pounding second, he visibly wrestles with his control.

He signals a passing cab and yanks the door open. "Get in, brat."

For a confusing, heart pounding second, I think he's going to take me home and torment us both until I give in and apologize for my words.

"Why?" I ask, my mouth dry.

"Because I was going to give you a lift home, but I'll be damned if I spend another minute listening to your ungrateful mouth," he says.

"Oh." I slide into the cab feeling both relieved and disappointed.

Luke slams the door behind me, shoves cash at the driver, and strides off into the dark night, looking like a brooding hero in a Gothic romance.

I must look worried because the cabby says, "Don't worry, miss. Your boyfriend will get over it. He cares about you."

"He's not my boyfriend," I fume. Then the rest of what he said catches up with me. "Wait. Why do you think he cares about me?"

"He wants to make sure you get home safe, even when he's mad," the cabby says, like it's obvious.

I blink. "That's not about me, specifically. He'd do that for any woman."

But the cabby's comment reminds me that as irritated with Luke as I am, there's a layer of decency underneath layers of arrogance, stubbornness, and sheer assholery.

I'm going to figure you out, Luke Dewinter, I swear to myself.

No matter how hard he makes it.

LUKE

Are you going to spank me for being naughty? In the dream, Hazel's naked and bent over my desk, biting her lip as she looks back over her shoulder and tilts her delicious ass up for me.

That's when I wake up, hard and gasping for my best friend's little sister.

Fuck, I think.

I realize my phone's buzzing. That's what woke me up.

I fumble in the dark to answer it, confused to see my dad's name on the screen.

Why's he calling at 6:13 a.m. on a Saturday?

"Hello?" I answer, worry twisting my stomach. I know it's irrational, since my dad is healthy as an ox, but once you've woken up to one phone call saying you've lost a parent, the fear never entirely goes away.

Then again, I'd thought my mom was healthy too. I'd left for a sleepover at my friend's house when I was fifteen, and she'd been gone by morning. Apparently, she'd been born with a heart defect she never told me about.

I'm not on great terms with my dad, but if he has the nerve to die on me, I'll kill him myself.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"What's *going on*?" As if you don't know," he thunders. "I gave you one chance to improve your reputation, and this is

what you do with it?”

My worry fades, replaced by irritated confusion.

What the hell is he talking about?

“It’s early, Dad,” I grumble. “Why don’t we talk about whatever you think I’ve done when the sun is actually up?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, is there someone in your bed right now? Someone I *hired to help write your autobiography?*” he demands.

For a second, guilt flashes through me. Then I remember I haven’t actually *done* anything.

I mean, stealing Hazel’s dessert wasn’t my finest moment. But she’s so goddamn *aggravating*. Always pushing, pushing, after I’ve fucking *told* her a question is off limits.

But I’m definitely not sleeping with her. And if I was, it wouldn’t be any of my dad’s business.

“Technically, I’m paying Hazel, not you,” I yawn, because I know it pisses him off when he thinks I’m not taking something seriously enough.

“My house. *Now*,” he orders. Then he hangs up.

I scowl at my phone. I don’t particularly feel like driving to Montclair, New Jersey on a Saturday morning to be yelled at by my dad like a misbehaving teenager.

But the alternative is falling back asleep and risking dreaming of Hazel again.

So I roll out of bed, take a quick shower, and drive 45 minutes to New Jersey.



OBJECTIVELY SPEAKING, my childhood home is a mansion. It’s a majestic brick building with a rolling lawn, perched on a hill that overlooks Manhattan.

I let myself in the front door and stand in the cavernous foyer.

It's a huge building, but it never felt empty until after my mom passed. She was the one who hosted parties, who had a million friends, who made sure we all sat down for meals as a family.

But it was more than just the events she organized. She had the kind of natural warmth that filled whatever room she was in.

Like Hazel, I think, and then shove the thought aside.

"Dad?" I call. He doesn't answer.

That means he's probably in his study, on the third floor.

I climb the stairs and trudge down the dark hallway to his office.

I knock on the door.

"Come in," he grumbles. According to his longtime secretary, my dad and I sound exactly the same when we're angry. I don't hear it, but maybe that's why so many of my employees are scared of disappointing me.

I've seen grown men cower when reporting to my dad at work.

Too bad I'm immune to his disapproval. At some point in college, I realized I was never going to win his approval, no matter how hard I tried, so I gave up trying.

I step into his office. Unlike the rest of the house, which was furnished in warm colors and soft fabrics by mom, this room is dark and practical to the point of austerity.

My dad's standing with his back to me, staring out the window. I got my height, build, and coloring from him. The only thing I got from my mom was my eyes.

He values manners and respect above all else, so to piss him off I slouch into the chair by the window and drawl, "So, what do you think I've done now? And why the hell do you think it involves Hazel?"

He turns around and shoves a stack of photos at me, eyes furious.

I glance at the first photo. It's of me and Hazel, taken last night.

I feel my own anger rise. "You're spying on me?"

"No. I have a deal with the local paparazzi. They know if they get an incriminating shot of you, I'll buy it for more than they'll make selling it to the papers," he says.

I snort. "Nothing incriminating about this. I had a work dinner with an employee."

He rounds on me. "Do you really think I'm that stupid?"

His ire catches me off guard. I've seen him angry before, but there's something about this that feels different.

It feels less like rage, and more like disgust.

I flip to the next photo, trying to figure what the fuck he thinks I did.

If you don't know any better, the photos definitely make it look like Hazel and I are on a date. There's one where my hand brushes against hers as I reach for the salt, and she blushes. One where she laughs, and it looks like I want to kiss her.

Probably because I did, I think.

In the second to the last photo, I'm guiding her out of the restaurant. I'm touching the small of her back, but the photo is out of the focus, and I guess if you squint, it looks like I'm touching her ass?

I struggle to hold back an eye roll. "Look, I get it, it would be bad if I was hooking up with an employee, but I'm obviously not, so ..."

I trail off as I see the last photo.

It's from when Hazel dropped her phone under the table. This one's not blurry at all. You can clearly make out the back of Hazel's head as she kneels between my legs, clutching my thigh.

From this angle, it looks like she's sucking me off in a public restaurant.

And my face isn't helping matters. My eyes are dark and unfocused. Why the hell do I look like ...

Oh. Right. That was immediately after Hazel took a bite of chocolate and moaned like a porn star.

My hands tighten on the photos. "This isn't what it looks like. We had a business dinner. She dropped her phone—"

"I don't want to hear your excuses," Dad says. "You said you wanted the CEO job when I retire, so I handed you a way to improve your reputation on a silver platter. But you don't *think*. You're selfish, lazy, and immature." He snatches the not-a-blowjob photo from me and shakes it in my face. "What would your mother think if she saw you like this?"

I grab the photo back from him. "She'd think I have a father who likes thinking the worst of me."

His eyes flash. "You are *never* going to have my support as CEO for Helius. In fact, I'm going to recommend against it when I retire." He jabs a finger at the photos I'm clutching. "You can tell Hazel to stop writing. If this is what she considers professional behavior, I'll make sure she never works in New York publishing again. I can't believe that she acted like another one of your whores—"

I'm out of my chair and in his face in an instant. "You keep her name out of your mouth," I snarl.

"Why?" my dad scoffs. "You going to marry her?"

"Yes, actually, I am," I snap, because he's being a dick and he deserves a good scare. "You just called your future daughter-in-law a whore and threatened to ruin her career. Guess that means you're not invited to the wedding. Is that enough of a scandal for you?"

I turn on my heel and stride toward the door.

"Wait." My dad grabs my arm, his eyes searching my face when I reluctantly turn back toward him. "Are you serious?"

To my surprise, he doesn't look nervous, or angry.

Instead, he looks ... hopeful?

Fuck.

I really am terrible son.

I open my mouth to correct the record and tell him the truth, but before I can, my brain kicks into gear and I see what might be the solution to all my problems.

I can get my dad back on my side and save Hazel's career in the process.

"You've been on me to marry a nice, respectable girl forever," I remind him. "Are you really going to ruin her career because she went on a date with her fiancé?"

He gapes. "I ... of course not."

I press my advantage. "I see. You're just going to have a stranger take over Heliuss Airlines because I did what you wanted and settled down with a nice, stable girl like you wanted."

He looks flustered. "But you ... but that photo ..."

"For the last time, *she dropped her phone*," I growl. Just thinking about that photo has my pulse pounding. "What's his name, by the way?"

"Who?" my dad asks, bewildered.

"The fucker who thought he could ruin Hazel's reputation to make a quick buck," I grit out. "Give me his name. I'll sue him into oblivion."

This time, I'm not lying. There's something about the idea of Hazel getting hurt because she's spending time with me that twists in my gut like poison spreading.

I don't want to think about what that feeling means.

Something in my dad's face softens. "You're actually telling the truth, aren't you?"

I don't say anything, just stare him down.

He looks away first, absently twisting his wedding ring. It's been seventeen years, and he still wears that fucking ring.

For a second the memory of my mom rises between us, and I feel bad for lying to my dad.

Then I remember he was willing to ruin Hazel's life just to punish me, and I don't regret a damn thing.

"I could see it in your face," he admits quietly. "The one where she's laughing. You're looking at her like ... well, like she's the one."

I bite down the impulse to correct him. If he wants to read too much into a photo, the better for me.

He scrubs a hand through his hair. "I don't understand. You hired your fiancée to write your autobiography?"

"*You* picked her. There wasn't time to find someone else," I remind him. "Besides, who knows me better than my fiancée?"

My dad studies me. For once in his life, he looks uncertain. "It would go a long way toward reassuring the board that you've finally grown up and settled down." He grimaces. "Fine. I won't hold these photos against either of you. But you have to promise you'll never get caught doing something like this—or looking like you're doing something like this—ever again."

I nod.

"And you need to get married by the end of the month."

"*What?*" I blurt.

"If these photos do leak, it will be better if you're already married." He raises his eyebrows. "That's not a problem, is it? If you're truly in love with the girl, I assume you want to tie the knot as soon as possible."

I force my expression to say calm and neutral. There's still a part of him that doubts the truth of my story.

"A month is a tight timeline to plan a wedding," I remind him.

He gives me a dry smile. "Somehow I think you can handle the extra expense."

I grit my jaw. “I’ll have to run it by Hazel.”

“You do that,” my dad says.

“Send me that photographer’s name,” I order as I turn and leave.

I can’t decide if faking an engagement to Hazel is the best or worst idea I’ve ever had.

But it’s too late to take it back now.

Now I just need to convince Hazel to go along with it.

HAZEL

I'm lounging on my bed in a sweatshirt and old workout shorts, staring at my notebook and trying to come up with a new idea for my next novel. I live in a tiny studio apartment that's basically all bed and doesn't have an oven, let alone a full kitchen, but it's mine.

I used to love spending Saturdays sipping tea, listening to my favorite writing playlist, and jotting down story ideas. But I've been at this for over an hour and the page in front of me is still terrifyingly blank.

Maybe you need inspiration, Luke's voice taunts me.

Someone raps on my door, and I jump.

Maybe one of my packages got mistakenly delivered to the surly goth girl at the end of the hall again.

I open the door, an apology on my lips, but it's not one of my neighbors.

No, it's Luke, frowning down at me with disapproval.

"I can't believe this is where you live," he says. "It has terrible security. Anyone can just wander in."

I sigh. "Look, the front door does lock, but you have to really shove it closed and sometimes people forget ... why am I explaining this to you? Why are you *here*?"

He steps around me and into my apartment without answering either of my questions. His frown deepens as he surveys my bed, bookshelves, and crowded corner where I've

stashed the microwave, the mini fridge, the toaster oven, and the electric teakettle.

Sarah calls it The Fire Hazard Corner of Death.

I straighten my spine. “I’m a freelance writer living alone in Manhattan. Did you think I lived in a penthouse on Central Park?”

“No but ... does Cooper know you live like this?”

I bristle with irritation. I *may* have neglected to mention to my parents and Cooper that my building door doesn’t always lock, and my apartment lacks an oven.

But that’s none of Luke’s business.

I cross my arms. “How did you find out where I live?”

“It’s on your employment paperwork,” Luke says, distracted. I follow his gaze and realize my red lace bra is lying on top of my dresser.

I grab it and shove it inside the top drawer, flustered. “Did you just come here to make fun of me?”

“No,” he gives his head a quick shake, like he’s trying to focus. “My dad’s decided the book isn’t enough. He wants me to get married to someone respectable by the end of the month if he’s going to recommend me for CEO.”

“*What?*” I blurt. “Luke, that’s insane. You can’t spend the rest of your life in a loveless marriage just for a *job*.”

Luke’s smile is grim. “CEO of my family company is more than just a job. It’s the thing I’ve been working toward my whole life.”

My stomach twists as I picture Luke with some boring, prim, high society wife. Someone who won’t try to get to know the complicated man underneath the asshole surface. Someone who will be happy to take his money and say *yes dear* and won’t challenge him at all.

I open my mouth to tell him he deserves more than a loveless marriage and a father who makes him jump through

hoops, but the last time I tried to get remotely personal with him he bit my head off and shoved me in a cab.

His presence fills the tiny room. Imposing, sexy, and larger than life.

“I just ... this doesn’t make sense. Why is it so important to your dad that you get married?” I ask, trying to process this.

“People view married men as more responsible and trustworthy,” Luke says. “Right now, those are two areas where the board finds me lacking. Basically, my getting married is my dad’s plan B to help me win over the board, in case our book doesn’t work.”

“Ok ...” I lean against the door, trying to keep as much distance between us as possible. “But why are you telling me about it? Do you want me to ... um ... interview her too? For the book?” God, I hate that idea. But he’s the boss, so if that’s what he wants I’ll suck it up and be a professional.

His smile turns wicked. “You misunderstand me. I’m not looking for a wife. I’m looking for an accomplice.”

Luke reaches into his pocket, pulls out a small box, and tosses it to me.

I catch it on reflex. It feels like the right size for ...

No. This can’t be what I think it is.

“Open it up,” Luke instructs.

I open the small jewelry box and gasp. I don’t know much about diamond rings, but I know this one is flawless. It catches the early afternoon sunlight and refracts it so that slivers of brilliant light dance around the room.

“I need a fake wife,” Luke says. “For six months. That’s long enough to fool my dad and the board. After that, we quietly part ways.”

“*We?*” I echo. I must have heard him wrong.

Luke’s smile has a dangerous edge to it. He looks like a man who’s willing to risk his whole world to win what he wants. “Say yes, Hazel. Be my fake wife.”

And just like that, *my* world tilts on its axis. “You can’t ... you can’t be serious.”

He frowns. “I bought a ring Hazel.” As if that alone proves he’s serious.

When all it proves is that he has, quite possibly, gone stark raving mad.

I close the ring box and shove it back at him with shaking hands. “I can’t. This is too much. Find someone else to play your rich person games with.”

Luke doesn’t take the ring back. I physically wrap his hand around the box and make him take it back.

Luke’s lips thin in displeasure. “Be practical, Hazel. Marrying me for six months benefits us both.”

“How?” I say. “How can that possibly be true?”

“For one, it will be easier for us to find time to work on the book, if you’re living with me,” Luke says “Plus, I can take care of you. Give you the time and resources you need to focus on writing your next novel. The book you *actually* care about.”

I hesitate. The idea of having the time, space, and financial security I need to work on my next novel is more tempting than I want to admit ...

No. This is crazy. I can’t believe I’m even considering it.

I put my hands on my hips and glare at him. “Do I look like I need to be taken care of?”

He pointedly looks around my shoebox apartment, his eyes lingering on my corner of makeshift kitchen appliances.

“Let’s put it this way. Your self-care could use an upgrade. And I’m the one who can give it to you.”

He holds my gaze, daring me to deny the truth of what he’s saying.

I can’t. Of course, I can’t. I’m at the end of my rope here. Anyone who steps into my apartment can tell that.

But if he thinks the solution is faking a marriage ...

I twist my hands.

This is madness. crazier than any plot I could come up with for my novel. But Luke's acting like his words are completely sensible. Ordinary, even.

Luke must sense my nervousness because his body language changes. He takes a step back and sits down on the foot of my bed, like he's trying to give me space.

Billionaire bad boy Luke Dewinter is sitting on my bed. The thought runs circles through my head like a broken record.

"What's your hesitation?" Luke asks calmly. "Are you seeing someone?"

I bark out a laugh. "No."

He tosses the ring box from one hand to the other, determined. "Then I don't see the issue."

"You don't see the issue with lying to everyone in your life about something this important?" I prod.

Luke studies my face. "I'd rather not lie. But they're the ones who dragged my personal life into this."

I nod. That makes a kind of sense. As much as any of this ridiculous plan makes sense.

Despite myself, I'm beginning to imagine what it would be like to do what Luke's proposing.

He stands. "Is it the lying that's holding you back? I'd say we can tell your parents, but ..."

"But they can't keep a secret if their lives depended on it," I finish for him. Like Cooper, my parents are science people. My mom teaches high school chemistry, and my dad's a lab tech at a local research facility. They're brilliant, but they can also be absent minded about real life stuff when they get caught up in their work.

Sometimes that means they forget to buy groceries.

Other times it means they casually mention who you have a crush on in front of all your friends.

They definitely couldn't keep a fake marriage a secret.

Cooper could keep a secret, but ...

I shake my head. "I can't believe I'm even considering this."

That's all the encouragement Luke needs to step forward and press the ring box into my hand. The brush of his hands against mine singes me like a wildfire. "My place is huge. You'd have your own room, your own office. My staff can take care of all your needs."

Of course the man has staff.

I swallow. I'm trying to avoid his eyes, but he's standing so close I just end up staring straight at his chest instead. His broad chest under his dark-gray T-shirt. I think I catch a whiff of his aftershave, and it makes my knees go weak.

The truth is, I'm not hesitating because I'm worried about lying to my parents. Or because this whole plan sounds like something out of a bad soap opera.

I'm hesitating because if I spend six months living with Luke, I might do something ridiculously stupid. Like rise up on my tiptoes so I can press my face into his neck and memorize why he smells so good. Or ask where, in this giant apartment of his, I'd find his bedroom.

When I'm only seeing him for a few hours at a time a day, I can lie to myself and downplay my attraction. But if we're *living* together, if I'm seeing him in the morning when he's grouchy and unshaven before his coffee hits ...

Well, I'll probably crack and do something that lets him know how hot I think he is. Then he'll either reject me, which would be humiliating and make the remainder of the six months excruciating.

Or, worse, he wouldn't reject me. Which would probably be hot as hell in the moment but would make the rest of our lives awkward.

“No.” I squeeze past him, trying to ignore how aware of him I am of him in my space. “Find someone else. I write books, not marriages.” I plop down on my bed and pick up my notebook and pen, as if I can just shoo him away and go back to writing. Pretend this never happened.

“Thanks, um, for thinking of me,” I say. That’s what you say when you reject a job offer, right? And that’s essentially what this is. “But I can’t do this. You should find someone else.”

Something sternly determined flickers across Luke’s face. “It needs to be you.”

My stomach flips.

HAZEL

“I don’t want anyone else,” Luke insists. “It’s you or no one.”

I toss my notebook down, frustrated. “*Why? Why me?*”

Luke leans back against the door and crosses his arms. “Last night proved we can stand each other’s company. And your Cooper’s sister, which means I can trust you not to take advantage of the situation.”

I frown, confused. “What do you mean?”

“I know you won’t use a fake marriage as an excuse to trap yourself a real billionaire husband,” Luke elaborates. “And you can trust that I’m not going to use a fake relationship as a sleazy opportunity to make a move on you.”

“Oh.” Something in me wilts in disappointment.

I guess that settles that. No need to make an embarrassing move on him two months from now. He’s making it clear where we stand before this thing even starts.

Luke comes and sits down next to me. I feel the mattress shift under his weight and hell, even that’s kind of hot. He holds out a big, capable hand to me. “Give me your notebook.”

“Oh no,” I say. “I’m not falling for this again. I’m not going to let you start jotting down deal points before I’ve even agreed to do this.”

But I’m wavering and he knows it.

“Hazel,” he orders, and there’s a note of warning that sends shivers of anticipation down my spine.

Heart racing, I pass over the notebook and pen. Because a part of me knows, as soon as we start negotiating, this is real. If the deal is good enough, I’m going to fake a marriage to Luke Dewinter for six months to save his career—and mine.

Luke flips to a clean page in the notebook and starts scribbling, looking serious, like he does at work.

Remember, how bossy and arrogant he can be, I tell myself. Remember that he throws a hissy fit any time you ask personal questions for his book. Do you really want to do this?

“How much is a one-bedroom rental in Manhattan?” Luke asks. “*Not* in this building.”

I blink, caught off guard. “I don’t know. \$4,000?”

Luke frowns like he’s doing mental math, then writes something down.

I can’t hold back my curiosity anymore. I lean over and peer at the notebook, the bed creaking as I scoot closer to Luke.

LUKE & Hazel’s Rules for Marriage

- 1. Hazel agrees to marry Luke by the end of the month and stay married for six months.*
- 2. Hazel will move in with Luke for the duration of this agreement and move out after six months.*
- 3. Luke will acquire the required attorneys and cover all legal fees associated with the divorce.*
- 4. Luke and Hazel will tell people the divorce was a mutual decision.*
- 5. Luke will pay Hazel \$250,000 when the six months are up so she can get a real apartment. With a kitchen and a building door that locks.*

“Hey. Rude,” I say, when I get to that last rule. Then my eyes loop back to the number. “Luke, that is way too much money.”

“Never bargain against yourself, Hazel,” Luke says. “Besides, I’m upending your life. Consider it an inconvenience fee. Other than the money, is there anything else on here you object to?”

I squint at the list. “Most of these are for after the marriage—fake marriage—is over. If we’re going to make this work, we need rules for during the marriage too.”

“Ok.” He turns his head to look at me, and for a second his eyes are so sharp and blue and close that I forget to breathe. “Like what?”

I take the notebook from him and start adding my rules.

6. Hazel won't trap Luke into a real relationship by being irresistibly loveable.

7. Luke won't seduce Hazel.

“Har, har, very funny,” Luke says. “Give me that back if you’re not serious—”

But I’m not done writing yet. “We should agree on what we’ll do to convince people we’re a real couple. You tend to be pretty into public displays of affection, and everyone knows it.”

“I am not,” Luke says, scowling.

I reach for my phone and type in *Luke Dewinter + Kissing* into Google. There’s a range of blurry photos from the past ten years of him with various women. Nothing R-rated, but it’s obvious that Luke is very ... tactile with his lovers.

“I think we can get away with a kiss or two at first, and then taper it off to hand holding once people get used to the idea of us,” I say, trying to sound like the idea of kissing him doesn’t set me on fire.

Luke stares at my phone for a bit.

For a stomach-twisting moment, I wonder if he's remembering his time with any of those women. Regretting that he didn't ask one of them to be his fake wife instead.

Luke abruptly closes the window and passes my phone back to me. "I'd be different," he says abruptly. "With my wife."

My wife. Something about those words sings through me. The words remind me that as much as we tell ourselves this is fake, there will be a legal document at the end of the month saying that I am Luke Dewinter's wife.

I shove that terrifying thought away and try to focus on what he's actually saying. "Do you mean that one-night stands are more exciting than if you're sleeping with the same woman every night?"

"No, I ... argh," he grumbles and runs a hand through his hair. "Forget it. Just write down in the rules that I can kiss you in public if we need to convince people."

Do his ears look a little pink?

"Luke, I want to know what you meant," I say stubbornly. "If we're going to fake a freaking marriage, we need to be on the same page."

"I just ..." Luke stands, restless, hands jammed in his pockets. It's clear he wants to pace, but there's not enough room. Just a small patch of clear floor between my bed, the door, the bathroom, and the corner with all my kitchen stuff. "It didn't matter if anyone took photos of me like that, because being with those women didn't matter to me. Just like being with me didn't matter to them."

I think he's underestimating his appeal to women, but I bite my tongue.

"If I was married, she'd matter. *We'd* matter," Luke continues. "And that means I wouldn't let anyone take fucking photos of us so they can sell it to some grubby gossip website or get more followers. And if they did, I'd make sure they'd never do it again."

He sounds frustrated and menacing, in defense of his hypothetical future wife.

I don't think he knows how sweet that is. I feel something ache in the vicinity of my heart. I try not to think about what it would be like to end up with someone who's half as protective of me as Luke is of his imaginary future wife.

I turn back to the notebook and scribble down our public kissing rule.

8. Limited PDA allowed to maintain the ruse. Hand holding allowed, as is kissing. No tongue.

Luke looks at the rule and snorts. "What, are we in middle school?"

I glare. "We're keeping it classy. You need to look respectable, remember?" I don't add the real reason—If this is going to work, I need as many barriers between myself and Luke as I can get. And yes, that means litigating what type of kisses are allowed.

He sighs. "Fine. No tongue. Let's sign the damn thing."

"Not so fast," I say. "There's one more thing. And this is important, or I won't do this."

9. Every night, Hazel gets to ask Luke one personal question for his book. And he needs to answer truthfully, without ducking the question.

I stand and hand the notebook to Luke and wait, holding my breath.

In the tight space, the movement brings us way closer together than I intended.

He shakes his head. "Hazel, this is ..."

"It doesn't have to go in the final draft of the book," I hurry to say. "You'll have a chance to edit the book before anyone else sees it, and you can delete anything you want. And I don't have to use my recording device." I search his face. I need him to understand why this is important. "But I can't write the story of who you are, if you keep trying to hold me at arm's length."

Luke grimaces. “How about I give you \$600,000 instead of \$250,000? Think how many novels you could write with that ...”

“How much money do you *have*?” I blurt. “Never mind, not the point.” I tap the notebook with my pen. “Number nine is nonnegotiable. You can’t bribe your way out of this.”

He narrows his eyes. “\$700,000.”

I laugh. He’s joking right?

He has to be joking.

I feel faintly lightheaded at the way he’s casually throwing money around, and faintly sick at the way I’m rejecting it. But if I do a good job on his book, I could have more than money.

I could have the connections and reputation I need to launch the next stage of my career.

I take the notebook from Luke and sign it. Then I hand it back to Luke.

He hesitates.

I wait.

Finally, he swears under his breath, but signs it. “You drive a hard bargain, Hazel Dawson.”

Then he tosses the notebook and pen down on my bed, pulls the ring box back out of his pocket, and opens it.

Luke takes the ring and slides it on my finger. “We can get it resized, but you should probably wear it in public ...”

He trails off as he realizes the same thing I do. It fits perfectly.

I flex my hand. “Maybe it’s a sign.”

His eyes jerk up to mine.

“That our plan is going to be a success,” I hastily elaborate. “Fake marriage. Hurrah!”

He rolls his eyes and steps back, which basically brings him up against the door.

I knew my apartment was small, but I didn't realize how small until Luke Dewinter was standing in it.

He reaches for the door handle. "I need to make a call. Pack whatever you need for tonight and meet me on the sidewalk. I'll have movers get your stuff tomorrow."

My eyes widen. "Wait. You want me to move in with you *today*? Why?"

He shrugs, the cocky asshole in him rising to the surface. "Why not? Besides, if I leave you in this deathtrap and you get murdered, I'll have to find a whole new fake wife."

I grab the journal off the bed and throw it at his head, but I'm too slow. He ducks out into the hallway, shutting the door behind him. The journal hits the door with a halfhearted thump and slides down to the floor.

As I bend to pick the journal up, the ring on my finger snags my attention.

I'm really doing this, I think.

I had a writing professor once who recommended that if we ever had writer's block, we should try doing something we'd never done before. He swore that novelty could change your perspective and get the creative juices flowing.

I look around the tiny apartment I've been cooped up in since I lost my magazine job, and let out a disbelieving, rueful laugh.

