



FIRST COMES



REVENGE

*First comes love. REVENGE
then comes marriage. MORE REVENGE*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PENELOPE
BLOOM

FIRST COMES REVENGE

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Author's Note

CHARLI

I'm in a microscopic hotel room, pacing in a circle, trying not to barf out of pure nervous panic. Three weeks ago, this idea seemed amazing. It was genius. So genius, in fact, that I didn't tell anybody, including the boyfriend I'm surprising by flying out here.

And now I'm learning a valuable lesson. If you move fast enough, you can temporarily outrun stupidity. About an hour ago, stupid caught up with me. *Hard.*

Yeah, maybe I should just barf. I'd feel better if I emptied my already empty stomach.

I gnaw on a fingernail, fold my arms, unfold my arms, pinch my temples, and then blow a raspberry. Surprisingly, none of that helps. I still feel like I'm in a blind panic.

I stare out the window at the unfamiliar desert landscape outside. Arizona. Ari-freaking-zona. I spent money I don't have on plane tickets here and spent even more money I don't have to buy tickets to the author's convention a few blocks from my hotel. And my boyfriend has no idea I'm coming. Why would he? He specifically asked me not to come.

Maybe I should faint instead of throwing up. At least then I'd get to enjoy a few moments of blissful unconsciousness.

I need to call someone. Two sisters, an overprotective brother, two best friends... It's quite the list to choose from. My youngest sister isn't old enough to handle something like this, so I cross her off my options. My brother would try to fix it for me and tell me not to move a muscle. That has a ring to it, but I don't want to be rescued. This was my colossal screw up. I should at least be the one to unscrew myself, if that's what I decide to do.

My other sister, Dani, is a wild card. She's smart and practical, and she shoots straight. I know she'll tell me exactly what she thinks.

Then there's my friends. Gemmaline would just encourage me in whatever direction she thinks I want to go. Pure, unconditional support. Also tempting, but probably not helpful except for calming me down temporarily.

Roxie is my last option. She has wanted me to break up with my boyfriend pretty much since we started dating. Unless I want to be told I should march up to him tomorrow and spit in his face or stab him with a prison shank, I probably don't need to call her.

I chew my nail a little more, then call Dani. *Honesty it is.*

Dani picks up on the second ring. "It's pretty late for you. Did you get hooked on another one of those serial killer documentaries?" I can hear her smiling as she slows down her speech like she's talking to a baby. "Is somebody scared again and needs their big sister?"

"It's not that," I snap. "Remember that time when I thought I found a stray cat and it was actually a baby bobcat?"

Dani audibly shudders. That was a long day for both of us. "Yes. I thought we agreed not to talk about that anymore."

“Yeah, well, I’m about to do something even dumber. And I need advice.”

There’s a pause. “Did you adopt something else?”

“What? No.” I guess I have a kind of history for adopting things and it turning out to be a massive mistake, but I don’t appreciate her assumption.

A longer pause follows. This time, her voice is hopeful and excited. “Did you finish your book?”

“Wait, what? I said I did something dumb. Why would that be dumb?”

“Oh, I got bored of guessing what you did wrong. I was just curious if you finished.”

“Focus, Dani. This is important.”

“Okay, okay. What did you do?”

When I speak, it comes out in a rush. I’m hoping it will all sound more reasonable when I say it aloud. “I showed up at Vaughn’s work conference thing in Arizona. I flew out without telling him, got a hotel room, and was planning to surprise him at the author meet and greet tomorrow.” I wait, wincing while I imagine all of that bouncing around my sister’s head. Saying it aloud definitely didn’t make it sound more reasonable. *Not even a little.*

I can almost picture Dani blinking as she takes in everything I just said. “That’s not funny, Charli.”

“Good, because it’s not a joke!” I walk around the room and do a sort of jazz hand thing with my free hand. “I’m *freaking out!* What do I do?”

“What do you mean what do you do?” Dani hisses. “You already did it, doofus!”

“I thought it would be one of those relationship saving kinds of gestures. I don’t know! It seemed like a good idea when I thought it up!” I’m practically hysterical now. I knew this was stupid. I was already freaking out, but hearing my sister’s panic is only pushing me more over the edge.

“Were you perhaps drunk when you thought this up?”

I pause jazz-handing to touch my fingertip to my chin. In fact, I think I was maybe a little tipsy at the time. “I’m here, Dani. And I need advice, not your best impression of Judge Judy.”

She takes a deep breath. “Well, let’s examine the facts. Shall we? You’ve dated Vaughn Vanderprick—”

“You know I hate when you call him that.”

“Sorry, it just really rolls off the tongue. Let me try again. You’ve dated Vaughn Vanderlesh for two years now. In those two years, he has strung you along, failed to follow through on any promises about helping you get discovered, never brought you to a single work thing, and has just been an all around scumbag boyfriend. In fact, he has essentially created a blueprint with a giant, fat, clear sign saying ‘showing up at a work thing unannounced is the last thing I’d ever be excited about!’”

I flop down on the mattress. She’s right. Of course she’s right. “Maybe I knew this was stupid from the start. I think I’m just hoping I can give him a chance to prove me wrong, you know? Maybe I’ve misread it all along. What if he sees me tomorrow and he just lights up? What if he parades me around like he’s proud to be my boyfriend? He might introduce me to all his work friends as his promising author girlfriend and try to convince them to sign me when I finish my book.”

Dani lets out a long, sad breath. And yes, when you've been sisters long enough, you know if breaths are sad or happy. "I don't want to see you get hurt. You're my favorite sister, and I love you."

I grin. "Maddie told me you say the exact same thing to her."

"Maddie is a dirty liar and you can't trust a word she says. She's also only sixteen. If I did say something like that to her, it wouldn't carry the same weight it does with you."

"You love me, *but...*" I say, knowing the "but" is coming.

"But I think this could be a total disaster. And I think you have to know that, so I'm just a little worried about you. So what's going on?"

I lay face first on the bed, flopping down like a dead fish. My voice comes out muffled by the pillow. "I feel like things with me and Vaughn are falling apart. The more I try to be the girl I think he wants me to be, the more he gets distant. He used to call me when he was at this kind of thing and now he just ghosts me and makes half-assed apologies after he gets back. Then he suggests something stupid like a blowjob to cheer *me* up."

Dani makes a gagging sound. I'm feeling mean, so I almost say there's no gagging when Vaughn is involved because he's not even big enough for that. But I don't voice my thoughts. I really do want to fix things.

"Vaughn is like that avocado you set on the counter because it wasn't ripe yet," Dani says. "You kept planning to eat it. Maybe it would be good for some guac or on your eggs, you think. Maybe you'll just eat it plain with some salt, because who doesn't love a little avocado with salt? But it's still not ready, so you wait. And then one day, you're moving shit

around on the counter and *surprise!* That fucking avocado is there. It's so soft now it will basically implode if you touch it. It smells. It has a small penis. It's a loser. It's the lamest, shittiest avocado you could ever imagine dating your sister, and you just want to pulverize it into smelly—"

"Dani?" I ask, rolling to my back and staring at the popcorn ceiling of my hotel room.

There's a pause. "Yes?"

"I think you lost the metaphor there. But why don't you tell me how you really feel?"

"Vaughn doesn't deserve you, Charli."

"Everybody deserves a chance," I counter.

Dani groans. "To a point, maybe. But you've given this guy more attempts than a billionaire's favorite son gets at being a self-made man."

"Well, maybe this is the last chance?"

"Is it?" Dani sounds skeptical.

"Maybe it is!" I don't sound confident.

She sighs again. "I think an honest conversation between you two would be a better way to handle this. Surprising him out of the blue... it just feels like it could go so wrong."

"I've tried calm and rational. He doesn't want to talk about 'us'. He just rolls his eyes and says he really doesn't have time for my drama—that work is crazy. Or that I'm trying to turn our life into one of my books because I'm bored. He always asks when I'm going to be finished with my book, but when I try to talk about the possibility of him helping me pitch it to agents, it's like he shuts down. I think he doesn't believe it's worth publishing, even though he has never read it."

“Charli...” There’s so much disappointment in my sister’s voice that I feel like doubling over and holding my face in my hands. I hate how clearly I can see myself when I talk to Dani. “You know you deserve better than this. You have to know that.”

“There’s one more thing,” I say slowly.

“There’s *more?*” Dani already sounds exhausted.

“Well, I kind of got fired when I told my boss I was coming to this. He said he didn’t have anyone to cover my shift and he’d fire me if I left. I thought he was bluffing, because, you know, if you’re short staffed, how does firing someone as a punishment for missing work make sense? *He wasn’t bluffing.*”

Dani groans. “Okay, okay. Do you have money? Like are you going to be able to pay rent this month?”

“I have some stashed away. And I kind of spent a lot of it on these tickets and this hotel.”

“*Duuude,*” Dani says. She can’t seem to help but laugh. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Love me for my impulsive, optimistic personality?”

“Yeah, yeah,” she sighs. “We’ll figure that out. I have some money saved up. I can help you get by while you look for a new job if you need it.”

“You’re the best.”

“Although I might only give you money if you promise to cut Vaughn off. Just end things and call it.”

“One more chance,” I say. “That’s all I’m giving him. Like, what if this was all part of his plan to motivate me, you know?”

He created that whole freaking app to help me write. He really can be a good guy.”

“That WritingBusy thing?” she asks.

“Yeah. I mean, it’s kind of buggy, but the way it lets me change the background color of my document is cool.”

“It’s not cool. It’s a shitty version of every word document that changes colors. It’s a glorified widget.”

“Yep. No idea what a widget is. But he made it for me. Or at least he paid that guy to make it for me. That counts for something, right?”

“No, not really.”

Maybe I’m being stupid. Maybe Dani and every ounce of common sense I have is right. But I’m already here. I already blew money I shouldn’t have on these tickets, the hotel, and my admission to the convention. Wouldn’t it be even dumber to go back without following through? “Well, I’m still doing this. I’m going to go up to him tomorrow morning and tell him I’m almost finished. I’m going to ask him to point me to the right person to pitch my story to, and I’m going to do it. I’ve got my elevator pitch all worked up and ready. It’s all going to work out for the best.”

“Wait,” Dani says. “When did you go from ‘working on it’ to ‘almost finished’?” She sounds absolutely floored, and her shock makes me smile.

“I didn’t want to tell anybody I was getting close and risk losing my momentum. But, yeah, you know... I’m almost done with the book. No biggie.”

“Dude!” I hear some kind of commotion, like my sister is jumping up and down or slamming her palm on something in excitement.

I chew my lip. “It’s really not that big of a deal.”

“It’s a huge deal. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you.”

“Now I’m only going to say it one more time because I don’t want to be annoying. But would you seriously consider just, you know, not doing what you’re planning to do tomorrow? I’m really worried you’re going to get hurt.”

“I have to do this. If I don’t, things between us are going to just keep limping along. At least this way, I’m going to figure out if he really cares about me and my writing. If he does, he’ll help me. If he doesn’t? Well, then I’ll know it’s time to move on. Right?”

“I know you always see the best in people, Charli. I love that about you. But holy shit, there’s a point where it just becomes masochistic. Like this guy is holding knives. He’s covered in blood. He’s grinning like a lunatic. And what are you doing? You’re walking up to him and turning your back.” She makes horror movie noises, some sounds I think are supposed to be the knife plunging in, and then she shrieks.

I shake my head. “Maybe real love only happens if you take real risks.”

“Oh come on, not the real love stuff again.”

“What?!” I say. I lay back on the bed and stare at the ceiling. “Love isn’t supposed to be easy, right? It’s challenging and frustrating and sometimes you think it’s impossible. But in the end, it pays off for the people who fight for it.”

“Unless only one side is fighting.”

“Maybe I’m the side fighting right now, but maybe sometimes it takes an extraordinary effort to remind your partner why the

relationship matters.”

I can tell Dani wants to counter with another round of arguments, but she lets out a breath instead. She’s trying to be a good sister and let me make my own decisions. In her mind, she’s probably thinking she’s letting me make my own mistakes, actually. Either way, I appreciate her for it.

“Just promise you’ll call as soon as you can, okay?” Dani says.

“Promise.”

I end the call and rest the phone on my chest, eyes still on the ceiling. Tomorrow morning, I’m going to find out if I’ve been wasting the last two years waiting for Vaughn to turn back into the man he was when we started dating.

CHARLI

Once per year, *Landmark Press* and *Gray Wolfe Publishing* host a meet and greet with authors from all over the world in Arizona. It's a chance for aspiring authors to come and pitch their stories directly to agents, editors, and publishers. Year after year, this place is where people get an opportunity to jumpstart their careers and get their books seen.

I feel like I've finally made some kind of holy pilgrimage.

Last year, I begged Vaughn to bring me, but he said it would make him look bad. He'd seem like the literary agent with the writer girlfriend who was trying to abuse his position as the son of Landmark's CEO. I was sad to miss my chance to go, but I understood his point. His dad was really hard on him since he started officially working for the company two years ago. He probably wouldn't let Vaughn hear the end of it if he thought I was getting preferential treatment. I got it, so I stayed home. I ended up re-writing my novel in progress after that, anyway, so maybe it was for the best. I would've been pitching a doomed book if he let me come last year.

Even with all that, I still thought this year would be different. We had another year under our belts and that had to mean our feelings were getting stronger for each other. Sure, it didn't always feel that way, but what were we doing if we weren't

growing as a couple? So maybe I *hoped* this year would be different more than I really believed it would. If he invited me here, all the little things that I'd noticed wouldn't be such a big deal. The convention would be the shining beacon out-shining all the doubts and worries I had about us.

I asked him if I could come two weeks ago when he flew out early "to get a head start". I didn't even press him to know why he needed to come so early. I just asked if I could come.

I think his exact words were, "Not this again, Charli. Please, just drop it."

So I did. *Sort of.*

I pull my laptop bag up on my shoulder, take a deep breath, and start wandering the convention center. I sort of imagined spotting him right away. I have the whole thing written up in my mind. He'll see me, light up, and we'll rush together in a big hug. Maybe he'll even kiss me and I'll do that dainty thing where I kick one leg up at the knee. Perhaps a giggle will even slip out of my lips, eyes squeezed shut in romantic bliss.

Sure, he isn't big on public displays of affection and we've never had that kind of moment, but this is going to be our big moment. It's going to be the time we both look back on as the point when we overcame all the obstacles and really leaned into our feelings for each other.

The first problem with my little fantasy is how huge this place is. There must be hundreds of rooms and thousands of people. It'll be a real challenge just to find Vaughn, so I decide to enjoy myself while I look.

I walk around, drinking it all in. I'm so nervous it's making me feel sick, but I can't ignore how awesome it feels to be here *as an author*. I've always kind of wanted to write a book since I

was a little girl, but I started to get serious about it four years ago when I turned twenty. I ended up using all my elective credits in college for creative writing classes, which I loved. I even switched my minor to English at the last minute. Sure, none of it helped my already useless psychology undergrad degree, but those classes were huge in pushing me to write and feel more confident.

In four years, I've always felt like I was at the little author kid table—on the outside looking in toward the real big boys. But now I'm almost done with my book. I'm actually attending a real life author thing. I'm locked and loaded with an elevator pitch, so maybe I'll even convince someone at Landmark or Gray Wolfe to pick up my book today. There are a few other smaller publishing houses here, too, but the big two would be the real dream.

It's all enough to make me temporarily forget how worried I am about things with Vaughn.

For a while, I do forget. I just sink into the moment and feel like I'm walking on clouds. There are desks set up for authors who write for *Landmark* and *Gray Wolfe*. I spot a few recognizable faces and internally fangirl. Okay, I do a little more than internally fangirl. I actually spend close to two hours waiting in lines to meet authors, collect signed books, and stuff them into my bag like a hamster filling its cheeks with goodies.

In my defense, I still have at least one eye on the prize at all times. I'm scanning the crowds for Vaughn. *Maybe* part of me doesn't even want to spot him yet.

I get caught up in a few random conversations with other authors and hopeful authors. I realize just how many people here haven't finished a book yet. They've written short stories

or they have an idea they are planning to write some day. It just reminds me how big of a deal it is that I actually finished. I did the thing. I wrote the book, and it's right there on my laptop, just waiting to be edited and pushed out into the world.

It has a sort of mystical quality to it. Writing a novel feels like catching the whale or successfully performing magic. Not that I have ever desired to catch a whale, of course. It's just the kind of thing people aspire towards but never actually do. Actually, I'm not sure anybody really dreams about catching whales, but the point is that writing a book is only a dream for so many people. A fancy, sparkly dream full of glitter and unicorns that the world tries very hard to make people like me give up—to *grow up* and move on to more realistic, mature things. But I never did. It was always there and I always knew I was going to keep chasing it until I made it happen.

And now here I am.

I have the freaking book and it is so close to done.

I hadn't even told Vaughn how close I was to finishing. He'd seemed so let down and disappointed with me when I told him I was scrapping the original draft last year. It was like I'd proved to him that I was never actually going to write the book. Now I can prove him wrong.

I break out of line with my much heavier bag in tow. I start looking for Vaughn with both eyes now. I've been a little distracted on the *Gray Wolfe* side of things because they publish most of my favorite authors. I move through the convention center and find the area where there's more *Landmark* people.

It's a big room with tables scattered around and lines of people waiting to talk to authors, agents, and representatives from Landmark. I wander into line to buy a book and get it signed

by one of my favorite fantasy authors. I'm glancing idly around the room when I do a double take. I think I see Vaughn, but it doesn't make sense, because he's holding hands with a beautiful woman.

Their backs are to me, but I'm pretty sure I know him from behind by now. I tilt my head a little, forehead creasing as I stare at him, then his hand in hers.

I drift out of line as it feels like the world shudders beneath my feet. My thumb is hooked under the strap of my bag. My jaw is hanging open just a little. The thump of my heart gets louder with each pulse in my ears.

He's not alone.

My boyfriend is here without me, and he's holding another girl's hand. She has thick, brown hair. He always complains about how thin my hair is.

She's skinnier than me. He has made several comments about how he wishes I put more effort into exercising and eating right.

She's wearing a cutesy little dress. It's the kind of dress he has told me multiple times not to wear because it looks like I'm trying too hard.

He's not alone, and the girl holding his hand is everything I'm not. She's the things he made me wish I could be.

Seeing them makes so many things click firmly into place. It hurts. The moving of parts inside me is like sandpaper on exposed skin. It feels like I'm burning inside, like pieces of me are falling off and crumbling into dust.

I realize I'm on the verge of tears, so I push that shit down. Dani was right about him, too. Every one of my family and friends were. I barely process all the moments and memories

that come rushing up to the surface—obvious signs of what I’m seeing right now with my eyes that I wasn’t willing to really see. Missed dates. Shitty excuses. How secretive he always was with his phone.

I walk toward them. I’m not sure what I’m planning to do, but I approach from behind so they don’t see me. He’s wearing the shirt I got him last Christmas. I told him he looks good in it, and it’s his favorite. I know because he always packs it when he’s going out of town and he hardly ever wears it for me.

I’m about to tap him on the shoulder when I overhear his conversation. He’s talking to two older men.

“...very promising,” Vaughn says. Was his voice always so nasally? “We’ve already copyrighted the draft. It’s that good.”

Oh, hell no. This girl holding hands with my boyfriend—*my former boyfriend*—had better not be an author.

She jumps in. She’s smiling a homecoming queen smile. I can see her profile up close now. She’s beautiful. Of course she’s beautiful. “I can’t give an exact timeline, but I’m just working on edits now.”

“That’s great,” the man says. “Why have you been hiding such a talented girlfriend all this time, Vaughn?”

He puffs up his chest. He’s proud. *The asshole is proud to be showing her off, isn’t he?* He’s soaking up the praise like a stupid sponge that’s wearing too much hair gel, even though his girlfriend told him gently so many times to take it easy—that the hair gel might become sentient and try to take over his brain if he kept giving it so much power.

“Does the book have a title?” the other man asks. “I’m already intrigued based on the pitch.”

I can't listen anymore. I stumble away from them. I need to clear my head before I lose the continental breakfast I kind of stole from the hotel across the street from mine. The place I booked was too cheap to offer free breakfast, so I may have walked into another hotel like I knew what I was doing, filled up on free food, and got out of there.

It would serve me right to throw it up.

I'm a terrible person. I don't deserve those eggs and bacon. I don't deserve anything when I'm too stupid to realize what a complete dumpster truck of slimeballs and moldy dicks my boyfriend is. *Was. Ex-boyfriend.*

I rush toward the closest door. I rip it open, spin as soon as I'm inside, and rest my head on the wood. It feels like the world is still spinning around me, like everything I thought I knew is coming loose.

"Can we help you?"

I open my eyes, slowly turning toward the voice.

I'm in a conference room and I've apparently interrupted a very important looking meeting. There's a little sign on the table that says *Gray Wolfe Publishing*. And then I recognize the two men at either end of the table. One is Nolan Gray. The other is Jameson Wolfe. *Gray and Wolfe.*

I would run, but my body is doing its best impression of water right now. All my joints feel completely useless. I'm not going anywhere.

I open my mouth to say something. A sound like a frog choking on a fly comes out.

There are six other people at the table. Two women, four men. Eight people staring at me looking like an idiot when all I need is a quiet place to cry or throw up in peace.

“Um,” I manage. “Just—” I turn and start pulling on the door. Suddenly my body is working again and adrenaline is flooding me. Fight or flight kicked in, and I’m all flight.

I yank and yank but the door won’t budge. I’m pulling on the handle with both hands, wincing in desperation to get out of this nightmare and run home at my top speed of approximately three point five miles per hour.

“You have to push it,” a man says.

I whimper, then shove the door open and stumble out. I look left, right, then spot an exit. I fast-walk toward it, trying not to draw any attention to myself, and I shove it open. I step outside and finally collapse with my back sliding down the stucco wall. I flop to my butt, cover my face, and let it all come crashing down on me.

Dani was worried I’d be hurt. I know the hurt will come. Right now, though? Now I just feel numb.

JAMESON

“Jameson,” Nolan says. “What are your thoughts on this?”

“Hmm?” I ask, eyebrows raised. I probably look like the kid in school who gets called on because he’s obviously not paying attention. To be fair, I wasn’t. I’ve been staring at the door ever since that woman barged in.

“Numbers are down,” Nolan prods. “We’re looking for fresh ideas. That’s usually where you come in.”

“Hold that thought,” I say, eyes shifting back to the door where the girl just was. “I need to go check on something.”

“Jameson, we’re on a schedule,” Nolan reminds me.

“That’s the best part of being a boss,” I say as I stand and straighten my tie. “You can tell schedules to go fuck themselves when it suits you.” I wink at my friend, who looks like he’d like to chuck his phone at my head right about now.

Everybody else looks down, clearly unwilling to be caught in the crossfire. I don’t blame them. Nolan is famous for his temper and I’m known for being unpredictable. Together, we make quite the pair of bosses. To them, it probably seems like we hate each other. In reality, I think I am the perfect foil to all of Nolan’s faults. He’s amazing if you set him in a direction and tell him to do something. He’ll keep grinding and doing it

as well as he can, but he's terrible when it comes to changing course or being creative. That's where my genius comes in. It's also why he bites his tongue and lets me rush out of the meeting.

Sure, I have no clue if going after her will help the company in any way, but I'm curious. I want to know what had her so worked up.

I step out into the conference hall. I look around for the girl. It's a big room, but I don't see her. Then I notice the exit door to my right. She looked like she was in the sort of mood that leads to storming out the nearest exit, so I push it open and head out.

It's dry and hot outside with a beautiful Arizona view of dead shit and a single, crooked cactus. Just lovely. I shield my eyes against the sun and then notice her sitting against the building beside the door.

She sees me and lets out a strangled yell. "Oh, God!"

"What?" I ask, looking behind me. I'm halfway expecting to see some kind of cougar or something with how terrified she looks. On second thought, I'm not sure Arizona has cougars.

When I look back, her hands are raised defensively. "Please don't hurt me. I'm sorry I interrupted your meeting."

"Easy," I say, stifling a laugh. "Believe it or not, I didn't come out here to attack you. I just wanted to see if you were okay."

She gives me a half smile, and *damn* if that little smile doesn't feel like the best thing I've made happen in a few weeks. She's also younger than I realized. She has to be in her early or mid twenties, and I must be getting old if that makes me wonder if she's too young for me at thirty-seven.

She slowly lowers her hands, apparently deciding I'm not about to hit her. "It isn't exactly my day," she says, regaining her composure moment by moment. "You coming out here to punch me in the throat would be totally on brand right now."

"Not in my plans. I promise. I'm just checking on you."

"I see," she says. "So you're some kind of chivalrous gentleman, then? A guy who chases after women in distress?"

I grin. "Gentlemen are overrated, and I've never claimed to be one. Besides, the last time I held a door for a woman she told me to stop imposing my masculinity on her. Safer to be a dick, I think."

That half smile of hers returns, and I can see how I could get addicted to fishing for those. I've always liked entertaining people and making them laugh. "I'm sorry," she says, putting on a show of mock sincerity. "I'll never call you a gentleman again. And for the record, I don't mind when people hold the door for me."

I lean against the wall, admiring her. She has nearly black hair with striking greenish brown eyes that stand out against her pale skin. She's a woman of contrasting extremes. Dark hair, light skin. Wide forehead, narrow chin. I sense some kind of contrast in her personality, too, but I haven't spoken to her long enough to put my finger on it, yet. Actually, I think I'd like to put more than just a finger on her.

"So," I say carefully. "If my instincts are on, I'd say something bad *just* happened with the way you barged in there. Anything I can help with?"

She narrows her eyes. "He's not a gentleman, but he follows a girl in distress to ask how he can help? Either you're a liar, or there's something else going on here."

“Hmm,” I tap my chin, pretending to think deeply. “I suppose I could have devious intentions. You just have to ask yourself if you’re curious enough to find out what I want, or if you’re going to tell me to leave you alone. Of course, you’d spend the rest of your life wondering what I wanted, but that’s your call.”

She eyes me, amusement battling with trepidation in her expression. “You make yourself sound dangerous.”

“Oh, absolutely. Very dangerous. Especially if you’re allergic to peanuts, because I eat peanutbutter every day. I might even be deadly, in that case.” I give her my best scorching glare.

There’s the smile again. Hypnotizing. That’s a good word for this girl.

“I don’t know if I’m desperate enough to get tied up with a dangerous man like yourself, Mr. Wolfe.”

Now it’s my turn to be surprised. “You know who I am?”

She nods. “Um, yeah. You’re Jameson Wolfe, right? I recognized you and Nolan Gray back there. You two run Gray Wolfe publishing. I know because I’ve been memorizing everything about the publishers at the convention in case it would help me get noticed. Well, also because my boyfriend, Vaughn, never stopped complaining about you two.”

A chill runs through me. “Vaughn Vanderlesh?”

She nods again. “Actually, I need to stop calling him my boyfriend. We’re breaking up. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

“Well, shit,” I say softly. On the one hand, *score*. Maybe I’m an asshole for internally celebrating her impending breakup, but I also know Vaughn Vanderlesh. That guy is scum. She’s better off. On the other hand, her connection to a business rival makes me feel like I’ve just been handed a puzzle piece. I

don't know where it fits, yet, but I'm sure there's a place. There's a way to take advantage of this. "How the hell did Vaughn land a girl like you?"

"Maybe I was the only one dumb enough to fall for his obvious tricks?"

The look on her face tells me that's a deeper question than I realized. So much passes over her expression in a few silent moments. Eventually, she just lets out a soft breath and gives me a scrap of the truth. "I always believed him," she says simply.

I nod. There's more to it. Plenty more, but I don't press her for it. Something happened back there and they are breaking up now. As some asshole who just barged in on her private moment, maybe that's all I deserve to know for now.

I sit down beside her, giving her a respectful foot or two of personal space. "Want me to get him back for you?" I ask.

She looks up sharply. "What?"

I grin, then shrug. "Just say the word. I've always hated that little prick. He's the son of our biggest rival. I don't really need an excuse to make his life a little shittier, but I'll take one if you're offering."

She shakes her head, looking sad. "No, it's okay. My big brother, Troy, is already hard enough to keep under control as it is. When he finds out about this, it's going to take all my effort to keep him from beating Vaughn up."

"Oh, I wasn't talking about violence. I'm more of a backstabber than a front-puncher."

That earns me a laugh from her. "Can't say I've heard that one before. But, no, thank you for offering to backstab my soon-to-

be ex. I don't really want payback. I just want to move on with my life."

I nod, waiting. Despite what people probably think about me, I can be thoughtful and considerate. Right now, she's not looking for a solution. Her world just got turned upside down. She needs a little bit of an open ear, and a little bit of a distraction. I'll be happy to offer both.

She lets out a breath. "I've always thought seeing the best in people was a good quality. I was *proud* of that. And now I'm just sitting here wondering if I've been stupid all along for being so trusting. Look where it got me, right?"

"Nah," I say. "I don't think it makes you stupid. Trust is kind of the whole point, isn't it? You put your neck on the chopping block, hand someone an axe, and wait to see if they deserve your trust. Kind of insane, if you ask me, but the whole world is playing the game."

"Let me guess, relationships are a game you don't play? How is that working for you?"

"Hey, now. We were talking about your problems, not mine. I prefer to maintain a healthy level of mystery."

She smirks. "A man of mystery, huh?"

"That's right. Women love a little mystery."

"Right now, I'm kind of thinking mysteries are overrated. Give me a man who is open and honest over one who hides things. Actually, don't give me a man at all. I think life would be better if I went on a dating hiatus. I can just focus on getting my book published. No distractions."

I raise an eyebrow. "Your book?" I ask. Suddenly that little puzzle piece she handed me is taking shape. I think I might know exactly how it fits.

“Um, yeah. I still need to do a final round of edits. But I did finish a book. That’s part of what I came here to do. I wanted to pitch it to publishers.”

“You were dating the son of Landmark Publishing’s CEO. Did you try asking him?”

“No,” she says. “I didn’t want to take advantage of him. I was going to pitch it to some agents from Landmark and not tell them I was dating Vaughn. Now I’m guessing there’s no point. Once I end things, he would probably shut the book down even if I did get someone to agree to pitch it up the chain.”

“Pitch it to me,” I say.

She laughs, then her face goes serious. “Wait, really? Right now?”

“Sure. Do you have a sample I can read on your phone or something?”

She digs in her bag and produces a massive stack of printed papers. I laugh. “Printed manuscript? Nice.”

“It’s not finished with edits,” she warns. She’s clutching it to her chest like she isn’t sure if she really wants to hand it to me.

“Got it. Needs polish.”

“Are you going to just like... read it right now?”

“I’ll read the first chapter or two, just like I would if you submitted it to me formally.”

She takes a deep breath, then hands it to me.

I look at the page. “What Have You Done: A Psychological Thriller by Charli McBride”.

“I like the title,” I say.

She's smiling now, and she also looks like she could possibly throw up. She sits quietly, almost like she can't bear to look at me as I read the book.

I crack open the manuscript and start reading. She has tight writing. She's avoiding most of the tell-tale signs of a writer who isn't quite ready for the big show. It doesn't seem like she's trying to convince anybody that she's Hemingway or that she has the biggest vocabulary on Earth. She's choosing simple language when it works best and focusing on building tension, character, and suspense.

By the end of the second chapter, I can already see the threads she's stringing together to lead my interest through the book. I have questions about the main cast of characters, guesses about where it might go, and a motivation to find out.