Faking a marriage to Luke Dewinter is a terrible idea. But it might be the thing to finally help me break through my writer's block and get my career back on track.

I just hope it's worth it.

LUKE

For better or worse, I'm a good judge of people.

I'm successful at work because I know how to hire the right people and bring out the best in them. I've got a bad reputation with certain board members because I can see right through them, and they don't like that.

That's how I know that if I give Hazel too much time to think about the deal we just struck, she'll talk herself out of it. I could see it in the way she kept frowning and nibbling at her bottom lip as I explained my plan to her.

I know it would have been faster to explain to her about the photographs, and my father, and that this is just as much to save her as it is for me. But something in me balks at the idea. I don't want her to know that proximity to me almost ruined her career. I don't want her to know I don't have enough power to shield her from my dad's wrath ... at least not yet.

And, most importantly, I don't want Hazel to feel forced into faking a marriage with me. I want her to choose it—choose me—because I can help give her something she wants. Not because she's running from something worse.

I don't let myself think about *why* it's so important that she chooses me of her own free will.

Instead, I give her just enough time to pack what she needs and load her into my car so we can drive to my place.

It's a handful of miles, and a world of difference.

When I pull up in front of my building and toss the keys to the discrete building valet, Hazel gapes.

“You live in Gramercy Park? I always pictured you living someplace ... shinier.”

“Hey. This place is great,” I say defensively. Gramercy Park is a calm oasis in the center of Manhattan. The ornate pre-war buildings cluster around a stately gated park that only nearby residents get keys to.

Some of my earliest memories are of playing with my grandad in that park.

Hazel shakes her head as she lugs her suitcases out of the car. “I’m complimenting you, idiot. I thought you’d live in some soulless skyscraper.”

She wasn’t entirely wrong. I had lived in a soulless skyscraper until my grandparents passed and left their penthouse apartment in an ivy-covered building to me. Originally, I’d planned to sell their place, and invest the proceeds in something practical. But the truth was, their place felt more like home than my skyscraper did.

Not that I’m going to admit any of that to Hazel.

I grab two of the three bags Hazel’s wrestling with. “Come on. I’ll show you around.”

The doorman eyes Hazel curiously as he welcomes us in. I rarely bring women home. And when I do, they definitely don’t come with three bags worth of luggage.

Can you really fool your dad and the board? Some voice inside of me mocks. Even your doorman knows you’re not a relationship person.

I ignore the voice and guide Hazel onto the elevator. Everything about this building speaks of old-world wealth. Polished marble. Dark wood. Ornate crown molding.

I like it. I like the way the building has been quietly loved, cared for, and improved for over a hundred years.

But I find myself sneaking glances at Hazel’s face, trying to figure out if *she* likes it.

We step off the elevator on the top floor, and directly into my apartment since I own the whole floor.

“The kitchen’s that way,” I gesture vaguely to the left. “This is the living room.”

Hazel walks across the room to the tall windows that looks down over the park. “I can’t believe you enjoy this view every day,” she says, a note of envy in her voice.

She looks beautiful, silhouetted against the window like that. More than that, she looks *right*.

I brush off the feeling. “Well, you get to enjoy this view for the next six months,” I remind her. “Come on. I’ll show you the wing with the bedrooms.”

“You have a whole *wing* for bedrooms?”

“That’s just what my grandma called it,” I grumble. I stride away, carrying the bags to her bedrooms. “Here’s the better guest room. You can have it.”

But Hazel, as usual, has ignored the thing I actually wanted to talk about in favor of picking up on the thing I wished she wouldn’t. “Wait,” she says. “Was this your grandparents’ place? I read in my research they lived in this neighborhood.”

“Yes,” I said. “Anyway, here’s your bedroom—”

“You could have lived anywhere, in all of Manhattan, and you picked a place that held sentimental value to you,” Hazel says. She beams up at me. “Luke, that’s so *sweet*.”

“I ... it’s not ...” I clear my throat. “It was a financial decision. The market was down. Better to live in it for a few years and sell it when the housing market improves.”

“Hmm.” Hazel studies my face, like she’s trying to decide whether or not she believes me.

“Just look at your damn bedroom,” I order.

She rolls her eyes and steps past me into the guest bedroom. Then she gasps. She turns in a circle, taking in the high ceiling, and the airy furnishings, and diaphanous curtains

on the huge windows. She crosses the room and plops down on the window seats.

Her big brown eyes look soft and dreamy.

“What are you thinking?” I ask, before I can think better of it.

“Oh ... it’s silly.” She twists her engagement ring self-consciously, then realizes what she’s doing and stops, sitting on her hands instead.

“Tell me,” I order.

She shrugs, sheepish. “I was just thinking that it would be fun to sit and write a book here.”

For a moment an image hit me, of Hazel curled up in the heart of my home, wearing one of those sweaters she likes, working away on the story that matters so much to her.

It’s basically the deal I’d sold her on. *Marry me. In exchange, I’ll give you everything you need to get your writing career on track.*

But it had been an abstract idea when I tossed it out before. A solution to a problem. Now I can picture exactly where she’ll be sitting, where she’ll be working.

I like it. I like it more than I should.

“I’m next door,” I say bluntly. “Don’t go in my room. Beyond that, you can use this wing however you want. If you need an office, feel free to call my decorator. We can turn one of the other bedrooms into your workspace. Or a yoga room.”

She arches an eyebrow. “A yoga room?”

“I don’t know what women want,” I snap. I run a hand through my hair, feeling foolish. “Sorry. I just haven’t ...”

“Faked an engagement before?” Hazel suggests.

Lived with my best friend’s little sister who I’m having sex dreams about was more what I had been thinking, but her version is true too.

I nod.

“How about you show me the rest of the place? I promise not to tease you too badly about thinking all women need yoga rooms,” Hazel says.

I give her a long-suffering sigh and show her the rest of the apartment. It’s probably for the best that she isn’t a yoga person.

The last thing I need is a visual of Hazel in skintight clothing, flushed and focused and sticking her highly fuckable ass in the air.

LUKE

“**T**here you are,” Hazel says, stepping out onto the roof. It’s cold up here now that the sun has set, but I don’t mind.

I love it up here. Second best thing to being up in my plane. The fresh air, the solitude ...

Of course, there’s not going to be much solitude anymore. Not for the next six months.

I stifle a sigh. It’s not that I regret inviting Hazel to move in with me. It’s the best call, logically.

I just wasn’t prepared for how much space such a small woman can take up in one apartment. Her chatter, the sound of her movements, the way I already found a strand of her hair on my couch. Even when she’s in her room with the door closed, I *know* she’s there.

She’s taking up space in my apartment, but she’s also taking up space in my head.

Hazel joins me, leaning against the wide stone railing. “Do you know what time it is?”

I check my watch. “About a quarter to ten.”

“That was a rhetorical question. It’s time for you to answer your daily personal question for me.” She sets a bottle of my favorite beer down in front of me. She must have found it in the fridge. “There. I even brought you alcohol to get you through the trauma of giving me one emotionally honest answer.”

“Brat,” I grunt.

She boosts herself up so she can sit on the wide cement railing that runs around the edge of the roof, and my breath twists and flips inside me at her recklessness.

“That’s not safe,” I tell her. “You want to sit, we sit over there.” I point to a table, chairs, and an outdoor chaise behind me.

She rolls her eyes. “Come on, it’s not that big a deal.”

I know she’s right. Hell, I’ve sat there often enough myself, either by myself or with Cooper.

But for some reason, it feels different when it’s Hazel. My heart is doing weird thumping things. I want to grab her and yank her back from the edge, but I don’t want to risk startling her into losing her balance.

“If you want your question answered, we sit over there,” I say.

She makes a sound of protest, like I’m a grumpy old man ruining her fun. But she reluctantly grabs the two beers she brought, hops off the railing, and strolls over to the chaise.

I join her, this time taking the beer she offers.

How the hell does Cooper handle having a sister like Hazel? She’s not reckless, not exactly. That railing she was sitting on was almost two feet wide. Her old apartment unit had a door that locked, even if the building itself didn’t. She agreed to fake a marriage to a stranger she’s known her entire adult life but drove a hard bargain in exchange.

No, she’s not reckless. But she walks right up to safety’s far edge and peeks over to see what’s on the other side.

I take a swig of beer. I need it, but not for the reason she thinks.

“Ok,” I say, gruff. “Ask your damn question.” I brace myself for something about my family.

I hope it’s not something about my dad. But if it is, I’ll tell her the truth. That was the deal, and I don’t turn my back on

deals.

“Why do you need a fake marriage?”

I frown. “I told you. My dad said—”

“I mean, why aren’t you married already?” Hazel asks. “You’re gorgeous, rich, successful, smart. Landing you would be most women’s Cinderella fantasy. So why haven’t you found something real?”

I open my mouth to give her one of my normal answers.

I’m too busy to date.

I’m not interested in relationships.

I’m not willing to inflict my family baggage on some nice girl who deserves better.

But I promised Hazel honest answers, and she’s got the ring on her finger to prove it.

I think about it. Trying to pinpoint when exactly I gave up on relationships.

“The things you mentioned—rich, successful, that stuff—they do make it easier to find a relationship. But they don’t necessarily make it easier to find something real,” I say.

Hazel half shifts in her seat to face me. Suddenly I’m aware of how small the couch is.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

I pick at the label on my beer bottle. “There was this girl I dated the last few years of college. Amy. It felt ... effortless. She wasn’t trying to change me or make me better. She liked me exactly as I was. We never fought. Ever.”

“Wow,” Hazel says. She sounds both impressed, and a little skeptical.

Clearly Hazel’s smarter than I was back then.

“Anyway. We broke up after college. She wanted to get married and start having kids right away. I was fine with marriage, but I wasn’t sure yet whether or not I wanted kids.

My childhood ... I don't know." I shake my head. "I wouldn't want kids unless I knew I could give them something better."

Hazel draws her knees up to her chest and tucks her chin on them. "How did she react when you told her?"

I grin wryly. "It was the final straw, apparently. Apparently, I was such a catch, she'd been holding her tongue every time I did something that bothered her. Every time I canceled on her last minute. Every time I left a dish in the sink. Every time she asked how my day was and I didn't return the favor." I take a sip of my beer. "Turns out, I was a shitty boyfriend. She was willing to compromise, because of all those qualities you mentioned. But the one thing she wasn't willing to compromise on was having kids."

The fight had gotten pretty ugly, expanding to cover everything from my studying technique to our sex life.

It turned out, there was something worse than my dad's constant criticism of me.

It was someone who constantly criticized me in their head but kept it a secret because of what she thought I could do for her.

"That was shitty of her," Hazel surprised me by saying.

I shrugged. "We were kids. The point is, I realized that who I was would always make relationships ... complicated. I'd rather have honest, selfish hookups than dishonest relationships where everyone pretends to be something they're not."

Hazel studies me. "Doesn't that get lonely after a while?"

Yes.

The instinctive answer surprised me. I never thought of myself as lonely.

Was I lonely?

I cover that moment of doubt up and flash her a cocky grin. "The trick is, don't look down. Focus on the stuff that matters more. Work, fun ..." I trail off, trying to think of something else.

But the truth is, mostly I just work.

I roll my shoulders, changing the subject. “What about? Why are you available on short notice for a fake marriage? Are you just not interested in relationships?”

Hazel snorts. “Hardly.” This time it’s her turn to look away. She readjusts herself, leaning back against the couch and tilting her head up to look at the sky. “There was this guy, back in high school. I loved him.”

“Did he give you his class ring?” I snark, mostly because the idea of Hazel getting her heart broken by some asshole puts me in some kind of mood.

She throws me a look. “I didn’t make fun of your story.”

I simmer down. “Sorry. Go on.”

“Anyway, I got a scholarship to NYU. We did the long-distance thing all through college. But when I got my dream job at that magazine, he didn’t want to move up to be with me. It turned out, he never wanted to leave West Virginia. So, if I wasn’t coming back ... well, that was that.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “That guy was a fucking idiot.”

“Hey,” she says defensively. “West Virginia’s a nice place. Plenty of people love it there—”

“That’s not what I meant.” I finish my beer. “That covers high school and college. What about since then?”

Hazel sighs dramatically. “The state of online dating is bleak, Luke Dewinter. *Bleak*.”

I bite back a grin at her theatrics. “I’m still having a hard time believing you haven’t met some lucky guy in the last six years. You’re a person who *likes* people, Hazel. Arguably more than they deserve.”

She blows out a sigh and sips her beer. “I mean, sure, I’ve had crushes. But they never noticed me.”

I laugh. “*That* is bullshit.”

She prickles. “What would you know about it—”

“Trust me Hazel, you’re the kind of girl men notice.” Involuntarily my eyes linger on her dark eyes, before dropping to her mouth. “Even when they shouldn’t.”

Something shifts in her breathing.

When did I get so close to her?

It would be so damn easy to lean forward, thread my hands through her dark, tumbling hair, bring her lips to mine where they *belong*.

The strength of the urge catches me off guard.

I stand up, grabbing my empty bottle. I answered her question, and then some. Which means it’s time for me to get off this damn roof. “I’m hiring a wedding planner tomorrow. Do you want to be involved in the planning process?”

“God no,” Hazel says, aghast. “I mean, it would be different if it was real but ...”

“It’s not,” I finish for her.

For a second I feel a flash of guilt for making her participate in this farce of a wedding, but I push it down ruthlessly.

“Just don’t make me wear an awful dress,” Hazel jokes. “I don’t want to look awful on my fake-wedding-day. A girl has standards.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her she could never look awful, but that feels dangerously close to a sincere compliment. Instead, I say gruffly, “I’ll leave you one of my credit cards. You can go shopping for it tomorrow.”

I turn to go.

Hazel scrambles to her feet. “Luke?”

I turn around, reluctant. What the hell does she want now?

“Can I shadow you sometime this week, at the office? I think watching you work will fill in a lot of gaps for me, for the book.” She hurries to add, “And it won’t disrupt your schedule at all. I’ll just sit quietly in a corner. You won’t even notice me.”

Of course I'll notice her. It's like the fucking air changes when she steps into a room.

But I don't have a good reason to turn her down. If it helps her write this damn book, it may even be for the best.

"Fine," I agree, gruffly.

I head to the door. Hazel wanders toward the edge of the roof.

At the last second, I turn around and point to the railing. "Are you going to climb up on that as soon as I leave?"

Hazel bites her lip, like a child who's been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

I open the door wide and gestured for her to precede me. "Your roof privileges have been revoked, young lady. Inside."

She laughs.

I wait.

"You can't be serious," she says.

"You lived in a building with a front door that didn't lock. In *New York*."

"You're really hung up on that," Hazel says.

"Just get inside," I growl, aware I'm being ridiculous, but unable to stop myself.

She glares at me. Then she stomps past me, her ass twitching.

I follow her inside, telling myself I'm only being insanely overprotective because Hazel is my best friend's little sister. It has nothing at all to do with that wild smile of hers. Or the way she's the first person in a decade to figure out that I'm lonely.

It has nothing to do with that at all.

HAZEL

I wake up in the biggest, most luxurious bed I've ever been in. For a moment I'm confused. Then I remember everything that happened yesterday.

I'm marrying Luke Dewinter.

I mean, it's fake. Of course it's fake.

But the diamond ring on my finger is real.

And the way Luke looked at me last night when he said *Trust me Hazel, you're the kind of girl men notice. Even when they shouldn't.*

I shiver.

Then I squinch my eyes closed against the memory. *Nope, not thinking about that.*

I jump out of bed, grab my bathrobe, and head down the hallway, searching for the bathroom.

Luke said something about planning to head into the office, even though it's Sunday, so I'm pretty sure I have the place to myself.

Maybe I can snoop through his room?

Nope, that would be a violation of his privacy, I scold myself as I open the bathroom door and step into an elegant, tiled bathroom.

And then I muffle a gasp.

Luke's stepping out of the shower, his back to me as he towels his hair dry.

My eyes skate down the contours of his broad, muscular back. The delicious ass I definitely shouldn't be staring at. Those long, strong legs ...

Luke turns around and I gasp.

The man is hung.

And also very, very angry.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" he snarls, not bothering to cover up.

I slap a hand over my eyes. "Why didn't you lock the door?"

"*This isn't your bathroom,*" he says. "You have one attached to your bedroom."

"Why don't you?" I ask, curious.

"Because my bedroom was originally built to be a library—you know what, I don't have to explain myself to you. *Get out.*"

I turn around, eyes still covered, and immediately walk into the corner of a very sharp counter. I swear and yelp against the pain, still covering my eyes because I don't think I can survive another look at his gloriously naked, righteously angry body.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Luke mutters.

I feel a strong hand on my shoulder, and the fresh, masculine scent of his soap overwhelms me. Then he guides me out of the bathroom and slams the door behind me.



IT TURNS out there is a bathroom attached to my bedroom.

Oops.

I take as long as I can with my shower and getting dressed, hoping Luke will leave for the office before I'm done.

But eventually I'm forced to leave the bedroom so I can seek out coffee and breakfast.

I find Luke in the kitchen, pouring himself a cup of coffee. He's got one of those fancy machines where you push a button and out comes a latte, or a mocha, or whatever drink you're craving.

Apparently, it's wasted on Luke, since he just poured himself black coffee.

I clear my throat. "Um. About earlier—"

"Please don't," he says. He looks pained.

I'm having a hard time meeting his eyes. Unfortunately staring at his neck, leads to staring at his chest, which leads to staring at his ...

Is it just me, or are those pants tighter than the ones he normally wears?

He clears his throat, and I yank my eyes back up to his. I'm definitely blushing.

"My chef doesn't work on the weekends, but she left pastries and ready-to-bake meals in the fridge. If there's nothing you want, order in. And buy yourself a wedding dress." He drops a credit card on the kitchen island between us. "I'll be working late tonight."

I nod. "I really am sorry. If there's something I can do to make it up to you ..."

He arcs a sarcastic brow. "You offering to strip for me Hazel? Make it even between us?"

"What?! No, I ..." I flush, caught off guard by the image of taking off my clothes for Luke. It's perverse and ridiculous, but also ... kind of hot.

Luke grits his jaw and looks away. "Calm down, Hazel. That was a joke."

My mouth feeling strangely dry.

“If you want to make it up to me, let’s skip tonight’s personal question. I think we’ve gotten personal enough for one day.”

I nod. I’m reluctant to give up today’s chance to get to know him better, but I can see the wisdom in giving us both a break from each other today.

Luke squeezes past me, travel mug in hand, briefcase slung over his shoulder.

I think of how I’d feel if he walked in on me naked, all my imperfections exposed in the harsh light of day.

On impulse I blurt, “Women definitely aren’t just after your money, you know. They’re clearly after, um, other things too.”

Luke freezes.

Then he very purposely keeps walking, without turning back.



AFTER SAVORING the most luxurious donut of my life (coffee flavored icing! With coffee flavored cream filling! And a coffee bean on top!) I spend the morning wandering around familiarizing myself with the apartment. The last thing I want is another accident like this morning. Then I settle down and spend a few hours working on Luke’s book. What started out as a topic I resented has become fascinating to me.

When questioned directly about it, Luke refuses to admit any part of his childhood was hard. But yesterday he admitted that he wouldn’t want to have a kid unless he could give them a better childhood than he had. On some level he *knows* the shit his dad put him through isn’t normal, even if he’s unwilling to admit that in public.

He’s infamous for his casual, playboy affairs. But underneath it all, he’s still being shaped by a bad break up with the woman he clearly thought he was going to marry.

He needs this autobiography, and this fake marriage, because his board members don't trust him. But underneath his flippant remarks, he takes his work incredibly seriously, and his employees clearly respond to that.

I'm so wrapped up in my subject I work through lunch. When my phone buzzes, I barely check the screen before answering. "Hello?"

"Why the hell did I just get an invitation to your *wedding*?" Sarah all but shrieks into my ear. "And it's next weekend? *To the man whose autobiography you're writing?*"

I wince. "Can you hold that thought? I want to finish this sentence."

"NO, I CANNOT HOLD THAT THOUGHT," Sarah says. "Tell me what's going on. Now."

I sigh, giving up writing.

Instead, I hit save and close my laptop. "It's not what you think. But if I tell you the truth, you can't tell anyone, understand?"

"Who would I tell?" she grumbles. "You're my best friend."

"Sarah," I say sternly. "I need you to promise."

"Fine, fine, I won't tell anyone," she concedes. "Now tell me what the fuck is happening."

I open my mouth to explain, then realize I have no idea where to start.

Also, it's 3:00 p.m., and I'm running out of time to go dress shopping.

"It's kind of a long story," I say. "How do you feel about helping me go wedding dress shopping while I explain?"

"You don't have a dress yet? Jesus," Sarah says. "This is a bigger mess than I thought."

She doesn't know the half of it.



THE SALES ATTENDANT at the first wedding dress store we go to laughs at us when I say I need a dress for next week. The sales attendant at the second place is a matronly woman who takes me aside and gently asks if I've thought this through.

Finally, Sarah gets exasperated. "You said you had a wedding planner. Get her contact info from Luke. Then tell her to get you an appointment."

So I do. Although I phrase it a lot more politely.

Fifteen minutes later I receive a text message telling me I have an appointment at one of the most sought-after designer boutiques in the city. It's a place that's comedically out of my price range.

But I guess it's not out of Luke's.

Sarah and I trek over a few neighborhoods, which gives me time to fill her in on everything that's happened since the moment Luke walked into my apartment and proposed fake marriage.

Once I explain it's for my career, Sarah calms down a little bit.

"Ok, I see why you're doing it," I say. "But are you sure you can fake a relationship with Luke for six months without catching feelings?"

"Feelings? For Luke?" I laugh, a little too hard. "Sarah, you know how I feel about him. He's cynical, and arrogant, and ..." I reach for another negative adjective, but the truth is, he's not exactly the spoiled rich guy I always thought. And if he's cynical ... well, maybe it's hard to see the best in people when half the people around you work for you, or want your friendship because of what it can do for them.

Sarah sends me a pointed look. "There's two ways to complain about a man, Hazel. You can complain because he's a jerk and you wish he wasn't in your life. Or you can

complain because some part of you wants him in your life, but he's a jerk."

I wrinkle my nose. I don't want her to be right. But the truth is, her assessment hits closer to the mark than I want it to.

"Look, the point is, I'm not going to catch feelings for Luke. And even if I did, he sees me as his best friend's little sister," I insist.

Sarah snorts. "Now that's an even bigger pile of bullshit."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Sarah points to fancy sign up ahead on the block. "Oh look, we're here."

Thankfully, she lets the conversation drop as we step into the shop and get down to the serious business of finding a wedding dress. When the sales attendant hears my name—and who I'm engaged to—she whisks us to a large, private dressing room in the back. It's already full of a rack of dresses, and there's snacks and champagne set out on a table near the couch.

Sarah's face lights up at the snacks and champagne. She grabs a glass and settles onto the couch. "I'm beginning to see the advantages of marrying Luke."

"It's nice that your loyalty can be bought with alcohol and snacks," I say.

The attendant clears her throat discreetly. "We've pulled a series of available dresses based on your measurements. Each of these dresses can be tailored to meet your requirements in time for the wedding."

I approach the rack, feeling weirdly nervous. Between telling Sarah the truth and choosing a wedding dress, it's beginning to sink in that there are more people than Luke and me involved in this fake marriage.

There will be people invited to this thing. People like Sarah, who got invitations.

Hell, I don't even know who's on the guest list. Or where the event is.

Maybe I should have asked to be more involved in the planning.

I turn to the sales attendant. “Could I have a moment alone to look at the dresses?”

The sales attendant is surprised, but she covers it up quickly. “Of course, miss. Please press that button if you need me.” She gestures to a discrete button by the door, and then slips out the room.

I run my hands over one dress, then another. Each is more gorgeous than the last. Silk, tulle, velvet. I’m pretty sure there’s one with real diamonds sewn into the neckline.

I don’t know much about high end fashion, but I’m pretty sure each one of these dresses costs more than a year of rent on my old apartment.

I swallow past my nerves. “Where am I getting married, by the way?” I ask Sarah, trying to sound casual.

“One of the fancy hotels by Central Park,” Sarah says. “I forget the name. I was a wee bit distracted.”

I nod, feeling a little numb. “Did it say anything else about the event?”

“The words ‘small’ and ‘intimate’ were used,” Sarah says.

I blow out a sigh. That’s reassuring. I’ll only be making a fool of myself in front of a few people.

“How’s Luke’s autobiography going, by the way?” Sarah asks around a mouthful of macaron. “I got so caught up in the wedding news, I forgot to ask.”

“Getting Luke to talk about himself is like pulling teeth,” I say. “But I’m starting to get pieces of him. He’s more complicated than I thought.”

“Sure,” Sarah agrees. “What simple man would fake his own wedding?”

I laugh.

“Which dress do you like best?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “They’re all so beautiful.”

“Then there’s nothing for it. You’ll have to try them all on and give me a fashion show.” She pulls out her phone and cranks up a sunny, happy pop playlist.

It’s the kind of music you can’t help but smile to.

What the hell, I think to myself. Yes, I’m faking a marriage and lying to almost everyone I know. But I’m also trying on amazing dresses, living in a gorgeous apartment, and writing a book about a fascinating subject.

I grab the second glass of champagne and drink it in one long swallow.

Then I pick the most expensive dress I’ve ever worn and try it on.

When I turn around so I can check myself out in the mirror, Sarah gasps.

“Hazel,” she says, her voice hushed. “You look like a bride.”

“That’s the plan,” I remind her.

But I know what she means. I don’t look like a woman in a last-minute wedding dress.

I look like a woman about to walk down the aisle to the love of her life.

This time when I reach for the champagne, I drink straight from the bottle.

LUKE

Hazel and I largely avoid each other for the rest of the week. I head out to work every day—thankfully with no more shower mishaps. Hazel stays home and works on our book. Sometimes she emails Joey, my administrative assistant, requesting documents from the company’s archives she needs for background research. Other times she’ll text me asking if I still have my high school yearbooks.

But mostly we avoid each other until I come home from work. When I do, we have a business-like dinner, where she sticks to my approved categories of questions. We cover any details that need to be worked out for the wedding, like travel arrangements for her parents (flying on Helius, naturally). Then at the end of dinner, right before we go our separate ways, Hazel asks her one personal question.

Sometimes they’re silly, like when she asked what movie I normally watch when I’m sick.

Other times, she’ll ask me about one of my family members. When she asked me to tell me a happy memory about my mom, I told her about one dinner when I was about fifteen, and my dad and I were at each other’s throats, until my mom started a food fight. It was so ridiculous and fun. I can still remember how big my dad’s laugh was, and how we all ended the evening laughing and smiling.

I hadn’t thought about that day in years.

No matter what question she asks, it always catches me off guard, and cracks me open a little wider than I intended.

On Thursday she reminds me that I promised to let her shadow me this week at the office. So, on Friday morning we head to the office together.

I told Hazel to wear something discrete, so she's in a black sweater dress that clings to her curves, paired with her cowboy boots and some dangling silver jewelry that catches the light when she moves.

I suppose it is discrete, by Hazel standards. But I can't help sneaking glances at her as we ride up the elevator together. "Would it have killed you to wear a suit?"

She laughs. Then she catches sight of my face. "Oh. You're serious." She tilts her head. "Do I seem like the kind of woman who has a suit?"

No, I think. That's the problem.

We head to my office. Hazel waves to everyone she met on the days she came in to interview me. They wave back enthusiastically.

Sit quietly in the corner, my ass, I think.

When Joey spots her, he immediately brightens. "Hazel! It's nice to see you again. I found a box of old company newsletters you might like. There's one of Luke playing games at the company picnic when he was six ..."

I growl.

"... that you probably don't want to see," Joey hastily finishes, shoving the box back under his desk.

Hazel winks. "Thanks, Joey. We can talk more about that when *someone* is busy."

"I'm right here," I grumble. "I can hear you."

She swats me on the arm playfully. I pretend I don't like it.

That's when I notice Joey's eyes have gone as wide as saucers. He's staring at Hazel's left hand.

"Hazel, you got engaged?" he asks.

Is it my imagination, or does he look a little disappointed?

Without thinking, my hand moves to the small of her back. Instinctively staking my claim. “Yes. She is.”

There’s an awkward second, as Joey figures out what my hand on Hazel’s back means, and Hazel and I realize that *of course* we’re going to spend the whole day playing “newly engaged couple” in front of the whole office. If we don’t, it will get back to my dad, and he’ll be suspicious.

Hazel recovers first.

A giant grin takes over her whole face, and she shoves her ring under Joe’s face. “Isn’t gorgeous? I wanted to get an engagement band for Luke, but he insists that’s not a thing for men. He’s such a traditionalist, you know?”

“I ... yeah. I guess he is.” Joey blinks up at Hazel in awe.

“I’m shadowing Luke today as research for his book,” Hazel says. “Could you give a heads up to everyone on his schedule today? Thanks, you’re a dear.” She flashes a brilliant smile at him again, and then swaggers into my office.

Joey watches her go, then turns back to me with new respect in his eyes. “Congratulations, sir. That’s ... wow.”

“Indeed,” I say dryly. I follow Hazel into my office and close the door behind me.

Hazel’s wandering around my office, poking at the books on my shelves. It’s both cute and annoying.

“You know he’s going to go on a gossip spree and tell the whole office, right?” I say.

“Obviously,” she says. “I figured it’s more efficient to get it announced in one fell swoop. Besides, they would have asked questions anyway when you showed up on Monday with a wedding ring.”

I don’t like the idea of the whole office gossiping about me, but it’s hard to argue with her logic.

“So.” She clasps her hands. “Let the shadowing begin. What do you normally do first thing in the morning?”

“Catch up on email,” I say. “But that can’t be useful for you ...”

“No, no, stick to your routine. That’s the whole point.” She plops into the chair across from my desk and pulls out her notebook. “Just pretend I’m not here.”

I settle in at my desk and dive into my inbox, trying to concentrate on my work.

She shifts in her chair. Jots something down in her notebook. Flicks her hair over her shoulder.

I try to block her out.

She finally stills. But that, it turns out, is even worse. Because she’s just *watching* me. I can feel her eyes on my face. Staring, like she can figure out something about my character from the way I frown at my inbox.

I turn away from my computer and face her. “This isn’t going to work. I can’t work with you ... there.” I motion at her.

“But I’m wearing something discreet.”

“Not discrete enough! You’re just there and I can’t think when you’re being all ... you.”

Her eyes widen. And then she smirks. “Luke. Did you just say you can’t think straight when I’m around? How *sweet* of you.”

I give her my most ferocious scowl. The one that makes junior employees like Joey quake in their boots.

Hazel just laughs.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I grumble. “I meant—”

“Oh, I know what you meant,” she says, brushing my explanation aside. “Calm down. I’ll go ask Joey to show me those newsletters. I can shadow your next meeting, and let you catch up on emails in peace.”

She leaves my office, the door clicking shut behind her.

I return to my computer, grateful to be alone.

Until I start thinking about Hazel leaning over Joey's desk in that dress, laughing delightedly as they read the newsletters he hunted down for her.

Damnit, that's distracting too.

I bang my head against my desk and groan, resigning myself to a thoroughly unproductive workday.



ONCE I SURRENDER to the chaos that is Hazel, it's surprisingly fun to have her at work with me. Not that I'd ever admit it to her. All my meetings start late because every employee I have wants to introduce themselves to Hazel and congratulate us on our engagement. That would be fine, except Hazel asks them follow up questions to get to know them. In general, my meetings are 50% less productive, but I know the people who work for me about 50% better. Even the quiet, impersonal, work-focused ones.

Hazel just hits people with that warm smile of hers, and suddenly my oldest, most crotchety employees are telling her fond stories about their own weddings.

I have a new respect for how she's wrestled so much personal information out of me. She's like a CIA interrogator, but friendly.

She's also sharp. When we're stuck on some problem in a meeting, she'll delicately raise her hand and timidly ask a clarifying question. And somehow, in the course of explaining the details to her, people have a Eureka moment that unlocks the whole problem.

I've seen her do it four times today. The last time she *winked* at me afterward. She acts all innocent, but she knows exactly what she's doing. She's a genius at subtly steering conversations in productive directions.

Part of me wonders why the hell she wants to be a writer, when clearly, she's got a talent for shepherding high-maintenance engineers and finicky businesspeople. I almost

offer her another job, then and there, but then I remember all the touchy-feely-get-to-know-you chaos she brings with her and shut my mouth.

Hazel sighs as we leave our final meeting of the day and head back to my office. “I don’t know how you do it. You spend all day surrounded by people who need something from you. When do you get your own work done?”

“That *is* my work. Pointing my people in the direction I want, then getting them everything they need to do their best,” I say.

“And yet, it’s a battle to get you to give me the answers *I* need to do my best,” Hazel says.

I flash her a smile. “It’s because you’re special.”

I watch her trying not to laugh, and something warms in my chest.

“Luke. I see you brought your fiancée,” my dad says.

I jerk my head up. All three of us come to a stop in the wide hallway. There’s plenty of room to slip past, but apparently we’re going to have a conversation.

“Dad,” I say, my voice cold. I haven’t spoken to my dad since Saturday morning, when he threw those damn photos in my face and tried to take away the CEO job I’ve spent my whole life working toward.

My dad waits for me to introduce him to Hazel. It’s petty, but I don’t want to. He doesn’t deserve her, not after the way he threatened her career.

Hazel has no such qualms. She sticks her hand out and flashes him a brilliant smile. “Hi. I’m Hazel Dawson.”

“I’m Roger Dewinter,” my dad says, curtly. Then he turns to me. “I meant to ask, have you drawn up your prenup yet? You’ll need that signed before tomorrow’s wedding.” His eyes flicker to Hazel’s scuffed cowboy boots, and there’s a wealth of judgment in his gaze.

“You didn’t have a prenup with Mom,” I say.

“That was different,” my dad says, icily stubborn. “We weren’t rushing into anything.”

I feel my temper rising. The oblivious *arrogance* of the man.

He’s the reason I’m rushing. He’s the only reason I’m doing this. And he has the nerve to act like me being hasty is a sign Hazel is after my money.

“We don’t need a prenup. I trust Hazel,” I grit out.

Specifically, I trust her to leave our marriage at the six-month mark with the massive payday I’ve promised her. But my dad doesn’t need to know that.

He purses his lips and shifts his focus to Hazel. “I’m not trying to be unnecessarily cynical—”

“So it runs in the family?” Hazel asks sweetly, and I choke back a laugh.

My dad ignores her. “I’ve looked into you and your family Miss Dawson. None of you own property, your parents included. All of you have student loan debt and credit card debt. And according to several sources, you didn’t even like my son until a few weeks ago.”

“That’s *enough*,” I hiss. Whatever our differences, dad and I don’t fight at the office. Especially out in the hallway where every employee can hear us.

But apparently dad doesn’t care if the whole company hears him belittle and embarrass Hazel. Because he keeps talking.

“If you want to marry into a better life, fine.” The muscle in my dad’s jaw ticks. “But I won’t have you changing your mind in a year when you realize the life Luke leads is harder than it looks, and taking him for all he’s worth.”

Something in me snaps. “You do *not* talk to her like that,” I growl, taking a step toward him. I don’t give a damn if people hear me. “She knows more about hard work than you do. And she does it without making the people around her hate her. Because she works *with* people, not against them.”

Hazel places a gentle hand on my arm. “Luke, it’s all right.”

But I’m not done. “The truth is, she’s the one who’s taking a risk on *me*. Her life was fine before I came into it. I’m the one who needs her.” *I’m the one who was lonely and didn’t know it.* “I’m not about to let you, or anyone else, drive her away from me.” I’m so mad, I’m shaking with it. And I don’t even know why. “Insult her one more time and you’re disinvited from the wedding.”

I grab Hazel’s hand and tow her past my dad and into the privacy of my office.

LUKE

I slam the door closed behind us. “He had no fucking right to say that to you. No fucking right.”

Hazel perches on the arm of a chair and watches me pace. “I think he’s trying to look out for you. In his own way.”

“By going after you? No.” I shake my head, snarling, “That’s not allowed.”

For some reason her face softens, which doesn’t make any sense.

People don’t soften when I get mad. They flinch and run away.

But Hazel’s not like everyone else. Instead of making an excuse to leave me alone with my foul mood, Hazel rises and walks toward me. She comes to a halt directly in front of me, so I have to stop my angry pacing. And then she reaches up and gently frames my face with her hands.

The intimacy of her touch is like brushing against a live wire. A shock of heat and energy, rooting me to the spot.

She takes a deep breath, and I mirror her without thinking. She’s calming me down without my consent, and I’m not sure how I feel about that.

“It’s ok, Luke,” Hazel says. “He’s not going to drive me away. I’m in this thing with you for the next six months, no matter what anyone else says.”

I swallow. It's almost embarrassing, how much better her words make me feel.

My eyes trace her face, as if I can find an explanation there for the hold she has on me. If her eyes were a little less kind. If her mouth was less quick to smile. If her tongue wasn't so sharp. Maybe then I wouldn't keep *noticing* her. Orienting myself toward her like a planet orbiting the sun.

My eyes rest on her mouth. That sweet, gorgeous mouth.

"I should kiss you," I hear myself say.

Her mouth parts and her eyes darken. Then she releases me and steps back with a shaky laugh. "Luke. We shouldn't ..."

"Before the wedding, I mean," I clarify. "We won't be a very convincing couple if we look like we've never touched when it's time for me to kiss the bride."

"Oh. Right. Of course." Her cheeks have flushed. "I guess we could practice tomorrow. Or tonight when we get home." She nervously shoves a strand of hair back behind her ear.

"Why not now?" I say, nonchalantly. But I don't feel nonchalant on the inside. I feel like she's spent all day turning me inside out, and if I can't touch her *now*, I'll spend the rest of the day obsessing about her. I'll spend the night having hot, sinful dreams about her.

I need to kiss her to prove she's not special. Break her hold on me. Prove she's as normal as every other woman.

"Someone could walk in on us," Hazel protests.

I smirk. "And what, see me kissing my future wife? The scandal."

But in deference to her wishes for privacy, I go lock my office door. In the silence, the quiet click of the lock sounds like a promise.

When I turn back to Hazel, she's wetting her lips.

Everything in me tightens in response.

"So, um, what kind of wedding kiss should we do?" Hazel asks nervously. "Chaste and sweet is classic. But maybe not

very *you*, you know? Open mouth is more natural, unless it goes on too long, then everyone's uncomfortable—"

"Hazel," I order. "Stop talking." I smooth her hair back from her face, and Christ it's soft. I wind my hands in her strands and tilt her head back, so her mouth is exactly where I want it.

She's just like anyone else, I tell myself. *She's not special.*

Hazel's eyelids flutter closed. "I really think we should discuss—"

I cut her off with a kiss.

At first her lips are startled, resistant. But just when I'm about to pull back and curse myself for overstepping, she sighs and softens into me. It's all the encouragement I need to kiss her back, in earnest this time, until she lets out a soft, uneven moan that sears through me.

My body knows what that moan means. It means I could walk her back right now, cage her against the wall, press our hungry bodies against each other. It means I could let my hands wander, find out how soft that sweater dress of hers really is. Find out if it holds a candle to the softness of her skin.

I could do all of that, and she'd let me.

But we'd both regret it in the morning.

I break the kiss, my breath jagged. "Does something like that work for you?"

"Mmm," Hazel's eyes are dazed, and it wakes up something primal in me. Then she blinks the feeling away and gives me a small frown. "I don't know. I don't want to just *stand there*, for the first kiss of my marriage."

"It's a fake marriage," I remind her.

"Still. It feels anti-feminist," she points out.

"Anti ... Woman, it's a kiss," I grumble. "Don't overthink it."

She puts her hands on her hips. “Look. We’ve covered how you’d do it if this was really your wedding. All ...” she waves a hand at me, “hot and possessive and demanding.”

I can’t hold back a crooked smile. “You think I’m hot and possessive and demanding?”

“The point is—” Hazel says, talking over me as she blushes like a virgin, “that if you were really my husband, I’d kiss you more like this.”

She rises up on her toes to kiss me, using my chest for balance. This time, she’s in it from the start. My hands instinctively find her waist, tugging her toward me, as we taste each other. It’s soft and sweet and *Hazel*, and when she laces her fingers at the nape of my neck so she can lean her full weight against me ... let’s just say this time she’s not the one moaning.

Hazel pulls away, lowering her heels to the ground. “We could do something like—”

But my mouth is on hers again. I shouldn’t be kissing her like this, I shouldn’t be kissing her *like this in my office*, but I don’t give a damn. I’m lost in the scent of her, the taste of her, the way she shudders and melts under my hands. Some distant part of my brain is thinking about how Cooper will kill me if he ever finds out, but the rest of my brain is occupied with the more important task of figuring out how I can ease up the hem of her skirt without stopping the kiss, because it’s not like kissing any other woman, it’s not.

Hazel is different.

And like the bastard I am, I’m greedy for her.

Maybe she’s a little greedy for me too. Because she doesn’t shove me away or scold me. Instead, she arcs into me, her mouth hot and sinful under mine, and we kiss some more, until someone knocks on the door.

Hazel jolts away from me, backing away until she hits my desk.

“Um, sir, you said it was ok if I left at 5:30 today, for that thing?” Joey calls through the door. “If that’s still ok, with

you, I'll head out?"

"Go home, Joey," I grunt.

I hear the muffled sounds of Joey grabbing his stuff and heading out for the night.

Hazel stares at me, gripping the desk for support, panting. "So, um, you're good with my version? For the wedding tomorrow?"

My laugh is harsh. She's really going to pretend that that kiss was just about practicing for a fake wedding?

Fine. Whatever. If that's how she wants to play it.

"No, Hazel," I say. "I'm not. We do it my way."

"But—"

"Do you want *this* to happen at the wedding?" I say, gesturing bluntly to where I'm obviously hard for her.

Her eyes widen. She shifts against the desk. Instinctively parts her legs a little wider.

Fuck.

I'm halfway toward her, before I remember I absolutely cannot do what we both want me to.

This is a business arrangement.

With my best friend's little sister.

I jerk to a halt. "Let me control the kiss. It's better for both of us."

Slowly, she nods. "Ok. Right. That's settled." She's trying hard to meet my eyes and failing miserably. "Let's go home."

"No," I say abruptly. "I need to catch up on all the work I didn't get done before you were shadowing me. You should go home and type up your notes from the day. Or have a bachelorette night out with Sarah. I don't care. Just don't be late for the wedding tomorrow."

I open the door and wait for her to leave.

She bites her lip. "Luke ..."

I wait. Dare her to face the elephant in the room.

But she doesn't. As brave as Hazel is, she chickens out.
"Fine. See you tomorrow."

And then she walks past me, without looking back.

I close the door, hoping I haven't just scared Hazel into leaving me at the altar.

HAZEL

Fifteen minutes before the start of the wedding I'm getting ready in a fancy hotel room with Sarah and freaking out.

My hair has been twisted up and pinned in a way that I could never replicate and threaded through with real freshwater pearls and tiny white flowers. My makeup is flawless. I look as vibrant and polished as a movie star. I'm standing there in my white bustier, white silk panties, and nude nylons. All that's left is the dress.

But I can't put it on. It's lying on the bed in front of me and I can't. Put. It. On.

"I can't do this," I burst out. "This whole plan is ridiculous. Why didn't you talk me out of this?"

"I tried," Sarah pointed out. "You were dead set on it a week ago. What changed?"

I scrub a hand over my face. "He kissed me."

"What?"

"We were practicing for the wedding. So we'd look like a real couple, you know? But it got out of hand and UGH." I collapse in a chair, glaring across the room at my wedding dress.

I already knew what Luke looked like naked. The last thing I needed to know was what he looked like when he wanted someone.

Wanted *me*.

I think of the look in his eyes after that third kiss. So intense and passionate he was almost angry with it.

I shiver.

How the hell am I supposed to live with *that* for six months?

“I can’t do it, Sarah,” I say, my voice quiet. “I need you to go outside and tell them ... tell them ...”

“No,” Sarah says bluntly.

My eyes jerk up to hers.

Sarah crosses her arms. “Look, if you are worried for your safety, I will get you out of this. If you think he’s going to hurt you, or be cruel to you, or just make you miserable, I will get you out of this. Are you worried about living with Luke for any of those reasons?”

“Of course not,” I say defensively. “He’s a good man underneath it all, it’s just—”

“Then you should go through with this wedding. At this point, anything less is career suicide. You’ll either be the writer who faked a relationship with her client for profit, or the writer who had a torrid affair with her client and left him at the altar,” Sarah says. “Either way it’s a bad look for you.”

I swallow. She’s right.

“I love you, but this is one of those things you can’t do halfway, Hazel,” Sarah tells me firmly. “You already jumped into this crazy mess. Now the only way out is through.”

I nod. “You’re right. I know you’re right.”

Sarah’s phone buzzes. She glances at the screen and answers it. “Calm down, Luke. She’ll be there in a second.”

She rolls her eyes as she listens to Luke talk, motioning for me to get in my dress.

I take a deep breath, move over towards the full-length mirror, and step into the dress. It’s gorgeous, whispery silk that pours over my curves and gently flares out around my knees.

It's elegant and sexy in a way that makes me feel like a cross between a nineteen-forties movie star and a princess.

Sarah zips me up. "Oh, babe. You're stunning."

We smile, our eyes meeting in the mirror.

Then Sarah frowns into her phone. "Not you, idiot. How the hell would I know what you look like? I'm hanging up now. We'll be there in a second."

Sarah shoves her phone in her purse. "That must have been some kiss. He sounded almost as distracted as you."

She reaches into her purse and hands me a dainty silver flask. "Here. Drink some of this for courage."

"What is it?" I ask, unscrewing the lid and taking a sip.

"Vodka."

I cough as the fiery liquid stings my throat. This definitely isn't top shelf. But it gets the job done.

Sarah takes an even bigger swig from the flask, then screws the lid on and drops it into her purse.

"Right. Let's get you horny dumbasses hitched."

And with that undignified rallying cry, I leave to go get married.



THE CEREMONY IS IN A SMALL, exquisitely decorated hotel function room overlooking Central Park. The whole room is covered in white roses. My parents are there in the front row, looking bewildered but happy. Luke's dad Roger is there too, watching the whole thing unfold with a serious expression I can't read. Cooper couldn't be reached, since he's traveling for work, and the rest of the people here are from Luke's side.

A good poker face must be hereditary for the Dewinters, because I can't read Luke's face either as I walk down the aisle to meet him at the front of the room. It's the first time I've

seen him since he kissed me like a god and threw me out of his office.

And I have no fucking clue what he's thinking.

When I get to the front Luke takes my hand and leans over to whisper in my ear, "*Breathe.*"

I inhale on instinct, catching the rich, earthy scent of his cologne. My stomach flips.

After that, I do my best to focus on the ceremony. I've never met the officiant, some gray-haired woman in an ill-fitting lavender dress who introduces herself as Judge Joan. But she's quick and efficient, which I appreciate.

We didn't write our own vows, so when the time comes, we exchange simple "I do's," swearing to love each other in sickness and health.

I thought I would feel guilty, lying like this. But mostly it just feels surreal. I almost let out a hysterical laugh. What the hell are we doing?

"You may now kiss the bride," Judge Joan says.

Before I can worry any more about what to do, Luke ducks his head and kisses me. It's gentle but insistent, rooting me to the moment, and for the first time all day I relax. When my lips part in relief, Luke's there with me, deepening the kiss with a soft groan only I can hear.

Then Judge Joan is clearing her throat, and Luke's pulling back, and I'm blinking up at him like someone who's stepped out of the darkness and into the bright light of day.

Luke truly is stunning, in his black tux and black shirt. He's got a sprig of white flowers in his pocket that match the ones in my hair. And now, he's wearing a ring that tells the whole world he's mine.

At least for the next six months.

"Come on," Luke says, his smile crooked. "The sooner we make it to the reception, the sooner we can leave."

I couldn't have said it better myself.



I’LL SAY this for the Dewinters. They throw a good last minute wedding reception. The food is delicious. The room—another tasteful hotel function room covered in white flowers—is big enough to fit everyone and a dance floor, but small enough to feel cozy.

Plus, we made it through the big wedding kiss without anyone standing up and yelling “Fraud! You people are clearly faking it!” so I feel like I can relax a bit.

I’m washing down a delicious meal with even more delicious wine, when I notice a delicate clinking that grows and grows as more and more people start tapping on their glasses with their forks.

Shit. I forgot about this tradition.

Luke frowns at me. “What?”

“They’re trying to get us to kiss. Remember, people did this at Cooper’s wedding.”

“Well, it’s a dumb tradition.” He looks so grumpy it would be funny if we weren’t trying to convince people we were in love.

Around us, the clinking increases. It’s only a matter of time before someone gets over enthusiastic and breaks a wine glass.

“Most grooms enjoy an excuse to kiss their bride,” I remind Luke.

“Most grooms don’t need an excuse,” Luke mutters. But he leans down and drops a chaste kiss on my lips.

I inhale sharply, but before I can react, he pulls back.

People cheer, and we go back to greeting the people who stop by our table to say hi.

Unfortunately, now that the guests have unlocked a fun new game, they don’t seem inclined to stop. Luke and I move

through the motions of the reception—cutting the cake, accepting a toast from Sarah and one of Luke’s friends from college, tossing my bouquet. But every time I start to relax, someone starts tapping on those damn glasses, and we’re kissing again.

We run through all the kiss options.

Him dropping a tender kiss on my temple.

Me returning the sweet, grounding kiss he gave me during our wedding ceremony.

Him accidentally biting my lip because he was irritated with all the kissing.

Me getting back at him for the lip biting by giving him a showy kiss that has the whole crowd whooping and means he can’t stand up from the table for a few minutes and needs to discretely adjust his trousers.

He glares at me after that one.

But at this point it’s just *funny*.

I’m faking a marriage to the hottest man alive, who will always see me as his best friend’s little sister. Meanwhile his kisses are driving me out of my mind.

As Sarah said, the only way out of this crazy mess is through.

While Luke is temporarily trapped at the table talking to some uncle of his, I discreetly step out into the hallway, needing a break from being on display all day.

Once I’m free, I lean against the wall, close my eyes, and sigh in relief.

“I owe you an apology.”

I yelp and straighten, whirling to see Luke’s dad Roger looking at me.

“Oh?” I ask, trying to calm my heart rate.

He adjusts the cuff of his suit self-consciously. “I’ve assumed the worst of you, more than once. I didn’t know Luke

was seeing anyone, and I suppose ... Well.” He stops fussing with his cuff and looks me squarely in the eyes. “It was more comfortable for me to tell myself that you were out to get Luke, than to accept that my son had fallen in love with a wonderful woman, and I hadn’t even noticed.”

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry,” Roger says. He’s clearly as unused to apologizing as his son is. But he awkwardly gives it his all. “I’d like to start over. But I understand if that’s not possible.”

“It’s possible,” I rush to say. “Of course it’s possible. You and Luke ... you shouldn’t be fighting over me.”

Especially because I’m leaving in six months, I think.

Roger gives me a sad smile. “Monica ... my wife ... she would have loved you.”

The wave of guilt I didn’t feel during the ceremony crashes over me now. “That’s very kind of you to say.”

“She was like you. She lit up a room. Everyone could feel it, but for those of us who loved her ... Well.” He looks down and blinks rapidly, clearing his throat.

That’s when I notice he’s still wearing his wedding ring. His wife’s been gone for fifteen years, and he’s still wearing the symbol of his love to her.

I almost reach out to, I don’t know, pat him on the shoulder? Give him a hug? But Roger has that imposing WASP-y thing going on. He doesn’t seem like the kind of man you casually touch.

Roger gets himself under control, and when he looks up again his expression is stoic. “The point is, I’m glad Luke can have that type of family again.”

I swallow against the unexpected emotion building in my throat. I’ve been building Roger up as this cold villain in my head. A rude man with impossibly high, standards for his son, who cares more about whether Luke is married than happy.

But clearly Roger cares, even if he’s doing his best not to show it.

He reminds me of Luke in that way.

Maybe that's why I do what I do next. On impulse, I lean in and wrap him in a hug. "You and your wife raised an amazing young man."

Roger freezes. "Oh. Ah. Thank you."

Then he hugs me back, albeit stiffly and awkwardly.

Maybe this fake marriage isn't just about helping mine and Luke's career, I think. Maybe I can help him and his dad learn how to talk to each other again.

The thought stays with me long after Roger has gruffly excused himself and escaped back to the reception. If I can give Luke something important, something that really matters ... well, maybe that can make up for us lying to everyone we know.

I head back to the reception, looking for Sarah.

I need another hit from that vodka flask.

LUKE

I escape my kind but mind-numbingly boring uncle by saying I need another drink and heading to the bar. But the last thing I need is more alcohol. Kissing Hazel over and over again has already got me feeling half drunk.

Cooper is going to kill me.

He never responded to our email wedding invitation, so I assume he's deep in the wilderness somewhere, collecting samples or measuring pollution levels or whatever environmental scientists do.

I mean, I'm *trying* to keep these kisses as G-rated as possible. But apparently Hazel got bored with behaving, because that last kiss had her threading her hands through my hair, slipping her tongue into my mouth, and pressing against me like she was the kind of bride who expected a wedding night.

I was hard in an instant.

And then the brat pulled away and *winked* at me.

I was halfway to hauling her off somewhere private so I could give her the kind of spanking that would teach her not to play with fire before common sense caught up with me.

God, I'm going to hell.

Maybe I do need that drink after all.

I signal the bartender.

“There you are! It’s been so hard to get you alone,” Hazel’s mom Kathy says. She has Hazel’s delicate bone structure and big brown eyes, although her own face has softened over the years, and she has smile lines at the corner of her eyes.

I wonder what Hazel will look like in thirty years. Will her smiles be etched in her face too?

Wait. Why the hell do I care what Hazel will look like in thirty years?

Hazel’s dad, Bill, stands beside Kathy, his face serious. Like Cooper, he wears his hair short, dresses plainly, and has a habit of trying to make small talk by sharing obscure science trivia.

I make myself smile, but I brace myself for the inevitable criticism. Bill and Kathy Dawson opened their home up to me more often than not in undergrad, when I didn’t want to spend holidays with my own father. Hell, one time when Dad and I were in a particularly bad fight, Cooper had let me crash with his family over Christmas. Kathy had gone out in a snowstorm to buy me a sweater that matched the one she’d already gotten Cooper, so that I’d have something to open on Christmas morning too.

It’s both the cheapest and most valuable thing anyone has ever given me.

And how do I repay them? By stealing their daughter away in a rushed wedding that screams “scandal.” They probably think I knocked Hazel up or something.

An image of a pregnant Hazel pops into my head, reclining in my bed while she gives me crap about working too much and uses my credit card to fulfill every bizarre pregnancy craving she has.

For a second, I almost smile.

Then I remember I don’t want kids and shove the image aside. I definitely don’t want kids with *Hazel*.

The bartender passes me a cocktail, and I sip it gratefully. I don’t know what it is, but it’s stiff and good. “Thank you both

for coming out here so last minute,” I say. “I know it was a bit unexpected, but when you know you know, right?”

It’s the line I’ve been using all day.

“Of course! Thank you for flying us out,” Kathy says. “I’ve never ridden in first class before. Those little pillows they give you—”

“We’re not here to talk about the plane tickets, dear,” Bill reminds Kathy.