If she didn't look like she was about to explode with nerves beside me, I would probably keep reading just for the enjoyment of the story. It's good. And *shit*, I can't believe an opportunity this perfect has fallen into my lap.

"Alright," I say, standing and handing her the manuscript.

"Alright?" she asks. She's clutching the manuscript to her chest so tight it's crumpling at the edges.

"Yeah, come with me. I extend my hand toward her.

She looks at it like a live grenade.

I give an impatient jerk of my head and pull the door open to the convention center. "Come on. It's now or never."

She doesn't take my hand, but she does follow after me when I open the door and gesture for her to step in.

I stop her just inside. "Act like you know what I'm talking about when we go in there. Understand?"

“No?”

“Great. Come on.” I pause. I notice Vaughn Vanderlesh and his father standing and talking with a young girl not too far away. Charli’s situation clicks into place. She said they were already over, even though Vaughn doesn’t know it yet. It didn’t make a ton of sense until I saw the girl he’s with. His arm is around her waist possessively.

He’s cheating, and Charli caught them.

I didn’t think it was possible, but my hatred for Vaughn ramps up to an entirely new level. Vaughn spots me and looks away from the conversation to glare. Then he notices who I’m walking with.

I almost laugh at the way his whole face contorts in confusion, rage, and hurt.

His mouth falls open and he turns his whole body, hands falling to his sides. He looks like one step away from sinking to his knees like the guy at the end of Planet of the Apes. I can almost imagine him raising clenched fists to the sky and shouting a dramatic, “Nooooo!”

He feels that much anger just to see me walking next to Charli? It makes me think how hard I could press his buttons if we leaned into this closeness—of how much it would destroy him if it was more than just walking side by side. What if he knew she was coming back to my bedroom every night?

I hook my arm around Charli, tugging her closer to me by the small of her waist like she’s mine. I wink at Vaughn, then pull the door open to the conference room, leaving him to wonder what the hell he just saw.

That’s how your own medicine tastes, prick.

Everyone looks up at us when we enter. I let go of Charli to open the door, so she's simply cowering a little behind me. I have to nudge her to get her to come into the room and stand where everyone can see her. "Ladies and gentleman, I present the answer to our problem. This is Charli McBride and she wrote the next big hit we'll be publishing."

Nolan pulls his head back, looking Charli up and down like a spoiled vegetable. "Her?" he asks.

"Me?" Charli squeaks.

"Have I ever been wrong about an author?" I ask.

Nobody but Nolan seems to want to make eye contact with me. Everyone else is staring at the table.

Nolan spreads his hands. "No," he says slowly and almost reluctantly.

"Exactly. I'll be handling this one personally. I'll handpick the editors, cover artists, marketing people, and so on. She's mine. Got it?"

Nolan twirls his pen, watching me. "You were alone with her for what? Twenty minutes? You're ready to pour that many resources into her and some idea she pitched you?"

He's enough of a professional to keep his true question silent. *You're not really doing all this because you want to fuck her, are you?*

I decide I'm going to leave his silent question silently ignored. I plaster a confident smile on my face and grip Charli's shoulder, giving it a little shake. "I'd love to come back and listen to you all moan about how bad things are, but I'm going to go out and get started fixing our problem. Charli and I are taking a field trip. I'll see you back at the office next week." I salute Nolan and our employees, then turn to face Charli.

I grip her shoulders and meet her eyes. She looks a little pale and shaky on her feet. “You alright?” I ask.

“Hm?” She says, as if I’ve just woken her from a good nap. “Alright? I’m great. Good. I’ve been seriously considering a good puke, though.”

I grab the trashcan and lift it for her. She eyes it, wobbles a little, then shakes her head. “Did you say a field trip?” she asks.

“Exactly. Come on. I’ve got to explain the plan to you.”

I take Charli’s hand in mine, mostly just because I’m enjoying the terrified and confused look on her face. I also take her hand because I want Vaughn to see when we walk back out into the conference room.

I open the door and find Vaughn and Griffon Vanderlesh staring our direction with very pissed looks on their faces. Vaughn must’ve told Daddy what he saw and they were waiting to see us when we came out. He’s probably hoping his eyes were playing tricks and it wasn’t really his girlfriend at my side. Griffon actually looks a little more pissed than Vaughn, but the man has resting dick face, so it’s hard to determine how mad he actually is.

I give them both my best charming smile and a wink while I pull Charli with me toward the exit again. I don’t look back to see if they’re following after us. Probably not. Vaughn and his father are, like me, more of the backstabbing and less of the front punching types. Cowards.

And no, I’m not a coward. I just prefer the satisfaction of subtle sabotage more than simple brutality. I’m a man of refinement in my tastes. They are just cowards.

“What’s going on?” Charli asks.

“I’m going to get your book published. That’s what.”

“Just like that?” she asks.

“Just like that. It’s your lucky day, I guess.”

“But—”

“Look, I’m going to tell you everything you want to know. But not here.” I tap my ear knowingly and raise my eyebrows. I have an idea, and having great ideas always puts me in an amazing mood. The more it’s forming in my head, the more energy I feel buzzing inside me. I could whistle and kick my heels right now. It’s all too fucking perfect.

“What?” she asks, looking around in confusion. “You’re worried somebody is going to listen? Out here?”

To her point, we’re in a parking lot full of cars and no people. I’m not even sure why I felt compelled to get her away from the convention in the first place. Maybe I was just sensing how much it was hurting her to be there while Vaughn was prancing around with that woman. Or maybe I’m just an asshole and I want her at my hotel.

“Can’t be too careful these days,” I say. “Come on. You can ride with me.”

I remember her comment about not minding door holding, so I open the passenger door of my rental for her and gesture. “After you.”

She rolls her eyes, but smiles as she slides in.

I move around behind the wheel. I drum my fingers excitedly on the dash and turn on some music. Charli is looking at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“You really aren’t what I expected,” she says.

“Good. Meeting expectations is boring as shit. And if your expectations were built by Vaughn Vanderlesh, then I better hope I don’t meet them.”

“Okay. Good point. But, can you tell me what’s going on yet? I feel like there’s more to this than you liking my story.”

I turn the key and start driving.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re kind of weird?” she asks.

“Words can hurt, Charli.”

When I glance her way, she’s actually grinning up at me.

And just like that, my cold, calloused, doesn’t-give-a-shit-about-relationships ass puckers a little. It puckers because I like something about this girl. Sure, I knew I liked the way she looked and I liked imagining what it would feel like to get my hands on her. But I’m quickly realizing I like more than just that. There’s a fire in her that isn’t quite like anything I’ve ever seen.

“Let me tell you the difference between *Landmark* and *Gray Wolfe*,” I say.

“Okay.” She folds her arms and tucks one leg beneath her. “Enlighten me.”

“The guys at *Landmark* are spineless, cheating, scumbags.”

“An hour ago, I would’ve argued with you on that. Right now, I’m leaning toward agreeing.”

“And,” I continue, “at *Gray Wolfe*, we’re also not afraid to cheat a little. But we like to do our cheating and screwing right out in the open. We’re honest about it. Make sense?”

“No, not really.”

“That’s fine. You just keep sitting there looking pretty until we get to my place. I need a coffee to pull together the finer points of my plan. Once I’m caffeinated, I’ll explain the plan to you.”

“You think I’m pretty?”

I glance her way, gaze going from her full lips, ample chest, and following the shape of her legs. “I’ve been thinking quite a few things about you. Pretty was the only one I thought was appropriate enough to say out loud..”

“Is this really you without caffeine?”

CHARLI

If mental whiplash is a thing, I have it. In the span of a single hour, I've gone from brain-meltingly nervous to devastated to confused. And right now, I'm amused, too. This man is absolutely nothing like what I would've expected, either from what Vaughn told me or from how he looks.

He's a towering hunk of muscle and suit. He has eyes so light brown it almost looks like they're lit from within and there's a perpetual shadow of humor at the corners of his shapely lips. He's a few days past clean shaven, and the more I look at him, the more sure I am that he's absolutely gorgeous.

And he's weird. I wasn't kidding. There's a kind of cannonball like quality to him. Like he's rolling, bursting, exploding, and pushing through anything and everything in his way without wondering if he should stop to ask permission first. It's almost like confidence, but it's too forceful to even feel like it fits the description.

I can already feel myself caught up in his momentum and I have no idea what he's planning. I can see how this man would make a good leader, though. He must inspire people to follow him before they even realize they're following. Half his employees probably woke up one morning and realized they'd

already signed a contract and would run through a wall for him.

He stops in front of my hotel. “How’d you know where I’m staying?”

“Huh? “This is where I’m staying. I was going to take you up to my room.”

“Wait, I didn’t agree to go to your room.”

“Oh, no,” he laughs. “I’m not trying to fuck you. I mean, you’ll know if I’m trying to fuck you. Trust me.” He narrows his eyes. “And I’m not trying to do that yet. So relax. I just want to explain the plan to you. We can do it in the lobby if that makes you more comfortable. Scheme, not fuck. Get your mind out of the gutter.” He gives my arm a little punch and then gets out of the rental, stretching.

I blow out a breath. *I’m not trying to do that yet.* Did he really just say that? I get out, sliding my bag over my shoulder. It’s heavy with all the books I acquired today.

He notices me grimace at the weight and reaches over, taking it from me. “Let me,” he says.

I let him take the bag and follow him into the lobby. He pours himself a coffee from the free coffee dispenser and dumps way too much sugar into it. He grins when he notices me watching. “Can’t stand the way this shit tastes plain.”

I bite my lip and pour myself a cup. I also pour in way too much sugar, because that’s how I like it. I’ve never understood the maniacs of the world who can drink coffee black and without sugar. I think maybe they’re just punishing themselves. Maybe their morning coffee is supposed to be like a reminder that one day, we’ll all die and just maybe we’ll be

drifting in a black, bitter nothingness. No sugar. No cream. Just blackness. *Or maybe they prefer the taste.* Who knows?

“You alright?” Jameson is watching me stir my coffee. I realize I’ve really been stirring the crap out of it. When I’m caught up in his wild energy, I can almost forget what happened back there between Vaughn and that girl. As soon as I have a quiet moment, though, it comes flooding back into my brain.

“I think I’m still processing everything that happened,” I say.

“Vent it out, then. I have time.”

He sits on a stained loveseat and pats the spot beside him in the lobby. I sit, blowing on my coffee. I also don’t like it hot the way most people do, so I have to wait several minutes for it to cool down enough. Maybe I’m the weird one.

“I’m supposed to call my sister as soon as I know something,” I say. “She has been texting me all day and I haven’t had it in me to respond yet. And then there are my friends back home. And my parents. They don’t all know why I came here. I guess I’m just thinking about having to tell everybody how Vaughn and I are over. And I’m thinking about admitting how sad the way it happened was.”

“Sad? Why?” he sips his coffee, eyes intent on me.

He’s watching me so closely it almost makes me laugh. He’s hanging on my words, I realize. This man is full of surprises. I wouldn’t have pegged him as a good listener, but he clearly is.

“Well,” I say. “He always tried to push me to be this other version of myself. I guess when I was being optimistic, I told myself it was a better version of me. You know? Like he wanted me to be better for myself. But when I saw the girl he was with, I realized he was just trying to make me *her*. He was

comparing us the whole time, I think. I don't understand why he let me keep thinking we were a couple, though. Why bother hiding her from me if he has his perfect girl already?"

"Ego," Jameson says simply. He doesn't even ask me to explain more details. I realize I didn't tell him I caught Vaughn obviously cheating, but Jameson just lets me say what I need to say and doesn't stop me to satisfy his curiosity. Or maybe he already figured it out when he saw Vaughn and his new girlfriend together back there.

I consider his response, then nod my head. I sip the coffee, but it's still too hot. "Probably. He's always so worried about what people think. Anyway, I haven't really had a moment to let it sink in. I saw them together a few seconds before I interrupted your meeting and then you followed me and now we're here. It's just... It's a lot."

He nods, drinks more coffee, and then surprises me by reaching over to where my hand is on my knee and gives it a squeeze. It's a sweet gesture. Given his assurances that I'm not his type and he isn't trying to "fuck" me, it feels very sweet.

"Thank you," I say.

"Can I make a confession?"

"I have a feeling you're going to make one either way."

"What I said in the rental about my intentions? I made it sound like I don't want to sleep with you yet. That's true, but not the full picture. I'd absolutely love to have you in my bed, but out of respect for your recently expired relationship, I'm not making any moves. Just thought I should clarify that."

I roll my eyes. I'm not sure if I find him charming or off-putting, yet, but he's at least distracting. It's hard to mope and dwell on what just happened back at the convention when this

human ball of energy is in front of me. I'm still not over the fact that Vaughn's arch rival is talking to me, either.

I've been trying to remember the story between them. I know Vaughn's dad started *Landmark Press* and handed Vaughn his position as a literary agent on a silver platter. Vaughn mentioned some kind of beef between his dad and Gray Wolfe, but I can't remember what it was.

"Thank you for informing me," I say flatly. "But I'm not interested in *that*. I'm technically still in a relationship, remember?"

Jameson looks completely unfazed by my rejection. "Speaking of that... Do you want to know my plan?"

"I do."

"We're going to get revenge on Vaughn. Revenge for you. Revenge for me. Does that sound palatable, Miss McBride?" There's a glint in Jameson's eye that tells me he may seem fun and wild, but there's a streak of evil in him, too.

"Revenge?" I ask. "I don't know. I'm not the revenging type."

He sticks his hand out for me to shake. "Please. Let me show you the way."

I think about his offer. I don't know what he has in mind, but I have a feeling his offer to publish my book is somehow tied up with his plans for revenge. I can vaguely understand how that makes sense. It would piss Vaughn off to know that his rival published my book, especially if it did well. But I've always said I didn't want to take advantage of Vaughn's position to get my book published when the time came. I'm not sure it's any different if I take Jameson's deal.

"I don't know," I say.

He waits, hand still extended. “Take my hand, Charli. I want revenge, but I also believe in your book. Unless you went on a drug fueled bender after those first two chapters, I think you really have something with it.”

I stare at his hand, then I take a deep breath. I’ll probably regret this, but I stick my hand out and let his big palm swallow mine up.

We shake, and the way he smiles at me makes me wonder if I’ve just made a deal with a devil.

JAMESON

Charli surprised me by making excuses and slipping off to her room after she finished her coffee. I made sure she knew my room number before she left. I also saw “232” written in black sharpie on her room keycard’s paper sleeve.

I can honestly say I’m not used to women making excuses to get away from me, so the move caught me off guard.

Maybe it’s for the best. Truth be told, I haven’t come up with a firm plan yet. Coffee was supposed to make the plan manifest for me, and that failed. I’m too busy thinking about how I want to take my new author protege somewhere private and ravage her. Respectfully, of course.

Maybe that’s why she went to her room? Is she coming on to me? Am I supposed to follow after her?

No, dumbass. She went to her room because she just caught her boyfriend cheating and probably wants some space. I can do space. I’ll hold down the fort here and keep brainstorming the plan.

The rough outline so far is pretty simple. I dangle the fact that I’m working very up close and personal with the ex-girlfriend of Griffon Vanderlesh’s son in Landmark’s face. I publish her book. Me, Nolan, and the rest of Grey Wolfe publishing enjoy

some much needed wild profit and success. It will be pure, petty revenge at its finest.

But something is missing. Maybe it's all just a little too straight forward. A little too simple and blunt. After all, it is more of a front punch and not much of a backstab.

I take my third cup of coffee up to my room and sit thoughtfully by the window. I even strike a thinker's pose—one fist beneath my chin and the other wielding the coffee. It's not exactly helping. I'm mostly just thinking about Charli and wondering if she's actually going to blow me off. Surely she wouldn't, though. Even if she isn't into me, she has to at least want the opportunity to work with Grey Wolfe.

As if on cue, there's a knock at my door.

There she is.

I frown when I pull open the door and see my business partner, Nolan.

He walks past me, having to squeeze to get by in the narrow hallway. He frowns, taking in the room with one sweep of his eyes. "What's with this room and the hotel?"

I scoot past him and sit on the bed. "Remember when you told me to book a room for this convention a few months ago?"

"I do. You said you already did it."

"That was a lie. I waited until the last minute and this was the only hotel with availability. It's working out just great, though. That author from earlier happens to be staying just down the hall." I wiggle my eyebrows.

He shakes his head. "If you weren't strangely good at what you do..."

"But I am. So you're stuck with me."

He sighs and pulls out a chair. He sits in it awkwardly because he can barely fit between the desk, the wall, and the chair. His knees are pressing into my bed. “I didn’t even know they made hotel rooms this small.”

“It’s cozy,” I say. I stretch out on the bed, which means my legs are hanging off the end. “You should try not buying executive suites once in a while. It would be good for your humility.”

He scoffs. “*My* humility? You’re one to talk.”

“I need not be unjudgeable to judge you. Pretty sure that’s in the Bible.”

Nolan squints. “And I’m pretty sure you’ve never read the Bible.”

“I read the Cliffs Notes once.” I shoot a finger gun at him. *Got ‘em.*

He shakes his head, then leans forward with his elbows on his knees. “Real talk, Jameson. What’s going on with the girl? Do you really have a plan? Does she actually have a book? Because I had to clean up your mess with everyone at the meeting after your stunt.”

“Just trust me and stop worrying. I’m going to handle everything and it’ll all end up amazing, just like it always does when I get involved.”

“I’m not worried. I’m aware that employees work better and more efficiently for bosses they respect and trust. I swear, half my fucking day is just following you around trying to undo the damage you do on that score.”

“This girl is special,” I say. “I think I like her.”

He's scowling. "This is the part where you tell me what was so amazing about the book. Because if I find out you were just following your cock, I swear to God..."

"Initially, my cock was in the back seat catching up on sleep while my kind heart took the wheel. Sure, my cock might have woken up and fought for the wheel a few times once things got going, but my motivations in going after her were temporarily pure. I was just trying to be a decent human being."

Nolan folds his arms. "Your definition of decent doesn't line up with any dictionary I've read."

"That's exactly your problem. You really aren't supposed to read dictionaries. They are reference material, and super outdated. Have you heard of the internet?"

As usual, Nolan looks torn between annoyance and amusement with me. That has kind of always been our dynamic since we were kids. We met in middle school because he had a thing for my sister, Cleo. I kicked his ass when I found out. Then he kicked my ass the next day because I supposedly "jumped him from a bush and only won because I surprised him." He called me a "sucker-punch throwing pussy," if I remember correctly. But I saw it for what it was. Give me a little time to plan, and I'll win any fight. Even if I have to emerge from a bush to do it.

Whatever the case, we bonded after that. I made sure he never dated Cleo, of course, but we bonded. We found ourselves to be a pretty effective duo. I try not to take life too seriously, which helps push Nolan outside of his boring ass box. He treats life like it's a test he doesn't want to fail, which occasionally is good for balancing out my chaos, I guess.

"Initially, your cock passed," Nolan says slowly, as if he's just now realizing what I said. "Does that mean your cock has had

a change of heart?”

“First of all, it makes me uncomfortable when you talk about my cock. *Don't stop, baby*. Second, yes. But the important part is I had nothing but decency in mind when I decided to help her.”

“That was...” He checks his phone. “You met her less than three hours ago. I'm really not sure I want to give you any credit for what you ‘initially’ felt. You changed your tune pretty quick.”

“I felt bad for her, man. Have you ever seen someone try to pull a door when they had to push for that long and in such a high stress moment? It was fucking tragic. I had to throw her a bone.”

If glares could melt butter and I was made of butter, then I'd be ready to spread on toast by now, because Nolan is furious. “Does she even have a book? Tell me she at least has a book, because I just vouched for you and swore up and down that you wouldn't rush off from the convention we've spent months planning for a girl without a book.”

“I held the manuscript in my hands and read the first two chapters. All joking aside, it was good. We can definitely make it sell.”

He runs his hands down his face. “We can't keep pulling stunts like this, Jameson. Landmark is riding our asses. Sure, it's bullshit, but they're chipping away at our reputation every month. We had three of our authors jump ship and sign with them just last month. *Three*. If that keeps up, we'll be operating in the red within a year or two.”

“I know. Believe it or not, I listen in our meetings and I read the reports you send me. I've been trying to come up with a

plan to help. Maybe this is it. We just need a big splash signing.” I consider mentioning the fact that she’s Vaughn’s ex, but I decide to hold onto that one for myself a little longer.

“And this is really just about the book? You’re not at all motivated by wanting to sleep with her?”

I raise my eyebrows and roll my lips together. “I mean, it’s mostly about the book.”

He stares at me.

“I have a pulse. She’s beautiful. I’d be insane if I wasn’t at least wondering what it would be like to have my hands on her.”

“I’m asking you to remember that Gray Wolfe and our partnership comes first. Before any woman. Can you at least do that for me?”

“I always do,” I say, feeling a little irritated. He has never shoved his nose this far in my personal business like this, but I suppose I am tying it to business in a way I never have before. I’ll be walking a thinner line than I realized.

“And you really just met her? This wasn’t some elaborate stunt you set up?”

“What? No. Us staying at the same hotel was a complete coincidence. She’s poor and this was the cheapest hotel available. I’m a procrastinator and this is also the shittiest hotel available, which meant it still had rooms. It’s not that crazy.”

“Fine. Just go read the rest of her book and make sure we get her under contract if it’s good. Cut her loose if it’s not. And do not fuck her.”

I pull my head back. “What? Why can’t I fuck her.”

“For starters? She probably doesn’t want to sleep with you. Beyond that, do I really need to explain it?”

“I’m perfectly capable of fucking an author and then handing them over to our very competent staff for all the business stuff.”

“But you said she was ‘yours’. You said you were handling this one personally. Didn’t exactly sound like you wanted to hand her over.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I hold up my palms defensively. “Anyway, she didn’t sound interested yet. I think I need a little more time.”

“You already asked?” He sounds somewhere between horrified and impressed.

I grin. “I didn’t ask, exactly. I just made my intentions clear. You think I’m going to let those dark, dirty thoughts bounce around my head in secret? She deserves to know what I want to do to her.”

Nolan gets up and trips because the chair has no room to slide backwards. He fumbles with the chair between the wall and desk for a moment, then gives it an angry shove. He looks like he’s about to lose his temper. It wouldn’t exactly be a rarity. Nolan has quite the short fuse.

I’m grinning, though.

He looks at me and points a warning finger. “Don’t. This room is fucking stupid. Handle this mess.”

“If you ask me nicely, I’ll do my best.”

“Please don’t fuck this up,” Nolan says coldly over his shoulder. He pulls the door open and slams it behind him.

I watch after him. The unfortunate thing is Nolan should know me better than that. Before our conversation, my interest in the

girl was simpler. I thought she was attractive and wondered how much I'd enjoy being inside her. *Simple*. I also figured there was some devious way to use our mutual hatred of the Vanderlesh family to exact some petty revenge. *Simple*. But now Nolan has added a not so simple wrinkle. He's told me to keep my hands off her.

I don't do well when I'm told I can't have something. It makes me want it more.

I pop up from the bed, fix my hair in the mirror, and head toward her room.

CHARLI

I didn't run away from Jameson Wolfe. I just... made a strategic retreat. There is absolutely a difference.

I packed my things as soon as I left him in the lobby. I headed to the airport several hours before my flight, and I got back home in the early hours of the morning. I drove to my apartment and failed to sleep even though I was dead tired. I did all of this in what felt like a daze. I put one foot in front of the other and kept moving until Arizona and everything that happened there was hundreds of miles away.

But once I was out of his presence, I could think straight. I realized I don't want whatever he's offering. I don't want to tie my book to some sort of deal with a devil. I don't want to be linked to a man with so much *momentum*. There's no way for me to be in control of my future or my career with him involved. He is too much Or maybe he's just too soon.

Now it's a new day. I'm back home in New York City and Dani is pulling stuff out of bags in my kitchen. From the looks of it, she has brought the entire "Boy Trouble" supply list. Alcohol, chocolate, cheese, and pickles. The pickles are more because I love pickles and she probably wants to make sure I'm stocked up.

Dani is two years older than me and people always tell us we don't look related. She has red hair with blue eyes and I've got nearly black hair with green eyes. Honestly, my eyes are probably closer to brown, but if I catch them in my rearview mirror at just the right moment with the sun in them, I can hardly see the brown. Or maybe it's just that I can hardly see *anything* with the sun in my eyes.

Dani's wearing scrubs. She works at a vet hospital four days a week and dog sits between shifts. She's kind of an animal geek, and she doesn't like when I call her that. But it's what she is. She's the girl who would've creamed herself if she ever got a pony as a birthday present when we were kids. Now she just organizes her life to involve animals in any way she can.

I'm twenty-four and she's twenty-six, and we both have big dreams. She wants to start a fully inclusive doggy style resort for pet boarding. All I want is for millions of people to read my book. We're both very grounded, very realistic people.

She holds up a bottle of tequila in one hand and a big thing of margarita mix in the other. "How drunk are we aiming for, here?"

"Mildly," I say. I lay back on the couch, folding my hands over my stomach. I haven't even changed out of what I wore to the convention. If I wasn't worried getting truly drunk would lead me straight to internet stalking Jameson, finding his contact info, and calling him, I'd motion for her to skip the cutesy drink and just bring me the whole bottle.

She brings me an icy, alcoholic concoction. It is kind of gross, but Dani has always made terrible mixed drinks. I've never had the heart to tell her.

She sits across from me, expression serious. "I still can't believe you just texted Vaughn that you wanted to break up.

With the shit he pulled, he deserved an explosive break up. Something public and embarrassing.”

Once I landed back in New York, I sent Vaughn the quickest, least emotional breakup text in history. I think my exact words were: “I know you cheated. I’m breaking up. Please don’t reach out to me or try to change my mind. Yes, I’m sure.”

He read the text almost immediately, and I don’t know if he tried to change my mind because I blocked his number.

“I’m not the explosive break up type,” I say. “I really just want to forget it all happened. Dragging things out and making it messy isn’t going to help me forget.”

“Well, normal, sweet, non-combative *you* could take a vacation just long enough to give that asshat what he deserves. Just a thought.”

“I’m not worried about getting even. I’m going to focus on myself, now. He wants to replace me with some girl he thinks is better? That’s fine. I’ll just take all the energy I spent thinking about him and put it into finishing the edits on this book. I’ll get discovered, and I’ll move on with my life. Why should I care what he thinks about any of that?”

“Because you’re human. Vaughn cheated on you, Charli. He took my sweet, adorably devoted sister’s trust and wiped his ass with it.”

“Okay, and?” I sound a little annoyed. I know I do, but I can’t quite put my finger on how I’m feeling. Maybe it’s just the not so subtle feeling that I’m talking out of my butt. Maybe part of me really does wish I had the balls to take revenge on him. Maybe I feel like sulking away quietly is another layer of defeat and embarrassment to this whole episode.

“And?” Dani asks, disbelief evident in her tone. “People like that need to know they suck, or they’ll go on being that kind of person to someone else. What about the next Charli McBride? Are you thinking of her?”

I sink a little deeper into the couch and take another sip. “No,” I admit. “But I don’t know if Vaughn is really going to change his ways just because I let him know how much he hurt me.”

“Well, yeah. I wasn’t talking about just calmly explaining how he hurt your feelings. I was talking about revenge. Nuclear warfare. Ruin his life, salt the Earth in your wake, and leave radioactive fallout so his descendants grow arms out of their foreheads.”

I stare. Dani is the sweetest person on Earth when it comes to animals. People, though? Not so much.

“You know I’m not going to do all that,” I say.

“I know,” she sighs. “So you really don’t want to call this Jameson guy? Even if you don’t want to use him to publish your book—which, for the record, is crazy—you could at least get over Vaughn by getting under Mr. Wolfe.”

“He’s probably already moved on. He didn’t strike me as the sort of man who dwells on the past for very long. He was... *something*.”

Dani leans closer. “What’s that glint in your eye?”

“There’s no glint.”

“There was a glint. A horny, hopeful glint.”

“There was not.”

“I saw a glint. And that means you should call him.”

“It’s not happening.”

“Alright, alright. Fine. But he’s still on your menu. Maybe you’re not ordering a slice today. Maybe not even tomorrow. *You’re going to keep thinking about it, though.*”

“Tell yourself whatever you need to make yourself happy. I honestly just want to move on with my life. I’m also really not looking forward to the ‘I told you so’ tour when I tell everybody it’s over and he was cheating. Convincing Roxy and Troy not to go kill him with their bare hands is going to be exhausting enough on its own.”

“To be fair, everybody did tell you so.”

I give my sister the stink eye. “Can we count that as your ‘I told you so’ so I can check one off the list?”

“Sure. Because I *so* told you so.” Her teasing smile fades and she gives me a sad look. “And I’m really sorry I was right. Believe it or not, I wanted to be wrong about you guys. I hate seeing bad things happen to my helpless little sister.”

“I’m not helpless,” I say, but I’m smiling and accepting the hug she offers.

Our conversation drifts to other topics and we eventually decide to put on an old rom-com to re-watch. When things are chaotic, sometimes the best feeling is just sinking into an old, familiar groove. Tonight, we go with “There’s Something About Mary.”

We’re on the part where Ben Stiller is fighting for his life against the small dog. He’s doing wrestling moves on it and has just ducked, sending it flying out an open window. I’m smiling distractedly while scrolling on my phone.

That’s when I get a notification on one of Vaughn’s email addresses I still need to take off my phone. When I met Vaughn, I was working two dead-end jobs and writing in the

little free time I had. He ended up offering me a paid position as his personal assistant. I always felt kind of dirty about it, but told myself it was something I'd only do as long as I needed to finish my book.

The job was mostly answering his emails and keeping his calendar, which worked out to being way less work than my previous jobs for pretty similar pay.

I guess that's just one more layer of how much my world got upended yesterday, because I hadn't even thought about how I'll need to find a new job.

But Vaughn apparently hasn't changed his passwords yet, because the email I'm staring at is addressed to his work email. It's a familiar email. Every time Landmark signs a new author, they send out these "Welcome so and so to the family" style emails. This one is congratulating Vaughn for the newest author he signed. *Aubrey Dizzie*.

There's her picture right at the top of the email. She's smiling, looking absolutely fantastic in a red dress. She's squinting toward the camera, as if she's contemplating something intellectual and fantastic for her next book. Her perfect chin is resting on the tops of her knuckles. *Ugh*. Good for her, I guess.

I'm about to close the email when I see the title of her story. *What Have You Done: A Psychological Thriller* by Aubrey Dizzie.

It's one of those moments that doesn't hit all at once. My shock, dismay, outrage, and absolute fury come in stages.

I'm standing up now and holding the phone a little too far from my face, expression scrunching so much I probably look like a goblin. My heart hasn't even started racing yet, but I can

feel it getting ready to. I'm pretty sure I've stopped breathing. It feels like the whole *world* has stopped breathing.

Dani is looking my way now, head tilted. "What? Did you start getting those erectile dysfunction spam texts again?" She laughs, shaping her fingers into an "L" and pointing them at me. "Loser!" But her smile fades when she sees I'm still staring open-jawed at my phone.

What Have You Done. That's the title of Aubrey's book. It's also the title of *my* book.

I scroll down in the email to see if there's any more information about the book. I find a brief synopsis and my eyes fly over the words.

"Holy shit," I whisper.

"What?" Dani has paused the movie.

"I think she's trying to steal my book. The girl Vaughn is cheating with. I just got this email from Landmark celebrating her signing. They're describing the book. It *is* my book. But there's no way. Vaughn never even read it. I never posted it anywhere or anything."