“Oh! Right.” She takes my free hand in both of hers and beams up at me. “We wanted to say that we are so, so glad Hazel found you. We didn’t understand why she needed to move to New York, then she dated some men off the internet who were *not nice*, and, well, I’m just so *happy* she found you.”

“I ... well ...” I smile weakly. “I suppose you could say we found each other.”

Kathy leans in conspiratorially. “You know, Hazel had the *biggest* crush on you that first time Cooper brought you home.”

My eyebrows shoot up. I have a vague memory of a teenage Hazel blushing and scurrying from the room whenever I was around. I’d thought she was just shy, and assumed she grew out of her shyness.

“Really?” I say innocently, but inside I’m fighting off a smirk. I’m going to give her so much crap about this. It’s the perfect way to get her back for that last kiss she gave me.

“Anyway.” Bill clears his throat. “We just wanted to say that we’re glad she’s found someone who can take care of her. You know Hazel. She’s got these big, impractical dreams, and ... well she doesn’t always take care of herself. But now she has you.”

He smiles, man-to-man, and I get this feeling, like he’s handing me his most precious responsibility—his baby girl.

I swallow back a weird tightness in my throat. Bill and Kathy think mine and Hazel’s marriage is real. And not only

do they approve of having me in the family for the rest of their lives, but they're also trusting me to take care of Hazel so she can pursue her dreams.

I think of that shit apartment Hazel was living in before she moved in with me.

If mine and Hazel's deal works out, she'll have enough money for a better apartment for the next few years, plus the reboot her career needs.

I know she's talented. She probably won't need any more help from me. Hell, she might not even want it, after our six months of marriage is up.

But if there was an emergency, or if those idiots who rejected her last book screw her over again ...

"I promise," I say, "I'll always be there for her. Whatever she needs."

Kathy gives me a big hug.

I return it as best as I can without spilling my drink on us.

When Kathy releases me, Bill claps me on the shoulder a few times, then starts to tell me a science fact about blue whales, which is his way of saying the emotional part of the conversation is over.

By the time Hazel finds me, Bill and I are happily discussing the science behind hybrid airplanes. Kathy is a few feet away giving a chemistry lecture to one of my more annoying relatives, who can't quite figure out how to escape.

Hazel lays a hand on my arm, and I can feel the heat of her touch through my suit jacket.

"The wedding planner says it's time for the first dance," she says. She's smiling, but I can hear the exasperation in her voice.

Will this wedding never end?

I usher Hazel onto the dance floor and pull her into the frame of my arms. I place one hand on the small of her back to

guide her and use the other to hold her hand. The music starts, and her eyes widen as I easily move us across the floor.

“I didn’t know you could dance,” Hazel says, delighted.

“Lessons every Sunday in middle school,” I say, spinning her out and then guiding her back to me.

At first Hazel’s a difficult partner. She’s instinctively fighting me.

“Was that your mom’s idea?” Hazel presses.

I narrow my eyes. “Are you trying to interview me at *our wedding?*”

She bites her lip and smiles, looking like a shamefaced kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

Actually, she looks a bit like the blushing teenager she was when we first met.

Hazel had the biggest crush on you. Kathy’s words ring in my head.

“It was my grandpa,” I relent, answering her question. “The Dewinter men go to a lot of high society events. He always said the best way to land a business deal with a man who was on the fence was to show the man’s wife a good time on the dance floor.”

Hazel grins. “Ok, *that* line is going in the book. I wish I could have met him.”

I’m surprised to realize I wish she could have too.

Hazel steps on my foot. “Shoot. Sorry.” She rolls her eyes at herself. “The Dawsons do not believe in dance lessons. I’m kind of clumsy.”

“Only because you’re fighting me,” I say. “Soften your body, so that your arm is resting on mine, and you can feel the muscles in my shoulder. That way you’ll feel the movement, when I start a dance step, and you’ll be able to follow.”

She does, frowning slightly.

“Good girl,” I say in her ear. “Now, turn off your brain, and stop trying to predict what I’m going to do next. Just relax and trust me. Trust your own body. Dancing like this is easier than you think.”

“Everyone’s staring at us,” she says.

She’s not wrong. But I find I don’t care about them. Not with Hazel in my arms, so close to trusting me.

LUKE

“**W**hy is it the man who leads, anyway?” she asks stubbornly.

“Well, in this case, because I’m the one who suffered through middle school dance lessons.” I change up our direction, so that she’s moving backward across the dance floor, and needs to trust me.

She fights it for a second, and our knees bash, before she grudgingly gives in and lets me steer her.

“You know what I mean,” she says. “Why with formal dance is it always the guy who gets to be the boss?”

I bite back a smile. “The politically correct answer is that it doesn’t have to be. These days people call the two dancers the Lead and the Follow, and it’s up to individual couples to decide who wants to dance which part.”

I dip her, forcing her to cling to me just a bit. Loving the way that, this time, she doesn’t fight it.

Our faces are inches apart.

“But the real answer men lead,” I say, voice low, “Is that the fastest way to get a man out onto a dance floor is to tell him he gets to have a beautiful woman in his arms, and he gets to move her where and when he wants.”

Hazel opens her mouth. “That is so sexist—”

I cut her off with a kiss. If she asks later, I’ll tell her someone was clinking their glasses. But right now, all I know

is that she's tempting me all day, and right now her mind is fighting me even as her body surrenders to my control, and it's just about the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

Dimly, I'm aware that people are clapping and cheering.

I reluctantly end the kiss and pull her out of the dip. "It might be sexist," I say, my voice deep and low in her ear. "But you like it."

She shivers, her eyes dark.

I almost lean in, every instinct I have saying to chase that kiss with another, when my mind finally comes back online.

What the hell am I doing?

I convinced Hazel she'd be safe platonically working, living, and faking a marriage with me for six months. And now I'm making promises to her parents, stealing kisses, and having stray thoughts about what she'd look like knocked up in my bed.

It's this damn wedding, I think. That damn white dress she's wearing, the ring that tells the whole world she's mine ...

It's getting to my head.

"You ready to get out of here?" I say.

"Hell yes," Hazel breathes. It's almost a groan. "But won't people be suspicious if we leave early?"

"That's why I kissed you," I lie. Then, before she can protest, I scoop her up in my arms. She shrieks in surprise and winds her hands behind my neck, holding on tight.

As if I'd ever drop her, I think, mildly insulted.

"You'll have to forgive me, but it's time to steal my bride away," I announce to the room at large. Knowing, indulgent laughter fills the room.

"Thank you all for coming!" Hazel calls over my shoulder as I turn and carry her out of the room. "It means so much to us!"

Then she lowers her voice and says in my ear, “You can put me down now.”

“No,” I say, as we step out into the hallway. “You’ll end up talking to someone and we’ll be stuck talking for another hour. Now. Which way to the dressing room with all your stuff?”

She points.

Once we’re at least a few minutes away from all our guests, I start to feel a bit ridiculous carrying Hazel like this, so I set her down. My muscles are grateful, but the rest of me misses the weight of her in my arms.

We stop outside the room, and Hazel fishes a hotel keycard from a hidden pocket in her dress.

But when she steps inside the room, it’s spotless and empty of all her bags.

“Where’s my stuff?” Hazel cries.

“Hold on! Hold on!” our wedding planner calls from the other end of the hall. She jogs to us as fast as she can in her pencil skirt. Hazel steps back into the hall to see what’s happening.

When the wedding planner finally reaches us, she holds out a different hotel keycard. “I reserved the hotel’s Bridal Suite for you. Your things have been delivered there. You have it for the next two nights, so no need to rush through an early morning checkout.” She winks.

Hazel and I stare at the hotel keycard. Then we look at each other.

If it’s a Bridal Suite, it almost certainly only has one bed.

On the other hand, I got us out of that dumb reception by heavily implying we were off to enjoy our wedding night. If we turn it down, our Wedding Planner will be confused, and may end up gossiping about us to someone.

The last thing we need is *anyone* looking too hard at our fake marriage.

I take the keycard. “Thank you. You think of everything.”

She beams. “Let me escort you up there.”

Hazel and I exchange frustrated, helpless glances, and follow in her wake.



THE BRIDAL SUITE IS GORGEOUS, all soft rugs, and softer furniture. The bathroom features a massive jacuzzi tub already filled with hot water and rose petals. There’s an ice bucket with two bottles of incredibly expensive champagne, and a gift basket that includes snacks, water bottles, condoms, and lube.

The only thing the suite doesn’t have is a damn couch. Instead, there’s a delicate settee thing that would fit about two-thirds of my body if I tried to lay down on it.

Which means I’m sleeping in the damn bed with Hazel.

I scowl down at it, hands on my hips.

It’s a mammoth bed. We’re both adults. Normally I wouldn’t be worried.

Except that my control almost snapped more than once today, and that was with a room full of people watching us.

Do I trust myself not to reach for Hazel in the middle of the night, when I’m half asleep and she’s running that gorgeous mouth at me, tempting me the way she’s been doing all day?

Hazel laughs. “You’re glaring at that bed like it insulted your mother.”

“I’m not ... what are you doing?” I ask, distracted by the way she’s arching her back and twisting around in her dress. The tightly tailored silky fabric is pulling across her body in interesting ways.

“Trying to get out of this dress,” she says. Finally, she gives up. “Fuck it. Will you help me?”

No, I want to say.

Because I am trying to do right by her, *I am trying damnit*, but she's wearing my ring and she kisses like heaven, and I can't remember the last time I wanted a woman this badly.

Hell, I can't remember the last time I wanted a woman I couldn't have.

This is an entirely new experience for me.

And now Hazel is asking me to help her slide all that silk off her body, so that it pools at her feet ...

"Are you wearing a bra under that thing?" I say, my voice embarrassingly rough.

"Actually, it's a bustier," Hazel sends primly. "It's sort of like a corset, but it's really soft and stops at the waist. Plus, it gives my boobs this great lift."

I swallow a groan. That description does *not* help my problem.

"Luke? Help me?" Hazel prompts.

I square my shoulders and approach Hazel, telling myself to suck it up. I do hard things all the time. I run marathons. I've had my pilot's license since I turned 16. Last month I worked 48 hours straight to meet a project deadline. I'm steps away from becoming one of the youngest airline CEOs in the world

I can unzip a damn dress without turning into a caveman.

I feel for the zipper and find a tiny hook thing just above it that holds the dress closed. My hands feel huge and useless as I fumble to unhook it. My knuckles brush against her soft, soft skin.

What would happen if I kissed the back of her neck, and ripped off her damn dress, and ...

Fuck, she smells good.

Don't think about how she smells, I order myself.

The hook slips out of my grip again.

I swear.

“You ok back there?” Hazel teases.

“Do you want my help or not?” I growl.

“Sorry,” she says, appropriately chastened.

Finally, I get the hook undone.

“Woo-hoo! Triumph!” Hazel jokes. “The next part’s easy.”

I grunt. Then I carefully slide the zipper down her back, expecting to see bare skin that will haunt my dreams. But her bustier-thing goes up pretty high, so I find myself staring at enough white lace to make my mouth go dry.

“There,” I say.

Hazel reaches back and tries to tug the zipper lower, but it’s delicate and keeps slipping out of her grasp. “Can you do the rest? It goes all the way down to my ass.”

“Jesus, Hazel,” I swear.

“What is your problem?” She turns around to glare at me, holding her dress up in front to keep it in place. “I get it, today was stressful. You’d like to flop down on this giant bed so you can read some boring business report and forget I exist. But I am literally trapped in this dress, so I need you to pretend to be a nice guy for sixty more seconds so I can take a bath and get into something more comfortable. *Then* you can retreat into being an asshole.”

I close my eyes briefly, fighting off images of Hazel in the bathtub.

“Oh my God, you can’t even look at me,” she says.

“It’s not ... just turn around so I can finish getting you naked,” I say, realizing as I do that this might be the least fun way I have ever said that sentence.

She does.

Somehow, even the back of her neck looks irritated.

I tug the zipper lower, until I reach the end of the bustier, and there’s nothing but bare skin. I keep going until my knuckles brush the top of her underwear.

She's wearing a lace thong.

"Maybe I can sleep on the floor," I blurt.

She turns around to face me. "Luke, *what* is wrong with you?" She looks glorious, her face flushed with passion, her dress an inch away from sliding off her entirely.

"Nothing," I say, scrubbing a hand over my face.

"Liar."

I turn and head toward the living room and its frustrating lack of couches. "Oh look, time for me to read that boring business report." I yank the door open.

"I want to use today's personal question," Hazel blurts. "Which means you need to tell me the truth. Why are you so upset about helping me out of my dress and sharing a giant bed."

I clench the doorknob and grit my teeth. "This is a bad idea, Hazel. Don't ask me that."

"I don't care. I'm asking it anyway." Her dress rustles as she steps closer to me. "We're stuck together for the next six months. If I did something to piss you off today, I want to know what it is. And if it's not me, if it's something else ... well, I want to know that too."

"Hazel ..." It's half warning and half plea.

"You promised, Luke," she says, her voice soft. "What's the real problem?"

I whirl to face her. "What's the problem? The problem is that I spent half the day fantasizing about getting you out of that dress. The problem is that I spent the rest of it wanting to drag you somewhere private and do a hell of a lot more than kiss you."

Her eyes widen, and her lips part.

"The problem, Hazel," I say, my voice rough. "Is that I want you so damn bad. And I'm one bad decision away from doing something we'd both regret."

HAZEL

I'm so shocked, I accidentally let go of my dress.

It slides down to my waist, pooling at my hips. Honestly, the bustier gives me far more coverage than a swimsuit top. And the front is solid white silk, so it's not like Luke can see anything.

But he says, "Damn it Hazel," and takes half a step toward me, before stopping himself and pressing a fist to his forehead. His breath is ragged in a way that tells me he's speaking the truth.

Luke Dewinter wants me.

Badly.

My stomach flutters.

I'm not an idiot. I know that when we kiss long enough, it turns him on. But I'd been telling myself that that didn't necessarily have anything to do with *me*. It was just a normal reaction given that Luke is a young, healthy man who clearly enjoys kissing women.

Lord knows he's kissed enough of us.

But the way he's talking, the way he's *looking* at me now ... there's nothing impersonal, generic, or convenient about it.

He wants *me*. Specifically.

"I ... since when?" I ask, stunned.

Luke snorts. “Really? That’s your response?”

“When we met, you barely even noticed me,” I say. “And when we were older, and you started noticing me, it was only so you could undermine my opinion and say something cynical and judgey.”

Luke looks away, his jaw tight. Finally, he says, “You were 17 when we met. My best friend’s little sister. I would have been a real asshole if I’d noticed how gorgeous you looked in that yellow sundress.”

My stomach flips. *He remembers my sundress?*

“And after?” I ask. “All those sarcastic comments?”

Luke laughs, cold and dangerous. “Come on, Hazel. You know I’m a selfish, cynical jerk. Don’t try to pretend I’m a better person just because now you know how badly I need to fuck you.”

The blunt, rude words make something inside me shiver.

Luke turns away and scrubs a hand over your face. “Fuck. I shouldn’t have said that. I shouldn’t have said any of this.”

My heart’s pounding. He looks so elegant and sophisticated in his tux, but underneath is a powerful, ruthless man who’s famous for going after what he wants—and getting it. I can see him fighting to control himself.

Do I want him to win?

Or do I want him to give me the kind of hot, savage, glorious sex I’ve been craving since he first kissed me?

It’s a moot point because Luke gets himself under control. Of course he does. When he turns to look back at me, his face is a calm mask, and his voice is firm.

“Hazel. I know I’m an ass. But I need you to know that even I wouldn’t use our situation to ...” he motions back and forth between us. “I promised I wouldn’t touch you. And I keep my word. Do you believe me?”

“Yes.” I feel a spurt of frustrated disappointment. It’s not fair. It’s not fair that he can wind me up like this and then just,

do *nothing* about it.

He hasn't even asked what I want. He just *assumes* I don't want this as badly as he does.

On the one hand, sleeping together is a terrible idea since we can't exactly have a one-night stand. We're stuck together for the next six months. Even after that, we'll be loosely connected by Cooper.

On the other hand, maybe if we finally have sex, we can exercise this insane chemistry between us.

"I'll go sleep in the other room," Luke says. He grabs one of the champagne bottles and heads out to the door.

"Aren't you going to ask what I want?"

He turns around and eyes me warily.

Using all my courage, I shimmy out of my dress.

His eyes darken as he watches the silk fall to my feet. Then he slowly takes in every inch of my body, until we're staring at each other.

"I promised I wouldn't touch you," he repeats, like it's a spell that will keep us both from making a stupid mistake.

"You did. But I never promised not to touch *you*." I walk across the room. Then I brace myself on his shoulders, rise up on my toes, and kiss him.

After all the practicing we've been doing today, I know exactly what kind of kiss he likes. Slow, deep, and hungry, with my hands tangling in his hair.

There's a thud as Luke drops the bottle of champagne onto the soft, thick carpet below us.

Then he's lifting me, and I'm wrapping my legs around his waist, as he moves us back to the edge of the bed.

"We can't," he murmurs, as he kisses my neck.

"Sure we can." I smile at him. For once, our eyes are on the same level. "I'll even let you lead. I'm supposed to go soft, right?" I trail a hand through his hair, and he sighs into the

sensation in a way that reminds me of a dangerous wild cat about to purr.

“I’ll go soft, and let you move me however you want,” I whisper. “Touch me however you want.”

His eyes go dark, feral, unreadable.

Then whatever was holding him back just *snaps*.

In a second we’re both on the bed. I’m shoving him out of his jacket, loosening his tie, while he unhooks my bustier and finds increasingly creative places to put his mouth.

We’re a mess of tangled mouths and limbs.

Then he’s out of his jacket and tie, and I’m down to my thong. I want to tell him to keep going, *I want him naked damnit*, but then his mouth’s on my breast, sucking and licking and gently biting until I’ve lost all willpower.

“Oh God. Oh, *Luke*.”

I hope he’s not attached to this nice designer shirt, because I’m pretty sure the way I’m clutching it will ruin something.

Luke grins up at me, cocky as all hell. Then he industriously returns to kissing his way down my body. By the time he slides my panties aside and kisses my clit I’m shaking with so much anticipation I almost come right there.

I half expect him to pull back and tease me some more, just to be an ass. God knows the man lives to frustrate me.

But he doesn’t. Instead, he sets about using his mouth to give me pleasure with a kind of single-minded focus I’ve only ever seen him apply to his work. And like his work, he’s really, really good at it.

Since he’s not playing coy, it gives me the freedom not to either. I reach down and tangle my hand in his hair. “Yes. Fuck. That—oh *fuck*, yes, a bit to the left.”

He obliges, and my hips arc off the mattress of their own accord.

Luke takes that as a signal to nudge my legs wider. Then he’s sliding two of his fingers inside me, waging delicious war

on me from every angle. The pleasure coils, bright and fast and stunning, and then I'm coming and coming, over and over again because Luke refuses to let up.

When I can't take it anymore, I weakly shove his head away and roll onto my side, gasping.

I have a new appreciation for how so many women end up in Luke's bed.

"That was ... that was ..."

"A delicious appetizer," Luke says. He sits up and rips off his shirt. Then he stands and walks over to the gift basket.

He strides back to me and tosses three condoms on the bed beside me.

I blink up at him. "Really. Three?"

He crawls back onto the bed and settles behind me, curling his body around mine. One of his big hands starts toying idly with my breast. "You said you'd do whatever I wanted."

"Sure, but *three*?"

He pinches my nipple, and I gasp at the sweet pain of it. Then he slides his hand down my stomach, until he's cupping my still tender pussy while his big, hard cock presses against my ass.

"Anything. I. Want," he growls.

"Three it is," I gasp.

I hear the zip of Luke's pants and the rip of the condom wrapper. I shiver in anticipation and roll onto my back to watch.

But before he can ditch his pants and sheath himself, my phone starts buzzing.

Luke's head automatically turns toward the sound. Like it's pulling him out of the moment and back toward the real world.

"It's mine," I say. "Ignore it."

He tries to. He leans down to kiss me as the buzzing stops.

But before we can find our rhythm, the buzzing starts up again.

Luke pulls away. "That could be important."

Not as important as this, I think, but he's got that stubborn look on his face.

I stand to go dig my phone out of my purse so I can answer it. Now that Luke's not touching me, the room feels way too cold, and I feel way too naked.

I grab my phone. Sarah's name flashes across the screen. "This better be good, Sarah," I say as I answer it.

"Oh, calm down, it's not like you're actually having a wedding night," Sarah says.

I flash a guilty look over my shoulder at Luke.

He rises and walks to the far end of the room, facing the gauzy curtains that cover the windows.

He's probably trying to give me privacy while I talk to Sarah, but I can't help but feel like he's trying to put as much distance as possible between me and him. Trying to get his control back.

No, I think. Don't put your mask back on. Stay with me.

"Trust me, this is amazing news," Sarah patters on. "You know Noah Turner, that big editor over at Spark House Publishing? He heard you were helping to write Luke's autobiography, and now he wants to meet you. He thinks he might have a project for you."

"Nonfiction?" I ask.

"Yes. I know helping rich barely literate businessmen write their autobiography isn't your first choice," Sarah admits. "But Noah Turner knows everybody. If you impress him, it could really help when you're ready to start shopping your next novel around."

"Ok," I hear myself say. Maybe it's that sixty seconds ago Luke was ready to thrust himself inside me and now I'm naked while Sarah gives me practical career talk ... but I don't know

how to feel about what she's telling me. My emotions soar and swoop in a tangled, tumbling mess.

"Here's the thing. He wants to meet us tomorrow morning at nine thirty. I said we could do that breakfast place in the Village with the good pancakes," Sarah says.

"Nine-thirty?" I blink. "That's so early."

"Again, I remind you, you're not actually having a wedding night. And this is a really important opportunity," Sarah says. "Go to bed now, get a great night's sleep, and I'll see you tomorrow. Nine-thirty sharp."

Then she hangs up on me.

Luke hands me a hotel bathrobe. It's silky and black and impossibly luxurious. I pull it on, grateful for the coverage, but disappointed at what I think it represents.

Luke has slipped his own shirt back on and buttoned it up halfway. And the condoms are gone from the bed.

"Sounds like you've got an early morning meeting tomorrow," he says, like we're back in his office calmly discussing our schedule for the day.

I hate it. I hate it with every fiber of my being. "Luke ..."

"It's a good thing we were interrupted," he says briskly. "We got a bit carried away, but we would have regretted it in the morning."

"But—"

"You said you'd let me lead," Luke says. "So let me lead. I have more experience in these things than you do."

The way he says it makes me feel foolish and naive.

Had I really thought all I had to do to seduce him was get naked and give him a kiss? When he'd said multiple times that he wasn't going to have sex with me?

I raise my chin and gather what little of my pride I can. "I agree. Sex would only make things unnecessarily complicated."

“Good,” he says. “Good.”

We stand there awkwardly.

“Do you still want to take a bath, or ...?” Luke asks.
“Because I’d like to shower.”

The *cold* part of the shower goes unsaid.

“Oh. No. Go ahead.”

I watch him walk stiffly into the bathroom.

Then I change into the leggings and T-shirt I wore this morning to the hotel. I use three makeup remover wipes to get all the wedding makeup off my face. Then I turn out the lights, crawl into bed, and try not to think about what Luke and I almost did. Or what we *actually* did.

Leave it to a man to think giving a woman the best oral sex of her life won’t make things awkward in the morning, but penetrative sex somehow would.

I don’t say anything when Luke emerges from the bathroom and joins me in bed.

Then again, he doesn’t say anything either.

I do my best to fall asleep, already dreading the morning.

This damn editor better be worth it.

LUKE

I wake up tangled in Hazel. She's half sprawled on top of me, her leg tucked between mine, while she uses my chest for a pillow. My arm is wrapped so tight around her, I half wonder if I moved her here in my sleep.

Waking up like this—her weight on me, her scent all around me—feels sinfully good. Part of me wants to roll her under me, wake her up, and finish what we started.

God, last night.

I know I should regret it. If I was a better man, I would. But the truth is, my only regret is what we didn't do.

My cock stirs at the memory.

Don't go there, I tell myself sternly.

Once I got enough blood in my brain to think clearly, stopping was the only possible choice. Even if we weren't stuck together for six months, even if she weren't Cooper's sister ... Hazel is the kind of girl who deserves something real. Something that's way more than a one-night stand.

And I can't give that to her.

I try to ease her off me, glancing at the clock as I do. 9:12 a.m.

I frown. "Hazel. What time is your meeting again?"

"No," she mutters, curling into my chest. "Sleeping. Go away."

I shake her shoulder gently, then more firmly. “Hazel. It’s after nine.”

She shrugs me off and sits up halfway, blinking in the daylight. Then her eyes fall on the clock.

“Shit!” she leaps out of bed, scrambling for her bags from yesterday. “I don’t have anything to wear! And I’m late!”

“You could wear your wedding dress,” I yawn.

“Not funny. Oh! Wait.” She strips off her T-shirt, then grabs the black shirt I wore yesterday and slips it over her. On her it looks more like a tunic than a shirt, but when she belts it at the waist with the tie from her hotel bathrobe, it doesn’t look half bad.

Of course, it leaves me with nothing to wear but a suit jacket and slacks. “You can’t borrow that. I need a shirt too.”

Hazel ignores me and grabs her phone, presumably to summon a rideshare. “Argh, there’s a fifteen-minute wait till the next cab. I’m going to be so late.”

She blinks rapidly, trying not to cry.

Something about Hazel on the verge of tears reaches into my chest and grabs my heart.

“I’ve got my car. I’ll drive you,” I say.

“Really?” The hope in her eyes is painful. “Even though I’m stealing your shirt?”

The thing in my chest twists even tighter. I don’t want to think about it.

“Come on,” I say, rolling out of bed and grabbing my slacks. “Let’s get you to your damn meeting.”



FIFTEEN MINUTES later we screech to a halt in front of Hazel’s restaurant. I had to drive the wrong way down a one-way street, but I got her here only two minutes late.

I spot Sarah sitting at an outdoor table with an objectively attractive blonde man.

I frown. “Aren’t editors supposed to be old?”

“What? Oh. No, Noah’s a little younger than you. But he’s basically publishing royalty. Everything he touches turns into gold.”

You’re already gold, I think.

Hazel clambers out of the car and joins Sarah and Noah at the table. Noah stands to hug her in greeting.

“Easy asshole,” I mutter. “She’s married.”

Someone behind me honks, jolting me out of my moment of jealousy.

I drive away, telling myself I have no right to feel possessive. If Hazel finds someone else who can help her with her career, it’s fine. If she finds a guy who can give her something real when our six months are up, it’s great.

Absolutely fucking great.

I clench the steering wheel and drive away.



THREE HOURS later I’m back home, working in the living room. Normally I’d work in my office, but this way I’ll notice as soon as Hazel gets home.

Not that I’m waiting for her.

I go back to my laptop.

Twelve minutes later, when I finally hear the sound of a key in the lock, I don’t look up. “How’d it go?” I ask, with a casualness I don’t feel.

“I ... I don’t know.” Hazel sounds uncertain in a way that’s not like her.

I glance up as she wanders into the living room and settles onto the couch. She’s lost in her own thoughts, and I find

myself eager to know what she's thinking.

"Is there a specific offer on the table, or was this more of a networking thing?" I ask.

"He wants to hire me to help some difficult celebrity clients write their memoirs. It's basically what I'm doing for you," she says.

"Well, not *exactly* what you're doing for me," I drawl, earning a reluctant smile from her.

I feel a spurt of victory.

"A month ago, this would have been the answer to my prayers. Steady, good paying writing work for at least the next year and a half. Maybe longer," Hazel says, nonplussed. "The people I'm writing for are interesting. Noah's an amazing editor. Short of getting my novel published, this is the best possible job I could have hoped for."