"Um, no way. Show me." She sticks her hand out. I notice it's shaking. She's scared for me. *I'm scared for me.*

I hand her the phone and start pacing while I gnaw on my fingers. "They can't do that."

"No, they can't," Dani agrees. She's reading now, eyes darting from side to side. "This is so fucked up. We need to call someone."

"Who?"

She snaps her fingers a few times. "Your Wolfe guy. Call him. He'll know what to do."

I run my tongue across my teeth. I don't want to be in that man's debt, but she's probably right. Who better to help me with something like this than Jameson?

She pulls out her phone and her fingers fly over the screen for a few moments. She holds up the phone so I can see. "Look, you can contact his secretary here."

I chew my nails a little longer, thinking it over. I'm hardly able to string a thought together, though. My brain is buzzing with so many emotions. I can't believe he'd do this. *Why* would he do this? Why would some random woman agree to pretend to be the author of my story? How does he even think he'll get away with something so brazen and obvious?

And maybe the biggest question I have is *how*? How the hell would he steal my story?

I take the phone from Dani and dial the number for Jameson's secretary. *Here goes nothing.*

JAMESON

I'm actually stunned. I'm sitting in my office on a Tuesday and Charli McBride is on the phone. She just finished telling me what Vaughn did, and *fuck*. I knew the Vanderlesh's were scum, but this is low, even for them.

"Alright," I say. "So you need my help?"

"Do I?" Charli sounds on the verge of hysterics. She's been speaking a mile a minute and her voice is shaky. I feel for her. I remember the look of panic on her face at the convention when she couldn't even figure out how to work a door. Something like this probably has her on the cusp of spontaneous combustion.

"You do. You need my help so badly I'm not even going to make you apologize for running off on me."

There's a pause. "I'm sorry," she says. "I got nervous about letting you have so much control over me and my book."

"I didn't want control. I wanted a partnership."

"Can we talk about it another time?" she asks.

"Yeah, sure. You dated Vaughn and he lives in Manhattan. I'm assuming you do, too?"

"I do," she says slowly.

I give her the address of my building, which is also in Manhattan. “How far are you from here?”

“Like half an hour, maybe, if I call a ride.”

“Tell me your address. I’ll call one for you. We can talk about this in my office.”

It’s a little more than half an hour before my secretary buzzes her in.

I’m at my desk, so I stand and come to greet her. I wrap her in a tight hug because the look on her face calls for tight hugs. “You came to the right person,” I say, resting my chin on top of her head. She squeezes her arms around me a little tighter and nods into my chest.

Once she lets go, I motion for her to sit on the couch beside my desk. I pull up a rolling chair and sit in it backwards, facing her. “So Vaughn is trying to steal your book. Before we figure out what we’re going to do, let’s clear up how he did it. Is there any way he could’ve had access to the manuscript?”

Normally, I’d have to exercise a little self control to stay focused on the problem at hand in a moment like this. My attraction to Charli goes beyond what I would consider normal, easily controlled limits. I was honestly crushed when I found out she ran off on me over the weekend, and the thought of never seeing her again was something I was still wrestling with. But her situation has me temporarily worried only about her. I can celebrate her coming back to me some other time. I can also worry about what this new wrinkle means for me and my grand plans to publish her book later.

Charli swallows hard and stares at the ground, eyebrows creasing with thought. She deflates a few moments later. “The app,” she says.

“The app?”

She’s nodding, as if the pieces are clicking together in her head. “He made this stupid app for me. I thought it was sweet, but it’s like a word processor that lets you change the background color and text color.”

I squint. “Don’t they all do that?”

“Not exactly?” She doesn’t sound very sure.

“He *made* an app?”

“Well, he paid someone to do it, I think. He made it out to be this big grand gesture. At the time, he said he was going to keep adding new features with my input. But he never really did that part. I wrote the whole book in the app, though.”

I run my thumb and forefinger along my jaw, thinking. “Did you sign anything when you opened the app?”

“Maybe? I didn’t really pay attention. I was just happy that he did something for me. We’d been getting pretty distant for a while at the time, and...” She trails off as she seems to be piecing together what happened.

“Is it on your phone?” I ask.

She nods. The color has drained from her face.

I reach my hand out. “Open it up and show me the agreement you have to click to use the app.”

She does, and it’s worse than I thought. I scroll through the agreement several times. It’s long as shit and full of legal mumbo jumbo, but buried in seemingly innocent piles of nothing are several key points. Using the app gave Vaughn full access and ownership of her work. “It’s not great news,” I say slowly after a few silent minutes of reading. I show her the

parts in question. “I’ll have our legal team look at this, though. Maybe there’s some hope.”

Charli brings her hands to her face and covers it, sagging forward. “I can’t believe I was this stupid.”

“Hey,” I say. I move beside her and put my arm around her. And, no, I’m not comforting her because I want to fuck her. I feel bad for the girl. I want to help her. Once she’s back on her feet, *then* I can think about getting her off them again. *In my bed*. “We’re going to figure this out, alright? You’re not stupid. You trusted a guy because you cared about him. Happens all the time.”

“How often does it lead to someone spending a year on a book and basically handing it over to their exes’ new girlfriend?”

“Admittedly, probably not that often,” I say.

She groans and leans into my arm, letting her head fall on my shoulder. “How can I even fix this?”

“The agreement may not be legally binding, for starters. It’s pretty clearly deceptive by intent. He’s burying the real meat in a bunch of fluff with hopes that you would never read it.”

“I don’t have the money to deal with a legal battle.”

“Lucky for you, I do. We have an entire, overpaid legal team.” I pull out my phone, attach a copy of the agreement, write up a few lines explaining the situation, and tell them to move it to the top of the priority stack. “There,” I say. “Ten legal dweebs are now on the case. Feel any better?”

“A little,” she says. “Except I don’t know if you’re the kind of man I want to be in debt to.”

“Hey, when you’re drowning, a hand is a hand, right?” I know I should tell her that she doesn’t owe me anything, but I’ve

never claimed to be a saint. The truth is she has two things I want. Maybe a few more than that, actually.

“Yeah,” she says quietly.

I don't speak for a while. Honestly, that's a bit of a rarity for me. But I'm enjoying the feeling of having my arm around her and the way she feels snuggled up against me. I thought Charli McBride had slipped out of my life back in Arizona. I also can't remember the last time a woman stood me up like that. First, Nolan tries to tell me I can't have her. Then *she* shows me I can't have her?

I've been in a downright foul mood ever since. But I feel better now. She's back, and I'm presented with an opportunity to use her unfortunate circumstances to help me deal with a problem of my own. It's quid pro quo. Or maybe it's not. I don't know latin for shit.

I have my secretary, Jenna, bring a blanket for Charli. I send our intern to pick up fresh coffees with lots of sugar and an extra cup of ice, because I'm a good listener and remember how she liked her coffee at the hotel.

I get up from the couch while we wait, partly because the moment passes and she seems to suddenly feel weird about sitting so close to me. That's fine, though. I'm a patient man, and I really do want to help her out of this jam. It just so happens that all my motivations in this case can play perfectly well together. No conflicts of interest. No issues.

Saving Charli also means screwing Vaughn and Landmark. If I get her book back, Landmark has egg on its face for trying to steal it and being exposed. If I'm working closely with Charli while we try to get the book back, Vaughn will be furious and jealous. Sabotaging Vaughn, enjoying Charli, and simultaneously saving my company and my partnership with

Nolan all in one fell swoop? It almost seems too good to be true. All I need to do is make sure she doesn't skitter off on me again.

The intern brings our coffees and leaves. I hand Charli a coffee and she looks up, thanking me. She sits curled in on herself, sipping the coffee with a distant look in her eyes. It's hard not to go to her again and try to put my arm around her. I really don't seem to have any tolerance at all for seeing this woman upset.

"What are you thinking?" I ask.

She looks up over the rim of her coffee cup. Suddenly the distant look is completely gone.

Her innocent, big eyes don't look like sad pools anymore. They look like ice. Like she's imagining violence, ruin, and retribution.

I don't know when she went from kicked puppy to John Freaking Wick, but she went there and I'm all for it. "I'm thinking about how you said you could help me get revenge on Vaughn."

CHARLI

The coffee cup is warm against my hands, but it's nothing compared to the heat I feel racing through my insides.

Revenge.

That's what I want. It's not enough to be the bigger person, move on, and live my own life. Not anymore. Because Vaughn Vanderprick took it too far. He tried to steal my goddamn novel. I was willing to walk away and suffer my lumps quietly. I was even willing to forgive the girl he was with, because she might not have known he wasn't single.

I was really going to do it, even if it hurt.

But now? Now he took it too far, and I'm going to make him regret it.

The old Charli would just want to move on. Forgive and forget, or something along those lines. I don't want to be the old Charli anymore, though. The old Charli gets deceived by manipulative men. The old Charli can't even figure out her boyfriend is cheating on her right under her nose because she's too damn ready to trust and give second chances.

Maybe I need to force myself to be some kind of new Charli. A new me. Maybe I can be a version of myself who doesn't blindly trust and doesn't let people take advantage. I can go

after what I want, and I can make the people who treat me wrong pay for it and regret it.

“Do you have a plan?” I ask. I’m surprised by how cold my voice sounds.

Jameson nods. “We let legal look into whether we can do anything to get your story back, first of all. In the meantime, I think Vaughn needs to realize he made a huge mistake by letting you go.”

“How do we make him realize that? Slash his tires?”

Jameson’s lips twitch. “Um, no. That wasn’t the idea that popped into my head. Although it’s a good one. We can definitely keep that on the back burner. I was going to say you come as my date to the mixer in two weeks. Gray Wolfe and Landmark get together after the convention every year with a Halloween party. It’s all good fun.”

“I know the party. Vaughn wouldn’t let me come last year. He said it would be embarrassing. He thought people would judge me if they knew I was working as his personal assistant. He said it was demeaning, even though he was the one who practically begged me to quit and take the job.”

Jameson presses his lips together. “He was with a woman last year. I remember it. She dressed in a ridiculously slutty bunny costume.”

I expect to feel a fresh wave of sadness. I know he was cheating now, but I didn’t expect to learn it had been going on for that long. I don’t even try to ask what she looked like so I can figure out if it was the same woman. I don’t care. I just want to make him pay.

“Wait,” I say. “How would that work? You want me to pretend to be your date? You don’t think people will realize we’re just

acting like we're together?"

"Who said anything about acting? I'm asking you to be my date."

I blush. His statement momentarily blasts away all the ice forming around my heart with a rush of heat and embarrassment. "I appreciate the offer, but..." I shake my head. "I don't feel ready to trust anyone again. Not yet."

"Then we'll pretend. Convincingly. You just agree to let me play a little grab ass and maybe kiss you on the neck or cheek at strategic moments, and we'll be golden. No trust required. No strings."

I feel my blush deepen. "I wouldn't want to give you the wrong idea."

"What wrong idea is there to give? You just told me how you feel. I'm a big boy. I can handle that. This whole revenge scheme benefits me, too, remember? You'll be doing me a favor by letting me piss off the Vanderlesh fuckers."

"What makes you want to piss them off so badly?"

Jameson is sitting backwards in an office chair with his arms folded over the headrest. He lets his chin settle on his forearms and, for a moment, he looks more serious than I've ever seen him look. Maybe there are certain things in life that even Jameson Wolfe doesn't take as a joke.

He suddenly looks like his usual, playful self again. Except I think maybe he's putting it on this time instead of wearing his carelessness naturally. "If I told you that, I'd lose all my mystery. I've got to keep a trick or two up my sleeve, remember?"

I nod, but only because I'm sensing I've touched on a very sensitive subject. The idea of making Jameson uncomfortable

is enough to stop me from pushing harder. “Okay,” I say.

He smiles, clearly relieved. “So? Will you be my date to the mixer?”

“I will.”

He straightens and claps his big hands together and gives them a rub. “Great. Do you have something to wear? A good costume? The sluttier the better, I’d say.”

“Um, well, I’ve never really been a slutty Halloween costume kind of girl.”

“Even better. Think how much it’ll make Vaughn jealous to see you flaunting what he let get away while you’re on my arm. It’ll drive him mad.”

He’s right. Vaughn gave me such a hard time when he saw my costume last year. I was a giant worm with a book in my hand. *Bookworm*. I thought it was hilarious. He rolled his eyes and told me I was twenty-four, and if I was going to dress up, I should choose something more age appropriate. I hadn’t wanted to start a fight, so I just took my lumps and agreed with him, promising I’d think of something different next year.

Well, I guess this is my way of keeping a promise. “What should I do, then?”

“I mean, there are like three options, right? Some sort of bunny, a maid, or a cat. Pick your poison.”

“You forgot an angel.”

“Oh, shit. Yeah, you should be an angel. I’m picturing you in nothing but wings, panties, and a bra.”

My blush returns. I can talk big about the new me, but new me and old me are absolutely terrible flirts. It doesn’t help that I’m not even sure I want to be flirting right now. Relationships

and trust go hand in hand. Admitting I'm feeling anything more than pure physical attraction to Jameson right now would be a very large step in the wrong direction. It would be taking me right back to that place of vulnerability. "Are you?" I ask. It's a sad attempt at flirtation, but the best my fried brain can do.

He meets my eyes, and then his gaze drifts down my body. "Yes. I can already imagine how every fucking guy at the mixer would be staring and wishing it was you on their arms. Vaughn will be a wreck. It'll be incredible."

"I want to make him jealous, but I don't know if I can picture myself actually going that far. Maybe something in between."

"We'll work on it. How about you just relax and I'll have somebody make you a custom costume."

"Trust you to decide how slutty I'll be?"

"What?" He spreads his arms, his smile not entirely trustworthy. "This isn't relationship flavored trust, so it's not what you're trying to avoid. This is you trusting my powers of backstabbing business rivals, which are enormously impressive. I'll pick just the right level of sluttiness. I promise."

I consider his words. I was honestly talking about all forms of trust, but I can't help already wanting to make an exception here. The idea of letting Jameson take over part of the planning here has its appeal. I don't really trust my own judgment right now, which isn't exactly what I meant when I said no more trust. All I know is there's something gaping and open inside me. I can't say if revenge or payback will make it close, but I can't say it won't, either. "Where would you get a costume?"

“I have a friend of a friend of a friend who does costumes for movies. He’s the best of the best. He told me he’d do a Halloween costume for me some time if I ever needed. I haven’t had reason to call in the favor until now. I’ll tell him to go for sensibly slutty. How about that?”

My smile is crooked. It feels good to smile, and I wonder if that’s one of Jameson’s super powers. He has a way of making me feel wrapped up in his world when we’re together—like no matter how insane everything is on the outside, it’s under control when I’m with him. That’s a dangerous quality, considering my circumstances. I could see myself getting hooked on that feeling. “Sensibly slutty?” I ask. “Isn’t that like calling something “reasonably destructive?”

He shrugs. “You’re going to have to step outside your comfort zone for this to work, Charli. Think about what this asshole did. He’s currently trying to steal your book. He pretended to make an app for you in a half-assed scheme to trick you into signing away your rights. He cheated on you and he’s trying to pawn *your* book off as his new girlfriend’s. He needs to pay, whether by fists or your exposed cleavage and ass cheeks.”

“What a rousing speech, general.”

“Well? Can I call my guy and have him make you a costume?”

“Okay. But I’m going to pick out a backup costume. So if you push it too far, I’ll have a fallback.”

“Boring. Fine. It’s a date, though. Two weeks. You and me at the mixer.”

He stands up and before I have time to react, he plants a kiss on my cheek. He steps back, pats my head like I’m a well behaved puppy, and gestures to the door. “You should get back

home, unless you want to be seduced. I have self control, but it has limits.”

“Okay?” I say slowly, unable to help but laugh a little.

I get up and leave him, feeling confused, a little relieved, a lot scared, and very much worried that I’m already making excuses for why this fragment of a real relationship is okay. And I’m worried that the way he makes me forget all my problems when we’re together is the kind of feeling I could chase right off a cliff.

I need to remember to be strong, even if he makes it hard.

CHARLI

Jameson likes to text me. I made the mistake of giving him my phone number, and now I'm finding myself distracted all day by his texts.

I'm supposed to be having family dinner, a regular Sunday tradition, and I keep finding myself looking at the phone.

Meemaw, otherwise known as Grandma Mimi, is looking at me knowingly. My brother Troy, my sisters Dani and Maddie, and my parents are all in the kitchen right now, gossiping about some drama at Maddie's school. It sounds like Troy is grumbling about how he wants to go have a word with one of the dads. Typical. He always wants to solve our problems by punching someone.

Their conversation in the kitchen leaves me isolated, alone, and in danger with Meemaw. We all try to avoid one-on-one time with her, because that's when she's her most powerful self.

Meemaw clears her throat. Her eyebrows are raised, drawing deep lines in her forehead. She keeps her white hair styled in tight curls that form a grandmotherly halo around her small head. She's not quite five feet and she's shrinking by the day, as she likes to say.

“Well?” Meemaw asks.

“What?” I can’t make eye contact. I’ve never confirmed as much, but I think Meemaw may be capable of reading minds when she makes eye contact. It’s safer not to risk it.

“Who is he?”

“Who is who?”

“The man who has you hornier than a teenager at Bible Camp.”

I try not to smile, but fail. “That’s terrible, Meemaw.”

“What? Do you even know what happens at those camps?” She looks up and crosses her chest, but I notice she does the gesture in the wrong order. “No offense, Lord.”

“You told me you two weren’t talking at the moment.”

“Oh, I’ve changed my ways. I’m eighty-two, Charli. Me and the Big Guy are going to meet pretty soon. I’ve got to start making things right.” She gives me a big wink, as if to say she’s just playing nice with God, and as if he wouldn’t be able to see her wink.

“You probably shouldn’t talk bad about his Bible Camps, then,” I say, smirking.

“Right, right. Well, what has you hornier than a youth counselor in skinny jeans leading a room full of preteen girls, then?”

I press my palms to my face. “I’m not horny. And you know I don’t feel comfortable talking about that kind of stuff with you.”

“That’s what makes it so fun.”

For an old woman, she moves quickly. While my face is in my hands, she scoots closer, putting her in the chair right beside me at the dinner table. For some reason, she's also drinking my water. "Who is he?" She elbows me.

"No one. Just this guy who texts too much."

As if he can sense he's being talked about, Jameson sends another message. My phone buzzes. Meemaw gets her paws on it before I can—*somehow*.

Her eyes bulge as she reads the message preview. "I can't see the whole thing. Unlock it for me."

"No!" I say, laughing and snatching the phone from her. I glance at the preview of his message and see he couldn't have started any worse.

Jameson: What cup size are you? I'm thinking we could—

I sigh. "It's not as bad as that sounds." He has been asking questions about my clothing size for the Halloween costume.

"Doesn't sound bad at all," Meemaw says. "You know I used to be a G cup. Ever heard of the motor boat? Boys would—"

"Meemaw," I say carefully. "If I have to picture boys motorboating your G cups, I'm going to vomit."

"Not *these*" she says, like I'm being stupid. "My younger self. Sorry, Lord, but I need to educate the youth so they're ready to go be fertile and multiply," she says to the ceiling. "Anyway, you know, your grandfather loved to—"

"Nope. No." I plug my ears.

She's smiling her typical, shit-eating Meemaw grin. I know she's not actually as depraved as she lets on. She was a troll before the internet learned what trolling was.

Dani and Maddie come to the table, saving me from more one on one with Meemaw. Maddie is sixteen and going through an “I’m a deep and emotionally scarred suburban girl with a tortured past and the music I listen to is my entire identity” phase. She has headphones in both ears and she’s wearing an oversized bright green outfit that clashes with her dyed blue hair.

She curls her lips up just a touch when our eyes meet. Somewhere inside all that moody pretending is my little sister who still likes to try to eat all the cookie dough before any of it makes it to the oven. Just a year ago, she always wore pink and she was still doing ballet.

Dani looks between me and Meemaw. “Are you harassing Charli, Meemaw? I told you to go easy on her. She just had a tough breakup.”

“Oh, I know. She paid the price for not listening to my elderly wisdom. I told her that boy was no good. Small penis, too, probably.”

Maddie chokes on her water. Apparently, she’s wearing the earbuds right now as an “aesthetic” choice and not actually listening to anything. I’m only eight years older than her, but sometimes I feel like we’re from different planets.

“No comment,” I say.

“No comment needed,” Meemaw says. “When a woman gets a really good fucking down, it’s impossible to hide it. And baby, you haven’t been hiding anything since you were with that boy.”

My parents choose this moment to walk into the dining room. My mom is looking at Meemaw, her mother, with a tired

expression. She has dealt with this for fifty years and some change, and knows there's no taming the woman.

My mom only pauses for a moment, then she sets down the plate of ham. My parents have a thing for ham. They say it's a shame it should only be served on Christmas and Easter, because it's amazing. I think they go through about forty hams per year, and it would be more if my dad had his way. He's an absolute ham fiend.

Dad pats my shoulder and leans in. "You okay, kid?"

"Yes, Dad," I say. He's already asked me several times tonight if I'm okay. I know he's just trying to be supportive, but I also don't know what he expects me to say. The truth is I don't want to go into details about just how messy this breakup became with anyone but Dani. I definitely don't want to tell Troy, because he'll track Vaughn down and kick his ass if he finds out.

My dad sits at the head of the table and straightens his collar. He's wearing his usual sweater over a button-down shirt. His hair is gelled nerdily in a side part and he has his thick glasses on. On weekends, Dad is the dungeon master for a Dungeons and Dragons group. They collect in the basement for hours while mom has fun testing out new recipes and snacks on the group.

Mom was a gymnast and a dancer in her youth, and absolutely the last kind of woman I would have pictured landing with a nerd like dad. But she was just getting out of a bad breakup with some jock asshole and Dad was her tutor. He won her over and they never looked back.

Mom sits down beside dad. She has her brown hair curled and her makeup done to perfection, as usual. "Well?" she says. "Where's Troy?"

“Coming,” a deep voice says. My brother lumbers into the room. He’s well over six feet and probably close to two hundred and fifty pounds. He has big, muscular shoulders and a power belly. He keeps his beard well groomed, but it’s puffy and frames his rounded face. Troy is the kind of man people steer clear of, and probably for good reason. He’s about as scary as he looks if you’re not part of his family.

He’s already chewing on something. My sisters are usually in the kitchen to help prep dinner. Troy’s usually in there to snack on food before it reaches the table. Sure enough, I notice there are already a few slices missing from the ham and a big scoop out of the mashed potatoes.

Meemaw clears her throat and waits until everybody stops what they’re doing to look up at her. “So,” she says loudly. “Charli has moved on quickly. She’s got some new stud asking how big her boobies are. We’re less than a week from the breakup and dick is back on the menu! Let’s celebrate!”

There’s a clatter of silverware and a screech as my dad’s knife slides on the plate. *So much for keeping things quiet.*

JAMESON

I usually enjoy work, but this whole week has been torture. Every day is another disaster and every night is a long stay in the office, putting out fires. Usually, I'm the one starting fires and Nolan is the one putting them out.

It's well past dinner time. I worked late again and I should probably go straight home to sleep. My body is practically screaming for it. But listening to your body is a great way to become weak, or so I've been told. Actually, maybe I just read that on a fortune cookie. But I know wisdom when I hear it, so I pull out my phone instead of heading back to my place for some rest.

It's Monday night and I haven't seen Charli for almost a full week. We have one more week until the Halloween mixer, and I've decided we need to practice pretending before then. I've also been thinking about her in every spare moment. Despite what she probably thinks, I've been trying very hard to respect her boundaries. She did really get fucked over by Vaughn, and I can imagine amazing rebound sex with more orgasms than she can count is low on her priority list.

So I've controlled myself. I've limited myself to only text based communication for seven days. Seven fucking days of self control. I haven't even asked for a nude photo. If they

gave out medals for this kind of thing, I'd be dripping in cheap plastic by now.

It's time to escalate things a bit. Sure, I want to respect her boundaries and all that, but I also want to let her know my gates are wide open. Maybe she already knows, but it won't hurt to remind her. And *fuck*, I just want to see her. I want a chance to put my hands on her, even if it's just a light press of my fingertips on the small of her back. I'm craving her and a little phone call is the least I can do for myself.

I stop on a bench and pull up her number while busy New Yorkers pass by on the street. Distractedly, I wonder what has people so busy and in such a rush so late. Maybe they're on the way to dates, rushing back home to capture what's left of their night, or maybe they're just so used to rushing from place to place they've forgotten to take it slow when they can.

I know as well as they do how easy it is to get wrapped up in things to do and places to be. I know how easy it is to focus on your goals so hard that you look up one day and realize years have passed by. Maybe that's why Charli has my attention so firmly. I've had my eyes down and focused on putting one foot in front of the other for a long time now. She's the first thing that has made me look up and smell the roses around me.

I'm enjoying it, too.

I call Charli. My leg bounces while it rings because I'm not sure what I'll do if she doesn't pick up. I'd probably dig up her address off the internet and show up at her door.

Relief floods me when she answers.

"What is it?" she asks.

I would've preferred it if she purred my name in a sultry voice and told me she was just thinking about me. I'll take what I

can get, though. “Are you free tonight?”

“What?”

“You and me. A date. What do you think?”

There’s a long pause, and I’m starting to believe she might just end the call on me. “Jameson, I told you I’m not ready for anything like that yet. I’m still trying to heal.”

“That’s why this will be a practice run. In a week, we’re going to do our big performance at the mixer. Do you really want to risk screwing that up in front of Vaughn and his new woman? Think about it. We hang out tonight, get the kinks out, practice pretending we like each other, and *boom*.”

“You have to pretend to like me?” she asks. I love that playful streak of hers. I imagine if I’d caught her at a different point of her life, it would be far more prominent, too. Maybe that’s part of what draws me to her. It feels like the real Charli McBride is currently buried under a metric ton of bad luck and sadness. I want to start lifting that shit off her and chucking it out of the way. I want to uncover the girl beneath it all. And hey, it’s not as if I’m selfishly trying to rescue her. Maybe I just want to set her free once I’ve done my good deeds. Probably not, but maybe.

I suppose that’s bullshit. Because uncovering Charli is also going to help me get back at the Vanderlesh assholes. I can’t pretend I’m in this for the right reasons.

“Um, no,” I say. “I don’t have to pretend to like you. I’ll have to pretend I don’t want to drag you straight back to my place all night. *You* will be the one learning to pretend to like me.”

I think I can hear a smile in her voice. “That’s a big task. I’ve never been a good actress.”

“Good. If you ever decide to get beneath me, I won’t have to worry you’re faking.”

“Is that a common problem for you, Mr. Wolfe? Women faking it in bed?”

I smile and run my thumb across my lip. *Damn*. I really do like this girl. “I guess you’ll have to give me a shot. You can tell me what you think after we’ve gone a few rounds.”

“You’re talking like it’s a foregone conclusion.”

My cock seems to think so. It’s already rock hard from the brief flirtation. “Call me an optimist.”

“My sister complains that I’m too optimistic, too.”

My smile widens. “You have a sister? See? This is why we need to spend some more time together, Charli. I barely know anything about you.”

“Ah, I see. So this is a fact finding mission? You’re not trying to seduce me. You’re just trying to gather intel?”

“I never said I wouldn’t try to seduce you.”

She pauses, and I picture her biting her lip. Maybe her cheeks are even going red in that sexily innocent way of hers. “What would we do for this hypothetical date?”

“It would be the lady’s choice. I’m a rogue, not an asshole.”

“Do rogues eat ice cream?”

“I’ll eat anything you put in front of my mouth. *Anything*,” I add, because a very vivid image pops into my brain at that moment. An image I wish I could make reality.

“Okay, then,” she says, sounding breathless. I imagine her hand between her thighs and a warm tingle running to her belly. I imagine she wants it just as fucking badly as I do, and I

like where my imagination goes. “Ice cream. Should I meet you there?”

“I wouldn’t let you roam the city all by yourself at this time of night. I can be outside your building in ten minutes. You just make yourself look nice, put on your favorite underwear, and meet me out front when you’re ready. I’ll wait.”

“I’m not changing my underwear for you.”

“Already happy with our choice? That’s even better. I can’t wait to see what you went with.”

“I’m hanging up,” she says, but I can hear the slightest touch of humor in her tone.

“And I’m on my way, sweet—” She ends the call before I could finish.

There’s a pep in my step as I make my way to her place. She lives in Manhattan, conveniently placing her near where I work. It’s just another reason we’re meant to be, I decide. And if we’re not meant to be soulmates, we’re at least meant to share a bed together a few dozen times. That much is certain.

Her building is in Murray Hill. It’s a huge, unremarkable thing in the middle of a busy area. I post up on the street in front of the building with my hands in my pockets. The door is locked behind an iron gate, so I’m stuck outside. It’s alright, though. It’s late October and the weather is pretty perfect this time of year. Chilly without being too chilly.

I wait, smelling the roses again because that’s apparently my thing these days. I watch the same things I see every day, but I actually notice them. People give the finger to honking cars as they move through crosswalks, people arguing over a cab, and a guy is playfully singing to a woman somewhere high up

above on an apartment balcony and she's laughing at how bad it is.

It feels like an eternity before the gate creaks and I turn to see Charli.

She is wearing a beige faux leather jacket, jeans, and a shirt that shows her midriff.

"Fuck," I say aloud, eyes roaming her body.

Her cheeks go red in that way I'm already coming to love. "What?" Charli asks. She folds an arm across her stomach, so I step closer and take her by the elbow, gently pulling the arm away.

"You look incredible is what. Why are you hiding?"

She lowers her eyes, so I press the side of my index finger to her chin and lift her face so she's meeting my gaze. "You. Look. Incredible. *Shit*. What did Vaughn pull to make a woman like you so self-conscious?"

She stares at the ground, like it's her fault.

Her smile is almost tragic, and it makes me want to invent a time machine so I can go into her past and punch every asshole responsible for making this woman think she has any reason to be self-conscious. "Thank you," she says like she doesn't believe me.

I throw my arm around her shoulder and start walking in no particular direction.

"Any word from your legal people yet?" she asks.

"Nothing conclusive."

She just nods, as if she was expecting as much.

We make it a few blocks before I notice a place on the corner called Van Leeuwen ice cream. We both pick a root beer float and take them on a short walk to the nearby park, claiming a bench in front of an empty playground. There are a few joggers circling the track around the park, but no other activity.

“What’s on your mind?” I ask.

Charli looks down at her float, then takes a big sip. “I guess I’m just worried about what we’re doing.”

“How so?”

She spends a while thinking before she answers. I like that about her. She doesn’t always have to fill every moment. She doesn’t start talking until she knows what she wants to say. “You aren’t like any man I’ve dated. Not that we’re dating, but you know what I mean.”

“Which is a good thing...” I prompt.

She grins, but she’s still staring at her treat. “It’s a scary thing. I don’t know what the rules are with a guy like you. The expectations. I mean, is it all just a conquest for you? Get me in bed and then you move on to the next woman? Because I’ve never even had casual sex, so if you’re hoping for that kind of thing with me, it’s just not who I am or what I’m ready for.”

“What? No. It’s not that at all.”

“Or are you just using me because I can help you get back at Vaughn and his dad?”

Maybe. “No. I’ve been open with you from the start, Charli. We both want to get those pricks back. It’s a bonus that I like you. It’s a bonus that your book is great and I want to publish it. It’s a bonus that you like me.”

“I never said I like you.”