"And yet, you don't sound thrilled."

She shrugs, chewing her lip.

For a second I'm distracted, because I remember how soft and perfect her lips are.

I yank my thoughts away from that dangerous path.

Hazel stands, restless, and paces toward the window. "I should say yes. Sarah wants me to say yes."

She sounds like she's trying to talk herself into eating unseasoned, overcooked broccoli, when she's obviously the type of woman who should be holding out for chocolate.

I set my laptop aside and join her in front of the window. "Would you rather be working on your next novel than writing these memoirs?"

"Obviously," Hazel says. "But it's not practical. I need the money ..."

I raise an eyebrow, and she trails off.

"I will need the money," she corrects herself. "Eventually. After I run through the money I'm making off *you*."

“That’s what, two, three years away? Why not use that time to focus on writing your next novel?” I prompt. “Then, if it doesn’t sell, you can go back to helping people write their memoirs.”

She hugs herself. “But what if this opportunity doesn’t come again? And I turn it down to write another novel no one wants to buy?”

“What if this is your chance to finally focus and write the novel every publisher’s going to clammer to buy?” I counter. “But you pass it up in favor of a career path that won’t actually make you happy?”

Hazel makes a frustrated sound and buries her hands in her hair. “It sounds so simple when you say it like that. But ...”

“But what?”

“But what if I’m not good enough?”

“Hey.” I take her by the shoulders and turn her so that I can look her in the eye. “It’s true, you can’t control whether or not some publisher decides to buy your next book. Sometimes people tell you no.”

“You suck at pep talks,” Hazel huffs.

“The point is, if you’re so scared of rejection that you say no to yourself, that you take yourself out of the game before you can even write the damn book ... well, I guess you protect your heart.” I shrug one shoulder. “Some people need to play it safe. But I don’t think that’s you. I think you’re hungry to take the risk.”

She’s searching my face, like she wants to believe what I’m saying but is scared to.

“I mean, you already faked a marriage to buy yourself the resources and time you need to write your novel,” I remind her. “Are you really going to flush that all down the drain by taking a job that will keep you too busy to work on your own dream?”

Still, she hesitates.

“Ok.” I release her and step back. “I obviously think you deserve to take a risk on yourself. But this is your decision, not mine. Here’s what you’re going to do. Close your eyes.”

She looks at me suspiciously. “Why?”

“So I can put a worm in your hands,” I say sarcastically. “Come on, just do it.”

She sighs but follows my directions.

“Ok. Imagine that you lost out on the opportunity to become the biggest thing in celebrity autobiography writing.”

She snorts out a laugh.

I grin. “Good. Ok. Now imagine you lost out on the opportunity to write a novel you’re going to absolutely love. It’s the kind of thing that fulfills you creatively and takes your writing to the next level. But you missed out on writing it because you were too busy.”

The smile falls from her face.

“Which opportunity would you be more upset about missing out on?”

When she opens her eyes, I know she has her answer.

On impulse, I reach out and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “I know careers can get complicated. But as long as you’re married to me, you don’t need to be practical. You can go after what you want.”

For a second she just stares at me.

And then she launches herself into my arms, burying her face in my chest. “Thank you. No one’s ever ... no one’s ever given that to me before.”

“I mean, you’re earning it,” I joke, because it feels *way* too good to have her in my arms. “I intend to be a demanding husband. I’ll need you to dress up in my favorite team’s jersey and serve me and my friends buffalo wings while we watch the game.”

She pulls away and whaps me in the shoulder. “Asshole.”

I grin, unrepentant.

“I’m going to go text Sarah I don’t want the job before I lose my nerve. Then I’m going to turn off my phone so she can’t talk me back into it,” Hazel says.

I nod, taking that as my cue to grab my laptop and disappear into my office. Now that I know she’s not going to be spending the next year working closely with stupid Noah, I can finally get some work done.

“Hey, do you want to do something fun tomorrow?” Hazel asks. “Even you don’t work on Sundays.”

I absolutely do work on Sundays. I just do it in jeans, from the comfort of my own home.

But I don’t say that. Because a part of me wants to spend the day with her.

Except this is Hazel. Hazel, who only tolerates my company because she’s writing a book about me and because I lured her into a fake marriage.

“When you say fun, do you actually mean fun? Or do you mean ruining an actual fun activity with more interview questions?” I ask suspiciously.

“Actual fun. Scout’s honor.” She holds up three fingers in a fairly good approximation of the Girl Scouts salute. “Come on. What’s your idea of fun? I promise I won’t write about it.”

Unbidden, I think of taking her up in my plane. The two of us up in the air, away from the city, away from our lives, free as birds.

I’ve never wanted to take someone else up in my plane. But now that I’ve had the idea, it just feels so *right*.

“Promise you won’t write about it?” I say.

“Promise.”

My smile widens. “Then I have the perfect idea. Tomorrow, I’m going to take you flying.”

HAZEL

I mean to tell Luke I'm terrified of flying. I do. But he was so damn excited yesterday when he invited me. And then the whole drive upstate to the airfield, he talked about his P-51 Mustang with a boyish enthusiasm I've never seen from him.

Apparently, it's some sort of vintage fighter-bomber plane used during WWII. His grandpa taught him how to fly this model. His is painted red, and the last owner customized it to squeeze a second seat into what was historically a one-seat plane.

"It means you can't use it for long range flights, because the extra person means you run through fuel faster," Luke had explained helpfully on the drive up. "But we're not flying to a destination. We're just flying for the joy of it."

As far as I was concerned, the only reason to fly *was* the destination. In the rare situations where I absolutely had to fly, I knocked myself out with sleeping pills and woke up at my destination.

Now I'm standing on the tarmac, looking with trepidation at the vintage plane I'm about to fly in. And I'm getting real hung up on the word *vintage*.

"Is it safe?" I squeak.

"Of course," Luke laughs. "I maintain my aircraft." In a leather jacket and aviators, with that loose, confident grin on his face, he looks like a movie star.

Ever since the wedding-night-that-wasn't, I've been trying to ignore how insanely sexy Luke is. But now it's a welcome distraction.

I focus on the delicious curve of his ass as he climbs the ladder up to the cockpit ahead of me.

Is it called a cockpit? I don't know.

Anyway, he climbs in the plane, and then turns around to offer his hand to help me in too.

His hand feels sure and strong. I let that anchor me.

He closes the canopy, so we're enclosed inside the plane. Then Luke settles me in a seat directly behind his and hands me a headset so we can talk to each other once we're in the air. The space is so small my knees are basically tucked into my chest. But it gives me a good view as Luke starts messing with controls, checking engine lights, etc. He narrates it all as he does it, but I'm barely listening.

Instead, I'm concentrating on taking calm, steady breaths.

I can do this. I can be brave while Luke shows me something he cares about.

All I have to do is sit here and keep breathing. Luke's doing the hard part. I did sneak a plastic bag into my purse in case I need to puke.

But I'm not going to puke, I tell myself sternly.

The engine roars as it comes to life. The propeller spins. Luke flashes a grin over his shoulder at me, and God, I'd do anything for that grin.

No man should be this beautiful, I think.

Then Luke's guiding the plane down the runway. Then the friction of the runway fades away, and we're up in the air.

I squeeze my eyes shut and concentrate on breathing.

I feel the plane vibrate as we climb higher and higher.

“Don’t you love this view?” Luke’s voice comes through the headset.

I open one eye and peek out the window.

The sky looks so *blue* up here. Blue like the ocean. Blue like Luke’s eyes.

Maybe it isn’t so bad up here, I think.

Then I make the mistake of glancing down.

The ground is so fucking far away. Everything looks tiny and far away, and I feel a rush of dizziness as I think about how far away everything is. I close my eyes again, but it’s too late. The wave of dizziness is followed by an even bigger wave of nausea.

I lunge for the plastic bag in my purse. As Luke does something tilty with the plane, I empty the contents of my stomach into the bag.

It turns out even Luke’s hotness isn’t a match for my fear of flying.

“Hazel? You ok?” he asks.

When I don’t answer, he glances over his shoulder and sees me hunched over my bag.

“Jesus,” he swears.

“Can we go down now?” I ask, feeling like a miserable failure of a fake wife.

I don’t hear Luke’s answer, but soon enough the plane is tilting again, descending, and then the plane’s on the ground, rattling down the runway, until we come to a blissful, perfect stop.

I lean back in the seat and breathe, grateful.

Once Luke’s parked the plane, he half-climbs over his seat to touch my forehead with the back of his hand. “Are you sick? You don’t feel like you’re running a fever.”

“It’s not that,” I mumble.

“Maybe it’s food poisoning? I told you not to eat that gas station donut.”

“The gas station donut was delicious, you’re just a food snob,” I say.

“Then what—”

“I’m terrified of flying,” I blurt.

For a second he just stares at me.

Then he scowls. “Why didn’t you *tell* me?”

“It’s embarrassing!” I say. “Can we get out of the plane now?”

He grumbles something I don’t hear, and messes around with handles and buttons. Then he’s opening up the door and helping me down to the ground.

My knees are shaky enough that when I get to the tarmac, I just sit down and breathe, my head between my knees.

“... you really are scared of planes,” Luke says, stunned.

I nod, still staring at the ground.

I hear Luke walking away.

I don’t blame him for being disappointed with me. He wanted to show me something he loves, and I ruined it.

Ugh. It’s such a stupid thing to be scared of.

Luke returns, and crouches next to me. “Here.”

He’s holding a water bottle.

I accept it and rinse my mouth, grateful to wash the gross taste from my mouth. “I’m sorry for ruining our day,” I say.

Luke sighs. “Hazel, I’m not mad that you don’t like flying. I’m mad that you didn’t *tell* me. I wanted to do something fun today, not torture you.”

I groan and put my head in my hands. “I don’t *want* it to feel like torture. I want to feel normal. Plus, what will people say when they find out *your* wife is scared of flying?”

Luke rubs my back in slow, easy circles. “Plenty of people are scared of flying. And if they’re not scared of flying, they’re scared of something else.”

“You’re not scared of anything,” I mumble. “You’re always so stoic, in total control of your emotions. Nothing gets to you. You’re so brave.”

Luke’s hand on my back stills. “Hazel ... me keeping my emotions under control ... that’s not because I’m brave.”

I look up from my knees, finally meeting his gaze. “It’s not?”

“Come on.” He stands and holds out his hand to me. “Let’s head back to the car.”

He pulls me to my feet like I weigh nothing. Then we head back to his car.

“You’re brave in your own way, you know,” Luke says. “You ask people difficult questions, you genuinely try to get to know them, even when it’s difficult. You wear your heart on your sleeve. That’s bravery.”

I give a watery laugh. “No it’s not. It’s just curiosity.”

We come to a stop beside the car.

Luke tilts my chin up so our eyes meet. His expression is intense and serious. “Trust me. It’s bravery.”

I swallow. “I have the feeling we’re talking about more than just my fear of planes right now?”

Luke grimaces. Then he steps back and pulls out his phone. I think that’s the end of the story, until he passes me his phone. He’s pulled up an old news story. It’s a profile of him, his dad, and their company.

“We did that interview about a week after my mom died. I was fifteen. I didn’t want to, but my dad said we had to. It was supposed to be a puff piece, and the company needed good press.” Luke stares off into the distance, his arms crossed. “The reporter asked a question about my family, and I started crying. After, when she filed the story, she called my tears an

expert P.R. manipulation, designed to pull attention away from some controversial business decisions my dad had made.”

I gape at him, aghast. “She did *what?*”

Luke takes his phone back from me and shoves his phone in his pocket. “The point is, I don’t keep my emotions to myself because I’m tough or brave or whatever shit people assume. I do it because I don’t trust people with what I’m actually thinking or feeling.” He kicks a bit of gravel by his feet. “When I give someone the truth, they just use it for their own agenda.”

Luke says it matter-of-factly. Like it doesn’t bother him anymore.

But I am *furious* on his behalf. How dare his dad force him to do that interview? How dare a journalist use a grieving teenager to suit her writing agenda?

I also have a new appreciation for why interviewing Luke has been like pulling teeth. It’s not just that he doesn’t trust journalists.

He has a hard time trusting anyone not to use what he’s feeling against him.

Luke shifts so he can face me. “The point is, it *is* brave of you to trust people with what you really think and feel. I don’t want you to start hiding what you feel. Not for me. Understand?”

His expression is so fierce, all I can do is nod.

His face clears. “Good. Now let’s go do something you actually want to do. What do *you* do for fun?”

LUKE

It turns out Hazel's version of a fun adventure is wandering around a bookstore we passed on our way to the airfield.

I've never thought of book shopping as particularly social, but with Hazel it is. She wanders through shelves pointing out every book by one of Sarah's clients. Every book she loves. Every book she hates. Books she's currently got on hold at the library, because she doesn't have the budget to buy *every* book she wants.

She shows me the table where my autobiography will go when it comes out.

I feel a weird clenching in my stomach, thinking of someone picking up a book and reading about *me*.

"Where would your next novel go?" I ask.

She leads me to the fiction shelf and points to the spot for authors whose last names start with "D."

Then she's distracted by another book on the shelf. "Oooo, I love this author. I didn't realize she had another book out. She writes the hottest sex scenes. Which, let's face it, is my entire sex life these days."

I cough, and clear my throat, trying very hard not to think about that night in the hotel.

I don't know what type of books she's reading but going down on Hazel Dawson was one of the sexier experiences of *my* life. And I'm not exactly living like a monk.

“I mean, unless I stroll into a bar, order a drink, and meet Mr. Perfect,” Hazel says, unaware of the direction my thoughts have taken.

“The ring you’re wearing should make that a less effective strategy,” I say dryly.

“Oh. Right.” She puts the book back on the shelf as she slides me a glance. “Then again, it’s a fake marriage ...”

I get the sense Hazel’s testing me. Maybe trying to see where we stand after the other night. Unfortunately, I have no idea what the fuck she wants me to say.

I’m too busy seeing red at the prospect of her flirting with some hypothetical guy in a bar.

Fuck. I’m a mess over this woman.

“I think either of us getting caught hooking up with someone would cause a scandal,” I make myself point out reasonably, “and defeat the point of using this marriage to improve my reputation. I’m going to need you to avoid men in bars for another six months.”

It’s the right thing to say. The practical thing to say. But it leaves me with this restless, caged energy.

On impulse, I grab the book she wanted back off the shelf. Then I backtrack through the store, grabbing every book she said she had on hold at the library and adding it to my stack.

Hazel half jogs after me. “What are you doing?”

“I’m buying my wife the books she wants,” I say, gruff. “I told you, as long as we’re together, I’m taking care of everything you need.”

“Luke ...” Her eyes are unreadable. “You don’t have to.”

I don’t have to. But I want to. The urge to give Hazel everything she needs, make her happy, is so powerful I don’t know what to do with it.

I hold up the first book I grabbed. “Is this the only smutty book you want? Or would you like to add more to the pile?”

I can see her instinct to put me in my place warring with her desire for more books.

The desire for more books wins.

“Well.” She raises her chin, dignified as a queen. “If you’re buying ...”

I bite back a smile and let her lead me around the bookshop.



WE END the day back home, sipping beer on my rooftop. Hazel’s reading one of the books I bought her.

I’m supposed to be reading a book she bought me because she said I’d like it. It’s a nonfiction book about WWII aviators. I probably *would* like it if I could focus.

But I keep finding myself sneaking glances at Hazel. Noticing the way she sits curled with her bare feet tucked up underneath her. Noticing the way she smiles at something she’s reading. Noticing the way her hand idly plays with that beer bottle.

The second time she catches me looking at her she sets her book down.

“Did I do that bad of a job picking out a book for you?” she asks.

It takes me a second to stop staring at her mouth. “... No. No, it’s good.”

She tilts her head, studying me.

“Really,” I say. “I’ve just got ... stuff on my mind.”

Like you, I think. Why can’t I get you off my mind, Hazel Dawson?

She bites her lip, and I briefly lose blood flow to my brain.

I take a swig of my beer to distract myself.

Hazel takes a deep breath. “Why don’t you want us to sleep with other people?”

I choke on my beer.

When I finish coughing, she’s still staring at me, waiting for an answer.

There’s something dangerous in her eyes. Like she knows she’s playing with fire and doesn’t give a damn.

“I told you,” I say, rolling my shoulders, restless. “I don’t need the scandal.”

“That’s one reason. But I don’t think it’s the real reason,” Hazel says steadily.

Every fiber of my being wants to grab her, and kiss her, and tell her it drives me wild when she even *jokes* about seeing other men. I want to make her mine, if only for the night. I want to drive every other man in the world from her mind.

But that’s not an option for us.

I stand up and wander to the edge of the roof, looking out over the centuries old, gated park below. “The real reason doesn’t matter,” I say at last.

“Luke.” Her footsteps sound behind me. And then she’s standing beside me. Close enough to touch.

Close enough to kiss.

She looks up at me. “This is my question tonight. You have to tell me the truth. You promised.”

“Pick another,” I growl.

“No.” She crosses her arms. “Tell me the damn the truth. For once Luke, tell me what you *feel*.”

I give a harsh laugh. “What I feel? What I *feel*, is that if another man touches you, I’ll fucking kill him. I want you for myself, Hazel. And I don’t care if that makes the next six months impossible for us. I don’t care if it makes me a bad friend. The only thing I care about is giving you a good hard fuck.”

Her lips part. Her eyes go wide. Her chest rises and falls in quick, shallow breaths.

“How’s that for the truth?” I all but snarl.

For a second our eyes lock.

And then she’s in my arms, and we’re kissing, and I’m grabbing her ass, holding her as close as I can while I grind her against my hard cock. Her hands are in my hair, and she’s moaning my name, and it’s already almost too much, because this is *Hazel*.

I need her *now*.

“Why are you so hot? It’s unfair how hot you are,” she says. “Sometimes I see you when you’re at your desk working, and you’re so focused, so in control, I just fantasize about going down on my knees and sucking your dick.”

Jesus. She’s killing me.

“Stop talking,” I say, my hands sliding up under her T-shirt so I can stroke her tits. She lets out a little whimper that slides through me like whiskey. I take her mouth with mine, liking the way she softens and clings to me. The way she *needs* me.

I’m about to drag her inside to my room when Hazel drops to her knees and reaches for my zipper.

Jesus fucking Christ.

“I like talking during sex,” she says matter-of-factly. “I believe in communication.”

“Of course you do,” I say through gritted teeth.

I let her take my cock out and stroke it, and *fuck* it’s good. Her touch is too tentative, the wrong rhythm, and there’s something about the combination that makes Hazel’s hands on me feel like the sweetest, cruelest tease.

When she tries to take me in her mouth, I stop her out of habit.

It’s not that I don’t like blowjobs. I do.

But I like being in control more.

Hazel's already tearing me apart. I don't need to give her any more ammunition.

I pull her to her feet and rearrange myself.

"Hey—"

"I don't like talking. I like action." I turn her to face the door and give her a light spank. "Get inside. Now."

She throws me a mischievous look over her shoulder. And then she grins and races inside.

I follow her inside toward our bedrooms.

When she starts to open her bedroom door, I stop her. I don't know why, but I don't want to do this in the guest room. I want her in my bed, in my space. I want to claim her as thoroughly as it is possible to claim someone.

I take her hand and lead her to my bedroom.

"Wow. I forgot you said this used to be the library." She turns around, taking in the stained-glass window, and the floor to ceiling bookshelves that cover most of the walls. "I like all the dark green, especially with that giant dark wood bed. It makes it feel like a forest. A book forest," Hazel says.

If my room's a forest, she's some kind of nymph, or maybe an enchanted princess. Someone who definitely shouldn't be here, but now that she is, a dark greed fills me. Like I'm not going to let her leave this room until she gives me everything.

Hazel's admiring one of the old New York photos I have propped on a bookshelf, when I close the distance between us and strip her T-shirt off.

She gasps and laughs as she twists to face me, surprised. But I'm not done yet.

Sixty seconds later she's completely bare.

I stare at the lines and curves of her body. She's sexy, but it's more than that. She's graceful and alive in a way that makes me think of art. If this was 200 years ago, men would be begging to immortalize her in marble.

"Your phone's buzzing," she says.

I turn it off and toss it aside without looking to see who it is. “Turn yours off too,” I order.

She laughs and rolls her eyes. “No one ever calls me. Really, last time was an anomaly—”

I cup the back of her neck. “I’m not having this interrupted by some dick editor who doesn’t even know what you’re worth.”

That’s what makes her blush.

Not standing naked in front of me. Not hearing I intend to fuck her.

No, Hazel blushes because I tell her she’s worth more than the mediocre opportunities the world keeps giving her.

I kiss her. I can’t help it.

When she breaks away from the kiss, she’s breathless and laughing. She tries to roll her eyes. “God, you’re bossy. Fine. Whatever.”

But I see through her.

She likes it when I force her to remember how amazing she is.

She fishes her phone from the pile of clothes at her feet, making a big show out of turning it off. “Ok. What now?”

I strip off my shirt.

Her lips part as she stares at my muscles.

“Now,” I say, “We stop talking.

HAZEL

I'll say this for Luke. He doesn't make me wait.

Approximately thirty seconds after we turn off our phones, we're both naked on his bed. He's braced over me, sucking at a sensitive spot on my neck in a way that's almost certainly going to leave a mark.

I shiver, partly from the things he's doing to me, and partly from the idea of Luke marking me as his.

His hard, insistent cock presses against me, reminding me what's coming.

Part of me wants to beg him to fuck me now. I'm wet and aching and desperate.

But the other part of me wants to make this last.

And I wasn't lying about that blow job fantasy ...

I trail a hand down his chest, loving the strength of him, reaching for his cock.

He catches my wrist and pins it to the bed, by my head.

Ok, I think. Not that.

There are other ways to make this last.

I wet my lips. "Remember when you went down on me? I loved it."

"You'll love whatever I do to you," he says, arrogant as hell. His lips find mine, and he kisses me until I'm twisting in the sheets, helpless and needy.

I'd be pissed at him for being a bossy, uncommunicative ass, if he wasn't so obviously, obnoxiously right.

I loved everything Luke Dewinter did to me.

He reaches down to pet me between the legs, coaxing me to the brink of orgasm over and over again but never letting me fly off the edge.

"God damn it, Luke," I swear.

He grins at me, his expression mock-innocent. "Just making sure you're ready for me. I'm kind of big."

"I know. I walked in on you getting out of the shower," I remind him. Then I shut my mouth before I admit anything else embarrassing.

Unfortunately, Luke notices the change in my expression. "What?"

"You said no talking."

"Hazel," he says sternly.

How the hell does Luke manage to sound like a disapproving boss when he's naked and about to be inside me?

And why am I so turned on by it?

"I, um, may have had this dream about you. After it happened," I admit. "I woke up so horny. So, I, um, touched myself, and thought about your cock."

He swears, every muscle in his body going tense as he pushes himself off me.

I blink, wondering if I said something wrong.

A second later, he's sheathed himself in a condom, and then he's thrusting into me, and it's a little tight, but so, so good.

He kisses my temple. "I changed my mind. You can talk. Tell me every naughty thought in that head of yours."

So I do. I tell him about every passing fantasy I've had about him. I tell him about all the ones I'll have in the future, because of this night. I tell him about how I'll spend the next

six months one room down from his, touching myself and thinking about this moment.

Luke doesn't say anything in return. But I can tell what he's feeling from the way he touches me. The way he gets wilder when I confess something especially naughty, until he gets a hold of himself and tries to be gentle for a bit, tries so hard his hands shake as he touches me. At least until I say something else that goads him into losing control, and we're losing ourselves in each other all over again.

I think I have two orgasms? Three? I don't know. The waves of pleasure crash against each other, until Luke finds a new angle and gives one last savage thrust that sends me over the edge a second before he follows, kissing me through the whole thing, so that I'm not even sure if I'm breathing.

When we break apart gasping, he stares down at me, something unreadable in his eyes.

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask him what he's feeling. But I already asked my question for the day.

And I don't think I could bear it if I asked him, and he refused to answer.

Luke rolls off me and takes care of the condom.

I fall back against the pillows and focus on breathing. I realize the room around us is dark. We fucked through the sun setting. The ring on my left hand glints in the twilight.

I wonder if this is the part where I'm supposed to leave? We didn't talk about if this was a meaningless one-time thing, but given Luke's track record, I kind of assume it is.

On the other hand, some of the things he said ...

What I feel, is that if another man touches you, I'll fucking kill him. I want you for myself, Hazel.

That's not something you say to a one-night stand, is it?

I'm still trying to figure out what to do when Luke returns to bed. He sprawls, completely unself-conscious, as he drapes a heavy, possessive arm over my waist.

Two minutes later he's out like a light.

It's not cuddling. Not exactly. Even in his sleep, Luke likes his space. But whenever I shift in the bed, he frowns and automatically readjusts until his arm is draped over me again. Like he's not quite ready to let me go.

I smile to myself. Maybe this is a one-night stand. But I don't think it's meaningless.

I close my eyes and drift off to sleep, my own hand resting over Luke's.



THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up starving, relaxed, and a little sore. It takes a second to remember why.

I blush, thinking about the things I confessed to Luke last night.

Then I smile, thinking about how obviously those whispered fantasies turned him on.

Next to me, Luke lets out a loud snore. He sounds like a bear hibernating.

I resist the urge to giggle as I slip out of bed. I don't really feel like getting dressed in yesterday's jeans and T-shirt, so I borrow Luke's bathrobe instead.

It's too big on me, almost sweeping the floor dramatically as I head to the kitchen to start coffee and wolf down one of the pastries Luke's chef leaves for us.

I feel relaxed, recharged ... I feel like writing.

On impulse, I go get my laptop and then sit down at the kitchen island.

Trying to work on my next novel feels too daunting.

Instead, I open the files for Luke's book. I've written tons of bits and pieces since we started. Now, for the first time, I start trying to thread them together. I flesh out some scenes and cut others.

Since I'm writing *for* Luke, in his voice, I can't come out and say, "Luke Dewinter is a complicated, fascinating man." Instead, I show it through the stories I choose. The way I juxtapose one scene with another, so that the reader can't help but read through the lines and see how amazing he is, even if he tries to hide it from people.

I've also got an idea I've been toying with—starting every chapter with a quote from someone else about Luke.

I want the first one to be from a newspaper article, commenting on the public, asshole playboy persona he shows to the world. Then I'll use the first chapter to flip that quote on its head, show once and for all how wrong that line of thinking is ...

My fingers fly as I work. The coffee goes cold in the mug next to me. I finish the pastry, wolf down another, then go back to typing.

"There she is," Luke says from behind me. "The bathrobe thief."

I start. "I didn't realize you were there ..." I trail off as I realize he's wearing nothing but low-slung pajama pants.

Luke absently scratches his stomach, and I briefly lose my train of thought.

How is it possible I feel even *more* horny after everything we did last night?

"What are you working on?" he asks. "Is that your book?"

"Oh. No. It's yours. I mean ours," I correct.

Is it my imagination, or does he stiffen slightly?

"Actually," I say on impulse, "I think I'm ready to show you the first chapter. If you want to read it and give me some feedback."

"You don't have to ... I mean, I've got to head into work ..." He trails off as I turn the laptop and slide it across the kitchen island to him.

Luke looks down at my laptop like it might jump up and bite him. Then he looks up at my nervous, hopeful expression.

He sighs and sits down. “Fine.”

As he reads, I pour him a cup of coffee. Then I putter around the kitchen, loading the dishes we left in the sink yesterday. Wiping the area where I was sitting free of pastry crumbs.

Every now and then I sneak glimpses at Luke. But I can’t tell what’s going on in his head.

My stomach is a mess of knots.

Have I ever cared this much what someone thought of what I’ve written?

When I can’t take the tension anymore, I blurt, “It’s just a first draft. We can go in a different direction if—”

He holds up a hand in the universal “stop” motion, eyes still on the words in front of him.

I shut my mouth and go back to cleaning an already spotless kitchen.

I’m two seconds away from going into the living room and fluffing all the pillows when Luke straightens, closes the laptop, and looks up at me. His eyes are dark with emotion. “I can’t believe you wrote this.”

My stomach plummets.

Suddenly I wish I was dressed in more than just his bathrobe. “Like I said, it’s just a draft. But if you let me know the parts that you have an issue with, I can fix them—”

He crosses the kitchen and kisses me. It’s fierce and tender at the same time, and I’m so relieved that he’s not mad I find myself clinging to him.

“The way you see me, Hazel ...” His voice is gruff and low. “I don’t deserve it.”

I reach up to touch his cheek. “I just wrote down the stuff you said, Luke. I didn’t make anything up.”

He shakes his head, stubborn. “No. You did something to it. The way you put all my stories together, you made me look ...”

I raise my eyebrows, waiting. I tried my best to capture his strength, leadership, and passion. The sharp, irreverent sense of humor that lurks under all that masculine beauty. The way he cares so much about taking care of the people who work for him.

“Good,” Luke says, at last, not quite able to meet my eyes. “You made me look like a good man.”

Something in my chest cracks open.

“That’s because you are,” I say firmly. “I mean, you cover it up with a thick layer of *cynical asshole*. But that’s just camouflage, isn’t it? Because you don’t trust people to see the real you?”

He doesn’t answer. At least not with words.

Instead, he wraps me in a giant bear-hug, hiding his face against my neck while he struggles to get control of his emotions. I stroke his hair, marveling that this time, I’m the one giving *Luke* a safe place to hide from the world.

For a while we just hold each other.

And somehow, it seems more intimate than anything we did last night.

When he pulls away, he’s looking at me so intently, with so much heat in his gaze, that I find myself getting flustered.

I tug at the neckline of my bathrobe, pulling it closed for modesty. “Don’t you need to get to work?”

He peels my hand away from the bathrobe and kisses it. It should be a chaste, romantic gesture, but something about the way he does it feels downright carnal.

“I think,” Luke says, “That it would be unrealistic if a groom came back to the office immediately after his wedding.”

He tugs at the tie around my waist, until the knot comes undone and the bathrobe falls open, exposing me to him. Then he kneels in front of me, placing a kiss against my stomach.

Ironically, *that* kiss feels chaste.

My heart is tripping over itself. I don't know what to do with this tender, more open side of Luke.

"I should stay home from the office today, so they don't get suspicious," Luke mutters against my skin. "Don't you agree?"

"We wouldn't want anyone to get suspicious," I agree breathlessly, my hand tracing the planes of his face.

After that, we don't say anything at all.

I think we're both afraid of what would come out if we did.

HAZEL

A week later I'm leaving Luke's office, humming to myself. I brought him lunch and we went over the first five chapters of the book, and the outline for the rest. It's still a battle to get him to let me put more personal details in the book, but he trusts me more than he did at the start.

And in general, he's a lot more willing to make time for me in his schedule, even if it's just so we can spend a half hour arguing about the book outline over dumplings. Even when we're fighting, we're both somehow in a good mood.

Of course, that *might* have something to do with all the sex we're having. He's insatiable. Or maybe *I'm* insatiable. I don't know. We're wearing wedding rings, but it feels like we're having some kind of secret affair.

I hum as I stride down the sidewalk, unable to hide the smile on my face.

My phone buzzes and I answer. "Hey, Sarah. What's up?"

"Oh, the usual. I just added another editor to my enemies list. She's thwarting me."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," I say, knowing Sarah thrives on these kinds of professional battles.

"Anyway, that's not why I'm calling," she says. "Now that you're a week into fake married life, I wanted to check how your book is going."

"It's *amazing*," I say. "Luke and I are really clicking. He's still fighting me on the concluding chapter, but I think I can

get him to come around—”

“That’s great, but I wasn’t talking about Luke’s autobiography,” Sarah interrupts. “I was talking about your next novel.”

“Oh. That.” My happiness dims slightly. “I’m, um, still mulling things over. I think it might be good to take a break before I try to write it. Relax, recharge. That sort of thing.”

On the other end of the line, Sarah falls silent.

A cab driving by honks aggressively at something or other.

“Did you hear me?” I ask Sarah. “I said I’m taking a break.”

“I heard you,” Sarah says faintly. She doesn’t sound happy about it. “Hazel, is there something going on with Luke?”

My shoulders tense. “Luke doesn’t have anything to do with this. I’m allowed to take a break from my own writing.”

“Of course you are,” Sarah says. “But the last time we talked about your career, you turned down a really lucrative writing gig so you could focus on your novel. And I supported you! But now you’re saying you don’t want to write that either.”

I shift from foot to foot as I wait for the light to change, trying not to feel caged in.

Sarah isn’t done yet. “So I’m asking again. What’s going on between you and Luke?”

Damn it. She knows me too well.

I didn’t want to pop the, well, honeymoon bubble Luke and I are in by telling anyone else. But I don’t want to lie to my best friend either. I’m lying to enough people as it is.

“Um.” I look up at the sky. “I’m sort of ... sleeping with Luke.”

“*What?*”

I wince and hold the phone away from my ear while she processes that bombshell. When she’s done swearing and

muttering vaguely about emotionally suicidal writers who make terrible career choices, Sarah takes a deep breath.

“Ok. We’re talking about this in person,” she declares. “Meet me at NewsBar Cafe in fifteen minutes.”

She hangs up before I can argue.

I sigh, head to the subway, and catch the subway to NewsBar. Sarah likes it because it’s far enough from her office she can have personal conversations without worrying that one of her coworkers will overhear.

Also, she saw a sitcom celebrity there once and is convinced more will appear if she’s just patient enough.

I’m faithfully sitting at a corner table sipping a latte when Sarah bustles in, buys an overpriced seltzer water, and sits down across from me like she means business.

“Is he not supportive of your fiction writing?” Sarah demands. “Is that why you’ve stopped working on your book?”

“What? No!” I say. “He’s plenty supportive. He was the one who gave me the courage to turn down that writing job. It’s just ... I don’t know. I haven’t been in the mood to write.” I look down at my latte, smiling to myself as I think of last night.

It was my turn to pick the movie we watched, and so we’d ended up watching one of those cheesy Home Sweet Home Entertainment romcoms. The ones with super predictable plots about overworked women who go back to their hometown and fall in love with a hunky farmer, which of course causes them to break up with their rich businessmen boyfriends back in the city.

Luke wasn’t a fan. He kept pointing out that the shareholder meeting scene wasn’t accurate. Then he argued that the whole movie could be improved by adding sex scenes. I’d told him he was wrong. The next thing I knew, Luke was scooping me up and carrying me to orchestrate a sex scene of our own.

“Hey. Earth to Hazel.” Sarah waves a hand in front of my face.

I blush. “Sorry. It’s just ... I’m really happy. For once. What’s so wrong with taking a break from fiction writing and living in the moment for once?”

“Nothing,” Sarah says, “if the thing that’s making you happy is real.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

She leans back in her chair and crosses her arms. “Has Luke said that he cares for you, the way you care about him? That this isn’t just some extended hook up?”

I shake my head. “That’s not fair. Luke doesn’t talk about his feelings. But I can tell he cares.”

Sarah studies me, worry etched on her brow.

“I promise, he’s shown me that this means something to him.” I think of the way he hugged me after I showed him the first chapter of my book. The way he listens when I talk. The way he physically gravitates to me as soon as he gets home from work, even if it’s just to sit next to me on the couch while I read and rest his eyes until I get to a stopping point.

Hell, when I told him a story about a brief STD scare, I’d had a few years ago with a guy I dated, Luke went out and got tested the next day, just because he didn’t want me to worry. Of course, as an added bonus, since then we’d been able to start enjoying sex without worrying about a condom since I’m on the pill.

But I can’t tell Sarah any of that. It’s private, between me and Luke.

Sarah blows out a sigh. “Look, I know Luke’s a great guy. And I want you to be happy. But be careful, ok? I don’t want you to end up with a broken heart.” She thinks about it. “Even if getting a broken heart would probably lead to a *great* novel.”

I throw a paper napkin at her.

She grins, then turns serious again. “Promise to be careful, Hazel.”

I look down at my latte. “I promise.”

But the truth is, I think it might already be too late. The last thing I feel around Luke is careful.



THAT NIGHT AFTER DINNER, instead of joining Luke on the couch to watch a movie, I tell him I need to go work on my novel. For a half-second he’s disappointed, but he covers it up quickly and says something encouraging.

Sarah’s wrong, and I’m going to prove it. I could write this novel if I wanted to. Falling for Luke has nothing to do with it.

Two hours later, I’ve started and deleted half a dozen opening paragraphs. I’ve been working through my “story ideas” folder, but every time I start to flesh one of them out, I think of all the rejection letters my last book got.

I think of all the reasons someone will reject *this* book.

Before I know it, I’ve deleted the whole paragraph and I’m searching for yet another idea.

I hear a gentle knock on the door.

“Come in,” I call.

Luke saunters in and sets a mug of tea down on my desk.

It’s the big, sky blue one I normally use when I’m working on his autobiography. And he’s used the decaf chai tea I like to drink at night when we’re watching a movie.

Something in my chest warms. He *noticed*.

Luke smiles down at me and tugs lightly on my short ponytail. “How’s it going, Hemingway?”

“Ugh. Bad. Awful.” I run a hand through my hair. “Every idea I have is bad.”

He cocks his head. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yes. No. I don’t think so.” I think of Sarah at the coffee shop this afternoon, worried that this will all end in massive heartbreak.

Luke tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear. I close my eyes and lean into his touch.

“Can you rescue me instead?” I ask.

“Always.” He scoops me up from my chair, like I’m a princess he’s rescuing. Then he carries my back to his room, the tea forgotten beside my laptop.

I kiss the spot on his neck he likes, and lose myself in the rough, hungry sound he makes. I decide I don’t want to be careful. I want as many nights with Luke as he’ll give me.

Damn the consequences.

LUKE

“**W**hat the fuck, Luke? You *married* my sister?”

I look up to see Cooper standing in my office doorway, as furious as I've ever seen him. He's got his suitcase with him, which implies he came straight from the airport.

Somewhere in the back of my brain I knew he was coming back home soon. After all, it's been a month since Hazel and I got married.

But the thing is, it's also been a month since Hazel and I seduced each other on a rooftop, and if I'm honest, I haven't thought about Cooper once.

I've been too damn *happy*.

I've never lived with woman, much less one like Hazel. And it turns out, now that I'm not trying to resist how attracted I am to her, I like it.

I like the little sounds she makes in her sleep. I like hearing about her day. I like fucking our way through every single one of her fantasies.

I shift uncomfortably, realizing I shouldn't be thinking about that last one while Cooper's glaring daggers at me.

Past Cooper, I can see my assistant Joey trying to look casual but clearly hungry for gossip.

I need to explain to Cooper that it's not real. I owe him that much.

Especially if this thing between me and Hazel actually ... well.

I don't let myself think about that.

The point is, I don't want to have that conversation here. The last thing I need is it getting back to my dad that I faked my marriage.

I rise. "I don't want to have this conversation at work."

"Fine." Cooper gestures curtly for me to proceed him out the door.

By mutual agreement, we don't talk as we leave the building and take a town car back to my apartment. Normally Hazel works from my place, but she told me she was planning on running errands and spending time with Sarah today.

Once we step through my door, Cooper drops his suitcase and turns to glare at me. "You're a fucking bastard—"

"I can explain," I interrupt. "It's not real."

He gapes at me. "What the hell does *that* mean?"

I take a deep breath. "I took Hazel out to dinner so she could interview me. But there was some paparazzi guy there I didn't see. He got a photo that made it look like we were doing something ... compromising. We weren't," I hasten to add. "My dad squashed the photos, but he assumed I was purposely fucking up the chance he'd given me to improve my reputation with this book."

I can see Cooper putting the pieces together in his mind. "He threatened your shot at CEO."

"And Hazel's career. He said he was going to ruin it. He wouldn't believe that she hadn't done anything wrong," I say. "I lied and convinced him we were engaged and going to get married. Obviously, he was thrilled. It's Hazel."

Cooper shakes his head. "So what, you told her she had to fake a marriage to you, or she'd be ruined?"

"No," I say. "I didn't tell her about any of that. I just told her my dad had told me I needed to get married or lose the

CEO position.” I explain the rest of the deal I’d offered Hazel, and that she’d taken it. I leave out all the ways our relationship had changed since the wedding night.

Cooper runs a hand through his hair. “I don’t understand. Why didn’t you tell her the truth?”

I look down. “I wanted her to feel like she had a choice,” I say, my voice low.

“Even if she didn’t?” Cooper points out.

Thinking about how close my dad came to ruining Hazel’s career turns my stomach. “I would have figured something else out. I wouldn’t have let him hurt her. I swear.”

Cooper scrubs a hand over his face. “I leave you alone for *one month*, Luke. Why are endangered ecosystems so much easier to manage than you?” He strides into the living room and flops on the couch.

I sit down on a nearby chair.

“How are the two of you even living together?” Cooper asks. “You two hated each other.”

“We’ve gotten ... closer since the wedding,” I say. “We understand each other now.”

It wasn’t technically a lie.

Cooper still looks suspicious. “Really.”

“Really,” I say. “She’s got this amazing ambition, but she was so stressed about money before ... You should have seen where she was living, Cooper. Of *course* she couldn’t write her next book there.” I gesture to the spacious, beautiful rooms around us. “My place is better for her. She doesn’t need to worry about rent, or groceries, or chores. I can take care of her, so she can go after what she wants.”

Cooper’s expression shifts to something more guarded. “You like having her here. You like taking care of her.”

I consider denying it, but what’s the point?

“I do.”

Cooper drops his head into his hands. “Luke, this is such a mess.”

“I know,” I say. But the truth is, it doesn’t feel like a mess. Not anymore.

Having Hazel in my home feels like the best decision I ever made.

“How long are you staying in New York?” I ask, hoping we’re done with this conversation.

“I don’t know. I hadn’t gotten farther than rescuing my little sister from my asshole best friend,” Cooper mumbles into his hands.

“A day or two?” I suggest. “You should stay for dinner. Hazel will want to see you.”

I don’t invite him to stay at my place, like I normally would.

If he stays here, Hazel and I will have to go back to pretending we’re friendly strangers. And that idea terrifies me in a way I’m not willing to examine.

I used to be worried that Hazel would ruin my relationship with Cooper. I’m not sure when it became the reverse.

Cooper looks up from his hands, his eyes piercing. “I know that in your own messed up way, you’re trying to do right by Hazel. I appreciate that. But don’t get too comfortable.”

Ice slides through my veins. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means Hazel deserves more than someone who will take care of her,” Cooper says. “She deserves a *real* husband. Who will *love* her. Not someone who will drag her into a sham marriage because family threatens her.”

His accusations hit me in the chest. Because the truth is, he’s right.

I might be giving Hazel a hell of a lot more than she had before. But it’s woefully short of what she deserves.

The hopes I hadn't dared to verbalize, even to myself, die a swift death.

I clench my jaw. Force myself to smile. "Understood. It will be over in five months. After that, we both sign the divorce papers, and walk away better than we were before."

Cooper blows out a sigh. "I guess that's all I can ask of you at this point. I know Hazel's an adult. But she's still my baby sister, you know?"

Guilt laces through me. I nod.

Cooper stands and heads back toward the door. "Well. I should go find a hotel. But we could all grab dinner tonight. Since I don't have to kill you after all."

I force a laugh, the sound wooden and hollow. Cooper departs, and I shut the door behind him.

Seeing myself through Hazel's eyes, I'd started to think ...

But no. The real world just came crashing back down on me, in the form of my best friend's opinion. I needed someone to remind me who I really am, for both my sake and Hazel's.

Even if that reminder feels like a knife to the ribs.

"Luke?"

I jerk my head up to see Hazel coming toward me from the kitchen.

"Hazel." My mouth feels dry.

She crosses her arms. "What the hell was that?"

HAZEL

I wait for Luke to give me an explanation for everything I just heard.

I want him to say, *The thing about the paparazzi photos was just a lie to get Cooper off my back.*

Or maybe, *I don't really want it to be over in five months. Not anymore. I realized the truth as soon as the words were out of my mouth.*

But Luke doesn't say any of that. Instead, he says, "I thought you were supposed to be with Sarah."

"She canceled. A work thing came up." I brush it aside with a flick of my hand. "Why did you tell Cooper someone took photographs of us at the restaurant?"

I want to believe it's a lie, or a misunderstanding. That Luke didn't keep something so important about my *career* from me ... But now that I think about that night, I remember someone with a phone camera a few tables over. The flashes that kept going off.

Luke winces. "You weren't supposed to ever know about that."

For a second I stare at him. Then the rage fills me hot and fast. "I wasn't supposed to know? Luke, that affected *me*. Your dad threatening to destroy my career affected *me*."

Luke takes a step toward me. "It's like I told Cooper. I didn't want you to feel forced into faking a relationship with me. I wanted you to—"

“What, choose it? Luke, I told you this was a crazy idea. I told you we shouldn’t do it.” I’m breathing fast now. “But you kept pressing. Kept offering more and more, until I’d be a fool to turn it down. What kind of choice is that?”

His face hardens. “You’re saying I forced you.”

“No! Of course you didn’t. I’m just saying ...” I drag a hand through my hair. “I don’t think you’re being honest with yourself. And you’re not being honest with me.”

He crosses arms. He looks as closed off and foreboding as he did that first day in his office. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Part of me wants to back down. To smooth things over, make it easier for both of us.

If I’m walking out of his life five months from now, what’s the point of fighting like this?

But his lies have brought us too close to an emotional cliff. And now I can’t stop myself from shoving us both over the edge.

“You didn’t tell me it had to be *me* for your fake marriage plan to work,” I say. “Was that really because you didn’t want me to feel pressured? Or was it because you were worried that if I knew it had to be me, I’d have more bargaining power? And you didn’t trust me not to screw you over.”

Luke’s face goes white. “*No*. Jesus, Hazel. No. Of course not.”

He’s shocked enough, raw enough, that some distant, logical part of me believes him.

But the emotional part of me is still reeling from the hurt of knowing that even after all we’d been through, he still trusted Cooper way more than he’d ever trust me.

“I know you’ve got good reason not to trust people,” I tell Luke quietly. “But I need you to trust *me*. You can’t withhold information from me if it affects both of us. You can’t make decisions for me, no matter what your intentions are. Do you get that?”

Luke reaches for me. “I was trying to take care of you.”

I shrug out of his grasp. “Cooper was right. I need more than someone who will take care of me. I need someone who will goddamn trust me.”

I storm away and don’t look back.

It’s not until I’ve slammed a door behind me that I realize I’ve stormed straight into Luke’s bedroom. The fact that this is the place I feel safest feels like a cruel irony. I sit down on the floor and try not to cry.



I EXPECT Luke to go back to the office. I don’t know what exactly prompted him to leave work in the middle of the day, but it’s highly unlike him. I grab a book off the shelf at random, curl up in an armchair by the fireplace, and start reading. I’m determined to hide out until Luke leaves the apartment. I can’t handle seeing his face right now.

But a half hour later, the door handle turns, and Luke trudges into the bedroom, his head hung low. His body is as broad and powerful as ever. But he moves like he’s aged ten years.

He looks like a warrior coming home from a battle he lost.

Then he looks up and sees me. “Hazel.”

“Luke.” I freeze, the book open in my lap.

“I couldn’t find you. I thought you left.” He blinks. “Why are you in my room?”

“I like it,” I say, because I can’t say *I like you*. I swallow. “I thought you would go back to work.”

He shakes his head once, fierce. “No. Not when you’re ... not when we’re ... no.”

Something almost like hope swells in my chest. But I temper it quickly. Luke might care about me now. But he doesn’t trust me enough to even consider that we might last.

He never promised you it would, a mature, fair voice reminds me.

I hate that voice. But I know it's right.

I knew who Luke was all along, and I went in with my eyes open. He shouldn't have lied about the reason we had to fake a marriage. But I shouldn't have tricked myself into wanting more than I knew he could give.

"I'm sorry," Luke says. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth. I was trying to protect you. But you're right. It was wrong."

I look down at the book in my lap, because his blue eyes are so earnest, so concerned, I'm worried I'll start crying. It's not his fault that I'm falling for him.

Because that's what's happening. I'm falling for Luke Dewinter.

I'm a fucking idiot.

I close the book and set it aside, trying to take refuge in the absurd details of our situation. "I still don't entirely understand what happened. We didn't do anything 'compromising' to take photos of. What was your father so upset about?"

"Ah." Luke scratches the back of his neck.

Is it my imagination, or does he look flushed?

"When you dropped your recording thing under the table. You grabbed my leg for balance, and the photographer made it look like ... he made it look like you were sucking me off."

I blink. And then I put my head in my hands and laugh.

All this happened because I dropped something under the table?

"Well," I say between laughs. "That's ironic."

"What do you mean?" Luke asks.

"I mean you don't like blowjobs anyway."

"That's not ... I do like ... I should go to work now." He turns to leave.

I rise and walk toward him, catching his forearm to stop him. “Hey. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. It’s ok. I don’t need to do that if you don’t want me to. You don’t owe me an explanation.”

He raises a sardonic brow. “Pretty sure we just established I do owe you explanations, or you’ll have a meltdown.”

“Oh, don’t be an ass,” I say, releasing his arm. I was trying to be kind, but of course he’s already hiding behind that sarcastic armor of his. “Whatever. Go to work. Don’t go to work. See if I care.”

He catches me to him and kisses me. It’s passionate and hungry and completely catches me off guard. For a second I’m stiff. And then I’m melting into his, taste, the texture of his skin, the heat pressure of his hands on my back.

Luke breaks the kiss and presses his forehead to mine.

“What was that for?” I ask.

“For wasting time on an asshole with trust issues,” Luke says. He takes a deep breath. “I told you about that big breakup fight I had with my college girlfriend? The one where all the things she’d been faking to make the relationship run smoothly rose to the surface?”

I nod. I remember.

“She, uh, said she hated doing that for me. Like, really hated it. But I liked it, and she liked me, so ...” Luke half grunts and rolls his eyes. “God, this is so stupid.”

“Wait,” I say. “So you haven’t since ...?”

“I like being in control,” Luke says bluntly. “Nothing’s worth feeling like you’re at someone else’s mercy. Not unless I actually ...”

“Trust someone?” I guess.

He gives me a crooked grin that’s somehow cocky and sheepish at the same time.

I wet my lips. “I have an idea. Of something you could let me do. To make up for not trusting me with the truth before.”

I watch his face for any hint of reluctance. Any hint that this is a bad idea.

What I see instead takes my breath away.

His eyes darken. His hands fist in the back of my shirt. His breathing shifts. And I can feel his cock begin to grow hard against me.

“Are you sure?” Luke’s voice is gruff.

I realize he’s searching my face the same way I’m searching his. For any hint I’m faking it. For any hint I don’t want this just as badly as he does.

In answer, I give his chest a little shove, walking him back until he sits down in that massive armchair where I was reading. Then I go shut the door and lock it, because the last thing I need is one of his staff showing up unexpectedly.

When I turn back to face Luke, he’s stroking himself through his pants. And the way he’s watching me ... I shiver.

I know what we’re about to do makes Luke feel vulnerable. But in this moment, he’s all power.

“Take your dress off,” he orders.

I shrug out of the casual T-shirt dress I’m wearing. Which leaves me in a bra and panties, while he’s fully clothed.

Needing to level the playing field a little—or maybe just needing to get my courage up—I climb onto his lap and kiss him. I trail kisses over his mouth, his brow, his neck.

He grabs my ass and grinds me against him.

It’s almost enough to make me come then and there.

“Tell me what you want,” I whisper.

“Hazel,” he groans, and it’s somewhere between a prayer and a curse.

I trace his lower lip with my thumb. “Tell me what you want, Luke.”

Let me take care of you, for once, I think.

When he speaks, it's like the words have been ripped free from somewhere deep inside him.

“On your knees, Hazel,” he growls. “And put that pretty mouth around my cock.”

It's a good thing standing is unnecessary because I'm pretty sure my knees just went weak.

I go to my knees before him while he unzips himself. And then, without preamble, he guides my mouth where he needs it. At first, he tries to control it, and that's hot too. But as I start sucking and licking—and using my hands when I can't take him any deeper—Luke's head falls back.

He takes a single, ragged breath.

And then he trusts me.

“God, baby, that feels so good.” He winds his hand in my hair, but it's not to steer me. It's more that he can't *not* touch me. Like when he falls asleep with his arm thrown over my waist.

“Normally you'd be talking right now. Telling me how much you'd fantasized about this,” Luke says. “But you can't, can you? Not when I'm filling you up so good. Guess that makes it my turn.”

I whimper. I thought I liked strong and silent Luke. But dirty talking Luke is *amazing*.

“Do you want to know the first time I fantasized about this?” Luke says. “It was the summer after your freshman year of college. I drove down to visit Cooper. You were wearing those tiny jeans shorts, and that bright red lipstick. And for five sinful seconds, I thought of this.”

I moan. I'm so gone for this man.

“Touch yourself,” Luke orders. “Make yourself come while you're sucking my cock.”

So I do. It takes embarrassingly little time.

Luke watches with an intensity so hot and hungry it would be frightening, if I didn't know exactly how he feels. And then

his head snaps back. He makes a sharp, guttural sound. And then he's losing all control, and I'm tasting the proof, as trust and pleasure and want swirl between us.

When we're done, Luke leans down and kisses me, tender and lingering. Then he pulls me to my feet and leads me to his bed, where we fall asleep in a tangled, exhausted heap.

I dream we're up in Luke's airplane, soaring too close to the sun while the world falls away behind us.

HAZEL

We make it through dinner with Cooper pretending everything is normal. We must put up a good show of casual, functional friendship, because Cooper gives us each a relieved hug at the end of the night and announces he's going to book a plane and head home.

Naturally, Luke offers to give him a free flight on Helius Airlines.

Naturally, Cooper refuses.

I've seen them do this dance more times than I can remember, but this time there's a weird masculine edge to it I can't explain. I'm sure there's something going unsaid between them, but I'm too exhausted to worry about it. The afternoon's fight—and make-up sex—took more out of me than I want to admit. Also, my breasts are feeling weirdly tender.

As I ride home in Luke's town car, I make a mental note to google if it's medically possible to have *too much* sex. Because Luke and I have certainly been having a lot of it.

The next morning is Saturday. Luke decides to head into the office to make up for the stuff he missed yesterday as a result of the Dawson siblings' emotions.

I sleep in.

But when I wake up, I still feel tired. Actually, I'm in a weird mood in general.

I wonder if my period is coming. I think as I brush my teeth.

Then I freeze.

I start to do the math.

I didn't notice, what with everything else that's been going on in my life. But my period is definitely a week late. And yes, Luke and I haven't been using condoms since he got the test results saying he's healthy. But I'm on the pill.

This isn't possible ... right?

Ten minutes of googling later, I discover that there's a whole host of things that can make the pill less effective, including taking the pill later or earlier than you normally do, accidentally skipping a day, drinking too much, and storing your pills in a location with high humidity and frequent temperature changes. Like, you know, *a bathroom*.

I stare at my phone in horror. I've done all these at least once in the past month.

The day I accidentally skipped was before Lucas and I started sleeping together, so I didn't think of it. But the rest of it ... honestly, I didn't realize it was a big deal.

It took my mom forever to get pregnant both times.

I guess a part of me just assumed it would be the same for me.

This is probably nothing, I tell myself. *A coincidence. Everything will be fine.*

I tell myself that as I leave the apartment, and buy a pregnancy test, and come back to the apartment. I tell myself that as I pee on a stick, and place it on the counter, and wait for the results.