I give her plastic cup a little knock with mine. “You don’t have to.”

There’s that blush again. “I don’t want to like anyone right now.”

“What are you worried about?”

“I don’t want to get hurt again.”

“Then I can promise you this much. I would never hurt you.”

Her eyes finally meet mine. She studies me for several long seconds, and I’m struck by an overwhelming urge to kiss her. It’s clearly not the moment, so I take a sip of my drink instead. The sound of my shake slurping up the straw makes her break eye contact and laugh.

Her smile is a thing of beauty. In that moment, I think I could throw everything I’ve worked for away and spend the rest of my life chasing those fucking smiles.

“I believe you,” she says.

“Here’s what I’m thinking,” I say. “Me and you take some time tonight to get to know each other. I know I promised I’d try to seduce you and all that, but my plans have changed. Not because I don’t *want* that, but because I only want it when you’re ready. And I can tell you’re not ready. So you can put your guard down.” I hold my palms up. “I’m going to stop trying to sleep with you. At least for tonight.”

“How chivalrous of you.”

“I can be chivalrous if I try. Hell, you could say I’ve been a knight in shining armor for you. You couldn’t figure out how to open a door and I rode in to your rescue.”

“You were the one who told me it was push, not pull?”

I puff up my chest. “That’s right. It was me.”

“My hero,” she laughs. She puts her hand on my arm, then pulls it back a little too quickly.

“So you said you have a sister?” I ask.

“I do. Dani is my older sister. People are always surprised we’re related because we look nothing alike. She’s red haired and blue eyed. I’m... *this*,” she says, gesturing to herself.

I do a chef’s kiss, grinning. “*This* is great, by the way.”

She chews the corner of her lip. “And my little sister, Maddie, is sixteen. She’s going through some kind of phase, but she’s really sweet once you get past how she’s trying to come off. My last sibling is Troy. He’s thirty-four and he used to compete in these strongman competitions. He doesn’t do that anymore, but he could probably still rip a door off its hinges. And he’s kind of super protective.”

“Yet Vaughn is still breathing?”

“I haven’t exactly told him the truth about the breakup. I don’t want Troy to wind up in jail. Right now, my family knows it’s over, but they think we just drifted apart.”

“Anyone know the truth?”

“Just you and Dani. I usually tell my friends everything, but they’re both out of town right now for a girl’s trip. I canceled on them at the last minute so I could go to the convention in Arizona. I’m really not looking forward to telling them, though. I’ve been fibbing when they text for updates because I know everybody is just going to say they told me so.”

“From where I’m sitting, I’d say your abundant ability to trust a scumbag shows how kind you are. And that’s a good thing.”

“I’m sure that has nothing to do with you being exactly the kind of guy women probably never trust?”

“Nothing at all,” I say, smirking.

“What about you?” she asks. “Only child? Or are there other Wolfes running around out there.” She makes a show of shuddering, as if the thought is terrifying.

“Two. Cleo and Kate are my sisters. Cleo is an esthetician. It’s like a makeup artist, sort of.”

“I know what it is,” Charli says with a half smile.

“Oh. Yeah, well that’s Cleo. She’s twenty-six. Or maybe she’s twenty-seven, now, actually. And then Kate is finishing her legal degree. She works as an intern when she’s not in class. She’s always busy as hell. She’s twenty-two.”

“Are you and your sisters close?”

“Somewhat. I was already finishing high school when they were starting elementary. I think I was more like a shitty dad to them than a brother.”

“Oh, come on. I bet you weren’t shitty.”

I shrug. “Shitty in the sense that I probably let them get away with way more than I should’ve. We were always racing shopping carts and crashing into bushes. Sometimes we’d all pile on my skateboard and go downhill, dodging traffic until we dented a car and had to run for it.”

Charli is smiling. “You sound like a good not-dad to me. My older brother just taught me not to share anything. If anybody ever did something remotely wrong, he wanted to kill them. So I had to keep everything bottled up. I guess I learned not to rock the boat, you know?”

I nod. “Been there. Except I think I chose a different path. My dad was a piece of shit. Impossible to please. Always riding us. Maybe I could’ve learned to play nice, but I went the other way. I looked for every opportunity to piss him off. I think I figured he’d eventually burn out, you know? Over-exposure to my shittiness would eventually just fry his ability to get mad. But then he split up with my mom when I was in college. Mom kind of withdrew. She blamed herself. I blamed myself. Yada yada.”

Charli’s forehead scrunches. “You shouldn’t blame yourself.”

“Nah, maybe not. But you know how that stuff is. And I really was a shit. It had to be part of why he wanted nothing to do with us.”

Charli surprises me by reaching over and hugging me tight. “I’m sorry,” she says.

I’m struck by an unexpected wave of emotion. I didn’t think I really cared about any of it anymore, but her sympathy makes me see it all in a different light. “It’s no big deal,” I say, even though I don’t particularly feel it at the moment. “That was a long time ago, anyway.”

She just hugs me a little tighter. I put an arm around her and give a squeeze. “But if talking about my sad past is going to get you to keep doing that, I can go on.”

Charli lets go and I can’t help laughing when I see she’s a little teary eyed. “What the hell?” I say, still chuckling. I reach up to wipe her eyes.

She shakes her head. “I get emotional easily, okay? Don’t make fun of me.”

“I’m not. It’s sweet. *Damn*,” I say, folding my arms. “You may be too good for me, Charli McBride.”

“There you go talking like having me is on the table.”

“It doesn’t have to be on a table. I’d have you in the kitchen, in my bed, or...” I gesture with my empty root beer float toward some trees in the park. “In those trees.”

“You said you were going to stop trying to seduce me.”

“Yeah, well, you started getting all sad and I thought I should annoy you a bit to lighten the mood.”

“It’s working.”

We share a smile, and at that moment, I don’t feel like myself. I feel like the kind of guy who doesn’t burn through people and problems, leaving wreckage in my wake without a care in the world. I feel like someone who wants to keep embracing this “stop and smell the roses” thing I’ve been doing all week—like the kind of guy who could learn to settle down if the right girl came along, because now I’ve had a glimpse of what the right girl looks like.

With all those thoughts comes my first real tinge of fear. What if Charli really just wants to pretend? I’m not sure that’ll be good enough for me anymore.

CHARLI

It has been a week since the breakup with Vaughn. A week since I met Jameson and ran away from his offer to publish my book. A week since I was questionably employed by my ex.

I wish I could say I have been editing like a maniac to get my book ready, but I haven't. It's morning now. I'm in a busy coffee shop that smells like fresh baked bread and dark roast, and I'm seeing my best friends for the first time since they left for their girl's trip.

They're going on and on about the trip, mostly because I haven't dropped any of my bombshells on them, yet. I'm doing my best to listen, but the back of my mind is completely consumed by the fact that as they speak, Vaughn and Aubrey are taking steps to put *my* book out into the world with Aubrey's name on it. It makes me sick.

Roxie snaps her fingers to get my attention. "Charli, I love the sound of my own voice, but I also love it when my friends actually pay attention to me." Roxie dresses like she's a rockstar from the 80's. Her brown hair is styled into a wolf cut with bangs and short curls that fall to her shoulders. She wears customized jackets and graphic t's with worn out jeans and boots. She has always been way cooler than me, but she's also more than a bit unhinged. She calls herself an entrepreneur,

but what she does is a whole lot closer to a scam artist or small-time criminal behavior.

“Sorry. *Sorry*,” I say, repeating myself and pinching the bridge of my nose. “Guys, I didn’t want to be rude and spoil your trip with bad news or be a bummer before you could tell me about all the fun you had. But...”

Gemmaline leans forward, pretty face scrunching up in concern. “What happened?” She has her silky black hair in a ponytail and looks perfect, even without makeup, like usual. Her parents died when she was really young, but left her tens of millions in their will, along with a huge stake in their health food business. She spends her money and time traveling or doing all things nature-themed. She’s also incredibly generous—probably *too* generous, and always tries to pay for everything when we’re together.

“Well,” I say, taking a deep breath. It takes me less time than I expected to unload everything that happened on my friends. I start with my crazy plan to surprise Vaughn at the convention and end with my desperate meeting in Jameson’s office and the amazing date that followed.

Roxie is tilting her head when I’ve finished. “Sensibly slutty? What does that even mean?”

“Roxie,” Gemmaline says, swatting at her arm. “That was absolutely not the most important question.” She turns from Roxie and her expression softens for me. “How are you doing? What can we do to help?”

I shrug. “I don’t really know how I’m doing right now. I feel a little lost and a lot confused. I should be editing but it feels kinda pointless. Like, what if I never get the book back?”

“You’ll get it back,” Roxie says. “If you don’t, I’ll make sure little Vaughnie Vanderprick has an accident.”

I roll my eyes, but can’t help smiling. I know she’s just talking. Roxie may have criminal inclinations, but she’s more of a petty theft and scam artist type of criminal. I can’t picture her hurting a fly. Last month, she realized she could use AI to generate endless variations of coloring book pages and temporarily became a best-selling coloring book author on Amazon. Or there was the time she “discovered” the art of selling products directly from big box stores at a slight upcharge. She’d list half the contents of a big box store online. She’d sell twenty dollar headphones for thirty dollars, two dollar mittens for six dollars, and so on. People placed orders, and then she’d go buy the items right off the shelves, package them up, and ship them.

It turns out that was illegal for a number of reasons, and she moved on to her next big idea shortly after. But that was Roxie. If it was strictly legal and moral, I think it just didn’t quite capture her interest or creativity.

“Do you really think this Jameson Wolfe guy can help you?” She has her phone out and her eyebrows shoot up. She turns it to face me and there’s a grid of pictures featuring Jameson from an internet search. He’s with beautiful women in several of them. There’s even one of him where he must have been quite a bit younger. “This is the guy?” she whisper yells.

“Wow,” Roxie says, yanking the phone from her and staring. She pinches her fingers and spreads them out, zooming in on something. “Damn. For once, you have good taste. Usually your boyfriends look like their hobbies include stamp collecting and building model train sets.”

“Excuse me?” I ask.

Roxie waves me away, smiling to herself. “Don’t go flying out of your panties. I’m just fucking with you. *Totally serious, though,*” she says under her breath.

I pretend not to hear her. “Yes, that’s him,” I say to Gemmaline.

“Wow. He’s really hot. But you’re saying this thing between you guys is just like some revenge arrangement? Isn’t that kind of weird?”

“Kind of? No, it’s super weird,” I say. “Especially because the last thing I want right now is another relationship. But then it’s like this sort of amazing guy falls into my lap literally moments after I realize Vaughn is cheating. Part of me doesn’t want to let him go, but the other part of me knows that’s selfish because I’m definitely not ready to trust someone with my heart again.”

“You realize relationships exist on a spectrum, right?” Roxie asks. She spreads her hands wide, then nods to her left hand. “Over here is lovey dovey shit and vows of monogamy. In sickness and health. Over here, though?” She eyes her right hand. “This is where dirty, no-strings or attachments sex goes. If you’re into him, just try out this side of things for a change. Honestly, it would be the perfect thing to get your mind off everything that happened.”

Gemmaline works her lips to the side. “I hate to admit it, but Roxie might be right.”

“I’m going to need you to say that again in a moment, but hold that thought.” Roxie gets up with her nearly empty coffee cup, looks around, then tops it off with water from the soda fountain. She winks at us and walks up to the counter. I overhear her telling the barista that her coffee was watered down and how she wonders if she could have another one. To

her credit, she's at least sweet with the guy while she's scamming a free coffee refill out of him.

I roll my eyes at Gemmaline, who shakes her head.

"I feel like we're enabling her by letting this happen," I say.

"It's better that we let her do the small stuff so we can keep an eye on her. If we judge too hard she'll just keep doing it in secret, and then we'll have no idea if she's going off the rails."

"Good point," I admit.

Roxie comes back less than a minute later with a fresh coffee.

"What did I miss?"

"Do you ever feel bad about it?" I ask.

"Hm, no?" she says, looking genuinely surprised that I'd ask.

"I don't use creamers or sugars or anything. The majority of food costs at coffee places are actually just from buying milk. After that, it's probably the cups and lids, which I conscientiously re-used, thank you very much. The coffee itself is dirt cheap. Refills *should* be free."

As usual, she does a pretty good job of justifying her immoral behavior. Good enough that I decide to drop it, at least.

"Well?" Roxie prods. "Are we allowed to say we told you so about Vaughn yet? I think my exact words were, 'do not date that limp-dicked excuse for a snake.'"

"Yeah," I say. "But you followed that up by telling me he wasn't cute enough for me, which I didn't care about. I thought we had a connection, and his ties to the publishing world kind of felt like some kind of sign."

Gemmaline at least has the grace to look unhappy about being right. "All the signs were there, but none of them were good."

You're a freaking Taurus and he's a Scorpio. I don't know if we needed to know much more than that."

"I'm pretty sure the arrangement of the stars on the day they were born didn't lead us to this moment," Roxie says.

"There's nothing wrong with believing in higher powers," Gemmaline says, but her tone is soft enough that Roxie doesn't feel challenged. Gemmaline has always been good at that. She dissolves fights before they can even start.

"Well, star sign or not, Vaughn was a bag of dicks. Wet dicks. Moldy, wet dicks."

"Ew," I laugh.

"Can this Jameson guy really stop them from publishing the book?" Gemmaline asks.

"I hope. But I have no idea. I honestly can't think too hard about it or it makes me sick to my stomach. Right now, I'm just pretending that isn't even happening. Maybe Jameson's legal team will come back with good news or something."

"So, what are you doing as far as revenge goes?" Roxie asks.

I grin. "I mean, I am going to a Halloween mixer with Jameson in four days. It's a joint event between Landmark and Gray Wolfe."

"That's a start. What are you wearing?" Roxie asks.

"I don't actually know yet. Jameson suggested something really slutty. He said he has a friend of a friend who does costumes for movies. Apparently, they're working on something for me. I think maybe it was just an excuse for him to keep texting me questions about my bra and panty sizes."

I see the way they're looking at me, which makes me wish I hadn't offered up so much detail. "So, like," Gemmaline says.

“You made it sound like this was kind of a mutual opportunity to stick one to Vaughn. The more you talk about Jameson, though, the more it sounds like it’s not just some pretend arrangement.”

“I don’t know what it is,” I admit. “It’s confusing. I think that’s all I know for sure.”

Roxie shakes her head and sips at her coffee. She leans back in the chair, throwing her arm over the empty chair beside her. “Good for you. The best cure for sour dick is fresh dick. I think you’re making a very uncharacteristic, but very wise choice.”

“Did you guys actually, you know?” Gemmaline asks.

“No, definitely not. He wants to. He’s very... *open*. But I also get this impression there’s something he’s not telling me.”

“What else are you going to do about Vaughn?” Roxie asks. “Making Vaughn jealous is a great start, but aren’t you going to annoy him? Make his life a little more irritating? You know, prank his ass.”

“Doesn’t that seem a bit childish?” Gemmaline asks.

I tap my chin in thought. “No,” I say. “Roxie’s right. I’ve been thinking up things I could do.”

Gemmaline raises her eyebrows at me. “You? Since when did our way-too-sweet friend turn into the revenge type?”

“He took it too far,” I say simply. “He pushed me to my limit, I guess.”

“So what are you planning?” Roxie asks.

“I actually already did one of my ideas.”

“What?” Roxie whacks me. Sometimes she gets violent when she’s surprised. *Or excited.* “You already pranked him and you didn’t start out with that? Tell us!”

“I spent like fifty dollars at the post office and used their copier to make a hundred posters with Vaughn’s face on them. I said he’s been stealing dirty underwear from homeless shelters, and to let authorities know if you see him.” I wince a little, watching my friends for a reaction. I was a little tipsy when I went through with the idea, and I wasn’t sure if I was taking it too far.

Roxie bursts out laughing, then claps her hands. Gemmaline just smiles, shaking her head.

“That’s great,” Roxie says. “We need more, though. More punishment. We’ll brainstorm.”

I smile. When I saw Vaughn and Aubrey at the convention center, I wasn’t sure if I’d ever feel like smiling again. When I learned they were trying to steal my novel, I was *sure* I wouldn’t ever be happy again. But it’s good to have my friends back in town and helping me out. Dani and Maddie actually helped me with the posters. Maddie figured out what happened with Vaughn because she didn’t buy my story of us drifting apart. She stalked him on social media and found evidence of him and Aubrey going back to when we were dating and pieced it together on her own.

In addition to her sleuthing skills, my littlest sister is also a Photoshop wizard, and she even did a little magic to make Vaughn’s picture look creepier after she cut him out and plastered his face in front of the homeless shelter. She also added a pair of dirty white panties floating beside his head.

Was it a bit much? Definitely. But it felt like I had my whole tribe on my side. My friends and my sisters were helping me

get through this.

And then there was Jameson. I keep thinking about last night. It wasn't like any date I've ever been on. He cared about me. He listened to me. It wasn't a dick measuring contest where I sat through him listing off a resume of his accomplishments.

On one hand, it was amazing. On the other hand, it made me realize I've either had the world's worst luck with men before him or I'm a total failure at deciding who to date. I don't know which one is more sad.

I grin, because Gemmaline is getting into the revenge plotting, too. She's got a drawing app pulled up on her phone and she's drawing some kind of diagram like a mad genius. She's pointing to various objects and scribbling notes in the corners. At the top, she's written "Charli's Revenge" in big, bold lettering.

I have good friends.

JAMESON

Three days until the company mixer with *Landmark*. Three days until I get to see Charli again.

Sure, I could ask her to go on another date, but she strikes me as a flight risk. It's like the turtle I befriended in my backyard as a kid. I had to come on slowly. I brought him lettuce every day. Most days, he just scurried back into the bushes. Whoever came up with the lie that turtles are slow has never met or tried to befriend a turtle. That turtle was fast as hell. My only hope of winning him over was to play it cool and win him over day by day.

Charli is like that turtle. Well, except for the obvious differences, like the fact that I had no intentions of getting anywhere near that turtle with my cock. If I want to win her over, I need to play my hand carefully. I've got to approach slowly, strategically. I've got to avoid sudden movements and loud noises, or she'll dart off and I'll be left knowing I missed out on an amazing opportunity to get her in my bed.

Deep down, I know I'm kidding myself. It's not just the thought of having sex with Charli that I'm so distracted by. If it was only that, I wouldn't be so scared of her getting away. I've let sexual attraction pass me by without bothering to even look up more times than I can count. Attraction is fleeting. It's

fun, but it's not the sort of thing that will keep me up at night in cold sweats asking "what if".

That's the tricky thing with Charli. I want to believe I'm just lusting after her. It's hard to convince myself it's true because the thought of her leaving my life feels like a punch in the gut. It feels like a void threatening to open up inside me. Like I'd carry some fragment of that regret for the rest of my life. Is it pathetic to be so invested in a woman I've probably spent less than three or four hours with in total? *No, and fuck you for asking.*

It's perfectly reasonable, because I keep replaying how good it feels to make her smile—to bring a little happiness back to her color-drained life. Besides, I'm not pretending I *know* she's the one, or any of that high-minded crap. I'm only starting to think I would regret not trying to find out for the rest of my life.

See? Reasonable.

I realize I haven't listened to a word of the meeting. Nolan is at the other end of the table in our main conference room at *Gray Wolfe*. He looks concerned as Jamie, one of our top level managers, is explaining something.

"...changing landscape," she says. "Last year, we published thirty-two books. Twenty were NYT bestsellers. Only two failed to recover our investment, and we knew those two were a risk. This year, we're on pace to publish twenty-four books with the recent loss of three authors. They've canceled their contracts with us and signed with *Landmark*. Of the fifteen books we've already published, only seven have hit the NYT bestseller list."

I know what she's saying is only part of the picture. It's bigger than a few canceled contracts. Unhappy authors are talking about shopping their next books with other publishers, agents

are suddenly deciding our contract terms aren't fair and trying to negotiate for pay rate bumps, and even some of our trusted advertisers are trying to back out or change deals. To put it elegantly, this place has been one big clusterfuck.

The reason is because Landmark is trying to run everyone out of business by using their deep pockets to operate at a loss. They are offering impossibly good deals to authors to bring them in and gain loyalty. Nobody can compete with their numbers, and it's because Griffon Vanderlesh was a trust fund kid with hundreds of millions at his disposal. If he has to bleed money for a few years to see us go under, he'll do it.

As a master of personal relations, I decide this is a good moment for calming down the troops. "It's a down year. These things happen," I say.

Jamie looks at me, seeming a bit surprised to hear me contribute. "In a vacuum, I would say that, but—"

"If you were in a vacuum, I don't think you'd be saying anything except, *help, get me the fuck out of here!*"

Crickets. Alright. Not the time for jokes, apparently. I clear my throat. "Go on," I say in my best "I'm a CEO" voice.

She gives me a look I'm a little too familiar with—something between drinking sour milk and noticing a toddler is smearing his own shit on the walls.

The rest of the meeting is just the staff lobbing out suggestions until Jamie goes to the whiteboard she loves so much and draws out an action plan. All the managers at the meeting leave with plans to wine, dine, and impress our existing authors. The people working under them are supposed to make extra efforts to kiss ass in all forms of communication, and so on.

None of it sounds particularly likely to move the needle, but I keep my mouth shut until it's all over. I'm grateful to escape back to my own office where I'm not being bombarded with all the facts of our failure.

I'm surprised when Nolan knocks and asks if he can come in. He hardly ever comes to my office.

He walks up to the bookshelf and lifts one of the books there, turning it over. "*Crime and Punishment?*" he asks. Honestly, I didn't even know you could read."

"Funny," I say, voice dry and humorless. "The guy who decorated my office picked out the books. I do have a little bookshelf at home, though."

"Hmph," he says, setting the book down. Usually, I'm the one in his office. It's how he prefers things. He's the one who is supposedly busting his ass and I'm the one who should have the time to make house calls.

"You need my help, don't you?" I say.

He sighs. He's still facing away from me, and I know my friend well enough to know this is hard for him. We used to be closer. Like brothers. I'd say we still are, but there's no denying work has created a rift between us that has only been growing with time and with the increasing stress Landmark is putting on us. "I don't know what your deal has been these past few months, but yes, I need you to be the old Jameson again. Do whatever magic it is you do with our authors. Find some diamonds in the rough for us again. I don't need a less handsome, less effective version of myself. I need you to do the weird shit you do that always seems to work. I need you to be Jameson Fucking Wolfe." He finally looks up and locks eyes with me. "Don't make me beg."

I nod. “I was just starting to get hard at the thought, but fine. I’ll spare you the begging.”

He flashes a rare grin. “Sometimes, I’m glad you haven’t let this life beat you down.” He chuckles to himself. “God knows I have..”

“You’re not beaten down,” I say. “You’re just boring and work obsessed, like half the country.”

“I want to save our company. It’s slipping away, Jameson. I can feel it. I can’t do this on my own. I don’t even want to admit how relieved I was when I thought you had that Charli woman in the bag with the next big book. But Landmark has fucked even that up, haven’t they?”

I let out a breath. I haven’t admitted it aloud, but maybe I owe it to Nolan to be honest. “I haven’t felt the same passion for this I used to. We’ve already made fortunes. More than we can spend in a lifetime, unless we try to beat Elon in a mega yacht competition, at least. Or if we start our own spaceship company... Actually, maybe we should earn some more cash.”

Nolan is frowning straight past my attempts to lighten the mood. “What are you saying?”

I slide my tongue across my teeth. I’m not usually at a loss for words, but I’m not finding the right ones for my friend. “I’m not sure,” I say. “That’s part of it, I guess. I feel like some part of me that used to burn with never-ending energy for this stuff has dimmed or started to sputter. Some days, I have it. Some days, I don’t.”

He sits down in the chair across from my desk. Okay, it’s more like he *falls* into the chair. Seeing what my words are doing to Nolan makes me feel like shit.

“Don’t you ever look around and wonder, ‘is this it?’” I ask.

“No?”

“I mean, we’ve got money. We succeeded. So are we supposed to... what, just keep doing this until we’re too old to get out of bed in the morning? Is this really the life everybody thinks they want? Work all day. Push away anything outside work because it might interfere with our focus. Grind and grind and grind until there are so many zeroes in our bank accounts that we lose track. What kind of life is that?”

“We do it because we love it. The challenge every day. It’s the fucking challenge, man. That’s why we get out of bed—because this is hard, and we’re uniquely made to do it better than anybody else. It’s like art.”

I grin. “Art?”

He throws up a hand in annoyance. “What made you do it for this long, then?”

I consider. “I like that I’m good at it. Everybody always told me I was a fuck up. When we started from our apartment and got our first authors published and those first checks came in? It was like a big ‘fuck you’ to all the people who told me I’d never accomplish anything.”

“See? There’s your ‘why’.”

“And,” I continue. “I’ve very thoroughly told everybody to go fuck themselves. I’m thirty-seven. I’ve spent my adult life telling women that work comes first. I’ve always picked this over them, and I end up back at my big, empty apartment.”

Nolan’s eyes narrow. “This is about women?”

I groan. “I open all this shit up for you and *that* is your analysis?”

“It’s the author girl, isn’t it? Push, don’t pull girl.”

“No.”

Nolan deflates a little in his seat. His eyes go distant like they do when he’s about to piece together the solution to a tricky puzzle. “That’s it. You weren’t yourself the last few months because you’ve been lonely. Then this girl comes along and you’re telling yourself she’s the perfect fit.”

“Okay, hold on. I’ve never been lonely in my life. I can walk into any building and walk out with the hottest woman on my arm.”

“Then why haven’t you been doing that?”

“Because what’s the point?” I snap. “It’s just catch and release fishing. I spend so much time here. There’s not enough of me to go around, even if I find the right one.”

He nods slowly. “Look, man. I need your help here. That much is true. But you’re also a brother to me. I’m not going to force you to keep at this if it’s making you miserable. If you need a break or some time off, that’s alright. Or...”

He trails off, probably because he doesn’t want to officially open the door to me leaving for good. I’m not sure I want to open that door, either. All I know is something isn’t working. Landmark is grinding our faces into the dirt with more and more force every year. Unless we want to dump our own savings into playing their game back, I can’t see a clear way out.

“Alright, alright. I’m sure your knees are getting sore from being down there sucking me off for so long. I’m not quitting or retiring, okay? I just wanted to tell you where my head was. Besides, I’ve got an ace up my sleeve.”

Nolan hesitates. If I know him, it’s because he’s probably sensing I’m changing the subject on purpose. If he’s in a really

perceptive mood, he knows I'm not anywhere near as sure that I don't want to leave the company as I'm letting on. "An ace up your sleeve?" he asks.

"Push or pull girl," I say, eyebrows raised suggestively. I can feel my mouth moving ahead of my brain, and I already hate myself for what I'm doing. But I can't stand seeing my best friend so down. I'd do just about anything to cheer him up, and I have a sinking feeling I'm going to regret what I'm about to say.

"Legal already briefed me on her situation. It doesn't look good. If she's your ace, then you're in bad shape."

"Yeah, they are claiming Vaughn's girlfriend wrote this book. But I've been thinking there's a way we can spin this to our advantage. If we're smart about the timing, we could really make Landmark look incompetent, too."

Nolan leans back in the chair, rubbing his chin in thought. As usual, he doesn't need more than a crumb or two to understand the whole plan. "So you're saying we find a way to get her rights back, but we sit on it. We wait until Landmark has already gone as public as possible and tied themselves firmly to the Aubrie Dizzie story. Maybe we let them publish the book and *then* we play our hand. They're forced to unpublish a book they tied their horse to and their reputation takes a massive hit. Stealing from young authors. Dishonesty. It'll put everything they're doing under a huge microscope and make other authors more hesitant to work with them."

"Something like that," I say, but my enthusiasm is draining rapidly. Hearing him say my half-formed plan aloud makes it really hit me. This would be massively screwing over Charli for our goals. It would mean lying to her and hiding the truth if I found out we could get the rights to her book back. It would

mean forcing her to sit on her hands and watch Vaughn publish her book with someone else's name on it. Even if we could get it back for her, how would that make her feel?

But, maybe this is what I need to do. It's the kind of gesture that unequivocally shows me I've put my career before anything else again. Maybe Nolan's right. We do this because it's hard and we're good at it. Maybe that's enough. After all, life felt a hell of a lot simpler when I was my old self.

Nolan is up and pacing in circles. He's stroking his chin and rubbing his thumb and forefinger together as he thinks. He's already turning this sketch of a plan into reality in that big brain of his. I feel like I've opened a door I can't close anymore. But that's just an excuse. I could come clean to Charli as soon as we're done here and I could go straight to her if legal hits me with good news.

But *is* that what I would do? Am I really going to betray my friend to help the girl I haven't even known for two weeks?

"Shit," he says, snapping his fingers. "This is good, Jameson. This is really good. It might be the only thing that could really slow down the train Landmark is running. Just like the old days, you're saving our asses with this. He bumps his fist on my desk two times, smiling wide and full of happy energy. "Fuck, man. That's perfect." He points at me, biting back a smile. "This is why we'd be lost if you left. You've got that magic touch."

He comes around the desk and gives my shoulder an appreciative squeeze. "We're going to nail this, and you'll realize you still love it too much to walk away. Just wait."

I smile back at him and give his hand a pat.

He walks out of my office in a rush, probably preparing to go straight to legal himself and check in.

I run my hands through my hair. I think about texting Charli. Maybe I shouldn't feel bad. This is the kind of shit I've always pulled, right? Work first. Have some fun and move on. Nobody ever got too attached, so nobody's feelings were hurt that badly.

But I'm kidding myself. Charli has been different already. I promised her I'd help with her book. Sure, my plan with Nolan would really be some perfect revenge against Vaughn, but I doubt Charli would want to risk something going wrong with her novel for the sake of revenge. What if we let them publish and we can't get it pulled? What if the double launch after a takedown kills any momentum and buzz her book has? What if Landmark fucks up the launch so badly that nobody wants to read the book when we repackage it and relaunch? There are plenty of perfectly valid, perfectly concerning questions.

I pull up her number and type out and delete at least ten messages before settling on one.

Jameson: Practice date again? They've got a Halloween event at the zoo, if you're game.

Yeah, I was just talking about how I should treat her like the turtle and not scare her off. But I feel too guilty to just sit on my hands and wait three days for the mixer. My leg bounces while I wait, watching the screen. I almost send another message. Some version of "there's something we need to talk about."

Her response comes before I can push myself to do it.

Charli: You take this practice stuff a lot more seriously than I expected. Keep it up, and I'm going to start suspecting you're

just looking for excuses to see me.

I'm smiling, partly because I can picture her face as she typed out her message. She was probably smiling, too.

Jameson: Guilty. Should I bring handcuffs?

She starts and stops typing several times. I laugh aloud as I picture how flustered she must be.

Charli: I'll meet you there. What time? No handcuffs needed. You're pardoned.

Jameson: Maybe I should still bring the cuffs. I could confess to some of the things I've been thinking about. Then you'd definitely want to slap them on me.

I make a lame promise to myself that I'll come clean if she asks what I need to confess.

Charli: Is this all part of practicing and pretending?

I run my tongue over my lips. *Dammit.* She just thinks I'm flirting. I can't bring myself to spoil everything, so I keep going. It's easy enough. Flirting with her feels like the most natural thing in the world.

Jameson: It works better if you're not sure. Just enjoy the ride, baby.

Charli: If being clueless makes this work, then we're really on the right track.

Jameson: That's the spirit. I'll pick you up in thirty minutes or so. And just a thought: if we were really dating, you'd probably wear one of those dresses I like. You'd probably even make sure you put on some sexy underwear for me.

Once again, she's typing and stopping and typing and stopping.

Charli: Granny panties. Got it.

CHARLI

I have just enough time to wrap up an act of minor sabotage before I leave my apartment to meet Jameson. My phone is busier than usual because “Operation: Charli’s Revenge” is apparently a group activity. Despite my strong words, I have to admit taking any kind of revenge doesn’t feel entirely natural for me. I’m more or less hoping to fake it until I make it at this point.

Do I think Vaughn deserves all kinds of Hell for what he did? *Yes.* It’s just that I’d rather keep my hands clean and hope karma catches up with him.

But I’ve promised myself something. I’m not going to be the old Charli. Not this time. I’m going to do whatever little part I can in making sure he regrets what he did to me, because maybe then he’ll think twice about doing it to the next girl. I think it’s the only way I’ll be able to live with everything that happened.

Gemmaline: Did you send him the invite yet?

I quickly let her know that I haven’t as I’m using my butt to push open the doors from the lobby to the street. Multitasking. Not usually my speciality, but I’m doing my best.

Roxie: Looks like he just changed his email password for the business one. I already changed the secret question, though. We should be able to change it back one more time.

Dani: Have you seen what Maddie is doing in photoshop? I'm dying.

She follows her text with a bunch of skull and laugh crying emojis.

It feels good to know how much everybody wants to rally behind me for this. It's their way of trying to show support and love. But as much as I can see it for what it is, I still feel a gnawing emptiness inside. Revenge or not, he still stole my book. *My book*. Just thinking about it makes me want to projectile vomit, and I hate knowing the only thing I can do about it right now is sit back and wait for the legal team at Gray Wolfe to find answers.

I must be grimacing when Jameson arrives to meet me in front of my apartment, because he frowns.

"You alright?" he asks.

"I'm fine. Good. *Great*," I say finally, when none of my statements seems to relax his concern.

He puts his hand on the small of my back and gives a reassuring rub. No words. It's just the simple touch and the hint of a smile.

I smile at my feet. A second ago, I was once again sure that I'd never want to smile again. Then a simple look from him has me showing my teeth and feeling all gooey inside.

I like how comfortable he is touching me. I like how he always makes me feel like I'm under his protective wing.

We stand in pleasant silence for a minute or two before a car pulls up.

“Our chariot,” he says, gesturing to the car.

I let him open the door of our ride for me. He comes around the other side and thanks the driver, who is a very large, very round man with thinning hair. “Sure, sure,” the driver says.

“You keep saying you’re a rogue,” I say to Jameson. “But you act more like a gentleman. Opening doors for me. Using your fancy legal team to try to fix my problem. Taking me on sweet fake dates... I have to say I’m beginning to think you lied to me and you’re actually a decent guy.”

“No, never,” he says. “The gentleman act just gets you to let your guard down. Trust me. My true intentions are entirely rogue-like.”

“The zoo, eh?” the driver asks loudly. He turns halfway in his seat, paying concerningly little attention to the merging maneuver he’s attempting.

“That’s right,” Jameson’s voice is tight. He gestures toward the road. “Ideally, we wanted to arrive in one piece.”

“Hah!” The driver laughs and cranes his neck all the way around to try to share a smile with Jameson. “You want gum? Either of you? I charge less than the gas station. I got a guy who hooks me up with gum in bulk. Whole pack for two bucks, one piece for a quarter. But if you take any, you gotta give me five stars, see?”

“Um, no thanks,” I say.

“He’s got a little deal with a guy who unloads the palettes down at the dock. One or twos go missing and nobody is too upset, you understand? He still has to find transportation for them and handle distribution, so it’s not like he can give the

gum away or nothin. But if you want any, I can get it to you cheap. Call it three packs for two bucks. One time offer.”

“If I buy your gum, will you watch the road?” Jameson asks.

“Five stars and I’ll watch the road, sure.”

Jameson stuffs a twenty-dollar-bill in the cup holder and gives me an exasperated look. “Keep the gum. Just get us there alive.”

I smile at him. For some reason, I think he’s only so worried about this guy’s driving because I’m in the car. I’m used to protectiveness from my brother, but Jameson’s flavor of protection is different. I love my brother, but it usually feels like his protectiveness comes from a place of pride. Like he sees a sleight against me as a sleight against his own honor. Jameson seems to genuinely care about me.

It’s probably sad that the way Jameson acts towards me feels so new and exciting. Having a guy be decent shouldn’t be such a novelty.

Our driver nearly crashes several times. Once was because he craned his neck to look at some young woman on the street, then he tried to make eye contact with Jameson, and a few more were because he was laughing with his eyes closed at something on his radio show.

By the time we get out at the zoo, I feel like I just had a near-death experience. “Holy crap,” I say a little shakily. “Maybe we can just walk next time.”

“No kidding.” Jameson looks after the driver.

“Did you just give him five stars?”

“We had a deal,” he says, shrugging. “I’m a man of my word, after all.”

I roll my eyes. “Rogue’s code?”

“Something like that.”

I take in the scene once we’re safely out of the car. The zoo is strung up with Halloween themed lights in orange, purple, and green. There are spooky inflatables positioned by the ticketing area of a big skeleton cat and a goat wearing a witch hat. Little mummy-wrapped cat paws cut from cardboard are sticking out in a line along the grass leading to the entrance.

“This is cute,” I say.

Jameson puts his arm around me and pulls me to his side. He’s taking it in with me, and *God*, I can’t stop feeling like there’s nothing at all “pretend” or “practice” about this. It feels silly to even call it that. But I guess that silliness is my fault, isn’t it? I’m the one who isn’t ready to admit any of this is real. I’m the one who’s too scared.

“Ready?” he asks.

I nod, but my stomach sinks when I notice the line out front for the first time. On one hand, it’s chillier than I expected and I don’t think my coat is going to be warm enough for standing in a long line. On the other hand, I’m not even sure they’ll let us in with how many people are waiting. “Do you think we’ll get in?”

He taps his temple. “I already have tickets. Got them ages ago.”

“Ages? We only met a few weeks ago.”

“And as much as I would love to pretend I reserved these the moment we met, the truth is I love the zoo. I’ve got connections. And I was planning to bring Nolan to see the Halloween decorations. You’re way cuter, though, so plans changed and you get his ticket.”

I laugh. For some reason, I can't picture two moguls of the publishing world chumming around at the zoo together, enjoying Halloween vibes. "You and Nolan like to come to the zoo together? That's super cute."

The way he tries not to smile too wide is adorable and sexy. He's close with his friend and also a little embarrassed to admit it. "We've been friends a long time. Halloween used to be our thing. You know, prank some kids, haul in the candy, wear the best costumes. I usually drag him to one or two Halloween related things each season. Of course, he's harder to get out of the office lately, but I still try."

"That's sweet."

"Nah, it's manly. Don't go trying to make it weird."

"I wasn't!" I laugh.

He's smiling as he hooks his arm in mine and leads us toward the entry gate. "Watch this," he says quietly.

The man at the ticket counter spots him and brightens. "Mr. Wolfe! I told Sarah you would be coming to see her this week. She's excited."

"Don't bullshit me," Jameson laughs. "I bet she's not even out of bed."

The man happily waves us through without even asking for tickets or ID.

"Wow," I say, raising my eyebrows in a bit of mock awe. "You're like some kind of VIP here at the Central Park Zoo? I've never dated someone so important."

He straightens his lapels and rolls out his neck. "I try not to brag about it. But, yeah, I'm a pretty big deal around here."

I let him take my arm again.

“So, who is Sarah? Some other girlfriend I should know about?” I ask lightly, but the truth is my heart is pounding a little.

Jameson winces theatrically. “Sarah does have a special place in my heart. I’ll admit that much. But she moves too slow for me. I’m a fast paced kind of guy. She couldn’t keep up.”

I narrow my eyes. I can tell he’s joking, but I’m not entirely sure what he means. I’m also more than a little scared I’ll find out Sarah is the hot zookeeper he sleeps with on the side. I’m scared because I realize I don’t have any promises of exclusivity from Jameson. I don’t think I even have any right to expect as much. If I wanted him to myself, I’d need to admit I wanted him in the first place. “Did you and Sarah date before?” I ask carefully.

He must see the concern on my face, because he stops walking and turns to face me. The crowds of people pass around us. Some are in costumes. Many are with kids. The night is chilly and perfect, with the sounds of conversation and children’s laughter all around us. Occasionally, a little kid or a young girl screams playfully. There are silly monster blow ups and wood cut-outs placed all over.

He takes my hand, lips twitching with amusement. “Did we date?” As perfect as the night feels, none of it is a match for how my chest tightens when Jameson’s light brown eyes find mine. The eye contact is so intense it almost feels like my feet start to lift until I’m floating just inches off the ground, held captive by his focus.

“Sarah and I...” he says, pausing to search for the right words. “I mean, she’s cute as hell. Don’t get me wrong. But date? No.” He finally laughs and cups my face with one hand. “I’m

sorry. I shouldn't tease you. Sarah and I definitely didn't date. Come on. You'll understand once you meet her."

I give him an uncertain look. I hate how even the little hint of jealousy is making my insides churn. I'm not supposed to be this invested already. The whole point of holding back my emotions was to protect myself. If a little mention of some cute ex of his is going to send me spiraling like this, I'm already screwed. "Okay. I trust you."

He throws his arm around my shoulder and leads me across the path and around a bend in the trail.

I replay those three words I just said again and again as we walk. Maybe it should be a small thing. *I trust you*. The old me would've trusted him with my life from the first meeting. But after Vaughn, I told myself to be more careful with my heart. I told myself I was done trusting men, especially. And yet I've fallen right back into the old me, haven't I?

Sure, there's this little flimsy wall of pretend we've put up between us, but none of that really matters. Because I do trust him. I do feel like I want to lay it on the line again to see where this goes, and as soon as he gets tired of waiting for me to admit the truth, I think I'll tell him what he wants to hear.

We find a small building and he knocks on the door twice. A young kid in his teens spots us and opens it, letting us in. The building smells musty and it's not set up like one of the exhibits. It seems like a holding area for small animals in cages. There are bunnies, chinchillas, and lizards everywhere. A girl is deeper in the room dumping some pebbles into a rabbit cage.

"Oh good," the boy says. "I was just telling Sarah you'd probably come to see her this week."

Jameson goes to a little area in the corner that's fenced off. He steps inside and points. There's something furry curled up in a ball.

"Hey big girl," he says. "Guess who came to see you?"

The animal lifts its head from the tangle of fur and my heart melts. It's a sloth. She has black fur around her eyes and a sleepy, adorable little smile as she blinks in recognition at Jameson. She lifts a long, clawed arm toward his face and touches his nose with the rounded center of one of her claws.

He gives her head a scratch, then points to me. "Sarah, don't be jealous, but this is my girlfriend. Things just weren't moving fast enough with us. I had to move on. Don't be mad."

Girlfriend? The word makes my heart start beating a mile a minute, even though I know he's probably just filing it under the whole "practice" category. We're practicing, Charli, remember? Part of practicing would include not freaking out when he refers to you as his girlfriend. Although he has made it pretty clear he's only calling this pretend for my sake. Maybe Jameson really thinks of me that way.

"Hi, Sarah," I whisper. I slide my eyes to Jameson. "How are you allowed to just come in here and pet a sloth? What's going on?" Both the keepers are just off tending to the animals in cages as if Jameson barging in here is the most normal thing in the world.

"Would you believe me if I said it's just a side effect of my charming personality?"

"No," I say slowly.

"A few years ago, the zoo had a donation drive. They were trying to adopt some orphaned animals, but didn't have the

funding to house and place them. Sarah was one of those animals, so I paid for her habitat and all the care she needs.”

I tilt my head. “I’m starting to think you just call yourself a bad boy to get girls. All I see is sweetness and kindness.”

He lifts a finger to his lips, smiling. “What if I told you the donation is tax deductible?” He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively. “That’s right. I’m sticking it to the tax man by helping this adorable little critter. Downright dirty, isn’t it?”

I laugh. “I’d still think it was super sweet of you to do something like this.”

“Well, it has perks. I get to come in and hang with Sarah whenever I want. And I can name drop her to see if my potential girlfriends get jealous.”

“I wasn’t jealous.”

He’s scratching Sarah behind the ears and she ever-so-slowly closes her eyes, lifting her chin to give him better access.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he says. “Jealousy wasn’t a big enough word. You were ready to murder whoever Sarah was. You were homicidal.”

I shake my head, cheeks going red with embarrassment. “You’re exaggerating. I was just concerned. I realized we never really set any ground rules for... *this*.”

“Like what?”

“Well,” I say, speaking slowly and deliberately. “It would be strange if we dated other people, right? While we’re... doing this.”

The corner of his mouth pulls up. “Are you asking me to be exclusive, Charli McBride?”

My embarrassment deepens. “I’m just voicing my concerns. When you mentioned a girl’s name, I thought... well, I thought if I was dating you, I’d want to know if you were going on romantic practice dates with some other girl. You know?”

“Ah, I see. You’re worried about the feelings of my potential girlfriends on the side? It’s not that you want me all to yourself?”

I lift my eyes to his, which is a mistake. I can see from the way his smile grows that my thoughts must be perfectly obvious from my expression.

He gives my thigh a squeeze. “I’m all yours, baby. Like it or not, I took myself off the market the moment we started this little fling.”

“Oh, okay.” I can’t seem to look at him. Relief is flooding me, and I don’t want him to realize that, too.

“So?” he asks, putting a finger under my chin and gently turning my eyes up to his. “What about you? Are you all mine?”

I press my lips together and to the side. I shrug slowly. “I’m not planning to date. Maybe ever again.”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that,” he says softly.

His eyes are so soft and brown and his eyelashes are so long. I feel like I’m lost in them and barely even realize how close our faces have become.

“I could kiss you,” he says. Our mouths are so close his breath puffs against my lips in four hot waves.

“For practice?” I ask.

“We can call it whatever you want. Just say ‘yes’.”

I'm distantly aware of the little adorable sloth who is watching us with her big, round eyes and the two young workers at the other end of the building. My awareness is only distant, though, because Jameson's eyes and his lips are *everything*.

"I could—" I stammer. "I mean. If you wanted to. We—*yeah*," I say finally.

His lips crash against mine. It's not soft or tender like I expect. It's hungry and frantic.

His big hand slides up the nape of my neck and he takes a fistful of my hair, tugging my face back gently to give him better access. I kiss him back like my life depends on it, because it feels like more than a kiss. It feels like fantasy. Like magic. It feels like fireworks are going off inside my head and beneath my skin, spreading prickles of molten electricity through my veins.

I'm not sure how long we kiss, but he eventually pulls back, hand still in my hair. I'm gasping for air. I'm not even sure I was breathing.

"Okay," I say.

"Okay," he agrees.

Sarah has brought her little face so close that I jump and scream in surprise once I open my eyes. She's just inches from our faces.

Jameson laughs, and Sarah lifts her claw up to his face with her sloth-like slowness, touching his cheek. He rubs her head and smiles sadly. "Sorry, girl. It was best for you to see how serious things are first hand. I know that couldn't have been easy."

Sarah reaches past Jameson and grabs a leaf from a basket. She brings it to her mouth and starts munching.

His eyes flick to mine. “She moves on quickly.”

I glance toward the two workers and both are pointedly keeping their backs to us. I wonder if that’s for privacy’s sake, or if they really didn’t notice that kiss. It’s hard to imagine anyone not noticing a kiss like that. I felt like there must have been a spotlight on us—like pulsating, sexy music must have been playing from speakers in the floor and ceiling.

I’m already wondering if it could’ve really been as amazing as I remember and it was only seconds ago.

“Want to see the rest of the zoo?” Jameson asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “I’d like that.”

I spend the rest of the night in a daze. My mind spins with the memory of his lips brushing against mine and the crackling potential I felt between us. Is that what a first kiss is supposed to be? Like grabbing a live wire with both hands and trying to hold on for dear life? Because every other first kiss I’ve had felt like a single, solitary spark hitting me on the cheek. That was my entire body submerged in icy hot fire and little winged fairies singing opera in my ears.

That kiss came against my walls like a ten ton hammer.

I feel the cracks already forming. I was so sure I could shield my heart until I had time to heal. I was so sure Vaughn was the last man I’d give a chance to hurt me like that. It’s one of the only ways I’ve managed to keep my sanity during all this. I know it won’t happen again. That has been my armor.

But as I walk through the dangling lights and laugh at decorations with Jameson in the Central Park Zoo, I don’t feel so safe anymore. I feel like a layer of my protection has been peeled back and I’m right here in the night for him, exposed and vulnerable.

I squeeze his hand tighter. “Can I really trust you?” I ask him as we’re watching two adorable otters float on their backs while holding rocks with their tiny arms.

He meets my eyes. I like that he doesn’t answer right away. He spends several long moments, apparently searching himself to decide how he can answer me. “You can trust me,” he says.

I kiss him. Maybe I’ll regret letting my guard down later. But for tonight?

Tonight I’m going to ride with my seatbelt off, the wind in my hair, and my eyes closed, because *fuck* Vaughn and *fuck* the way he has tried to rob me of my happiness.

“I was thinking...” Jameson says. We’ve moved to a bench behind the otter exhibit, sandwiched between two scarecrows and a pile of pumpkins. His arm is around me and my head is leaned into him, drinking in the warmth of his big body. “It might be best if we clear the tension in the air. Before the big day.”

I look up at him. “How do you mean?”

“Well,” he sighs theatrically. “There’s clearly sexual tension between us. It might look suspicious. Why so much tension if we’re supposedly together, right?”

I squint up at him. “You’re going to have to spell it out for me, Jameson.” My heart is pounding, though, because I know exactly what he’s getting at. I’m just too much of a chicken to leave my interpretation up to chance. I want him to say it plain and clear for me. No doubts. No risk.

He lowers his mouth to my ear, and his voice is warm chocolate running down my spine. “I want to take you back to my place, lay you on my bed, and do unspeakable things to

you. Otherwise, I'm going to have trouble keeping my hands off you at the mixer."

"So," I whisper back. "You think putting your hands on me will cure you of... wanting your hands on me? I don't know how to take that, Mr. Wolfe."

I feel his smile even though I can't see it. His cheek pulls tight against my ear. "Well, that would be a good point. But the truth is I just really want you in my bed tonight, Charli. I can't make any promises about my hands at the mixer. I was hoping you'd just roll with the moment."

Now I'm the one smiling. "I think I could maybe roll with this. And you."

I laugh, because a second later, he's carrying me like we're newly weds. I kick and swat at him but he just keeps on fast-walking toward the exit of the zoo.

CHARLI

I worry the magic might slip by as we ride to his place from the zoo. It's one thing to agree to go sleep with a guy in the heat of the moment. It's another to let minutes pass and hope passions haven't cooled. Besides, how am I supposed to do this? Vaughn always just gave me this dumb look and said, "can I do you tonight?" Those five words became about as exciting to me as "can you pick up some milk?" or "did you know tonight's a full moon?"

This feels so different.

I'm still buzzing with heat by the time we get out of the car and head into his building. I have time to wonder if he's going to want to warm up to it once we're inside with drinks or conversation. I'm trying to plan out what I'll say when he works the key to his apartment. I barely get to see how nice it is before his hands are on me. His mouth is on mine. His body is practically one with mine.

We're kissing, feeling, and walking *somewhere*. He picks me up again and carries me, giving me a chance to look around his place. It's decorated like a true bachelor pad, but huge for a Manhattan apartment. There's a steel staircase that looks antique winding up to a half second floor that's partly exposed from down here.

“Wow,” I say, craning my neck to look over his shoulder as he pushes open a door to his bedroom. “This place is beautiful.”

“You can take a tour later,” he says gruffly.

I run my tongue over my lips. “What if I want a tour first?”

He tosses me on the bed. I land on my ass, hands planted behind myself and knees bent over the edge. “You’re serious?” His hair has fallen out of place and dangles in front of his eyes. The heat in his brown eyes is almost comical. He wants this as badly as I do. I can see it all over his face, and I *love* it. He’s not afraid to show me how much he wants me, and I can’t even describe how sexy I find that.

“What if I am?” I ask, just because I’m feeling a little bratty.

He puts his hands on his hips, looming over me. My question looks like it’s physically paining him. “Then I might die of blue balls before we finish, but...”

“Come here,” I laugh, reaching up to grab his tie. I tug him toward me and he falls over me, fists planted on either side of me as he kisses me. He moves from my lips to my neck, mouth greedily claiming every inch of me. He kisses my earlobe and a hot trail down the side of my neck, giving me chills when he runs his lips softly along my collarbone. He whispers and his breath is hot against my chest. “I get a little bossy,” he says, warning me.

“That’s okay,” I breathe. It’s ridiculous, but I feel like I’m already halfway to climax just from his lips on me. I’m still fully clothed.

He looks up with fresh heat in his eyes. I can see from his expression there’s something different there. Something harder and steely.

I bite my lip, watching him and waiting.

He slowly moves down my body, dragging the tip of his nose between my breasts and the fabric of my dress, kissing my belly through my clothes. He stands, then beckons for me to stand with one curled finger. “Stand up.”

My eyebrow twitches up, but I obey. I get up and straighten my dress, brushing out the wrinkles we just made. I reach up to touch my hair and fix that too, but his hand lifts suddenly, palm toward me. “No,” he says. “Leave it. I like you messy. It’s my mess.” He steps inside my space, running his hand roughly through my hair as a satisfied grin pulls at his lips. “I get to see you this way. Nobody else.” He meets my eyes, and I think maybe he’s waiting for a response, so I nod my head.

“Good girl,” he says. There is definitely something bossy and commanding in his tone. Something new, different, and a little kinky.

His words send a fresh rush of heat through me. I’ve always been a people pleaser, but I’ve never had a man find a way to bring that aspect of my personality into the bedroom. I can already feel the potential of this dynamic, and I’m hungry for more. I want to please him. I want to be his good girl, and I even like how dirty that feels in my mind.

I wait, and Jameson slowly starts to take his tie off. There’s something deliberate and infinitely sexy about it. It’s in the way he’s watching me, eyes never leaving mine.

“Hands?” he says. It’s a request this time.

I tilt my head, then I see he has pulled a pair of handcuffs from the nightstand beside his bed. He’s dangling it, waiting and watching to see what I say. I think back to our texts where he joked about bringing handcuffs for him. I realize he might not have been kidding. “Will it hurt?” I ask. “I’ve never...” I trail off, embarrassed.

He steps closer. “Don’t worry,” he says. For a moment, I feel like he’s letting the commanding air drop so I know I can back out if I’m uncomfortable. “I don’t have a closet full of whips and chains and leather masks, if that’s what you’re wondering. I just... I like to take control.” He runs a fingertip down my cheek, eyes following its trail. “I know how to take care of your needs, and it’s easier if you give me all your trust. You sit back, I drive. Alright?”

I pull my lower lip under my teeth, nodding. I stick my hands out together for him. “Like this?”

He slides the cuffs over my wrist and squeezes them around me. He leaves enough space for a few fingers to fit between my skin and the cold metal.

“Arms up,” he says.

I obey, lifting my arms over my head.

His fingertips brush against my skin as he lifts my dress from my thighs to my neck. And then he pauses, looking at the way it’s stuck on the handcuffs.

He points a warning finger at me. “No escaping when I undo these.”

“Okay,” I say, smiling. “Do you... not do this often?” I ask, wondering why a man who has handcuffs beside his bed wouldn’t know to get me undressed first.

He smiles at his feet, dropping the bossy act for a moment. “Just got the cuffs after our text the other day. You gave me the idea.”

I laugh. I like that he got these for me.

He flips a hidden lever that releases the handcuffs without a key. I smile wider when I realize the handcuffs aren’t even

escape proof.

“Hey,” he warns. “You didn’t see that.” He tosses my dress aside, then clicks the cuffs back into place and once again checks to make sure they aren’t too tight on my wrists.

He takes his time looking me over in my underwear. I watch his face. His full lips part and he breathes out, then he pulls his lip under his teeth. His jaw flexes and his hands lift, like he can’t keep himself from wanting to touch me.

Just like that, he’s back to the bossy version of himself. He’s hungry for me again.

I’m struck by how different this all feels. The date. The conversations. Even the silent moments. *Especially this.*

When Vaughn looked at me naked or saw me changing, I felt like he was searching for flaws. Jameson looks like he’s at an art gallery—like my body is a masterpiece he’s trying to fully drink in and appreciate.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” he breathes.

“It’s dark in here,” I say, unable to simply accept the compliment.

He puts a finger to my lips, locks eyes with me, then shakes his head. “Perfect,” he repeats. “Now turn around.”

I do as he says and feel him reach to the clasp on my bra. My bound hands are in front of me and I have to lift them so he can pull the bra away. My bra is strapless, so he doesn’t need to release my cuffs again this time. I’m not sure how he wants this to go, but I feel like the way he cups my breasts from behind and sucks in a raspy breath wasn’t part of his plan. It makes me smile to myself.

I like that he enjoys this little game of control. I also like that I'm screwing it up for him, even if it's by small measures.

He slides a hand down from my breast to my belly and then over my panties. His fingers tease me, spreading wide to pass my clit and rub me. I find my back arching and my ass pressing into him. I'm surprised by how desperate I already feel to have him on me without restraint. The little game is fun, but I'm already craving the feeling of him inside me.

It's like he's teasing me now by dragging this out, even though we both just want to let loose.

I want him to let go.

To take me.

"Please," I whisper.

"Please, what?" He asks, lips against my ear.

"Just... please."

I can feel his smile. "Not specific enough. You'll have to keep letting me do this my way."

"Please, fuck me." I feel a rush of embarrassment, arousal, and surprise by my own words. I've never been the vocal type with this sort of thing. I've never even talked dirty with a guy before.

Jameson sucks in a breath and his grip on my breast tightens. His fingers close over my sex, rubbing skillfully in a circle that makes me want to bend forward and gasp. I can't, though, because he's gripping me too powerfully. He's holding me to himself and I can feel his arousal pressing against the small of my back. I want to touch it, but my hands are bound and I couldn't turn around if I tried right now.

"You..." he says slowly. "You make a compelling argument."

I can sense that he still wants his little game to play out the way he intended, but I've got him on the ropes. Maybe if I push it just a little further. He seemed to really like it when I talked dirty. Maybe if I do it more, he won't be able to keep dragging this out. "I want your cock," I say, turning my face to the side so I can kiss his cheek and then his neck when he arches against my touch. "I want to feel you inside me. Please, Jameson."

I almost laugh with how suddenly I'm pushed to the bed. I land on my bound hands, ass toward him. He yanks my panties down and then I hear the rustle of his clothes. When I look back over my shoulder, he's already got his shirt off and is working on his belt. "Is that a yes?" I tease.

"Yes, it's a fucking yes," he growls.

"I'm on the pill," I say, hesitant.

"I'm clean." His words are careful, almost hopeful.

"I got tested after... yeah. I'm clean, too. You can do it, if you want."

"If I want?" he laughs. His hands are on my hips a moment later and he reaches around me, teasing me with his fingertips. I feel his length pushing up against me, warm and ready.

I grind my ass back against him, hungry for what he has. Hungry for what I need.

"I want to see you when I fuck you," he says suddenly. He flips me over and climbs above me. His broad, muscled chest is dusted with dark hairs that trail down his belly.

He takes my hands and pushes them overhead like he's about to bind me to the bedposts.

“I want to touch you,” I complain, tugging my wrists apart so the chain clicks.

He considers, then he straddles me, his *very* impressive manhood resting on my stomach. He brings my hands down between us, and I think he’s about to undo the cuffs, completely giving up the game. Instead he brings my arms forward and guides my hands along his body. First, he leans forward so I can run my fingers down his cheeks, then his neck and through the short hairs on his chest. I moan aloud when he leads me down the ripples of his abs and finally to the pulsing length between his legs.

“Oh, God,” I breathe.

I start to stroke him with my hands. He’s big enough that I can use both hands on top of each other. He reaches behind himself to plunge his fingers inside me. I gasp as he fills me with two, then three fingers, curling them skillfully until I can barely focus on what I’m doing.

I get lost in the movements of our bodies until he’s gently pressing his hands to mine, urging me to stop before he climaxes. But he doesn’t stop what he’s doing until I’m writhing beneath him with stars in my eyes and fire beneath my skin. I convulse, clenching all around him and crying out.

I’m still riding the echoes of my orgasm when he slides back, pushing my legs apart. He meets my eyes and positions himself above me.

My eyes squeeze shut when I feel him start to press inside me.

“Open them,” he commands. “I want to watch your eyes when I fill you for the first time.”

For the first time. I nod my head obediently. *So much for his claim that this was a one time thing, I guess.* He takes my

wrists from my chest and presses them over my head against the pillows, pinning them down with one arm while he holds himself up with the other. He rocks into me, filling me more with each thrust.

I want my hands in his hair, on his back, and on his ass. I'm greedy to touch him and I can't with my hands like this. I hook my heels against the backs of his thighs and pull him deeper into me, gasping and breathing in thick gulps. I can barely take this. It's too fucking good.

"You feel so perfect," he groans.

"Mhm," is all I can manage.

He keeps saying things in my ear as he works into a rhythm. He tells me I'm beautiful. How tight I am for him. How much he's wanted to do this since we met. How Vaughn was a fucking idiot for letting me go.

It's sensory overload. His body is so hard and powerful. His movements are so smooth and hypnotic I can't stop watching him pound into me. I can't stop myself from spreading my legs wider, pulling him against me with my heels and squirming against his grip on my wrists.

"Oh, God," I gasp.

He returns my words with a groan. His eyes grow even more intense. "Look at me. *Fuck,*" he hisses. I feel him pulse inside me and the warmth deep inside.

It pushes me over the edge and we climax together.

It's beautiful.

It's amazing.

It's like being catapulted straight into the starriest night sky I've ever seen. It's glitter and freaking rainbows. It's so perfect

it hurts.

And then it just hurts, because he's sliding out of me and I'm bracing myself for what comes next.

He's rolling to his back and laying with an arm behind his head, watching the ceiling. He's probably trying to decide the best combination of words to get me out of his apartment without being too much of a dick, because that's how this works with guys like Jameson, isn't it? He's the type of perfect guy that women line up to date, and those guys are always ready to move on as soon as they get what they're after.

I'm just laying, bracing myself for whatever he's about to say now that he got what he wanted. I decide to save myself the embarrassment of being dismissed. "I should get back home."

I start to get up awkwardly with my wrists still cuffed, but he pushes me back down. "Who said I was done with you?"

I raise an eyebrow. "I'm not sure if I have another round in me tonight. That was... *wow*," I say.

He grins. "We'll work on your stamina. But I'll warn you, I'm a tough coach."

I bite my lip. This isn't the conversation I expected afterwards. He's making it sound like this is the first of many. "Hm, I don't know. Can I hire a different coach?"

He rolls on top of me again. He pins my hands over my head again, then plants a slow, passionate kiss on my mouth. "Fuck, no. You're welcome to say this is still pretend and practice. But I have a confession."

I wait, heart pounding.

"The time we've spent together hasn't been pretend for me. I like you, Charli." His eyebrows draw together. "I want this to

work. Not just to piss off Vaughn or any of that. I want this to work just because of you. All the other shit is secondary.”