I keep telling myself *This is nothing* right up until the moment the "positive" sign appears.

"I'm pregnant," I say out loud, testing the words. "I'm having a baby."

I spread my hand over my stomach. “I’m having Luke’s baby.”

My wedding ring sparkles in the afternoon sunlight.

And all at once, this feels meant to be. I’ve always wanted kids, but my career and dating life were such a mess, I hadn’t let myself linger in that want, in case it never happened for me.

But now that’s happening, I know.

I want this baby.

I see my reflection in the mirror and realize I’m smiling.

Luke raps on the door. “Hazel, you in there?”

On instinct, I shove the pregnancy test in a bathroom drawer. “One second.”

I’m not even sure why I do it, until I remember what Luke said about why he and his college girlfriend broke up.

She wanted kids.

And he wasn’t sure if he did.

I wash my hands, feeling my heart grow heavier by the minute.

Maybe Luke’s changed his mind, I think.

But what if he hasn’t?

I open the door and force a smile. “What’s up?”

He grins down at me. “I finished up at the office and I’m ordering brunch from Good Egg before they close. Do you want anything?”

“Um.” I know I need to tell Luke about the baby.

But if I tell him, and he doesn’t want it, then this thing between us will be over. Sure, we’ll still be married. But we’ll be back to being strangers.

No, worse than strangers. We’ll be *married* exes.

Maybe it’s selfish, but I’m not ready to deal with that. I need to figure out how this baby is going to affect my life, my

career. I need the world to feel stable under my feet before I can face the possibility of losing Luke.

“Hazel?” Luke ducks his head, worried. “You ok?”

I blink. “Yes. Sorry. I’m just ... I’ve only got a week left to finish your autobiography. I think I’m going to go back to my old apartment for a week to focus.”

“The hell you are,” Luke says. “If you need to be alone to write, then I’m getting you a hotel room. You liked the place we got married, right?”

Before I can say that that is the last place in the world I want to stay right now, Luke pulls out his phone and shoots an email to somebody.

Five minutes later, I have a reservation for a suite.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I say helplessly.

“Nonsense.” Luke drops a kiss on my lips. “I’ll miss you. But I get needing space to focus.”

He grins. “I can’t wait until this book is done and I can have you all to myself again.”

I smile weakly and nod.

LUKE

It's been six days since Hazel moved into the hotel to finish my book, and I miss her like hell.

I wander into the kitchen and start slicing myself an apple. I'm hungry, but I feel too restless for a real dinner. Hazel's absence feels like a dark cloud that fills my whole home.

I miss the sex, sure, but it's more than that. I miss the way the apartment feels when she's in it. I miss hearing her typing away on her laptop in the other room. I miss talking about our days over dinner, and I miss her laughing while we watch some dumb movie.

God, I miss her laugh.

The knife slips, and I nick my finger.

"Fuck," I swear. The cut isn't deep, but the blood wells up. I need a band aid.

I wander into the nearest bathroom and start rooting around in drawers looking for one. I find an old box of bandages and start to shut the drawer, when I notice what else is in that drawer.

It's a pregnancy test. And it's positive.

For a second I just stare at it, confused.

And then my brain clicks into gear.

It has to be Hazel's.

Hazel's pregnant.

It has to be mine. *Ours*.

We're having a kid. Hazel and I are having a kid.

"Fuck." My smile's so big I'm surprised it fits on my face.
"We're having a kid."

I think of Hazel living with me for good. A little baby with Hazel's big brown eyes toddling around the apartment. I said I didn't want a kid until I knew I could give them a better childhood than I had. But now that the decision's out of my hands, I'm elated.

What if you mess them up, the way your dad messed up you?

The fear tangles with the joy in a messy, painful knot.

It won't be the same, I tell myself. There's no way in hell I'd serve my kid up to the press for P.R. points. Besides, the kid will have Hazel in their corner.

I can't wait to talk to Hazel about this.

Wait.

Why hasn't she talked to me about this yet?

She hasn't been at the apartment in a week. That means she took this test six days ago, right before she moved out to work on her book, and she didn't tell me ...

Suddenly the missing puzzle piece clicks into place with a dreadful click.

Hazel didn't leave to work on the book. She left because she found out she was pregnant.

Does not she not want the baby? Or does she not want me?

Why didn't she *talk* to me?

She called me out for keeping secrets from her. But this ... this is bigger than some paparazzi photos, or a threat from my dad. This is a *kid*. Or the possibility of one. And Hazel didn't tell me.

She talks a lot about how I need to get better at trusting her.

But does she trust me?

I clamp down on the spiraling anger and panic.

I tell myself not to jump to the worst conclusion. If she doesn't trust me, if she's not wildly excited about this ...

We can still make this work. *I* can make this work. I just need to be calm when I talk to her. Practical. Focus on the things that are objectively true. Like the all the ways I can help take care of her and the baby. She doesn't need to trust me, or love me, to realize that's true.

My finger's finally stopped bleeding.

I wash the cut, then grab my wallet, keys, and jacket. Then I head out to the hotel where Hazel's staying.

Under the surface, my emotions are roiling. But on the outside, I'm calm as a frozen ocean.

Hazel and I have some talking to do.

HAZEL

Sarah and I sit in the hotel bar, celebrating the fact that I just finished the first draft of Luke's book.

We raise our champagne glasses.

"To another successful book," Sarah says. "Please don't marry any of your future clients."

"Ha. Ha. Funny." We clink our glasses, but I set mine down without taking a sip. I'm not going to risk drinking any alcohol while pregnant.

Plus, I'm not sure I feel like celebrating. Finishing Luke's book was the excuse I needed to avoid facing the rest of my life. Now that it's done, I'm going to have to face Luke.

As much as I've missed him, I'm also afraid of the moment when I see him again. Because I need to tell him the truth—and that means I might lose him.

Sarah takes another sip of her champagne. "Are you going to tell me why you're celebrating with me in a hotel bar instead of back home in that gorgeous apartment with that hot grump you're in love with?"

"I'm not in love with him!" I protest.

Sarah raises her eyebrows.

"I'm not," I repeat. "I mean yes, being around him makes my day better. But that's because he's brave, and flawed, and fascinating and funny. It's not because of how I *feel* about him. It's not because of how he looks at me, or the amazing sex, or

the way he takes risks for me. He's just, objectively, the best man I've ever met."

Sarah's expression softens. "Honey. Do you hear yourself?"

I replay the words in my head. "Oh, hell. I'm in love with him."

"Hey. It's ok. It happens to the best of us." Sarah squeezes my hand. "And I get that the fake marriage thing makes it complicated. But that's just words on a paper. It's not like you bought a house together, or you have a kid together, or ..."

I put my head in my hands, finally losing my battle with the tears that have been threatening all week.

"Wait, what did I ... Oh. Hazel, is there a reason you're not drinking your champagne?"

I raise my head and swipe at the tears on my cheeks. "I'm pregnant. And I haven't told him yet. Because I don't know what he wants, and I'm scared that once I tell him, it will be over between us."

She slides the basket of breadsticks toward me. I tear into one gratefully.

If I can't drink my feelings, at least I can eat them.

"You should definitely tell him, but let's set that aside for right now," Sarah says. "You say you don't know what he wants. But what do *you* want?"

"I want to keep this baby," I say.

Sarah nods. "Good. What else?"

"I ... I want to keep trying to be a novelist. I don't want to go back to writing autobiographies for other people, just because I have a baby to support. I know it's impractical."

"It's not that impractical." Sarah finishes her champagne and switches her glass for mine. "You've got a billionaire for a baby daddy. I'm pretty sure he can chip in for child support. What else do you want?"

I hesitate.

“Hazel,” she prompts.

“I want Luke,” I say on a rush. “And not because we’re fake married, or because I messed up my birth control. I want him because ... well because it’s *him*.”

If I’m honest myself, I think it’s always been him.

Ever since the day Cooper brought him home from college.

Sarah takes my hand again, and this time I let her.

“That’s a good thing to want,” she says. “He is a damn lucky man. And if he doesn’t realize it, I will smack him over the head myself.”

I give a watery laugh.

Then she spots something over my shoulder and her eyes widen. “Oh.”

“What?”

“Speaking of that grump you’re in love with,” she says. She nods over my shoulder.

I turn over my shoulder and spot Luke striding toward us. My heart leaps at the sight of him, until I spot his face.

It’s as cool and impenetrable as ice. At least until our eyes lock, and pain flashes in his eyes.

Something is wrong. Something is very, very wrong.

Sarah waves him over with a bright smile. “Hey, Luke! We’re celebrating. Hazel just finished the first draft of your book. You should join us—”

Luke takes something out of his pocket and lays it on the table beside me.

It’s my pregnancy test.

My heart tumbles in my chest.

Sarah clears her throat. “Well. That’s my cue. Sounds like you need to talk.” Sarah collects her things and stands. Then she pokes Luke’s chest. “By the way, if you don’t do the right thing here, I will beat you up.”

Luke's whole body is tense as he stares at me. I don't think he even registers what Sarah says.

Behind Luke's back, Sarah gives me a worried smile and a thumbs up. Then she turns and leaves.

I'm about to tell Luke we should go have this conversation somewhere private, but he wordlessly takes Sarah's chair.

"Breadstick?" I ask, my voice squeaking.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Luke asks. "Do you not want it?"

"Of course I want it," I say.

Luke's shoulders relax infinitesimally. "Ok. Good."

Good? He wants our baby?

Something like hope flickers to life in my chest.

"I wanted to tell you," I say. "I just needed time to figure out how it was going to affect my life first."

"What's to figure out?" Luke asks. "We stay married and raise the kid together. Obviously."

I can't believe my ears.

He's saying exactly what I need to hear.

So why doesn't he look happier about it.

"Really?" I ask. I reach across the table and take his hand. "That's what you want?"

"Of course," Luke says. "It's better for the baby if we're married, raising it together. And it's better for you. I can support you until your novelist career takes off. Or if you'd rather be a full-time mom for a while, I can support that too."

Something cold settles over my bones. "That's all very ... practical."

Luke releases my hand. "Good. I'm glad you see reason. Now that that's settled, let's go get your stuff and go home."

It's the most tempting offer I've had in a long time. Going home with Luke, to *our* apartment. Staying with him. Raising

our kid together.

But something's missing, and it's too big for me to ignore.

"Wait. You said how this is good for me and our child. But how is staying married good for you? Why do *you* want it?" I ask.

He freezes, a wild animal caught in the headlights.

I wait.

Say you care about me, I pray. Say you care about our kid.

I don't need him to love me. Not yet.

But I need him to be honest with me. I'm about to embark on the scariest, most important thing I've ever done. And I can't do it if I'm busy loving a husband who's too emotionally scarred to trust me with how he really feels.

"I ..." he wets his lips.

For the first time, I understand what it means to hang on someone's words. I feel like I'm clinging to the edge of a cliff, and I'm waiting to find out if Luke will say the words that can pull me to him or fling me back into the abyss.

My heart's pounding so hard it hurts.

"It would help my image professionally," Luke says at last. "A divorce is one thing, but divorcing your pregnant wife is another. It could hurt my career, with the more conservative board members."

I sit back, stunned. "That's all? That's the only way us staying together would improve your life?"

He looks away, his jaw tight. "We're compatible. There's that."

"We're *compatible*? Are you fucking serious?" Suddenly I'm full of fury. Either he's a bigger asshole than I thought. Or he's being a goddamn coward.

And I don't have time for either option.

I jump to my feet, yank my wedding ring off, and slam it down on the table in front of him. "This is why I didn't tell

you, Luke. Because some part of me *knew* this would happen. We're having a *kid*, and you're too stuck in the past to ... to ...” I blink back angry tears. “Have one of your staff drop the rest of my stuff off at the hotel. I can't look at you right now.”

He rises and reaches for me. “Hazel, wait—”

“No! We're done, Luke. We're fucking done,” I say.

I'm dimly aware that the whole restaurant is staring at us.

Luke's holding my ring in his clenched fist. “If this is what you want.”

My laugh is hollow. “What I *want* is a man who loves me so much he can shout it to the whole world. But that's not you, is it? And it never will be.”

I turn on my heel and stride out of the restaurant.

Luke doesn't follow.

LUKE

I move through the next 48 hours in a blur.

The inevitable happened. Hazel left me, just like Cooper warned me she would. Because I'm not the kind of man who can give her what she wants.

Now I'm at my office desk, staring at my laptop, reading an email about shareholder prices for the millionth time.

And I don't care. I don't fucking care.

I grab my laptop and hurl it against the wall. It doesn't break. But it does dent the wall.

"Um. Excuse me, sir?" my assistant Joey asks tentatively from the doorway. He looks warily at the laptop-size dent in the plaster.

"What?" I bark, then scrub a hand over my face. "Sorry, it's not your fault. What do you need?"

"Your dad invited you to dinner at his house tonight. It sounds important. I think he wants to talk about ..." Joey lowers his voice and leans in, "the CEO position."

I wait to care about that. To feel that normal hunger to lead the company I've been training to take over since birth.

I don't feel anything, other than the all-consuming ache that's been weighing me down since Hazel gave me back her ring.

I'm still carrying the damn thing around in my pocket. Like maybe she'll wander back into my life and need it.

Fuck, I'm a mess.

"Sure," I hear myself say. "Dinner at my dad's. Why the hell not?"

I must seem unhinged because Joey looks at me like he's worried. Then he slowly backs out of the room.



I DRIVE TOO FAST on the way to my dad's. It feels good, the same way a shot of cheap liquor feels good, until I realize that now I'm early.

I let myself into the house and follow the smell of food to the dining room.

When Mom was alive, we ate in the kitchen. But Dad and I don't do that anymore.

No, we eat in the formal dining room, set by his staff.

I expect to see a chef fussing around the table settings when I walk in.

But instead, it's my dad who's carefully arranging the place settings. Making sure everything's lined up perfectly.

He's giving it so much focus, you'd think he was setting the table for U.N. Peace Summit.

When he sees me, he straightens, surprised. "Luke. You're early."

I shrug. "What did you want to talk about?"

He heads to the liquor cabinet. "We don't have to talk business right away. How are things with Hazel?"

"I told you to keep her name out of your mouth," I say. "Now why the hell did you drag me out here?"

He pours a glass of whiskey for himself. It's the kind that's 200 years old.

Dad's always believed in patience.

He sips his glass. “I thought we could be civilized about this.” He studies me. “I read the first draft of your autobiography.”

“You ... what?”

Hazel sent the draft to me yesterday. But I hadn’t been able to make myself read it.

“It’s exactly what I hoped for. Better.” He arcs an eyebrow. “Your *writer* did a good job getting you to open up. The side of you she showed ... well. Let’s say it made an impression on me. As I’m sure it will on everyone else who reads it.”

I don’t say anything. I hate the thought of strangers reading what Hazel wrote about me. It feels like I’m losing one of the last parts of our relationship that was just us.

My dad keeps talking. “Between the book and your marriage, you’ve shown me the maturity I was looking for.” He pours a second glass of whiskey. “I see no need to wait for the book to hit shelves. I’ll be calling a meeting next week to announce my retirement and formally recommend you for CEO.”

He holds out the second glass to me. “Congratulations, Luke. You’ve earned this.”

I stare at that whiskey.

And then I just start laughing.

Even to my own ears, the sound is wild, hysterical. “Screw the CEO position,” I snarl. “I spent my whole *life* turning myself into the perfect corporate leader. Anything for the company, right?”

My dad frowns. “Luke—”

“She left me, Dad. Hazel left me. Because I don’t know how to be the person she wants.” I think of her face in that restaurant. “All she wanted me to do was tell her how I really felt about her. And I *couldn’t*. Of course I fucking love her. But all I could think was, *if she knows, she’ll find it lacking, or worse, use it against me.*”

My dad is aghast. “At the wedding, you seemed so ...”

“It was a fake wedding, dad,” I say. “I lied to you, and bribed Hazel to go along with it. And then when it got real, I froze, and she walked out. But hey, at least I got a fucking CEO job out of it.”

I scrub my hand over my face and look away.

“Luke.” My dad’s voice is full of censure. I wait for him to tell me he’s disappointed, like he always does. That I’m not the son he raised me to be.

But then my dad says, “I’m so sorry.”

My eyes jerk to his.

He sits down at the table, staring at his whiskey. “When I lost your mom ... It was too much. I wasn’t strong enough. I had to bury my own emotions and just focus on the tasks at hand. Work. Success. Raising you. If I made myself numb, I could keep moving.”

My dad shakes his head. “I never meant to force my method of coping on you. I taught you how to lead the company, pushed you to be better, because I wanted you to have a good future. But clearly that wasn’t enough. I should have ... I should have told you I loved you more.”

My chest tightens painfully. For the first time, my dad looks old to me. Old and lonely.

I think of everything I felt since Hazel walked away from me. For a split second I let myself imagine how I’d feel if something even worse had happened.

In his own way, my dad tried to take care of me after I lost my mom. But I never tried to do the same for him when he lost his wife.

I sink into the chair beside him. “You did your best,” I say gruffly.

“That’s not good enough,” my dad says firmly. “Your mom would have told you she loved you. She would have said it all the time. She would have made it easy for you to trust your own heart.”

My dad's always been hard on me. But he's even harder on himself.

I forget that.

On impulse, I lean over and hug my dad. "I'm sorry you lost her. She should have been here with us. You shouldn't be alone."

He inhales, roughly. I realize he's crying.

My dad is crying in my arms.

For a long time, we just hold each other.

It's my dad who breaks away. "You should go. Now."

"What?" I ask, stung. I thought he and I were making progress.

"Go talk to Hazel. Tell her you love her. Get her back. Now."

As soon as he says, it a sense of purpose floods my veins. If my dad is giving me a task, it's because he thinks I can do it. "What if it's too late?"

"What if it's not?"

That's the only argument I need to hear.

I stand and turn to go.

"And Luke?" my dad calls.

I turn back to look at him.

"I ... I love you," he says.

My throat tightens. "I love you too."

And then I rush off into the night to find my wife.



I SCREECH to a halt in front of Hazel's hotel, not bothering to find a parking space.

I ignore the honking and swearing from the drivers behind me, and head inside.

My heart hammers in my chest as I take the elevator up to Hazel's suite.

She forgave me for lying to her about why I asked her to marry me. Surely, she can forgive me for waiting two days to tell her how much I love her.

I knock on the door.

No one answers.

I knock harder. "Hazel, it's me. Open up."

She doesn't.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you I love you. I love you so fucking much. Just open the door and—"

The door opens. But it's not Hazel staring at me.

No, it's a middle-aged woman in a hotel cleaning uniform. "There is no Hazel here, young man," she says in accented English. "She checked out."

"Checked out?"

Maybe she went back to my apartment. Hope flares painfully as I pace the hotel hallway, calling Hazel.

My call goes straight to voicemail. And her voicemail is full.

So, I call the front desk in my building, and ask if Hazel moved back in while I was out. But neither the doorman nor the person at the front desk have seen her.

Where would she go?

I thought she let the lease lapse on her old apartment.

I call Cooper. "Do you know where Hazel is?"

"Hello to you too. No, I don't—"

I hang up on him.

Who else would Hazel talk to?

Sarah. She'd talk to Sarah.

Sarah answers on the first ring. "I told you that I'd beat you up if you broke her heart."

"I fucked up," I say. "But I can fix it. I can make it right if you just tell me where she is. Is she staying with you?"

Sarah doesn't say anything.

"Please," I beg. "I'll give you anything you want. Money. A job. A private audience with your favorite rockstar. Anything you want, just tell me where Hazel is."

"What I want," Sarah says, "is for you to stop making my best friend cry."

The words feel like a knife to the stomach. "She cried?"

"Oh my God, you're such an idiot." Sarah sighs. "Look, even if I thought you deserved a second chance, it's too late. Hazel's moving back in with her parents so she can have support when the baby comes. She already left New York. I dropped her off at the train myself."

I think of Hazel taking a train alone through the night, thinking I don't love her. Thinking I wouldn't give up anything for her.

"I can fix this," I repeat. It's the only thought that's keeping me sane. "I'll talk to her, and—"

Sarah snorts. "You're gonna need more than a conversation. She was in love with you. She wanted to build a life with you. And you stomped on her heart. It'll take more than a phone call apology to win her back."

As soon as she says it, I realize she's right.

The beginnings of a desperate, foolish plan begin to form in my mind. "Understood. Thanks."

I start to hang up.

"Luke?"

I wait.

"Don't fuck up again," Sarah says.

HAZEL

My train pulls into West Virginia train station a little before midnight. It's not nearly as big of a station as Grand Central Station in New York, but it's old enough to be pretty.

Plus, it's home. And right now, I desperately need home. Leaving New York is one of the hardest things I've done. But if I want to be able to raise this kid on my own and pursue a career as a novelist, I need my family's support.

I rub the base of my back, glad my thirteen-hour trip is over at last. The normally quiet train was full of college kids and sports fans heading home from some big out of state game. Normally I like people, but today the crowd is getting on my nerves. All I want to do is crawl into bed with a tub of ice cream to ease my broken heart, and forget Luke Dewinter ever existed.

I clamber off the train, suitcases in hand and head to the station's lobby area. Normally I'd meet them in the parking lot, but since my train was coming in so late, we agreed to meet inside.

I look around for my parents, but they're nowhere to be seen in the crowd of sports fans and college kids.

Weird.

Maybe my parents got my arrival time wrong?

I'm texting them to ask where they are, when I hear a pack of college girls who were on the train with me giggling and

pointing at the electronic sign where the train times are normally displayed.

I follow their gaze and do a double take.

The whole board has been filled with a single message.

I love you, Hazel Dawson. I want to be your husband because everything's better with you. I'm greedy for you. Please give me another chance.

My heart flips. No. He can't have ... This can't mean ...

How does Luke even know I'm here?

Around me more and more people are pointing at the sign. A guy in a red jersey makes a sympathetic face. "Ooof. Poor bastard. Hope she takes him back."

Maybe I'm dreaming. Maybe I fell asleep, and I'm dreaming.

That's the only explanation. Luke wouldn't ... He doesn't ... He couldn't even say ...

But what if it's real? Some glorious voice inside me whispers.

"There you are," Luke says from behind me. His deep voice warms my back like a winter's fire.

I turn to look at him. "Luke."

For a second I just drink him in with my eyes. His dark hair is a mess, and there's shadows under those bright blue eyes I love. His button up shirt is a wrinkled mess. He's an absolute wreck—but there's a fierce determination in his eyes.

To me, he's never looked more gorgeous.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, stunned all over again by the way he can make my heart ache.

He smiles, crooked. "Besides making sure they got my sign right?"

I swallow.

His smile fades into something more serious. He takes a step toward me and cups my face. "Hazel. Love. You were

right. I hid behind practical reasons, instead of saying what's in my heart. I think I know why I do it now, but I don't ..." He closes his eye briefly. "I don't want to teach our child to do the same thing."

Hope flutters, painful and gorgeous, in my chest.

"Whether or not you take me back, I'm going to start practicing that skill now."

"I ... ok?" That was *not* what I was expecting.

"At Cooper's wedding, a few years ago. I said I didn't like weddings because it was a waste of money, they didn't last, etc." He looks me square in the eyes. "But it's because secretly, I wanted that future for myself. And I didn't think I'd ever get to have it."

"Oh, Luke," I say softly.

But he's not done.

"When I lied to my dad that we were engaged. It wasn't a thought out, or practical plan. It was pure instinct," Luke confesses. "He insulted you, and I ... I still don't know why I said it. But I think I was trying to claim you. Mark you as off limits. Make sure he knew you were different from any other woman I've ever known."

I blink.

"It wasn't practical," he admits. "It was primal."

"But we ... we barely knew each other back then," I say.

He just looks at me, completely unflinching.

How the hell is he turning me on right now?

"You already got me to admit why I didn't want us sleeping with other people while we were married," he reminds me. His eyes darken.

I nod, mutely, the look in his eyes stealing my words.

"So now, we're to the most important stuff." He takes a breath and steps back, releasing me.

For a second I'm confused.

And then Luke goes down on one knee.

“Here’s what I should have said that day at the restaurant.” He raises his voice loud enough that anyone standing nearby can hear us. “I love you so much, Hazel. I love you in a way that scares me, because I know what it does to a man to lose someone like you. And I already love the kid we’ve made together.”

I choke back tears.

“I want to be your husband because I can’t imagine not coming home to you both every day,” Luke says. He digs in his pocket and pulls out my ring. “I know you gave this back to me. Maybe I fucked up everything too badly. But if you give me one last chance, Hazel, I’ll do everything in my power not to hurt you again. I want to love you right, all the days of my life.”

I stare at his stubborn, beautiful, hopeful face.

“What happens if I can’t?” I ask softly. “What happens if I’m too scared?”

I expect his face to close off. I wouldn’t blame him if he did.

But he doesn’t disappear behind his professional mask.

Instead, his expression gentles. “If that’s what you need, I’ll understand. But just know I’ll be carrying this ring around for the rest of my life in case you ever change your mind.’

I can’t help it. I start crying now. I’m crying for the way we hurt each other, and the way he’s grown for me, and the way hope can hurt so much but feel so good.

I’m crying for the way I love him so damn much.

That pulls Luke to his feet. The next moment he’s cradling my face, wiping my tears. “Don’t cry, baby. Please.”

I rise up on my toes and kiss him, fierce. He kisses me back, hard, and it heals some fragile crack in my heart.

“If there’s anyone brave enough to love me,” he whispers against my lips, “It’s you, Hazel. It’s always been you.”

“I do,” I say. “I love you. I’ll always love you.”

“Yeah?” Happiness lights his smile. “Seems like you better put my ring back on then.”

I laugh, and then I’m crying, and then I’m laughing some more. Luke slides the ring back onto my finger, and kisses everywhere my tears fall.

When we come up for air, I realize everyone around is clapping.

“Well. It’s about time,” a familiar voice says.

I blink, shocked and delighted to see Sarah standing not too far from me, along with my parents, and Cooper.

“Wait. How did you get here ...?” I ask.

Luke wraps around my waist and pulls me back close to him. “I own an airline. And, if I was going to shout about how much I loved you, I figured I’d do it in front of the people who mattered most to you.”

“Luke flew himself up here early though,” Cooper chimes in, rolling his eyes. “He couldn’t risk anything screwing up his big plan.”

“It was sort of dashing,” my mom chimes in. “Like in one of those old movies.”

Everyone keeps talking, but I’ve only got eyes for Luke.

“I know we started off fake,” he says quietly. “But this time every inch of it is real. I told my dad the truth about us too.”

My eyebrows shoot up, surprised.

I can’t wait to hear how *that* conversation went.

I take his face in my hands. “Thank you for giving me all of this. For bringing them here. But the most important thing is that *you’re* here. That’s all I need, Luke.”

He smiles down at me, and it’s full of wonder. Like he can’t quite believe we get this happy ever after.

I kiss him, and together in a train station, we bring each other home.

EPILOGUE

HAZEL

It turns out that when you give the Dewinter men a challenge, they throw their heart and souls into it. Two years and nine months after Luke chased me down in a train station, we've gathered our friends and family together to celebrate little George's second birthday.

You wouldn't *think* that a two-year-old boy who's into planes needs an entire airfield rented out for his birthday. But Luke and his father have both been trying to do a better job of wearing their hearts on their sleeves. And if the youngest Dewinter wants a plane-themed birthday party he's going to get it.

George and his friends from daycare toddle back and forth between the toy cars shaped like planes, the plane-shaped bouncy castle, and the six-layer-cake in the shape of "Daddy's plane."

Meanwhile, Luke's been taking any of the adults up in his plane who want a ride. I don't think he expected so many people to take him up on it, but he's obviously having a blast sharing the skies with the people he loves.