I know what I want to say. I want to melt. I want to tug him down so he can kiss me again and send me floating into bliss. But there’s still part of me deep inside that’s raw, open, and bleeding. I find myself talking out of fear instead of from my heart. “I’m in a really weird place right now,” I say slowly. “Any other time and I’d be on the exact same page. I just... I’m so scared to get hurt again. It might be easier for me to keep this one step away from real. For now,” I add.

Disappointment flashes across Jameson’s expression, but he covers it up quickly, nodding. “I’m a patient man. Actually, that’s a lie. But I can be patient for you.” He kisses my forehead, smiling. “I’ll go get you something comfortable to sleep in.” He releases the cuffs, then runs his fingers over where the metal was against my skin and inspects it. He seems satisfied with what he sees. He plants a kiss on both my wrists, grinning. “You’re just practicing sleeping over after we fuck, of course,” he adds.

I smile, even though something inside me is screaming to stop being such an idiot. I want to just tell him I feel everything he feels. I just... I can’t make myself do it. It’s like climbing up to a lakeside cliff and walking all the way to the edge. I can’t take that final step and trust the waters beneath me. I can’t fully believe there won’t be rocks hiding just beneath the cool, inviting waters.

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll practice sleeping over.”

“Perfect.” He stands, apparently without an ounce of self-consciousness for his nudity. Then again, I can’t imagine many people *would* be self-conscious if they looked like he does. He

rubs his hands together. “Food? Are you hungry? I can whip something up.”

“You don’t have to cook for me,” I say, tugging the covers up to my neck. His bed is so comfy, and his smell is everywhere. I want to bottle it up and steal some to keep.

“I was planning to feed you after the zoo. You’ve got to be hungry.”

“You did all the work,” I laugh.

“Sandwiches? Do you eat sandwiches? Salad? Yogurt? Takeout? I could go grab something.”

“Peanut Butter and jelly?”

He claps, then points. He’s smiling like he’s actually happy that I’m *letting* him take care of me. “You got it. Don’t move. I mean, you can move. But stay there.”

I nod my head. It’s not a hard command. I feel like I could curl up and live in this bed.

It’s what happens after I leave that I’m afraid of, anyway. So I decide to shut off my brain for tonight. Tonight, I’ll live in this pretty little dream where a perfect, gorgeous man makes me have two incredible orgasms and then goes to nakedly make me dinner in bed.

Eventually, I’ll have to wake up, but I’m going to enjoy this dream as long as it lasts.

JAMESON

I'm waiting outside a deli roughly halfway between the offices of *Landmark* and *Gray Wolfe*. It's chilly, early evening, and the city streets are busy with cars and people, like usual. My mind is busy with thoughts of what I did with Charli, but I'm trying to stay focused on the moment, as much as I want to live in memories of last night.

This morning, I made her breakfast in bed and tried to convince her to stick around longer. Eventually, she made her excuses and left. I haven't stopped trying to figure out how to get her back to my place since.

But I need to at least get my shit together for this meeting, because it could be important.

Griffon Vanderlesh reached out today and asked to meet with Nolan and me. Nolan suggested refusing, but I couldn't quite help myself. When I heard Vaughn would be coming along with his father, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to meet.

Nolan sips his water and throws me an annoyed look. "Tell me we aren't only here because you are into that girl and Vaughn dated her. Is this some ego dick-measuring thing?"

I purse my lips in thought. "No," I say slowly. "Sometimes you don't even need to pull the cocks out and start measuring.

It's just that obvious."

Nolan sighs. "I hate *Landmark* as much as you. Just keep in mind we're not in the strongest position right now. They've got their boots on our necks. I would rather wait until we get our footing again to provoke them."

I give my friend a look of disgust. "Come on. When did my ruthless business partner get so fucking meek? We've always enjoyed provoking these assholes."

"I am ruthless," he says, eyes blazing with anger. "That's why I'm not willing to indulge some fantasy of revenge and payback if it's going to be bad for our company. Gray Wolfe comes first."

"Ah," I say, holding up my index finger. "But if things play out the way I'm planning, my fantasy of revenge is going to be exactly what helps get us back on track. Remember?" The too-familiar guilt seeps through me. I already felt like absolute shit for the way my plan throws Charli's needs under the bus. After yesterday and this morning, I feel even worse about it.

"Assuming we're able to get this woman's book back in her hands, you mean."

"Her name is Charli."

Nolan looks up, eyebrow quirking. "Is it that serious already?"

I shrug. "I'm a private person, Nolan. I prefer not to have amazing sex with multiple orgasms and then brag about it."

He rolls his eyes, but smiles a little. We are constantly on edge with each other lately, but we're still friends. "I'm happy for you. I do wish you wouldn't mix pleasure with work, though."

"I'm weaponizing my pleasure for the benefit of work. You should be thanking me." I'm speaking lightly, but hearing my

words aloud turns my stomach. I'm overstating it, aren't I? All I'm planning to do is delay the good news to Charli a little while—to let Landmark publish her book and *then* pull the appropriate legal strings to get it taken down and back into her hands. Honestly, it could be the best thing for her book. The controversy should bring readers.

But I know I'm just rationalizing. I know Charli well enough by now to know how much it will hurt her to see the book go live with someone else's name on it. No matter how it plays out or whether it's in her best interest, that alone would crush her. It would crush her, and it was my fucking idea.

"Second thoughts?" Nolan asks, perceptive as always.

"No," I say, before I can change my mind. Charli is being very careful to keep me at an emotional distance. Maybe that distance is getting smaller and smaller, but she's trying to maintain it. She doesn't want to be hurt again, and I guess she's the wise one. What would she think if she knew what I'm planning?

I lean back and check my phone. I still have the text sitting there from my guy at legal. It came in yesterday. He says Vaughn screwed up something in the way he registered the app under someone else's business LLC. Basically, the error on his part voids out any contractual legalese within the app. Charli's in the clear, and if I was a better person, I could make some calls and get the process started right now. I could've told her yesterday when she asked if there were any updates from legal. But I lied to her. I lied, and it's already tearing me up inside.

"No doubts. Gray Wolfe comes first," I say, convincing myself more than Nolan. "Our friendship comes first."

He nods, and some of the hardness that always seems to be in his features these days relaxes a touch.

Vaughn and his father join us at the table a few minutes later. Vaughn looks a little irritable and harassed. His dark hair is slicked back, but a few strands have come loose. The lapels on his suit jacket are askew, and he keeps fidgeting and adjusting himself in the seat.

His father, Griffon, looks as icy as always. He has the same cold blue eyes and similar features to Vaughn, but there's a no-nonsense cast to his face that makes it hard to forget he knows his business. Hate him or not, Griffon is a pain in our ass because he's good at what he does. "What he does" is be a fucking weasel with full pockets because of his dead father, but he's still good at it.

"You're both late," I say.

Nolan side eyes me. I'm not exactly avoiding provocation, but I never promised to behave.

Griffon gives his son a look of annoyance. Apparently, it was Vaughn's fault.

Vaughn shakes his head and rubs the back of his neck. "Some asshole put posters up all around the office and the city with my face on them and a bunch of childish lies. It's getting hard to make it from one place to another without getting stopped and asked idiotic questions." His nostrils flare and he lifts his jacket to show a patch of something brown staining his white button-down. "And this random woman threw her coffee on me. There have been all the prank calls, too. If I find out this was you, I'm going to crush you and your shitty company. I'm going to—"

“Vaughn, that’s enough,” Griffon snaps. “Just ask them and we can get this miserable affair behind us.”

It’s very hard not to smile. *Just ask them?* I lick my lips in anticipation. Does Vaughn want to ask us if we’re the ones behind the things I’ve seen all over the streets near Landmark and Gray Wolfe?

Because I’ve seen the posters. It would be impossible not to.

I haven’t asked Charli directly, but I don’t really need to. It’s pretty obviously her handiwork. The posters show Vaughn’s head photoshopped in with some dirty underwear and accuse him of stealing from homeless shelters. I’ve even seen a few other variations pop up, including multiple advertisements from supposedly “hot, single college girls looking for male roommates who don’t mind a woman that loves cooking, cleaning, and spontaneous blowjobs”. There are others, too, like one from a man who has fantasies about being aggressively propositioned for phone sex. It includes assurances that he would claim he isn’t interested, but his kink is for the caller to press on anyway and get as dirty as possible. Every weird poster I’ve seen lists the same phone number, and I’ve had a suspicion they lead to Vaughn’s cell, or maybe even his work phone, where he’ll be forced to answer.

“Ask us what?” Nolan prods.

Vaughn looks livid. I can almost read it in his expression. His whole life, things have gone his way. The trust fund. The father who will die some day and pass his wealth and success to his son, whether or not he deserves it. It’s the kind of cushy existence that leads to stale, soft people. Nothing in his easy existence has prepared him for even a little pranking, and if he can’t find and squash whoever is doing it, he might just lose

his shit. “Admit it. You two are doing this. This childish bullshit has Gray Wolfe all over it.”

“What posters?” I manage to say the two words without smiling or laughing. It’s so hard, though, because I desperately want to hear him explain it.

I can feel even Nolan is trying not to laugh. We both passed some on our way here and commented on them.

Vaughn glances to the side and adjusts himself in his chair. “The posters and the want ads. They are stapled up wherever they can fit all around our offices. It’s suspicious. Don’t you think? At a time when Landmark is wiping the floor with your company, suddenly somebody is motivated to prank us?”

“Pranks?” I ask. I’m having to keep my responses to one or two word minimums to avoid laughing. My hand is over my mouth and I’m worried my eyes are watering now with the effort. “You’re going to have to be more specific. I don’t know what you mean.”

Vaughn’s jaw clenches and his father looks exceedingly embarrassed to even be a part of this whole encounter.

“The posters of me with fucking dirty underwear. What would I want with homeless people’s fucking dirty panties? Who would even believe that?”

I finally lose it. I snort first, then have to squeeze my eyes shut and compose myself before I look back up. Nolan is shaking slightly beside me, but doing a better job of keeping it together.

“I’m sorry,” I say slowly. “Did you say there are pictures of you with dirty homeless women’s panties and men’s tighy-not-so-whities all over the city? That sounds less like a prank

and more like a personal problem. Or at the very least, a questionable moment to let someone take a picture of.”

Nolan makes a choked sound, then clears his throat and starts aggressively drinking his water.

Griffon rolls his eyes and blows out a long breath, staring daggers at his son.

Vaughn’s face has gone red. “It’s not real, asshole. It’s—it’s—” He sputters, waving his hand around in annoyance. “Photo editing bullshit, or something. And the same person is putting my personal office phone out there with all these dumb claims asking people to call the number. I had to get the number changed twice already, and the posters just keep changing with the new number.”

“I’m failing to understand why you needed to meet with us,” Nolan says. “So your son could confess about his fetish for dirty underwear?”

I’m grinning. “Or because you needed us to know you’ve got a thing for dirty phone sex with men? You should’ve just asked, Vaughn. I would’ve been happy to hop on a call some time.”

He practically leaps forward, fist coming down on the table as he points at me. “So you’ve read them!”

I shake my head. “They are everywhere. I’ve seen them, sure. Doesn’t mean I had anything to do with them. But they’re funny. I had no idea the number was leading to your office. I probably wouldn’t admit that to anyone else, by the way.”

“I told you how this would go,” Griffon snaps. “We’re done here.”

“Thanks for wasting our time,” Nolan says.

“No, this was great,” I say. “I’m going to get some extra joy every time I see those want ads or posters from now on. I had no idea you were letting it get to you so much.”

“I’m not,” Vaughn snaps as he stands. He runs a hand through his hair, but even more of it falls loose a moment later. “It’s childish. I’m too busy for this shit.”

“Busy with that new book?” I ask. “From what’s her name? Aubrey Drizzle?”

“Dizzie,” he says, voice suddenly cold. “And yes. It’s going to be a chart topper.”

“Bold claim. Is the author going to talk about where she got the idea from? What was her motivation? How long has she been working on this?”

Griffon’s eyes narrow. “That’s enough. She’s under contract with us already. Neither of you buffoons are getting your claws into her. Vaughn, let’s go.”

Before the men are out of sight, I see a homeless woman rush up to Vaughn. She lobbs a huge, baggy pair of green panties at him. They land on his head, nearly draping over his eyes.

Vaughn jerks like he’s being electrocuted, flinging the panties off his head and staring in horror at what he just touched as it floats in a puddle by the road. “Did you just—”

“Yeah, you like that, pervert?” The woman cackles. “Found them this morning and thought they’d get your Johnson all Jimmied, Big Boy!”

Johnson all Jimmied? I’m watching in amused confusion.

“Fuck you,” Vaughn says, jabbing his finger toward me and Nolan, as if that was our fault. They cross the street, leaving behind the still-laughing woman.

I share a smile with Nolan and pull out my phone.

Jameson: Just talked to Vaughn. He's not having a good time. *Somebody* has put up prank posters all over town and it's making him miserable. Would be a shame if his ex-girlfriend showed up with a business rival he hates tomorrow night at the Halloween mixer, wouldn't it?

Her text comes just moments later.

Charli: OMG. My friends are going to die. Not that we had anything to do with those, but... Yes. I think seeing us at the mixer really would sour his mood. I hope all our practice pays off.

Jameson: The costume is ready, by the way. Super slutty and sensible at the same time. You'll love it. I'm not sure we've practiced enough, though. I'm feeling a little rusty. Maybe you could swing by tonight for a few practice reps?

Charli: I wish I could.

I frown at my phone. That's all she's got to say?

Jameson: Everything okay?

It's a few minutes before she responds. It's long enough for Nolan to complain about an author who has pushed back her deadline for the third time, and how we can't afford to pressure her because Landmark will just scoop her up if we scare her off.

Charli: I'm feeling a little down about the book stuff, I guess. Maybe I'm losing a little hope that I'll be able to stop them from publishing it. I keep seeing update emails in Vaughn's inbox about how they're moving along and cover concepts and all that. It's just hard to think about.

“What?” Nolan asks. “You look like you swallowed a live eel.”

I glance up from my phone and try to wipe the look from my face. “It’s nothing,” I say, even though my stomach is turning over. I feel like the scum of the Earth for not telling her yesterday as soon as I found out. I *am* the scum of the Earth because I’m making the decision to put my friend and my company before her and her book. But isn’t that the reasonable thing any sane person would do? I’ve known Nolan since we were kids. Dozens of people work for us at Gray Wolfe. That’s dozens of lives and livelihoods depending on our success. Charli is only one person I met weeks ago. One person, no matter how much I already like her. She’s just one person.

And yet I still feel like absolute garbage.

Jameson: Come see me tonight. I can think of a few ways to take your mind off things.

Charli: I’ll see you at the mixer. I just need to mope a little. It’s okay. I’ll be good for the mixer though, I promise.

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath.

CHARLI

Knives and forks scrape on plates, Meemaw chews her mashed potatoes, Troy is eyeing me suspiciously while he chews a chicken thigh, and Dani is showing Maddie something on her phone.

Dad points his fork at me. “Any big plans tonight?” he asks. “Working on that book, maybe?”

“You haven’t been talking about your book lately,” my mom says, jumping in to join the assault. “Did the breakup make it hard to keep pushing forward with it? I hope not. You were getting so close, weren’t you?”

I wince, trying not to make eye contact with Maddie or Dani, who both know the full truth.

“Still working on it. I might actually head out a little early tonight to do just that,” I add. I stab a green bean with my fork and eat it, chewing with my focus on the tablecloth, hoping they drop it.

“You know,” Mom says. “Before your father and I met, I had a pretty serious thing going with this boy named Archie Matterson. He was a real looker.”

My dad shakes his head, lips pursed. “His muscles were just silly. No girl could possibly want a guy with all that rippling

muscle. Imagine the grocery bill! Muscles don't grow on trees, you know. Those guys go through hundreds of dollars in protein every month. And for what? To look amazing? Psh."

My mom gives my dad's spindly arms a squeeze, smiling lovingly. "Your father is right. I can't imagine who would be into that. Anyway, I thought my world ended when we broke things off. I swore I was going to spend the rest of my life grieving. I'd wait a year to date again, and—"

"How old were you?" Maddie asks.

"Fourteen," Mom says. "He was sixteen," she adds with a proud wiggle of her eyebrows.

"Mom, you dog," Dani laughs. "Dating an older man."

"I'm not sure I understand where this is going," I say.

My mom holds up her palm for patience. "*But*, I did move on. It was only a month later before I found someone new. And what do you know? Dating someone new cheered me right up."

"Moral of the story," Meemaw croaks. "Your mother is a hoe. If your father ever dies, she'll cope with her grief in the arms of another man."

My mom chokes on her water and Maddie snorts, covering her mouth with both hands. Dani bulges her eyes at me, grinning, and my dad's eyes go a little wider.

"That's not the point at all," Mom manages, laughing a little. "My point was that Charli shouldn't let this break up keep her down forever. And that it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if she, you know, explored the market. That's all."

"Oh, trust me," Meemaw says, nodding knowingly my way. "Charli has been at the meat market for weeks. I can smell it

on her.”

I consider hiding under the table, but settle for staring blankly at the table and hoping this all ends quickly. Last Sunday, Meemaw announced to everyone that I was dating again when she saw the text on my phone. It took a monumental acting job and some quick thinking, but I convinced them all it wasn't anything serious.

“Are you dating someone?” Troy asks. “What about that guy from last week?”

I want to sigh, but I just smile innocently. “Hm? What guy?”

Troy knowingly points his fork at me. “It's serious. I can see it on her face.”

My dad nods. “Don't keep us in suspense, Charli Bug. Tell us about this new guy.”

“Well?” My dad prods. “Don't keep us in suspense, Charli Bug.”

I could deny everything, but what would be the point? “It's really nothing serious,” I say finally. “He's just a guy I met at that publisher's conference in Arizona a couple weeks ago.”

“When are we going to meet him?” Troy asks. I can already see his protective streak has fully engaged. He wants to vet Jameson, which basically equates to confirming he's not good enough for one of Troy McBride's little sisters. No man is good enough in my brother's eyes. As sweet as the sentiment is, dealing with my brother trying to chase off every man who has ever shown interest in me is exhausting in practice.

“I don't know,” I say. “But I'll put a family meet and greet on the to-do list. Okay?”

My mom claps her hands quickly. “I’m so happy. I can’t wait to meet this boy.”

“He’s not a boy,” I say. “He’s a man.”

Maddie “oohs” dramatically. Dani smiles.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just—nevermind.” And now I’m blushing.

“How old is he?” Troy asks.

“That’s none of your business,” I say.

“Like hell it isn’t. He’s older, isn’t he?”

I make a point of focusing on my food and ignoring my brother. I hear my dad quietly trying to calm Troy down. I don’t pay attention to it. I push my mind to what I’ll be doing in a few hours.

Meemaw raises a crooked finger, eyebrows up. “What’s wrong with older lovers, Troy Boy?”

He opens his mouth, but then snaps it shut and stares at his plate. Troy may be obnoxiously confrontational, but he has always respected Mom and our grandparents. Meemaw knows and abuses this fact.

She smiles a little, sensing weakness. “Some of the best sex of my life was with older men. *Much older.*”

“Much older?” Maddie says, a devious grin beginning to form on her face. “Wouldn’t that be like... necrophilia?”

Meemaw throws her head back and cackles.

I smile, but my thoughts are elsewhere. They’re on the mixer tonight. In just a little while, I’ll be meeting Jameson at his place to see whatever “sensibly slutty” costume his friend of a

friend whipped up. I'll be heading to the party between Landmark and Gray Wolfe.

And I'll be parading myself around it with Jameson Wolfe on my arm in front of Vaughn and Aubrey.

The thought makes my nerves light up. I'm *not* confrontational. The idea of Vaughn coming up and challenging us or making a scene terrifies me. How did I ever think this was a good idea?

I take a few calming breaths while Meemaw, Maddie, and Dani go back and forth about some convoluted plumbing metaphor that definitely means sex. I think Meemaw is trying to argue that two plumbers are better than one.

Mom is staring at her food with a glazed look on her face I've seen a million times. Meemaw traumatizes her on a regular basis, so she simply chooses to detach her brain and pretend nothing is happening. Dad is excitedly telling Troy the entire plot of a TV show he wants him to watch, as if having the whole thing spoiled scene by scene is going to make Troy want to go home and watch it all.

And me? I'm just silently losing my shit while it feels like a time bomb ticks away beneath my chair.



“I DON'T KNOW ABOUT THIS,” I SAY FOR THE HUNDREDTH time. We're walking into the hotel where the mixer is being hosted. Jameson's arm is hooked in mine, and I'm dressed in a glorified lingerie costume.

I specifically remember talking about the tried and true slutty Halloween tropes: angels, bunnies, kittens, and so on. This

costume is not that.

“Well,” Jameson says, stopping to look at me again. He has been doing that ever since I put this on, and it’s probably the only reason I haven’t revolted and demanded to go to my place where I left my backup costume—a baggy set of pirate clothing, complete with hat, fake mustache, and a pen to do the stubble. “The guy works in Hollywood. I guess he was creatively inspired. You look great, though.”

Jameson is dressed to match me. I’m some sort of ringleader’s assistant straight out of a porno. I’ve got a short cropped coat with curled up coattails in the back. It’s open at the front to reveal a one-piece, skintight black thing that’s basically a lacy swimsuit. My legs are clad in fishnets and I’ve got a huge top-hat on. Of course, I’ve also got heels that are way too tall.

He’s in a suit that looks like it could belong to an actual ringmaster, and he’s giving me total Hugh Jackman from *The Greatest Showman* vibes. He’s even got a little walking stick and a big hat of his own.

I reach down and fiddle with the hemline on my ass, which is far more *aggressive* than any swimsuit I would ever wear in public. Half my butt is hanging out and I feel ridiculous.

“Quit fiddling,” he says softly. He puts his hand on my shoulder and smirks as he lifts the monkey-headed top of his walking stick to my chin and presses up, making me meet his eyes. “We’re following the plan. You look so fucking good it hurts. You’re going to make Vaughn want to crawl out of his own skin tonight. This is payback. Remember? We’re getting him back for being a giant ball of cocks.”

I smile, nodding. “He is a giant ball of cocks.”

“That’s right.” Jameson bends a little and reaches around to give my ass a healthy squeeze. “And I love this costume on you. Everybody is going to wish you were on their arm instead of mine tonight. I plan to drink that in.”

My smile widens. He’s so confident. Every guy I’ve ever been with before would see me showing up in something like this as a threat. They’d be scolding me for wearing something so provocative or accuse me of seeking attention. Jameson seems to have no fear at all of me straying. Is that because he doesn’t have any real plans of making this thing between us last beyond tonight? Or is it because he’s so sure it will work he’s not worried about what could go wrong?

“Okay,” I say softly.

He gives his staff two triumphant clicks on the ground, then gestures forward with it. I’m realizing I may have to take that thing away from him before the night is over. He’s having entirely too much fun with it. There’s something about men and sticks. I’ve always thought if you abandoned a man by a body of water with plenty of good sticks to find and big rocks to throw, he would be entertained for weeks.

We head through the lobby of the hotel, following a trickle of costumed people who seem to know where they’re going. The sound of music and voices gets louder as we get close. I’m a little relieved to see I’m not the only woman who went the “slutty” route. There are plenty of girls in revealing costumes throughout the room.

They’ve decorated the whole place with classy Halloween decor. There’s an ice sculpture of a bat, people in professional makeup and costumes posing near the exits and the drink table, a bartender making some kind of orange and black

mixed drink, and even a full haunted house built up in the back corner of the room.

I can't help clapping my hands with excitement, momentarily forgetting my nerves. "This is insane!"

Jameson nods. "I always throw a little personal donation towards making these things more fun. If we left it up to the Vanderlesh prick, it would be all cardboard cutouts of bats and big jugs of fruit punch from Costco. For a filthy rich asshole, the guy is painfully cheap. He also doesn't appreciate a good Halloween party."

"I like that you do," I say. My arm is hooked in his, and I give it a little squeeze.

Then I squeeze harder, because I spot Vaughn and Aubrey by the drink table. They're talking to a pair of men. Aubrey is wearing a leather one-piece with a bunny tail and bunny ears. She looks good in it, and Vaughn has his hand on the small of her back with his pinky splayed to rest on the swell of her ass.

I'm a little surprised when I don't even feel the ghost of jealousy to see them together. Vaughn is dressed in a normal business suit but he has devil horns poking out of his hair and a tail coming out from beneath his jacket.

"Doing alright?" Jameson asks.

"I'm good," I say.

Nolan interrupts the moment when he walks up. He's dressed in a huge dog onesie with a hood that pulls up, complete with ears and a big, floppy tail. It's ridiculous and surprisingly funny, considering my impression of Nolan as a buttoned-up workaholic. "You two really went all-out. Damn." He lifts up Jameson's staff and seems to make a point of hardly looking

my way. I'm grateful, considering I feel like I'm half naked right now. "This is a nice fucking stick," he says.

I bite my lip, looking between the two of them as they spend a full thirty seconds going back and forth about how well balanced and "satisfying" it is to hold. It's probably a good thing that men are the ones who wound up with dicks. It's like they were all given one built in stick for emergencies.

"I'm Nolan, by the way," he says once he finally peels his attention from the walking stick. "Jameson's more talented business partner. I don't think we've officially met."

He holds out his hand for me to shake and pointedly keeps his eyes on mine. They don't wander one bit. I don't consider myself to be some impossible to resist seductress, but I admire the man for not gawking at my obviously attention-seeking costume. He must be a good friend to Jameson. "Hi. I'm Charli."

"Jameson has tried to avoid telling me much about you," Nolan says. "But his attempts to keep you secret kind of tell me all I need to know. He must really like you."

"And he's standing right here," Jameson says. "Thank you for introducing yourself, Nolan. Now kindly fuck off. We have mixing to do."

"I also want to say I'm sorry about your story. I'm really hoping we're able to pry it back from Landmark's hands and publish it for you." Nolan takes one last longing look at the walking stick, then heads off to join a circle of men in costume who are having an animated discussion about something.

"So," I say. We stop by a table full of finger foods. Jameson is happily filling a plate with a little bit of everything. I just stay at his side, holding his stick for him while he loads up because

I'm too nervous to eat right now. I have to admit it *is* a nice stick. There's something about the weight of it that is satisfying, and—*nope*. I'm not going to get caught up in how nice this stupid stick is.

“What’s the deal with all the joint stuff between Gray Wolfe and Landmark, anyway?” I ask. “If you guys hate each other so much, I don’t see the point in mixing.”

Jameson shrugs. “Before things got so tense, it was kind of a peacemaking idea. Nolan suggested it. I think Griffon only agreed because he wanted to use these to try to poach employees and ideas from us.”

“And you’ve kept it up all these years?”

“The poaching goes both ways. Besides, I love a good rivalry. It’s fun to hate their guts. I think Griffon sees these as an opportunity to remind us how behind they’ve put us.”

I shake my head. “If it’s anything like the way I’ve felt toward Vaughn since the breakup, I’d say it’s more like mentally exhausting. I can’t imagine willfully keeping it going for so long.”

“Well, you’re handling it like a champ. Seriously. Those pranks you pulled on him so far? Fucking fantastic.”

I smirk. “That is mostly just my friends. Roxie loves a good excuse for payback, and Gemmaline is just sweet, so she’s probably happy to feel like there’s something she can do to help. I do have to admit it was *really* satisfying to get your text about how much the pranks bothered him.”

“Well, you have good friends.” Jameson finally runs out of room on his plate. He stops a few steps from the table, eyes on Nolan, who is still with the same group. “Nolan and I have

always been close, but running a business together changed things.”

“I can see how it would,” I say. “That’s a lot to manage with a friendship being thrown in the mix.”

“Yeah,” he says, and for a moment, he looks impossibly sad. Clearly, there’s something going on there, but I don’t want to push him to share.

“Um,” I say. “I feel like I need to tell you something.”

“Okay?” He looks concerned.

I bite my lip, trying to find the best way to put this. “When you mentioned you personally put money towards this, I realized this is kind of your party. And then I felt really bad for not running this by you before I did it. I could maybe still call it off if I get on the phone soon enough.”

His eyes narrow. “Call what off?”

“It was sort of Roxie’s idea. Well, not the details, but the thought of messing with Vaughn at the party. He is always so sensitive about being masculine and seen as this womanizer. I thought it would be hilarious if a squad of male strippers came in and gave him a lap dance here—especially if they make it clear that he hired them.” I wince. “I did ask them to dress Halloween themed, though, so it’s not like it would completely spoil the vibe of the party, right?”

Jameson laughs, throwing his head back. I think he would clap if his hands weren’t full with his plate in one and a little sandwich in the other. “Fuck! That’s amazing. *Yes*. Listen.” He sets down his plate on the edge of a table and cups my face with both hands. “Don’t ever apologize for hiring male strippers to embarrass your shitty ex. Understand? That is amazing.”

I smile. “You think it’s a good idea?”

“It’s an amazing idea. When are they going to be here?”

“Like ten minutes maybe if they are on time?”

“Then we don’t have long. Come on.” Jameson stuffs another mini sandwich in his mouth, dusts off his hands, and takes mine, leading me straight toward Vaughn and Aubrey.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Just saying a friendly ‘hello’ to my business rival and his date.”

I try to resist, but there’s no point. Jameson practically drags me straight up to Vaughn, who turns and notices us at the last moment. The pair of men he’s talking to with Aubrey drift off as Vaughn’s eyes widen with recognition.

He looks at me, then my hand in Jameson’s, then back to me, to my chest, my crotch, and back to where our hands are joined. “Charli?” he breathes.

Looking him in the face for the first time like this is surreal. The last time he spoke to me directly, we were still dating. He was making sure I understood how annoyed he was that I had the nerve to ask to come to the convention. I think he was even accusing me of only dating him for his publishing connections.

I’m overcome by a sudden urge to punch him. I manage to hold it back, deciding standing at Jameson’s side and glaring hard is good enough.

“Charli?” Aubrey asks. “Do you two know each other?”

I’m not usually the type to blame the person a cheater cheats with. I mean, the person in the relationship is the one with the most responsibility, right? In this case, I think I will happily blame both of them, considering Aubrey at least has to know

she didn't write the book her name is being put on. "We dated," I say.

"I think there might have actually been some overlap," Jameson adds.

I nearly snort with sudden laughter. It's such a simple, beautiful way to put things.

Aubrey's smooth forehead creases, and she looks to Vaughn. "What does he mean?"

Vaughn still seems to be in a state of shock. Now that I'm looking more closely at him, I feel like I can see he's not his usual self. There are circles under his eyes, and he usually takes his sleep so seriously. I feel the tiniest pang of guilt when I think maybe my little pranks could be playing a part, and then I mentally slap myself for feeling bad. He deserves every bit of what has come his way and what's about to come.

"Um," he says. He's holding a glass of the orange and black drink in his hand. The colors have mixed together though, and the whipped cream on top is blurring to make it a brownish mess in his hand. "We dated. Yeah."

"What does he mean there was an overlap?" Aubrey is facing him now with both hands on her small waist. She sounds pissed more than hurt. I will at least give her credit for being just as in the dark as I was. That much seems clear.

"Listen, baby. Charli has always been a little—"

Crazy. I can almost hear the word about to come out of his mouth, because it's exactly the kind of thing he liked to do to me. He'd throw me under the bus if he ever had to save face. I was disposable, like an emotional shield he would use at will. I was too busy trying to be a good girlfriend to stop and wonder why I was putting up with his shit.

Only this time, the word doesn't come out, because Jameson takes a very aggressive step forward, invading Vaughn's space. The closeness emphasizes how much bigger and taller Jameson is than Vaughn.

"Careful," is all Jameson says. He may have claimed not to be a "front puncher", but when he's looming over Vaughn, I'm suddenly very confident Jameson is more than capable of knocking Vaughn on his ass if he decides to.

Vaughn looks up at him, eyebrows twitching together for a moment in confusion. He seems surprised to be threatened, and like he's trying to decide if he has the balls to stand up to the confrontation. After a moment of hesitation, he raises the two fingers holding his glass and his other palm, stepping back a half foot. "Who can keep all the dates straight," Vaughn says, laughing a little.

"Does she know?" I ask. I didn't plan to ask or confront him. I still haven't so much as texted, called, or even talked to him about what he did. Well, I did send him the shortest breakup text in the history of breakup texts before blocking his number, but I don't count that. I just couldn't bring myself to ask him why he would steal my book. What could he have said that would make me feel any better about what he did?

"Know what?" Aubrey asks.

"Does she know who wrote the story you're slapping her name on?"

The look on Aubrey's face isn't surprised like when Jameson mentioned an "overlap" in the time Vaughn spent dating Aubrey and me. This time, she looks guarded and worried. She looks like she's wondering how I know she didn't write the story, because she knows damn well she didn't. Any points I was willing to award her go down the drain. "We don't know

what you're talking about," she says. Now she is hooking her arm in Vaughn's and smiling. The expression seems full of plastic and fake things.

"I saw you two at the convention," Vaughn says, ignoring my question and Aubrey's reaction. All he cares about is his wounded pride. "How long was this going on, Charli? You and Jameson behind my back."

I'm opening my mouth in absolute shock. Is he seriously going to try to turn himself into some sort of victim? He told me to stay home and brought another woman to an author's convention to parade her around as the author of a book he stole from me. He was probably fucking her for months before that. All that, and he tries to turn things around on me?

Vaughn sniffs and his lips turn up in a sneer. "I always knew you were a slut. You show up in... *that*," he says, gesturing to my costume. "And you just go fucking your way from one powerful man in publishing to another, don't you? Because you always knew your book wasn't good enough to stand on its own, didn't you? You were always so goddamn unsure and insecure. It was exhausting. Why do you think I had to cheat?"

"Please," Jameson says. His voice is a dangerous, low sound. It makes me picture some big predatory animal crouched in tall grass, waiting for its moment to strike. "Set him straight," he says, looking at me.

I raise my eyebrows. I was expecting him to jump in and defend my honor. I think I *wanted* him to. But then I realize he probably feels like I deserve the chance to defend myself. My feelings for Jameson swell in a warm, pleasant rush. Most guys probably would just punch Vaughn right now, or they'd start yelling and insulting him. But Jameson is different. He wants me to grow from this, I think. He wants me to feel

closure and have the chance to know I spoke my mind and faced my demons.

“You’re wrong,” I say. Okay, not exactly the best start, but my throat feels like it’s being gripped by an invisible hand and I’m trying not to speak in that “I’m about to cry any second out of pure nerves” crack in my voice. I take a few deep breaths and focus on the ugly look Vaughn is giving me—like I’m something he stepped on and wishes he could get off his shoe.

“Wrong?” He laughs. “That’s rich, coming from—”

“No,” I say. “It’s my turn to talk. You know, the worst part about dating you was that you actually made me feel like the one who was in the wrong. I thought I was being a bad girlfriend because you had to tell me ponytails made my ears look big, or that I looked ridiculous when I wore that blue dress I love, or that I was chewing like a cow and that’s why you made a scene and got us to leave dinner with your friends early. I thought it was my fault that I couldn’t lose more weight for you or find time to exercise like the girls you were always showing me on your phone. I thought you were trying to motivate me and *I* was the one in the wrong for letting it hurt my feelings.” I shake my head, because the memories alone are making suppressed emotions try to raise up from the depths. “But it was just you. The whole time it was only you. You couldn’t feel good about yourself without putting everyone else down, could you? Without putting *me* down? I was just some emotional punching bag to you, and I’m so glad I finally found somebody who appreciates me for me.” I put my arm around Jameson’s and realize I mean what I just said. I really am glad I found him, even if I am bitterly confused about what happens next with us.

Vaughn is just glaring, though. If any of my words really sank in, he's not letting it show. He rolls his eyes at me and folds his arms. "Feel better, Charli? Been waiting to get that off your chest, have you?"

"I do. Yes. I feel much better."

"Well, let me tell you—"

He's cut off by a chorus of whoops and cheers.

I look, and I see four men in various skimpy costumes dance walking through the room toward us. One of them is doing congo fists in his little tiger speedo and mask. Another is pumping up the crowd, raising his arms and shouting something I can't quite hear. A third cups his hands around his mouth. He's in a police uniform with a leather vest and booty shorts. "Where's the bad boy? We're here to punish the bad boy!"

Several people laugh and someone does a dramatic "ooh".

"Was this your idea?" Vaughn asks Jameson. "Strippers? Really? At a work party?"

"Our bad boy goes by the name Vaughn Vanderlesh. Come out, come out, wherever you are, Vaughnie boy! You paid top dollar for our time, baby. No point hiding now!"

The people around us start moving away and pointing. Aubrey is tilting her head at Vaughn, our confrontation already forgotten as the attention of the entire room is turning toward her boyfriend.

I take a few steps back with Jameson so Vaughn and Aubrey are now at the center of a growing crowd. The crowd parts ways for the stripper parade to dance its way toward him. They punch through into the open center where Aubrey has

abandoned Vaughn to stand all by himself in his silly little devil “costume.”

“There he is,” the police stripper says. He pulls out a floppy baton that I realize is actually a big, thin dildo. He holds it over one shoulder and purses his lips. “Boys? Get him!”

“What the hell is this?” Vaughn asks.

“Don’t play stupid, Vaughnie boy. You gave us very specific instructions. You paid for a dirty lap dance, and you’re getting what you paid for.”

Jameson looks down at me, and I can’t help laughing, because his eyes are practically glistening like he’s falling in love with me for this.

I give his arm a squeeze, leaning in and smiling. It really is beautiful watching the way Vaughn is squirming and trying to argue as someone pulls up a chair and sits him down.

The cowboy stripper starts tying Vaughn up while the tiger and pro wrestler stripper holds him still.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” Vaughn snaps. “Do you have any idea who I am?”

“We know exactly who you are,” the officer says, leaning in close. “You’re a bad, bad boy, aren’t you, Sweetheart?” He punctuates his question by violently pulling his vest off, then tossing it to the ground. He points the dildo stick at Vaughn, then aggressively flips around, bending over at the waist with an impressive show of flexibility.

Vaughn tries to look away, but the pro wrestler stripper holds his head from behind, making him look at the officer’s ass. Technically they *are* touching him, but at least the touching isn’t sexual. He could also close his eyes, but he’s keeping them wide, whether out of defiance or fascination, I can’t say.

Everybody is laughing and clapping. The strippers all start prancing around, dancing and taking turns doing elaborate moves in front of Vaughn, who looks absolutely livid.

The madness goes on for a solid minute or two before Griffon Vanderlesh storms through the crowd, takes one look at the strippers, his son, and then Nolan. He inserts himself into the mix, shoving the men away from his son. “This is over the line, Gray.” He points an accusatory finger at Nolan as everybody backs up a half step.

Nolan holds up his hands. “Don’t point at me. Your son apparently hired them.”

“Bullshit,” Vaughn shouts as his father unties him. He gets up, moving to jab a finger into Nolan’s chest. “This just proves all the those posters were you assholes all along.”

Jameson leaves my side and pushes Vaughn away from Nolan. “Get your finger off him,” he warns. “And be careful about the accusations you throw around.”

“Be careful who you fuck with,” Griffon counters.

The police officer sticks his face in the middle of the confrontation. “Sorry if this is a bad time, but our customers usually tip. We take Venmo or Cashapp. I’ll just leave my card.” He sticks a card in the breast pocket of Vaughn’s jacket and gives it a pat, then winks.

The four strippers stroll off to the bar and a small group of women follow after them.

The crowd is dispersing, but Nolan is still squared off with Griffon and Jameson is facing Vaughn. Both men look like they might come to blows at any moment. I don’t want them to fight.

I hurry to Jameson and take his arm. “Come on. Vaughn probably needs to walk off his erection after that.”

Vaughn’s eyes blaze with sudden rage. “What did you just say?”

Okay, maybe that wasn’t my best attempt at diffusing a fight.

Jameson steps between us this time. He let me have my chance to put Vaughn in his place before the strippers. I can see now how hard he must’ve been holding back. I’ve never seen Jameson look so mad. “Give me an excuse,” he says. He’s speaking in a completely normal, but quiet voice. Jameson’s body language says he’s ready to hit Vaughn, but his voice is calm. The contrast is chilling, and Vaughn must feel it too.

He lowers his eyes immediately and shakes his head. “You’d love that, wouldn’t you? Give the big oaf an excuse to solve things with his fists.”

Jameson’s voice is still low and dangerous. “I don’t usually, but I’ll make an exception for you. Happily.”

Vaughn raises his eyes again. “You know what? Maybe you should take your little slut somewh—”

That’s as far as he gets before Jameson’s arm rockets straight out. There’s a sound like brick’s cracking together and Vaughn is on his back, touching his cheek.

Jameson is looming over him, feet planted wide and hands bunched into fists. “Well?”

I’m not sure what Jameson is expecting Vaughn to say, but I’m also not exactly sure what goes through the heads of men who get in fist fights. *Probably not a whole lot.*

“Get off me,” Vaughn manages through clenched teeth.

Jameson steps off him and gestures, as if Vaughn needs reminding where the exit is. “If you’re planning to press charges, just contact our legal department directly.” There’s a dismissive tone to Jameson’s words, as if no part of him even expects Vaughn to do anything but go running to the authorities.

Vaughn glares up at him and gets to his feet, straightening his clothes. Griffon Vanderlesh is watching, along with a huge crowd of Landmark and Grey Wolfe employees, who have all gone completely silent. It’s not every day you see your boss punch out the son of your rival company’s boss, after all.

For a minute, I think Vaughn might actually try to hit Jameson back. Then he unclenches his fists and scoffs. “Fuck you,” Vaughn says, storming off without another word.

Jameson spreads his arms, smiling, as if nothing happened. “Who doesn’t love a good old healthy rivalry, right?”

There is a scattering of nervous laughter. Nolan emerges and gives Jameson’s shoulder a squeeze. “I promise Jameson won’t punch anyone else. Let’s all just get back to having fun.”

“Or else I’ll start punching!” Jameson announces, still smiling.

This time, his words get some real laughter and seem to break the spell the fight caused. The DJ turns up the music and people start dispersing to enjoy the party again.

“I feel kind of guilty about all that,” I admit once Jameson’s attention is back on me. “I hope I didn’t goad you two into that.”

“Nah,” Jameson says. He eyes his knuckles, which are red, but otherwise unscathed. “I may not typically be the punching type, but some guys really need to be punched. I think it’s the

only medicine that will get through to them. Vaughn might be one of those guys.”

I grin. “I can’t believe I hired strippers to dance for him in front of everybody.”

Jameson matches my smile. “That was fucking amazing. *You* were amazing. I’m proud of you. Seriously. You handled that perfectly.”

“Thank you for letting me,” I say. “At first, I wanted you to jump in from the start. But I feel better. I stood up to him and spoke my mind. Maybe none of it sank in for him, but it felt really good to know I had the courage to say it. So, thank you for that.”

“Any time.”

“Hey,” I say slowly. “You told me I couldn’t know the full story behind you hating Vaughn—that it was part of your mystery. Do I get to know yet?”

He chuckles. “I guess a man of mystery has to eventually give up his secrets, huh?”

“That’s right. Spill it, mystery man.”

“When Nolan and I were just getting started, Landmark was already huge. We were making good ground and had already signed contracts with a few authors. Then, out of nowhere, we got resignation notices one after the other. Our agents were quitting and our authors were declining to sign with us on future books. Turns out Vaughn Vanderlesh was trying to get a good start with his father by spreading lies. I guess he figured he could make a good impression with Daddy by sabotaging an up-and-comer.”

“Wow. But what was he telling people?”

Jameson's expression sours. "Lies. He claimed I was sexually involved with several of our female authors and employees. Simultaneously. He managed to convince people they would be next, and that I was only in the business to abuse my power and get into people's pants."

My stomach twists. I wish I could say I can't believe him, but I can see Vaughn doing something exactly like that. Worse, I can see his father being proud of him for the idea. "What happened? I mean, you guys seem to have overcome it. How?"

"I managed to get everybody together and prove his stories were bullshit. The women he said I slept with came forward and verified we'd never been involved. It was a mess, and I don't think I ever fully got the stain off my name, but we moved on. We got over it. Well, mostly. I've always wanted to pay that little asshole back."

"I don't blame you," I say. "Thank you for telling me, though."

We spend the next few hours finally enjoying the party. Jameson goes back to his piled high plate of finger foods and makes short work of them. He gets a picture of us with the costumed actors. We both laugh when I scream so hard I nearly pee myself in the haunted house because some jerk with a fake chainsaw pops out and starts chasing me. We even dance as the party starts to wind down and the first waves of people leave. First, we dance fun and wild and then we dance slow, with his hands all over me and our bodies dangerously close.

I let him kiss me on the dance floor and I don't even bother to look and see if Vaughn is watching. I don't care if he is or isn't. The first part of the party was about paying him back. This part is for me.

Neither of us seem ready for the night to be over, but midnight passes and almost everyone has left. We sit in two cheap metal chairs at the back corner of the room together. And then we sit on one chair, because he beckons me into his lap, and my skimpy costume has me feeling chilly, so I cuddle into his warmth gladly.

“Well,” he says. “That was fun.”

“It was,” I agree. My mind has started turning toward what’s next, though. Everything we agreed on led up to this moment. Nothing ever went past this. The Halloween mixer was an endpoint. A goal. And now we’ve reached it.

“Did you notice Vaughn and Aubrey didn’t leave together?” he asks.

I grin. “No. I didn’t, actually. Once the stripper thing was over, I kind of got distracted with you.”

He chuckles, and the vibration of his amusement rumbles straight through his chest into me. “I like that I distracted you. Did tonight help? I know the book thing is still unresolved...” he pauses so long I think he’s about to say more, but then he pushes on. “But did tonight help you maybe feel like he got some of what he deserved for the way he treated you?”

“It did,” I say. “I’m sure Roxie is still going to have some more childish ideas for getting him back, and maybe I’ll listen to some of them. But, yeah, honestly it feels different now. I want my book back, but I just... don’t care about him. Not even to be mad. That’s progress, right?”

“It is.”

“So have the legal people said what’s taking them so long?”

He hesitates again, and for the first time I wonder what it is he’s not telling me. Did they already give him bad news and

he's just trying to save my feelings? "I think it'll all get worked out," he says, not exactly answering my question. He looks like he's about to say more, but decides to stay silent.

I'm exhausted after everything, so I just nod my head and let it drop. I've been anticipating tonight for what feels like ages, I had to get through dinner with my family, and then there was all the activity of the night. "I think I could fall into bed and be asleep before my head hits the pillow," I say, yawning.

"Stay at my place. I wouldn't mind the company."

I pick at my nail, not sure how to answer.

"I know," he says softly. "We only planned it up to this point. But this was so much fun. What if we run it back for a repeat at the Christmas party in a couple months?"

I turn, looking up at him. "Christmas is a ways off. You really think we should keep up this act for that long?"

"Charli, I already told you. I haven't been acting. I'm happy to call things whatever you want to call them. I'll play along with any game it takes to make you comfortable. So, yeah. I think we keep it up till Christmas. And then I'll figure out some excuse to make it go on longer after that. And I'll keep it up as long as I need to, because I have no intentions of letting you walk out of my life."

I chew my lip and sink into him a little more. His arms tighten around me, pulling me closer.

"The Christmas party," I say carefully. "You know, Christmas is right around when Landmark is planning to publish the book."

"Really?" he asks.

I nod. "I still get Vaughn's work emails."

“Well, we can’t have them celebrating stealing your book in peace, can we?”

“No,” I laugh, but I don’t feel the humor. I feel empty when I think about it getting closer—when I think about them actually putting my book out there without my name on it and not being able to do anything about it.

“I decided I won’t just sit down and take it quietly,” I say. “I thought a lot about it. If your legal team can’t help and they end up publishing it, I mean. I was thinking I could do some kind of post on social media. I have save files on my computer with earlier drafts and everything. Maybe it won’t do anything, but I’ll tell my side of things. I’ll make sure at least some people know they are thieves.”

Jameson sighs. “That’s good,” he says.

Once again, there’s something he’s not saying. I can feel it. I know I shouldn’t trust anyone after what Vaughn just put me through, but I do trust Jameson. I trust him to have my best interest at heart, and I trust him not to hold anything back from me that I’d need to know. So I just close my eyes and let him hold me. I let myself hold on to the flimsy excuse to stay together, as if we both don’t know the feelings between us aren’t pretend or part of the act.

JAMESON

I'm not sure what time it is, but it's well into the dark hours of early morning, thunder rumbles outside my windows, and Charli is in my kitchen.

It would be perfect if not for the elephant hiding in the fucking room. Every passing hour, I'm more tempted to blurt out the truth to her, but doing that would feel like betraying Nolan. I press the thoughts back down into the depths again, hoping to distract myself with how good she looks.

She's still wearing most of her costume, though she has ditched the jacket and now she's just in the skimpy little one-piece that looks sinfully good on her. She let her hair down and I can barely look at her without scooping her up and dragging her straight to my bedroom. But I'm trying to be a gentleman. Charli makes me want to be a little less of my usual, irreverent self. I like that about her.

I push a plate with a PB&J toward her. She thanks me and takes a big bite.

"I've always been a terrible cook," I admit. "I used to make millions of these for myself and my sisters growing up. My parents were notorious when it came to forgetting to make sure we were fed. Sometimes they'd go out and weren't even home when we got off the bus from school."

“Wow,” she says softly. “I can’t really imagine that. I got really lucky with my parents. I’m sorry you had to take so much on yourself.”

I shake my head. “It’s not a big deal. Some people aren’t cut out to be parents. But kids are resilient, right? I survived. My sisters are fine.”

“Yeah, but... I’m sad for you. I mean, I still have dinner with my family every Sunday. I run almost everything by them. Life is just easier with a support system.”

“So they know about me?” I ask, suddenly interested to hear her response.

She counters with a question of her own. “Do your sisters know about *me*?”

“Sort of. I told them there’s a girl I am obsessed with. I said she’s been through a lot, so it’s hard for her to open up and trust another guy to take care of her. So we’re pretending all the time we’re spending together is just about getting revenge on Vaughn for both our sakes, but that I’m completely head over heels for her.”

I wait, watching Charli’s mouth hang open. “Oh,” she says quietly. “I just told my family you’re older and it wasn’t anything serious.”

I laugh.

Her cheeks go red and she takes a few moments in silence, running her fingertips along the crust of her still untouched sandwich. “Do you mean all those things you told your sisters?”

“I do.”

She swallows. “When I first met you, I thought you were the kind of man who probably plays with women’s emotions all the time. Says what he needs to say to get in their pants, then moves on when he gets bored. I didn’t expect you to be... so much more than that.”

“Neither did I. You had me pegged pretty accurately, to be honest. Except that I’ve always put work first. It has never been toying with people to toy with them. It’s that some point comes and I always have to choose. The women or the work. It’s hard to be really good at both, and I know work is all Nolan has. If I choose a woman over work, I’m letting my friend down, too.” I can feel a little desperation in my words. I know what I’m doing to Charli. Every moment I don’t tell her what I know from the legal team, I’m choosing work over her. I’m being the same old me, no matter what I tell her. But maybe if she understands where I’m coming from, the truth won’t hurt as much if she finds out. Or maybe it’s not the same, because I think there’s a way it will all work out well for her in the end, even if Landmark publishes her book first.

She looks down. “I don’t think that sounds like a healthy outlook.”

“What do you mean?”

“No thing or person deserves every bit of you. I mean, yes, be monogamous and exclusive in a romantic relationship if that’s the expectation. Be loyal and hardworking at your job. But there should still be something left over. It shouldn’t feel like you can’t have both a job you care about and a person you care about. They should give you the space to do what’s important at work and still be there to support you when it’s all over.”

And my plan is failing faster and harder than I expected. Not only does she disagree with my sentiment, she’s making a

damn good point to counter it. Now I feel like even more of an asshole.

I rub the back of my neck. “Those are... pretty good points,” I say.

Her smile is crooked. “Yeah. I had a lot of time to think of them when Vaughn was always choosing work over me, I guess.”

And the cut goes deeper.

Fuck.

Not only am I being an asshole, I’m betraying her trust in almost exactly the same way as Vaughn. Am I even any different than that prick if I follow through with this?

“Anyway,” she says, laughing a little, like she’s embarrassed for speaking her mind so bluntly. “I’m not trying to guilt trip you or anything. I don’t expect you to change your life for me. I haven’t even been willing to stop calling this thing between us pretend, right? Who am I to talk about what’s fair or right?”

I hang my head. I want to tell her the truth right then. I want to do it so fucking badly, but I at least need to talk to Nolan first. I need to come up with some other plan to save our asses if I’m going to tell Charli the truth and get the book pulled from Landmark’s hands.

I make the decision at that moment. It’s tearing me up too much to keep moving forward with this plan of mine. Nolan will just have to forgive me, because I’m going to tell Charli as soon as I can. I’ll tell her that Vaughn screwed up the business registration on the app and lost any hope of stealing her book. I’ll even tell her what I was planning to do, because I want her to know everything when I ask her to forgive me for not telling her right away.

I'd tell her right now, but I owe it to Nolan to at least tell him first. I'll meet with him first thing in the morning and break the news. Then I'll find Charli and put it all in the open.

"You're not guilt tripping me," I say. "Don't apologize. And, hey, I was thinking. I read those first two chapters of your manuscript at the convention, but I never got to finish the book. Do you think I could read the rest of it?"

She's chewing a bite of her sandwich and freezes, mouth full and eyes wide. "What?" She gulps down the bite. "Um, I mean, you could. We still don't know if it's actually 'my' book, though. It's pretty bittersweet, even if you end up liking it."

"Nah," I say, shaking my head. "We'll get it back for you. I'm absolutely positive. So stop worrying."

"Okay," she says. She looks a little excited now, like the idea is growing on her. "Okay," she says again, more forcefully. "You really think you might want to publish it if we get it back? I kind of ran away with my tail between my legs when you offered the first time, so I thought maybe the offer wasn't on the table anymore."

I shrug. "Landmark seems to think it's good enough to steal. That's a start, right?"

She laughs. "That is a twisted start, but yeah, it's a start."

I clap my hands. "Perfect. Then it's a plan."

I watch her finish her sandwich while I feel all the weight start to lift from my shoulders.

I'm going to do the right thing by her. I can feel it. I know Nolan is going to be disappointed, but he'll live. Gray Wolfe will live. I'll think of something else—some other way to get us

back on our feet. I'm so sure of it that I almost blurt out everything to Charli.

But I wait, because I need to tell Nolan first. Maybe I feel like I owe it to my business partner to tell him first since I was the one who pitched this whole scheme as the hail mary to save Gray Wolfe. Or maybe I'm just a coward and hoping he'll offer up some other way to use this situation that doesn't involve screwing over Charli—some way that means I don't need to come clean and admit what an idiotic prick I was for even dreaming the idea up.

Right now, none of that can stop me from feeling like I'm in an insanely good mood. I can't think of a way tonight could have gone more perfectly, from the party to this. Even this small moment with her working on the sandwich I made her in her costume. It's fucking perfect.

There's only one thing I can think that could cap off the night—which is now morning, I guess.

“That costume looks like it isn't very comfortable,” I say slowly.

Her eyes lift up. “It's—” She hesitates, catching my intention. “It's definitely a little tight.”

“Those fishnet stockings must be really getting on your nerves.” I move around the counter, my focus sliding from her face to her long legs, which are crossed in front of her as she sits on the barstool at my kitchen island.

“Just terrible,” she breathes.

I lift a finger, beckoning her to stand.

I love how she does as I ask without hesitation. She stands, turns to face me, and waits, like my little sex puppet.

I move closer. Usually, I have trouble getting off if I don't play the game of submission and domination. Something about the power is attractive to me.

But tonight?

Tonight I don't want games. I just want Charli. Maybe I've only needed the games in the past because the women weren't enough for me.

But Charli is enough. Just Charli. Just her body and her mind.

"I have a request," I say. I pull her into my arms, chin resting on the top of her head.

"Okay."

"I want to admit that I'd like to fuck you. Not for practice. Not for some convoluted excuse of a revenge plot. I just want you because I can't stop thinking about you. I can't make myself believe anything matters more to me right now than the moments we're together. That *this* isn't what it's all about."

I can feel her breathing come faster. "I... I want this, too."

Relief pours through me. I didn't know how much I wanted to hear her say it without any pretense or qualifications until the words came out of her mouth. I squeeze her tighter. "Come on. No games tonight. Just us, okay?"

She pulls back a little, looking up. I wonder if she'll seem disappointed, because the way she responded to our first time together told me she was enjoying it. She looks excited, though. She nods quickly. "Okay."

We crawl into bed together and she slides up to me.

I kiss her slowly, taking my time. I run one hand along the curve of her waist and hips, forcing myself not to rush. I've wanted my hands on this body of hers all night. I've wanted to

feel the swell of her ass and squeeze. I've wanted to pull her body against mine and feel the hardness of my cock pinned between us. I've craved the friction of her sex against me and the heat of her breath on my neck.

I've wanted Charli McBride to be completely and totally mine, and the moment is here. I plan to enjoy it.

My hand eventually finds its way between her legs, rubbing through the fabric of her costume. She moans, arching against me. "Oh, God," she gasps.

I try to push the costume aside to get inside her with my fingers, but it's too tight. I struggle one-handedly while kissing her for a few seconds, then we both laugh at my failed attempts. She sits up for me and pulls the costume down, releasing her breasts.

I put my mouth on them while she tries to wiggle out of the costume. "Do you plan to help, or are you busy?" she asks.

I grin, taking my mouth away from her hardened nipples. I push her to her back and tug the thing off her. It really is tight, because she comes with it when I tug, sliding down the bed.

I have to practically peel her out of the costume, which involves a whole lot of my hands on her body and the gradual reward of more and more bare skin.

I finally get it off, strip away the fishnets, and she's completely naked. I start working on my own costume as I admire her form lying on my bed, but she sits up.

"Let me," she says, eyes gleaming with excitement.

I nod, watching as she crawls toward me, the shape of her ass inviting and absolutely perfect from this angle. I want to take her hips and plunge into her, but I also want to soak in these moments. I stand still, letting her small hands work at my

ringmaster jacket, the buttons on my shirt, and then my belt. I alternate my attention between her perfect body and the hunger in her eyes as she works at getting me undressed.

She laughs when she pulls down my underwear and my cock springs free, nearly slapping her in the face.

I chuckle. It feels good. This isn't the kind of sex we had last time. It's not scripted, like some well practiced routine. It's not the perfectly crafted orgasm generating experience. It's real. It's natural. It's a little awkward, a little fun, and not like anything I've ever shared with a woman before.

I crawl back on the bed, pushing her until her head is on the pillows and she's lying down for me. I kiss my way down her body, taking a significant detour at her chest as I enjoy her with my hands and my mouth. I love the way she squirms beneath me and how her legs are not so sneakily brushing against my length as she moves, like she can't stop herself from trying to feel me.

She gasps a little when I kiss down from her breasts and toward her belly because she can probably guess what I'm planning to do.

I push her legs apart, kissing her inner thighs and up toward her knees, teasing her just a little—making her wonder if I'm going to kiss her where she really wants me to, or just everywhere *but* there.

I hold her by the back of the knee, lifting her leg and kissing, teasing her with my tongue while I watch her watching me. She's breathing hard, breasts rising and falling with nipples still hardened into perfect points for me.

“Whew,” I say, trying not to smile. “I'm pretty worn out. Maybe we should call it a night here.”

“Don’t you dare,” she warns. The way she’s glaring at me is hilarious and adorable.

I laugh, but she looks deadly serious. I bite my lip and shrug. “I have to admit you have the most beautiful fucking pussy I’ve ever seen. I want to taste it.”

She takes in a breath and holds it, watching me.

I hook my arms under her legs, hands on her knees, pushing them all the way apart as I plunge down, kissing the sensitive flesh above her clit. She shakes with anticipation and my cock is so hard it is actually painful every time my blood pumps to it.

I tease her, brushing my lips gently across her before swiping softly with my tongue. I bring one hand in as well, circling her while I run my tongue along her folds and then I plunge my fingers inside her, fingers and mouth working in unison.

I feel less like I’m carefully executing the correct movements to get her off and more like I’m just letting go. The moment is carrying me. I’m devouring her pussy and absolutely loving the sounds it’s making come from her. She’s squirming like she’s trying to break free. She’s bucking against me and she’s so wet against my fingers that I can’t help imagining how good it will feel for my cock to take their place in her waiting heat.

She comes hard.

Her whole body shivers and shudders. She curls up on herself and has to push my face away, laughing a little as she breathlessly smiles. She pauses for just a moment, hesitating but also confident because she’s getting more comfortable with me. “I want to ride you,” she says.

And just like that, I'm in love. My face must light up, because she laughs, bringing her teeth over her lower lip and biting.

"Is that okay?" she asks a moment later.

"Fuck," is all I can manage to say. I hop on my back and tug her on me.

She laughs again, climbing over me and looking like the image of perfection. She reaches between us, positioning me at her entrance. The amusement in her face immediately melts into a gasp when my cock touches her. She lowers herself, taking me in slowly.

I'm impatient, so I pull her down, pushing myself into her as I feel her walls having to stretch to make room for me. She moans, leaning forward and squeezing hard on my shoulders with her breasts in my face.

And then she starts to ride me.

She bounces on me, slowly at first with her eyes closed. She grips my chest, squeezing as she pulls herself forward, grinding her hips into me.

I'm in fucking heaven. I want to close my eyes but I also don't want to take them off her. I watch her body move. I watch the way her lips part and her chest heaves. I listen to the occasional "Mmm" sounds that spill from her. It's so goddamn perfect.

Her breasts bounce as she increases her pace. She's sitting up straight now, hands on her own chest as she bounces.

My hands are on her hips, pulling her down into my thrusts.

And then she bends forward, cupping my face and kissing me. She breaks the kisses every few seconds and just stares into my eyes.

This isn't just sex.

The significance of what we're doing is in the way she's looking at me as our bodies move and our worlds collide. This is so much more than sex.

Something has been empty inside me for so long I've almost forgotten to notice it. That place feels like it's filling up as we look into each other's eyes. If I had any doubts about telling her the truth and admitting my fucked up plan, they're gone. This woman deserves the full and absolute truth from me. She deserves to be protected and cherished.

"Oh God," she says, dropping her head and pressing her forehead into the crook of my neck. Her teeth bite down on my collar bone gently as her body quivers.

I've barely been holding back, so the moment I feel her orgasm, I let mine go as well.

A few minutes later, we're still lying naked and sweaty in my bed. I'm on my back and she's on my chest, fingertips idly roaming my hot skin. "That was... different," she says.

"Different how?" I ask, even though I know exactly what she means. I'm just curious to hear how it felt for her.