"Yes!" Sarah punches her fist in the air as she stares at her phone.

I sigh. "You promised you'd put your phone down for the party."

"Ok but *look at this review!*" She shoves her phone in my face. "The Los Angeles Times calls your novel 'an adventurous, poignant exploration of love, loss, and the heroes

we wait for.” She launches herself into my arms and hugs me tight. “You did it, Hazel. You freaking did it.”

I laugh and hug her back. “We did it. You were the one who kept believing in me.”

I’d spent most of my pregnancy and the first year of George’s life writing a historical fiction novel about a brave, cocky WWII pilot and the farm girl who sneaks behind enemy lines to rescue him.

While I was writing and revising, Luke supplied me with tea, back rubs, and endless supply of encouragement. He also patiently explained all the airplane stuff to me about ten times. Flying still makes me nervous, but it turns out flying is less frightening when I actually understand how the planes stay in the air.

Once I finished the book, I handed it off to Sarah and she made her magic happen.

The book’s only been out for a week, but it’s already getting good buzz.

I smile to myself, watching George play with Luke’s dad Roger, and Roger’s new lady friend. Luke convinced Roger to try going to a widower’s support group, and slowly, he’s started healing.

Three years ago, a review like this was all I could dream of. And I am proud—I’ll probably frame that review and hang it up in my office later.

But it no longer means as much as it once did. Today, my life is so much richer than I ever could have imagined. After almost three years as CEO, Luke is making his mark on Helius Airlines, and on the Dewinter family legacy. Both Luke and his father shield George from the media. And Luke makes sure that George always knows he’s the center of his world, and that he is absolutely loved, exactly as he is.

Sarah and I end the hug. She fans her eyes, blinking back tears. “Ok. Wow. I’m just so proud of you. I’m going to go eat more cake.”

“You do that,” I say, smiling.

Luke strolls up from the airplane runway, finally alone. He grins when he sees me, then wraps an arm around my waist and kisses me with enough heat to make me blush. He's always that extra bit alive when he's spent the day in the sky.

"All right, all done flying," Luke says. "I'm yours now."

"Well," I say gathering my courage, "Do you think you could go up just one more time?"

Luke sighs, looking longingly at the cake. "Sure. Who is it?"

"Me."

His eyebrows shoot up. "Are you sure?"

I nod. "I feel like being brave. And if I'm not, we'll just come back down, right?"

"Right." His whole body is lit with enthusiasm.

We both make sure Roger is good to watch George for a bit, and then Luke and I take off toward his plane.

As Luke helps me into the plane and settles into his own seat, he explains everything he's doing. Reminds me how safe it all is.

It helps, but not for the reasons he thinks it will. It's the sound of his voice, confident and sure, that lets me know I'm going to be alright. That and the sangria I've been sipping through the whole party to get my courage up.

As Luke takes off, the engine roars. He angles the plane up toward the sky, and I close my eyes on instinct.

"Open your eyes, Hazel!" Luke says into my headset. "You can do this!"

I take a deep breath and force my eyes open.

This time when I look out the window at the airfield below, I see all the people we love gathered below to support our little family. Wonder washes over me. As Luke carries us through the sky, it hits me for the millionth time how lucky I am.

For a moment up here, my fear falls away and I feel completely content. Completely free.

When we land, Luke studies my face worriedly as he helps me out of the plane. “How was that?”

I smile at him, breathless. “I think I get why you love it.”

He leans toward me, and I can feel the smile on his lips as he kisses me. “Bravest woman I know.”

I hold on tight to him. “Do you ever get the feeling you’re exactly where you’re supposed to be?”

Luke grins. “With you? Always.”

Then he laces his fingers through mine, and we walk back to all the people we love, looking forward to spending a lifetime exactly where we’re supposed to be.



Keep reading for a sneak peek of **Billionaire Accidental Daddy**.

BILLIONAIRE ACCIDENTAL DADDY SNEAK PEEK

**My grumpy boss is my baby's daddy,
But I haven't told him yet.**

All I wanted was a bagel,
Then Mr Gump-hole cuts in line,
With his steel-blue eyes and his smoldering scowl,
And ruins my day.

Now he's my new boss,
And he's doing everything he can to ruin my life.

In the office he's practically a tyrant,
But with his little daughter he's the perfect dad.

When he summons me to his office,
I'm sure I'm about to get growled at,
But he asks me to be his fake fiancée,
To help him save his company.

Faking an engagement with a chisel-jawed hottie,

Is hard enough,

Then we have to share a bed,

And my willpower runs out.

I pretend it's only raw physical connection,

Secretly I want more.

But he's demanding, grouchy, never apologizes and our fake
engagement is only for six months.

Then we're supposed to go our separate ways.

Except the positive pregnancy test says otherwise,

And this is one secret I can't keep.

CHAPTER 1

AMELIA

I run up the dirty steps to get out of the NYC Subway system, cursing the backed-up trains, and tapping frantically on my phone. I can still save the morning, get to work on time, and make a good impression on my new boss if I take a rideshare. I can get to work in ... I hold my breath, watching the app's loading signal.

Ten minutes. That's when the nearest car can get to me.

I blow out a sigh of relief and wrap my puffy coat tighter against the winter cold. I can make that work. In my headphones, Carly Rae Jepsen is breathlessly singing about throwing a wish in the well. I love this song because you can hear the smile in her voice. I take a few more deep breaths and remind myself that *this time* things are going to work out. For good.

I wait for my heartbeat to slow from a sprint to a jog. The truth is, I'd be a knot of anxiety, even without the backed-up trains. I'm a 26-year-old graphic designer, and I have the worst possible luck with jobs. First there was the theater company that went belly up. Then there was the greeting card company that downsized. And, finally, the urban gardening nonprofit which I managed to ruin all by myself.

But that was the old me. The me who gave my all to people who couldn't return the favor. The me who felt every rejection like a freshly broken heart.

The new me is tough. The new me has a plan. The new me is going to stand up for myself, and plan ahead, and be a calm

professional adult, and ...

The nutty, savory smell of baked goods wafts out from the bagel place behind me and my stomach growls.

Shit. Breakfast. *That's* what I forgot.

I'm in one of the fancy parts of Manhattan where the rich people live, so breakfast will cost an arm and a leg, but it doesn't look too crowded. I bet I can get in and out before my car gets here.

I adjust the strap on my one professional purse, which is looking a little worse for wear, and head into the bakery. I step inside and let the warm, golden smell of carbs and coffee wash over me.

That's when someone bashes into me from behind, and I stumble forward like a lurching goat in high heels.

"Sorry" I say, on reflex, but then I catch myself. *He* bumped into *me*. And now he's already striding past me, getting *my* spot in line.

I feel the ticking clock in my head.

The old me would spend the next five hours starving in my new fancy office building because this asshole stole my breakfast time. Hell, the old me would smile and assure him that it was fine, I should probably eat healthier anyway.

But I don't want to be the person people take for granted anymore. And now seems like as good a time as any to start practicing.

Even if he is tall, hot, and wearing an expensive wool coat with the kind of exquisitely designed suit that makes business-wear haters like me reconsider my hatred of suits.

"Actually, sir," I say. "I'm not sorry. You bumped into *me*."

He ignores me.

I tap him on the shoulder. "*Sir*. You took my spot."

He looks back over his shoulder, grumpy as a bear woken from hibernation. He's got tousled brown hair, blue eyes, and

the kind of tan that implies he didn't spend his Christmas in snowy New York like the rest of us.

He frowns, and now he's looking less like a generically grumpy bear and more like one resisting the urge to charge.

Do bears charge?

I remind myself not to go hiking until I've looked that up.

"I'll buy your coffee," he says gruffly, not yielding his place in the line. "Or whatever pumpkin sweetened atrocity women like you drink."

Standing up for myself just got a whole lot easier. "*How dare you—*"

"May I help the next customer?" the barista asks, like he's trying to move the line along before me and the Suit break into an all-out war.

"Yes!" I say, beaming at the barista with the smile that once made a man in midtown walk straight into a trashcan. "Coffee with a cream and a toasted—"

But the Suit is talking over me, telling *Carlos* he'd like his usual, *quickly*.

I check the barista for a name tag, but he's not wearing one.

The Suit's a regular. And guessing by the way *Carlos* leaps into action to prep his order, he tips well.

Dammit.

"Kiera's usual as well?" the barista asks.

I raise my eyebrows, surprised a woman would put up with this man long enough to develop a "usual" at his favorite coffee shop. Then again, the dating field in New York is abysmal, as I know first-hand. Whoever the poor woman is, I can't judge her too harshly.

"No," the Suit says shortly. "And I'll cover whatever this one is having." He gestures vaguely toward me like I'm a bug he doesn't care enough to swat.

“No,” I say, annoyed. “He will not.”

I’d hoped standing up for myself would involve less complaining, and more, you know, *winning*.

But if I can’t win, the Suit doesn’t get to either. I’m not letting this man assuage his guilt for being a grumpy asshole. I’m not *that* easily bought.

When I hear the price for my coffee and pumpkin spice bagel, I almost regret my pride. My plan to take a well-paying job at a soulless marketing firm, so I can save up enough to start my own graphic design business, is going to backfire rapidly if I keep having mornings like this.

I join the Suit waiting at the end of the counter to pick up our drinks. Like most New York cafes, the space is small, and I’m standing close enough to smell his cologne, or soap, or whatever it is that makes him smell like Eucalyptus and sandalwood. I make a note to tell my friend Maddy, who works for a sex-toy company and keeps a running list of the sexiest things a man can smell like.

Not that I think the Suit smells sexy.

Carlos puts a drink on the bar, and I snatch it before the Suit can.

Victory, I think. And immediately I feel a little stronger, tougher, more formidable. I wonder if this feeling is why men are obsessed with winning.

“*Hey*,” the Suit says, his voice low and stern enough to give a woman fantasies. Not me though. I am fantasy free.

“That’s mine,” he says.

“No, it’s mine,” I say, taking a swig of coffee. And then I’m coughing and gagging because of how black and bitter it is.

So much for the victory tasting sweet.

“Never mind,” I croak, as Carlos sets my bagel and coffee on the counter. I pass this coffee to the Suit. “This one’s yours.”

He looks down at the lipstick stain on the coffee lid with distaste. Then his phone buzzes, and he swears.

He takes the coffee from me, and my stomach does a weird buzzy thing when our fingers touch. Probably leftover adrenaline from standing up to Mr. Tall and Powerful.

“You better not have any communicable diseases,” he says. Then he guzzles the caffeine, his mouth where mine was a second ago. He strides out of the coffee shop, the door swinging closed behind him. The bell hanging above the door chimes like it’s saying *Good Riddance*.

I realize my phone is vibrating, letting me know my ride is here. I rush out the door.

At least I’ll never see him again. That’s the nice thing about New York—you never run into the same stranger twice.



THE SLEEK BLACK rideshare is parked in the street, leading the cars behind it to honk and swerve. I yank open the passenger door and let out a startled, “gah!”

The Suit is sitting in my seat.

I don’t have *time* for this.

“Get out,” I say. “This is my ride.”

“No,” he says. “This is *my* ride.” He reaches for the door handle and tries to slam it. I resist, from the other side.

The struggle is not exactly dignified, as we both tug back and forth on the door. He clearly goes to the gym more often than I do, but he’s sitting down in a plush car, whereas I am standing and can put my whole weight into keeping this goddamn door open. I hear him grumble something that sounds like *What the hell is wrong with you?*

And then he grunts, and my fingers slip, and the door slams shut, leaving me staring at a glossy tinted window.

In days of yore, grunts like that were reserved for sexy bricklayers building houses for their women. Now apparently, it's the sound of a finance bro stealing your cab.

I'd love to take the high road and storm off. This is *way* more than I bargained for when I called him out for cutting in line. Unfortunately, I don't have that option. I *need* this job, which means I need to get to work on time.

I dash around the front of the cab to the other side, dodge an angry cyclist, yank open the other passenger door, and slide in the back. I slam the door closed, then lock myself in for emphasis.

The Suit looks at me in aristocratic disbelief. "Are you stalking me?"

"You wish," I snort. I pull out my phone and shove it in his face. "This is my car. See?"

"No," he says, through gritted teeth. "This is *my* car."

He shows me his phone screen, which admittedly seems to have the same car info as mine does. I squint. "You selected the carpool option."

"I did not ..." he trails off as he looks at his phone and realizes I'm right. He has the aghast look of a man who just realized he booked himself in steerage instead of first class on the Titanic.

I watch him, smug.

At least until the driver speaks up from the front. "You *both* picked carpool. That's what the app defaults to during unusually busy hours."

Dammit.

"That was an error," the Suit says, his eyes sliding toward me. "Obviously."

At least we agree about that.

"She's getting out now." The Suit reaches across me to open my door. His arrogance is truly astounding.

"*She* has a name," I say. "And it's Amelia."

“*Fine*,” the Suit says, cool exasperation leaching out of every muscle. “Amelia is getting out. Now.”

I’ve changed my mind. He’s not a bear. He’s a shark. Or maybe a wolf. Something silver and snarling with extra pointy teeth.

“You’re taking me directly to my destination,” the Suit says to the driver, ignoring me. “Five-hundred extra if you can get me there before eight-thirty.”

“What about me?” I ask. I hate how easily he ignores me. I hate how easy everyone ignores me.

“Two-hundred dollars?” he offers.

I start to cross my arms, then I realize it’s not a great idea while holding a pastry and a muffin. So I settle for what I hope is a stern frown. “I already know you’re willing to go up to five-hundred.”

“Yes, because he’s *driving*. You’re merely vacating.”

I snort a laugh. I can’t help it. The whole thing is so tragically on the nose. People would rather give me money to quietly disappear than to stick around and actually do something.

The Suit looks at me strangely. And then the corner of his mouth twitches. It’s the tiniest, barest hint toward a smile.

Maybe he’s human after all.

And that gives me enough courage to settle in and fasten my seat belt. “Here’s the thing,” I say. “I’m not getting out. So, we can keep arguing and both be late, or we can stop arguing and both get there on time. Either way, we’re doing it together.”

The Suit sizes me up, from my black flats, to my itchy gray suit, to my blond curls tied back in a ponytail, to the mutinous set of my jaw. For the first time all morning, I get the sense that he’s really seeing me.

For some reason, the idea makes my pulse speed up.

“Are you trying to tell if I’m bluffing?” I ask.

“No,” he says shortly. “I don’t gamble.”

He leans forward, meeting the driver’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “Drop me off first. There’s an extra hundred in it for you.”

“Drop *me* off first,” I say. “Please. I can’t be late. I can give you ...” I rack my brains, “a pumpkin spice bagel.”

“You’re both going to the same block,” the driver says, in a voice that suggests his day has already been far too long.

“Oh.” I hesitate. “Do you still want the bagel or ...?”

“Please stop talking,” the driver says, as he turns up the radio and pulls out into the ruthless Manhattan traffic.

We drive for a few blocks, until the silence is broken by my stomach growling. My ears burn. “I didn’t eat breakfast,” I explain.

“I don’t *care*,” he says, pinching the bridge of his nose. It’s a nice nose, with a prominent bridge to keep it from being too perfect. Like the profile you see on old Roman statues of ancient gods. If the ancient god in question was really annoyed.

I shift my focus to trying to inch my bagel out of the bag one handed since there’s no place to set my coffee down.

It takes about fifteen seconds of inefficient paper rustling for the Suit’s patience to snap.

He grabs my coffee from me. “Just eat the damn thing.”

I don’t say thank you, because it’s *him*, but I don’t argue either.

I scarf the bagel down, sighing happily as the melted butter and rich nutty taste fills my mouth.

The Suit eyes me out of the corner of his eyes, his jaw tightening. He probably disapproves of women who enjoy eating. He looks like the type who expects his dates to order salads and spend their mornings on a stationary bike.

Not that I have a problem with stationary bikes. Just men who buy them for you for your birthday, then break up with

you a month later, leaving you with a giant machine you didn't want taking up most of the space in your tiny apartment.

It's possible I'm projecting onto the Suit a tiny bit.

"What's your opinion on stationary bikes?" I ask the man around a mouthful of bagel.

He looks pained and turns away from me without answering. He raises one of the coffees he's holding to his lips, then chokes, coughs, and lets out a vicious "*Fuck.*"

"I think you drank mine," I say mildly.

He shoves it back at me like it's poison. "How much sugar did you put in this?"

"I'm sorry I'm not a masochist like you," I say primly. "Unlike some people, I *enjoy* sweetness in my life."

His lips thin. "There's nothing sweet about you."

I know he means it as an insult, but I can't help feeling a little prick of pride. I didn't do my normal small, nice, polite thing. I fought back. I *earned* that insult.

It feels like a good omen.

New job. New Amelia, I remind myself.

"We're here!" the driver interrupts, as the car screeches to a halt and slams me back into the real world. "Have a good morning—"

I don't hear whatever else he says. I'm already rushing out of the car and up the block to my building. I've got three minutes to make it into the building and up sixteen flights to my office.

I hardly notice the heavy steps behind me.

At least not until I make it into the lobby of my building and see the Suit is following me.

He's so scowly that for a wild second I think he's followed me in here to yell at me for ruining his morning. But then I remember how many offices are in this building.

According to my best friend Maddy, I have a *slight* tendency to jump to the worst-case, most dramatic scenario where men are concerned.

He probably just works here, I tell myself as I jab the elevator button. The doors open and I step inside.

It's not like he's chasing me onto the elevator, I think as the doors begin to close. It's a comforting thought.

Right up until the moment he catches the elevator door with one hand, growls "Oh no you don't," and slips into the enclosed space with me.

It's a gleaming elevator, all shining mirrors and polished metals. That should probably make the space feel more important, but instead it feels like the Suit and his growling is surrounding me from all sides.

It makes me feel small. And as someone who's been gawkily tall since I was fourteen, I'm not used to feeling small.

I punch the button for the sixteenth floor and wait for him to punch another one. But the Suit doesn't touch any of the elevator buttons. Instead, he looks at the glowing *16* button, then back at me, then back at the button, then back at me. He scowls, and there's something happening in the back of his throat that sounds positively feral. He's looking even more wolf-like than usual.

It's distressing that I've spent enough time with this man to have a "usual."

My mind flashes to all the stories my parents told me about New York murderers to try to keep me from moving all the way out here after college.

They pick a random woman off the street, then follow her, and by the time she realizes there's something wrong, it's too late. Granted, most of mom's horror stories were from the 80s.

Except there *was* that one true-crime podcast last year about the elevator murderer.

They never caught him.

“You forgot to hit the button for your floor,” I say, my voice coming out squeakily.

“Unfortunately for one of us,” he says, “I didn’t.”

Jesus fucking Christ. I angered a serial killer by stealing his coffee and now I’m going to die in an office elevator on my first day of work.

Is that danger in his eyes? It looks like danger. He definitely looks like he wants to do violence to *someone*.

And I’m the only *someone* here.

Heart pounding, I discreetly slip my hand into my purse, fumbling for something I could defend myself with.

My hand closes on a travel can of hairspray as I step off the elevator, the Suit’s heat ominous at my back. He follows me out of the elevator.

I whirl and point the hair spray at him. “Stay back or I’ll mace you.”

“What the hell? Put that down,” he barks. “*Now.*”

He reaches his giant arm toward me.

I dodge, spraying as I go but he moves too and fluidly dodges the spray.

Instead, I end up spraying an older man in the face.

A tall older man with a designer suit, and blue eyes, and a face that looks disquietingly familiar.

The man coughs and bats at his face.

The Suit uses my moment of distraction to snatch the can from my hand. “Hairspray?” he reads, judgment leaking from his voice. “You sprayed my dad in the face with hairspray?”

I can’t tell if he disapproves of my vanity or my wimpy choice of weapon.

Wait. “Your dad?”

A brisk looking middle-aged woman I recognize as Linda Chen from HR steps into the lobby. “Ah, Amelia, I heard you’d arrived.” She turns to the Suit and his father. “Howard,

Cole, may I introduce you to our new graphic design associate?”

Howard? As in ...

“Howard Ashford?” I croak.

I just hair sprayed the head of the company and spent the morning pissing off his son.

The Suit—Cole—smirks.

Cole fucking Ashford.

I have a feeling that smirk is going to haunt my dreams.

CHAPTER 2

I make it a full thirteen minutes into my weekly meeting with my dad before I start fantasizing about asking the unhinged blonde to spray him in the face again.

I can't help it. His plan is so infuriatingly dumb.

And fine, maybe some of that fantasy has to do with seeing the blonde again. Amelia, that's what her name was.

Amelia, who just laughed when I tried to order her around.

I drum my fingers on the arm of my chair. *Why did she laugh? I wonder. What did she see in the morning that I didn't?*

My dad is still talking. And his favorite board member Todd Haversham is still sitting in the corner, nodding along like a worshipping bobblehead.

"Let me get this straight," I interrupt. "You want to buy up a failing digital marketing agency *we're already beating*, and offload all of our current digital ad production to them?"

My dad leans in, rapt. He's intense like this. Some might say magnetic.

Me, I just see controlling the man who broke my mother's heart and almost ran a hundred-year-old company into the ground. I was the one who came on board and rescued it. I don't think he's ever forgiven me for being a better version of him.

“Market research shows people associate Ashford Marketing with *real* marketing. Unforgettable PR events, iconic billboards, luxury ad placement no one else can get. Not this ...” he makes a face of distaste and flicks his hand, “online stuff.”

I can already feel the headache coming on. The online stuff, as my dad calls it, is one of the ways I saved the company after his gambling debt drove it to the brink.

The only thing he couldn't touch was the trust fund my grandma was smart enough to set up for me, and the properties she passed to my mom.

“If I have to tell you one more time why that is the *dumbest fucking thing—*”

“It doesn't matter what you think,” My dad says. “I have the votes. This is happening at the next board meeting, whether you want it to or not.” He leans back, imperious. “Get on board.”

My eyes cut to Todd, trying to tell from his face if my dad is bluffing.

Todd raises a magazine in front of his face.

Which could mean he's trying not to reveal my dad is bluffing. Or it could just mean he's bored of our shit.

I don't blame him. *I'm* bored of our constant fighting.

Fighting with Amelia wasn't boring. The thought sneaks into my brain without my permission, along with the image of her flushed cheeks and tense body as she wrestled me for the cab door. The sound of her moaning as she ate her food. Or that husky, bell-like laugh.

I could make her go soft, I think, and then instantly regret it. She's not some anonymous woman I can fuck in a hotel room to make a long night go faster. She's working for me. And unlike my dad, I'd never risk hurting our company or the people who work here to satisfy my private vices.

I'd never gamble.

My dad's talking again. I ignore him.

The board meeting is in two months. That means I have two months to sway over half of the board to my side before my dad convinces them to buy an overpriced, failing company. The last thing I need is him tanking the company *again*.

I stand and leave without bothering to say goodbye.



IT'S JUST after 3:00 p.m. when my assistant Lucinda steps into the office and coughs discreetly. In one of her many stylishly asymmetrical loose black suits and her signature brunette pixie cut, she looks like a cross between Audrey Hepburn and the scariest school principal you ever met. In addition to being a flawless administrative assistant, she can get information out of anyone.

Also, she's on my side.

Everyone at the company can be divided into basically two camps: the people on my dad's side, and the people on mine. My side has most of the admin team (since I don't patronize them), the accounting department (since I care about little things like tax law and financial solvency), and generally all the account managers, copywriters, and project managers who are actually good at their jobs. My dad's side has the sales team, everyone who likes reminiscing about the good old days more than doing their jobs, and a few ambitious kiss-ups in account management who appreciate how easy my dad is to manipulate. Also—weirdly—the graphic designers.

I have no idea what I did to piss off the graphic designers.

Well, I know what I did to piss off *one* of the graphic designers. I wonder if Amelia's always that feisty, or if I bring it out in her.

I kind of hope I bring it out in her.

I brush the thought aside and focus on Lucinda. "What's the vote headcount?"

"Your father does seem to have the votes, but just barely. Lexington, Flanigan, and Reinbold can probably be persuaded

if you lay out the facts but—”

“But they never read my reports,” I finish, and she nods. Unlike my dad, they’re smart enough to follow the facts, not their guts when making business decisions.

“Reinbold could be swayed by a personal meeting, but Lexington and Flanigan will need a slick presentation.”

I stand, frustrated, and look out the window. She’s right. Which means I’ll have to go to the trouble of hunting down and hiring an outside graphic designer because I don’t trust any of ours not to go tattling to my dad with my strategy.

Lucinda doesn’t say anything.

“Go on,” I prompt.

She does, going through the remaining board members.

I can feel myself grinding my teeth by the time Lucinda finishes.

There’s something off about this whole deal. But I can’t put my finger on it. I turn back to Lucinda. “Do you know why he wants to buy *this* company? Why Tree House Digital? Why not a similar company that’s more successful?”

Lucinda jots something in her notebook. “I’ll look into it.”

I thank her and dismiss her.

I turn back to the window. Outside, the world is full of workers in skyscrapers just like this one. Everyone hustling to make it big.

I used to love the chase. Putting together a plan, beating the competition. Winning.

Hell, even losing can be fun, if it’s to a worthwhile opponent.

But fighting with my dad just feels ugly.

I scowl, running the board vote numbers in my head. Even accounting for Lexington, Flanigan, and Reinbold, there are still two more board members I’ll need to convince to switch sides. And I have no idea how to do it.

I swear and kick a chair.

It crashes over backward just as my door opens to reveal the same woman who got my morning off to such a brilliant fucking start.

Amelia's slim and pale, with big brown eyes that give her a deer-in-the-headlights look and corkscrewing, barely tamed blonde hair that makes her look like the girl next door. I don't know much about women's fashion, but even I can tell her gray suit is the wrong size for her and several years out of date.

"Yes?" I bark.

"Lucinda said I could come in," she says, oddly timid.

Or maybe not odd, considering she knows I'm one of her bosses now. There's something sweet and Southern in her accent, but I can't quite place it.

I frown, surprised to realize I don't like *timid* on her. I like her spitting fire.

"Whatever it is, spit it out," I say impatiently. "I don't bite."

"You just kick," she says, then claps a hand over her mouth, like she can't believe she said that.

I glance at the overturned chair, the corner of my mouth twitching. "Fair enough," I say, and she blinks.

"I, uh, came to apologize," she says. "About this morning. I shouldn't have—"

"No need to waste my time with an apology—"

"Assumed you were a serial killer," she finishes on a rush.

I open my mouth. Close it again. Start to ask ... but no. I don't have time for this. I *really* don't have time for this.

But for some reason I can't help myself. She's so ... unexpected. "You thought I was a serial killer."

"Not any serial killer," she says, like that makes her theory make more sense. "The elevator one. Specifically."

I know better than to ask but I do anyway. “*Why?*”

“You have angry bear eyes,” she says. “Possibly more wolf.”

I peer at her. It’s funny. She *looks* sane. And then she opens her mouth.

She backs away, hands up in a placating gesture, like she really does think I’m a wild animal about to charge.

And maybe I am, because despite the absolutely hellish day I’ve had, some part of me wants to give chase.

It’s been a long time since I wanted that.

“Anyway. That’s it. I’ll go apologize to your dad, uh, I mean Howard. Then back to the graphic design pen. You’ll never see me again, I swear.”

“Wait.” Something in her babbling sparks my brain back into gear. I need a graphic designer who won’t betray me to my dad. And she needs someone to keep my dad from firing her when he eventually crosses paths with her in the hallway and remembers she hair-sprayed him in the face.

“Stay,” I say. “And close the door behind you.”

Amelia swallows, the movement drawing attention to her delicate neck. For a second I’m back in the bakery, crashing into blonde curls that smell like oranges and sunshine.

And then Amelia straightens her shoulders, nods, and does what I say.

It’s a small victory, but it’s satisfying as fuck.

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