"Like I've been trying to keep my heart safe this whole time. But you were right when you told me that first day. You're a rogue. You stole it right out of my chest, and now I don't think I want to ask for it back."

I grin. "I borrowed it. But I have to admit I'm the kind of guy who borrows stuff and forgets to give it back."

She laughs quietly. "It's scary to trust someone again. When everything happened with Vaughn, I knew I shouldn't have cared about the relationship the way I did. It wasn't losing him that felt like everything was ending. It was more like I lost the

trust in myself to be responsible with my feelings. I didn't think I could listen to my heart anymore—like I needed to cage it up and keep it safe.”

“And then you let me take it for a ride. Big mistake.”

“Big mistake,” she agrees.

We are laying in comfortable silence and all I can think is how I want to tell her now. I *should* tell her now, maybe, but I owe it to Nolan to at least tell him what's going to happen first. Charli said Landmark isn't going to publish until near Christmas, and one more day isn't going to damage her book's chances. I'll talk to Nolan first thing in the morning and then I'll talk to Charli right after that, just like I planned.

I'm thinking about telling her I love her. But maybe that's crazy. Not crazy to say, because I'm pretty sure it's how I feel. It's crazy because she's still like that turtle from when I was a kid. She can scare easily, so I'll just hold on to that one for a little while longer.

For now, tonight is enough for me. It's more than enough.

I kiss her forehead and close my eyes. “Good night,” Charli.

“It's six in the morning,” she laughs. “I think you have to say good morning.”

“Good morning, then. But it was a damn good night.”

JAMESON

“Fuck,” Nolan says. He’s in the chair in his office and looks dejected.

“I can’t do it to her,” I say. “I kept figuring things would go the way they usually do. Once the fun wears off, I get bored or just realize it’s not worth the hassle to keep up with a relationship. But it isn’t happening. It’s only getting worse. I’m thinking about her all the time, Nolan. All the fucking time.” I run both hands up my face and through my hair. “I feel like I’m losing my mind. And the idea of letting Landmark put her book out there with someone else’s name on it? Shit. It has been making me want to put my fist through a wall. We can’t go through with it.”

Nolan temples his fingers in front of his face. “So let me just be sure I’m understanding this.”

I brace myself. I can hear it in his tone. He’s not just a little pissed. He’s on the verge of nuclear.

“The woman you met, what, two weeks ago?”

“More like three...” I say.

He dismisses my reply with a quick jerk of his hand. “This woman you just met. She’s more important than our company? The company we’ve spent years building? Your plan is a good

one. It's a *great* plan. If we stick to it, Landmark will have shit all over their faces and we'll come out shining. Your girl will get her book published, which is more than most talented authors in the world can ever hope to say about their work. Sure, she has to stress for a few more months. Maybe the reception won't be as explosive for a book that gets published and then unpublished with controversy, but so fucking what? Life isn't easy. She should be grateful to get even this much from us."

I know there's a touch of truth in what Nolan is saying. Talented or not. Beautiful writing or not. Authors these days are lucky to get any eyes on their story. Having a publisher like Gray Wolfe is more good fortune than most people could hope for. But my aversion to the idea goes beyond logic.

"I just can't do it to her," I say, shaking my head. "I can't."

Nolan's expression hardens. "Then I'll do it for you."

"We're partners. I can't let you do it, either. It's not happening, Nolan. We're going to find another way."

"Like hell we are." He slams his fist on the desk. "I'll call her and tell her the plan myself. I'll explain how grateful she should be."

"Fuck you," I say between my teeth.

He shakes his head at me, disappointment clear in every line of his face. "So this is how it goes, huh? Throw it all away over some woman? Everything we worked for?"

"Only if you make it all or nothing," I say, voice icy.

He spreads his palms. "It's her or us. And don't think if you do this, I'll ever sign off on publishing her story. I'll fight it every step of the way."

I glare at my friend. I wish I could say I couldn't see this coming from him, but I knew he'd probably react this way when I decided to have this conversation. This is Nolan at his core. Ruthless. He will push every button and pull every lever at his disposal if he thinks it will lead him towards his goals. He thinks I'm sabotaging the company, and he's not going to pull any punch in his attempt to stop me.

"Are we done?" I ask.

He holds my eyes, then clicks his tongue and shakes his head. "Looks like we are. But this isn't over."

"My part in it certainly is. I'll tell you when I've come up with another plan that doesn't involve fucking over an innocent woman."

"Right. Because you're the one who prefers to fuck the innocent women, right?"

I don't dignify that with a response. I'm fuming when I leave his office. I'm still fuming when I sit down at my desk. I chuck a paperweight at my wall and watch it explode into a shower of glass.

I need to calm down before I tell Charli what's happening. I don't want to scare her. I want her to understand her book is safe, and I don't want her to sense all this bullshit behind the scenes. I take a deep breath and start mentally preparing for a conversation that might go even worse than the one I just had with Nolan.

CHARLI

I do a little spin, smiling and spreading my arms. I know Dani is rolling her eyes without needing to look.

“Are you going to thank me?” she asks.

We’re in my apartment and she’s on the couch. Gemmaline and Roxie are in the kitchen bickering over the best way to cook grilled cheese. Gemmaline thinks less is more when it comes to cheese. Roxie is trying to argue that “inside out” grilled cheese is God’s gift to women. She also says it tastes better if you toast the bread with mayo instead of butter. Gemmaline is making gagging noises at the thought of mayo toasted bread, but they’re both smiling.

“Thank you?” I ask.

“I’m the one who suggested getting over Vaughn by getting under Jameson from the start,” Dani says, pressing on. “You acted like that was crazy. And now look who is doing satisfied orgasm spins in her living room?”

I pull a face and plop down on the couch. “As far as my family is concerned, sex does not exist. I don’t know how many times we need to go over this.”

“Blah blah. We’re all sexual creatures and even my innocent little sister likes a good dicking down from time to time. No

need to be so skittish about it.”

I press my palms over my eyes, cringing.

“She’s right,” Roxie calls from the kitchen. “Only I think you both should try swinging both ways before you knock it. Like, sure, I enjoy dick as much as the next girl. But sometimes a little clamshell can be the perfect palate cleanser.”

“Could you all just not?” I ask.

“Leave her alone,” Gemmaline says. “She’s happy. We should just be happy for her. Not trying to get her to thank us or try lesbian sex,” she says, shooting Dani a look and then Roxie. “And ew, I saw that. I’m not going anywhere near your freaking grilled cheese if you try to make me. Mayonnaise is not a substitute for butter. I don’t care what you tell me. That is the stuff of nightmares.”

The smell of cooking bread fills my apartment.

My phone rings and I look down at the number.

“Is it your boy toy?” Dani asks.

“Hm, no. But I’ve been applying for some jobs. I should take this.” I get up and walk to the back of the room. In a shocker to nobody, my measly savings is drying up at an alarming rate ever since the breakup.

“Hello?”

“Hi, is this Charli McBride?” The voice on the other end is unfamiliar. It’s a young woman’s voice.

“Yes?”

“I’m Kiana with Gray Wolfe’s legal team. Mr. Gray just called and asked if I could gather some contact info from you so we can proceed with the takedown notices..”

“Um, wait. What takedown notices?”

There’s a pause.

“For Landmark,” she says slowly, as if she’s explaining something I should already understand. “Mr. Wolfe told me he was going to fill you in on all the details a few days ago.”

“Tell me what?”

“Oh, um. Well, we let him know a few days ago that we would be able to get your book back from Landmark. The app Mr. Vanderlesh used to steal your IP was registered to a completely different business, and that registration expired. We even reached out to see if the owner of the defunct business had any interest in trying to pursue his rights to your IP or any other IP created on his app. Long story short, nobody has the rights to your book but you. We’re as in the clear as we can be.”

I jump up to the full height my unathletic legs are capable of—a solid half inch to one inch, maybe. I thrust an arm in the air and nearly drop the phone. “Really?” I ask breathlessly.

Roxie and Gemmaline have come from the kitchen and the smell of cooking bread has shifted to the smell of burning bread. Nobody seems to care.

“The book?” Gemmaline mouths.

“Yes!” I say, covering the speaker of the phone. “They say they can get it back!”

My sister and friends all start jumping up in excitement along with me, hugging while Roxie starts shoving like it’s a mosh pit.

“I’m really glad we could get this solved for you,” the woman says. I can hear the smile in her voice. “We just need you to

sign a few things. Precautionary measures, honestly. As soon as you give us the okay, we can go ahead and start taking the proper steps to get the book back in your hands. There's potentially a case for financial damages, too, if you want to pursue that route." She pauses. "Mr. Wolfe really didn't tell you about this?"

"Um, no," I say. I think back to just last night when I specifically asked him if there was any news. He told me there wasn't. Why would he lie?

An old, familiar pang of fear rises up inside me, and I don't want to acknowledge why it feels so familiar.

I can see the concern on everyone's face as they watch my expression. I force a smile that I hope looks real.

"I'm sure he had some kind of reason," I say.

I spend a little while longer giving my email and other contact info to the woman, and then we end the call. I sink down into a chair, not sure how to feel.

The author in me is elated. It feels like someone snagged my baby right out of my hands and disappeared into a crowd. Now my baby is miraculously being handed to me, unharmed. But then there's the Jameson part of things. He has been like a rock I've clung to through all this, and that rock has never wavered. Except now I'm learning he knew about this and didn't tell me? He at least knew last night, so why wouldn't he tell me?

"What did he do?" Dani asks.

JAMESON

I'm reading War and Peace from my bookshelf that is more for display than reading for fun. Correction, I'm re-reading the first page for about the hundredth time, because I'm mostly just trying to calm myself down. It has taken close to half an hour to quiet the urge to rush over to Nolan's office and tackle him. Now I'm in the middle of convincing myself Charli won't hire a hitman to kill me when I tell her the truth.

My secretary buzzes in. "A Charli McBride is here, Mr. Wolfe. She said you will let her in."

My skin crawls. There's something about the timing that makes me feel like I'm staring into dark, blue waters—like I'm just beginning to see the vague shape of wide open jaws and rows of teeth surging up to meet me from the depths. "Alright," I say, half choking on the word. "Send her in."

She comes in slowly, hesitantly. Her eyes look puffy and red. Her expression is grim. My worry is forgotten when I see the way she looks. All my protective instincts trigger, and I'm suddenly wondering who's life I should ruin for this.

"What did he do?" I ask, standing up, palms on my desk. "Was it Vaughn?"

She laughs, and there's a venom in the laugh that I don't like at all. "Actually, no," she says. "This time, it was another asshole I made the mistake of trusting. When were you going to tell me?"

It feels like a thousand pound ball of iron settles into my stomach.

She knows.

"I was going to tell you," I say.

She folds her arms and scoffs. "When, exactly? What reason could you possibly have to lie? I just asked you at the mixer. I asked you directly if you'd heard from legal and you said you hadn't. But that was a lie, wasn't it?"

I set my jaw. I owe it to her to be honest. "It was a lie. Yes," I say.

She laughs. "Okay, you know what? I'm going to skip all the drama here. Thanks for the good time. Thank you for giving me the legal resources to get my book back. But no thank you to everything else. I told myself not to trust another guy again and I stupidly started to trust you. That was my mistake."

"Wait, Charli."

She stops halfway to the door, spinning. "Why? So you can make up some convenient story and convince me you had some kind of good reason? I don't want to hear it. You lied to me. End of story. That's it."

"I was going to tell you today," I say. "I fucking swear. I just finished talking to Nolan about how we needed to change the plan. Actually," I laugh, but the sound is humorless. "That's why you're finding out when you did. He got pissed and sabotaged us to get back at me for backing out of the plan." I move around the desk, reaching for her hands.

“Don’t!” she snaps, backing away and pulling her hands up defensively. “Don’t,” she says more softly, eyes meeting mine.

“Charli,” the word sounds pathetic to my own ears. I can’t think of what else to say, but it feels like my fucking insides are being ripped out and I can barely string a coherent thought together.

She shakes her head. “I really should thank you. Vaughn taught me how dangerous it is to trust people with your heart. I was dumb enough to go right back and hand it to you. Now there’s really no excuse for me anymore. No more stupid Charli. I’m going to be smart from now on. That starts with walking away from this. *From you.*”

Those last two words hit me like punches. I search for the right words, but what the fuck can I say? Tell her I did plan to gently screw her over originally, but I just changed my mind? Tell her again that I really was about to tell her the truth? She’s right. I was willing to betray her trust. Maybe that’s all that matters.

I hang my head and hear the door click shut a moment later.

When Charli leaves the room, it feels like all the color from my life drains away—all the color I hadn’t realized was seeping into the lines these past few weeks. It leaves with her.

CHARLI

“Done,” I say. I click the laptop shut and look up at Dani, who is studying something out of a textbook and still wearing her scrubs from work on my couch.

“Done?” she asks.

“Done!” I say, smiling a little.

“I thought you were already done,” she says, eyebrows creased.

“Done editing, doofus,” I say. “It’s kind of a big part of the process, and part I still needed to do. I couldn’t bring myself to until I knew the book was actually mine again. But I finished it. I *really* finished it. Signed, sealed, and ready to deliver.” I wait, then smile and lift my hands up. “That means we celebrate!”

Dani leaps up, pumping her fists and laughing as we dance around with no coordination or rhythm. It’s a beautiful, chaotic moment of fist pumping, booty shaking, and hugging. When we settle back down, her expression tells me she’s about to ask me something she knows I won’t want to talk about. That means it’s about Jameson.

For the past month, Dani hasn’t given it up. Her attempts to talk about what happened lurk around every corner like the

bad guy in a scary movie—and that’s exactly how talking about it makes me feel. I want to run, scream, or fall to the ground and curl in a ball when I think about it.

It physically *hurts* to think about. I remember how happy I was. Jameson didn’t come into my life with a bag of tools, a know-it-all mentality, and start trying to fix me. He was like a bright light that shined into all my dark places, forcing me to see myself for what I really am. He showed me my flaws as well as the good parts. He made me see I’m worth standing up for—that I should have been speaking up all along and defending myself. But then he went and screwed it all up by making me use that lesson to push him out of my life, because I *do* deserve better than being lied to. *Don’t I?*

I think about the weirdness and wildness of Jameson and so many parts of me long to go back, but I know I can’t. Except maybe I could. That’s the part that haunts me the most. I could go right back to him, but I’m convinced I need to stay strong and stay away from Jameson Wolfe.

“Are you going to tell him you finished the book?” she asks.

“Why would I do that?” My tone is harsher than I intend, but I can’t help it. It has been four weeks and three days since I stormed out of his office. Four weeks and three days since his legal team helped me get the rights to my story pulled from Landmark. I haven’t contacted Vaughn, Aubrey, or anyone else at Gray Wolfe. All I know is I’ve been given the go-ahead by the legal team to resume treating the story like it’s mine, and their assurances that nobody else is going to publish it. They even made sure my copyright status is ironclad as a favor to make sure I can rest easy against any other forms of piracy.

“I don’t know,” Dani says. “I just wonder. I mean, what if he really was going to tell you?”

“So what?” I say. “He lied to me. He already proved he would lie to me and deceive me. Do any of the other details even matter?”

This is a conversation Dani and I have circled about a thousand times. Gemmaline is kind of on Dani’s side and thinks I should at least hear him out. Roxie agrees with me and thinks I should slash his tires. Maddie suggested photoshopping him on some posters to hang up around town, but I think she just wants the excuse to prank more people. She has been begging me to tick off more items on our brainstorming board for Vaughn pranks, but I haven’t had the energy or motivation. I just want to keep moving on from all of it.

All I feel is drained. I’m disappointed and empty. Finishing the book does feel good, but the happiness doesn’t last. It’s like I started this book in a different life, and I can remember what it was supposed to mean to me to be finished. But that’s as far as it goes. It’s like the memory of meaning. It’s not sinking in the way it should, and that makes me feel even more empty.

Dani sighs. “I hate this for you. You guys seemed so good together.”

“I guess that’s the problem with relationships,” I say. “It’s not really that hard to be on your best behavior at first. It’s not hard to manipulate and trick people. And once you’ve been through that, how are you supposed to ever trust someone again? How do you stop looking behind every corner and wondering what else they’re not being honest about?”

Dani purses her lips. She just started dating a guy from the vet clinic where she works last week, and I know what she’s probably wanting to say. To her credit, she doesn’t voice it. Whatever she’s thinking is probably some optimistic take on

trust and love from someone who is still in the early days of the honeymoon phase with a brand new boyfriend. It's almost funny that I think of her relationship as so young and innocent, considering I only fake dated Jameson for three weeks before things blew up. It felt like so much more, though.

"So," she says. "What is the next step now that it's finished?"

I know she means the book, but I can't help thinking she's talking about how finished me and Jameson are. Another familiar pang of sadness rings through me, reminding me how hollowed out I feel now.

"I try to get published."

"I'm guessing Landmark is ruled out?"

I laugh. "Um, yeah. And so is Gray Wolfe."

"Why? So you and one of the bosses hooked up and it didn't work out. Does that have to mean anything for the business of publishing your book?"

"I can't get involved with Jameson again. And I want to earn this. I don't want some kind of charity from him."

"Charli," Dani says with a voice that reminds me of Mom. "What matters? People reading your book, or how it gets in their hands?"

I sigh. "I just can't, okay? If I stop and think about it too long, it'll only hurt worse. I'm going to keep moving forward and just... not."

"What about Vaughn?"

"What about him?"

"He hasn't reached out? Isn't he pissed that you got the better of him?"

I shrug. “I blocked his number, remember? I’m sure he’s pissed. I hope he’s tearing his hair out.”

She grins. “You really got him back. Like, I’m proud of you. Fuck around and find out, right? You made sure he found out.”

I smile a little. I’d like to pretend I’m a big enough person that I don’t care, but I’d be lying. It feels good to know how thoroughly I won. Vaughn didn’t just try to take my book. He tried to take a piece of me. Now I can say I took back just as much from him, and at least I know there’s some justice in the universe. It is certainly a win, but the victory feels empty in my current circumstances.

“Did you ever find out what Aubrey’s angle was?” Dani asks.

“No,” I say. “But she at least knew something was up. She got really weird when we asked about who actually wrote the book at the mixer. I mean, obviously she knows she didn’t write it. But, yeah, I don’t know why she agreed to play along with Vaughn.”

“You should ask her.”

“What?”

Dani sits up straighter, eyes lighting up. “Ask her. Don’t you want to know?”

I lick my lips. “Kind of? But that seems like a bad idea. What if she tries to have me murdered or something? I’m guessing I’m not her favorite person right now.”

“Meet her at a coffee shop or something and scream if she does anything weird. You’ll be fine.”

“I’m glad my sister is so worried about my safety.”

“Hey, some risks are worth taking. I’m curious. I need you to do this. If not for you, then for me.”

I roll my eyes, but I have to admit I am deeply curious. Cutting off contact with Vaughn has been harder than I've let on, mostly because the petty part of me has wanted to know how he's taking all of this. He screwed me over, I got him back, and his plan to steal my book even backfired. I haven't had access to his email in weeks, so I don't know what kind of backlash there was. Aubrey might be the only way I could find out, short of reaching out to Vaughn, which I'm absolutely not doing. "Okay," I say slowly. "Maybe I'm a little curious. But what if I ask to meet her and she shows up with Vaughn?"

"Definitely. If Vaughn is there, you don't even show yourself. Just bail."

"You're talking like this is happening."

Dani shrugs. "She posts all that shit on Instagram. I'm sure she checks her DMs. It's not like you couldn't get in touch with her."

I sigh. "Why do I feel like I'll regret this?"



AUBREY IS WAITING WHERE SHE SAID SHE'D BE. SHE'S AT A table in the corner of a busy coffee shop in the middle of the day. I ready myself, then head inside.

I don't bother getting a coffee. I'm just here for information. *And maybe a little satisfaction.* God knows that has been in short supply these last few weeks.

"Hi," I say carefully once I've sat down.

"Hi," she says, voice measured.

I'm not sure what I expected from her, but this isn't it. She looks reserved and cautious. She also hasn't pulled the classic

mean girl “I stole your man and look how much prettier I am now”. She looks like she barely put on makeup and she’s dressed casual in workout clothes with a ponytail. It almost feels like a subtle peace offering.

“I’m going to just get straight to it,” I say. “I want to hear your side of things. Why did you agree to pretend to write my book?”

She lets out a breath, nodding. “I don’t know if you’ll believe this, but I didn’t know the truth. And before I say more, I should tell you I broke up with Vaughn when I found this all out. I thought about reaching out to you and apologizing, but figured you wouldn’t want to hear from me.”

“You did?” I have to admit I’m more than a little stunned.

“I did. I didn’t even know he was in a relationship when we were dating. And yeah, I found out about that and decided to give him another chance after you came into the picture. But he lied about how long you two were dating and painted you out to be some villain. He said you were always belittling him for not being worthy of his family name and not finding more success as an agent. And then when all the pranks started, it seemed like it was completely in character for what he described. He made you out to be a bully.”

I grimace. “Do you still believe I am?”

She laughs a little. “No. And even if you were, I think he deserved it. He’s a prick. And a liar.”

“At least we can agree on that.”

She sips her drink, eyes down on the table. “I’m not entirely innocent with the book thing, either. I mean, it wasn’t anything illegal like stealing your book—but he told me he had this new idea. He said real authors were boring, moody, and hard to

work with. He said the next big thing would be finding people who were more like actors or models and having them take credit for ghostwritten material. It would be like an author influencer. The perfect person picked to represent certain kinds of books—like crack for fans. They'd get a great book and a great personality to rally behind, or something like that."

"So he chose you to be the better personality to represent my book, I guess?"

She grimaces. "I've worked as an actress and I was trying to find work when I met him. He said it was the perfect job for me, and he said he already had a ghostwriter who was almost done with a story. I thought it was all voluntary."

I have to sit back in my chair and digest that for a few moments. Vaughn seriously thought my personality and look wasn't good enough to represent my own book? His solution was to trick me into using an app so he could steal my rights and hire some pretty actress to pretend the book was hers? Naturally, he decided to cheat on me with her in the process.

Suddenly I'm not so sure I got enough payback on Vaughn. If he was here right now, I think I might actually throw something at him or scream like a feral animal.

I do a pretty good job of pretending to be calm, though. I nod slowly. "That is... *wow*," I say. "I can see you're not the cartoon villain I assumed you were, but Vaughn is even worse than I thought, which I didn't know was possible."

"Yeah," she says, smiling a little. "And you're not a cartoon villain like he made you out to be, either. He actually said you told him his dick was small and called him a hobgoblin."

I choke out a laugh. "I never said his dick was small. *Out loud*," I add.

We both laugh.

“And I definitely didn’t call him a... hobgoblin. He’s pathetic.”

“You should see him now. He’s in shambles after the breakup,” Aubrey says. She leans forward, and I can see she’s excited to have a chance to share what she’s about to say. “His father has been more and more on his case ever since his whole ghostwriting idea. Griffon thought it was stupid, but he was giving Vaughn the leash to prove his idea. When the copyright claim came out, Griffon looked like he wanted to murder Vaughn. Landmark has lost several authors already. When authors heard about Vaughn’s stunt, they backed out of book deals and contracts. It’s a huge mess, and I’m not sure if being Griffon’s son is even going to be enough to save Vaughn this time.”

“Wow. What about Gray Wolfe? Are they doing any better after all this?” I hate myself for asking, just a little bit. I’ve very purposefully been keeping my head in the sand about any of the publishing stuff since breaking things off with Jameson. It all feels too connected to him, and anything connected to him just hurts.

“Oh,” she says, forehead creasing. “Jameson hasn’t been keeping you updated?”

“I broke things off last month. He lied to me about something, and after Vaughn, that was a non-negotiable. So, yeah...”

“I’m sorry. You two looked really good together at the mixer. I was honestly so jealous. Vaughn just kept complaining about your costume and you guys all night. I felt invisible, but it was like Jameson didn’t have eyes for anyone else in the room.”

I smile a little wistfully, because she's right. I remember it perfectly well. Except he was already lying to me that night, so what does it matter? "Yeah, it was a fun night," I say.

Aubrey and I spend a while sharing small talk, but I think we both feel like we said what we needed to say. I see her in a new light now, but the conversation feels like it's ultimately more of a transaction than a step toward anything. She wanted a chance to enjoy my reaction to hearing how bad things have gone for Vaughn. She wanted to clear her name.

She makes an excuse about having to run for an audition, and I happily let the meeting end. My mind feels like it's buzzing with too much to keep talking, anyway.

As I'm walking home, I'm struck by how it feels like all these loose ends in my life are finally tying themselves up. One by one, the messy parts are getting cleaned up. It should feel like a huge relief. It should make me happy.

And yet I still feel this gnawing emptiness I can't shake. I could take an easy guess at what that emptiness wants to be filled with, but I refuse to acknowledge it.

It'll pass.

I'll find someone to publish my book, move on with my life, and that echo of Jameson will eventually fade away into background noise.

And if it doesn't? I guess I'll just have to keep pretending I'm not wondering every day what could have been between us.

JAMESON

Cleo and Kate are in my apartment, and they know everything.

I did my best to downplay the disaster of the last couple months, but I could only hold off my sisters for so long. They ask too many questions and they read between the lines too well. Cleo has been taking extra classes to get a license to cut hair and Kate has been cramming for a big test for weeks now. If they weren't so preoccupied, I never would've made it this far without both of them staging an intervention by now.

But it's finally here. I guess I can only hide from them for so long.

I'm on the couch and both of my sisters are standing in front of me. Kate looks like she's in court and getting ready to seal the deal on a case with fiery logic and facts. Cleo looks like she's desperately trying to think of a nice way to tell me I'm a dumbass.

Kate's wearing a pantsuit and her brown hair is pulled into a no-nonsense ponytail, like usual. She's pacing in a small circle. "I can't believe you," she says. "What were you thinking?"

I spread my palms. “At first, I was thinking of being a loyal friend and a good leader of my company.”

Cleo winces. As usual, she’s put together in a trendy outfit with high heels, long eyelashes, and looks like she’s ready for some kind of photoshoot. “I think,” she says slowly, searching for how she wants to voice her thoughts. “If loyalty to a friend requires deception and lies, it might make you want to question the friendship.”

Kate just points to Cleo as if to say, *what she said*. She turns to me, waiting for my response.

“Yes. I agree with you. In retrospect. But in the moment, that wasn’t how I saw things.”

“What were you thinking in the moment, then?” she asks. As usual, Kate is obsessively trying to collect a full report of every detail of what happened. I know any little nugget I provide is going to come back like a punch in the gut when she crafts her final argument against me.

“That the needs of hundreds of employees and my best friend probably came before the needs of a woman I just met.”

“So you were thinking with your brain instead of your heart,” Cleo says.

“I was just doing the best I could in the moment. I fucked up. I’m aware of that, now. I should have found another way to handle our problem. Instead, I latched on to the first usable idea I came up with, and it was a shitty, mean idea. But maybe I was trying to prove to myself that I wasn’t getting carried away with my feelings for this girl.”

“Like you wanted to prove she was like all the girls before?” Cleo asks. “A diversion, but ultimately nothing that would get in the way of your ambitions?”

“Something like that,” I say.

Kate is still pacing, fingertip rubbing her lower lip as she stares at the floor. “Here’s how I see it,” she says, and now I know it’s coming. She’s about to pass judgment on me. Guilty or not guilty. “You are my big brother. I’ve watched the trainwreck you call a love life for a long time now, and I’ve never known you to have any trouble cutting someone loose when they start to take too much of your time away from work. I’ve also never known you to end things messy like this.”

“Things just got complicated. It was bad luck,” I say.

“And,” she continues, glaring at me as if to say *shut up and let me finish*. “The fact that it got this messy tells me you had really strong feelings for this girl. I’m not ready to watch you throw that away, because she must have been something special to get through your thick skull and make you screw up so magnificently.”

I grin. “She is special.”

Cleo clutches her hands over her heart and gives an “aww”.

“So what are you going to do?” Kate asks.

“What do you mean? I already fucked it up. She made herself pretty damn clear. She doesn’t want anything to do with me now.”

“But what if she does?” Cleo asks. “I mean, she came and talked to you like *right* after she found out. Sometimes people aren’t ready to hear an apology right away. They need time to digest it and cool off.”

“She’s right,” Kate says. “In your defense, you only held the truth from her for a couple days. Yes, you made a heartless plan and you took the first step toward following through. But

you said you argued with Nolan before she found out, right? That means he can vouch for you. He can tell her you really were planning to tell her the truth.”

“Yes!” Cleo claps her hands together once. “That will go so far. I mean, without that, it’s just your word, which probably doesn’t mean a whole lot to someone who has been through what she has. Would Nolan tell her the truth for you?”

I consider. “She knows Nolan is my friend and business partner. I don’t know if she’s going to believe anything out of his mouth, either. Besides, he admitted he’s the one who asked legal to call her after our conversation. The bastard made this blow up before I could tell her because he was pissed at me for putting a woman before the company.”

“Holy shit,” Cleo says.

“Seriously? You left that little detail out?”

I shrug. “I can’t say I fully blame him. She’s nobody to him. I also spent the whole time we were together downplaying how much I like her to him. I didn’t want to deal with him giving me shit about it. As far as he knew, I was just messing around with her on the side. So when he heard me say I was going to tell her everything and ruin our little plan, it made no sense to him.”

Kate pinches the bridge of his nose. “Okay, okay. So have you two patched things up yet? You and Nolan?”

“We always do,” I say. “I told him he was a fucking asshole and he said I was, too. We hugged it out and moved on. Bro code.”

Cleo rolls her eyes. “Men are so simple. Neither of you are holding a grudge? Really?”

“I saw my first pair of boobs on TV with Nolan right by my side, Cleo. Cinemax at night in his parent’s basement. That’s not the kind of shit you throw away over a little squabble over a girl. We’re brothers for life.”

Now Kate rolls her eyes. “Men really are stupid. But if you’ve patched things up, you really should have Nolan talk to her. Have him vouch for you. Maybe it won’t be enough on its own, but that’s why you’re going to figure out how to do the rest of the convincing.”

“Wait. What? I already told you she said it’s over. She’s probably already dating someone else.” That thought is like a hundred little knives sliding through my veins. It has crossed my mind a few times now and it tears me up every single time. I can’t stand the idea of Charli with someone else. Someone else’s hands on her body. It’s too much, and I’ll never admit to my sisters it’s part of why I’ve kept my distance. I’m too scared I’ll find out she has already moved on. After all, I sort of taught her the best way to get back at a shitty ex was to date someone new, didn’t I?

“Then win her back,” Cleo says. “Make a romantic gesture. Embarrass yourself. Prove you understand how badly you screwed up and that you’ve changed and won’t do it again. Make it good. From your heart.”

Kate folds her arms, nodding. “When you’ve got a plan, run it by us and we’ll help you workshop it until it doesn’t suck.”

I clasp my hands between my knees, nodding my head. “I’ll think about it. But I’ve never been the type to plan things out. I fly by the seat of my pants. You guys know me.”

“Then prove you’re willing to change and get out of your comfort zone for her. Be different because you believe it’s what you have to do to earn her trust back,” Kate says.

I nod again, hating that I think she's right. It's a testament to how fucked up this whole ordeal has me. My sisters have given me advice in the past, but this is another level of guidance. Usually, I'm the one steering the ship. I guess I feel like I've driven my own ship into the rocks this time, and maybe I needed someone else's help to undo my mistake.

Because I see it now. The plan I hatched with Nolan was a mistake, but it was only the first mistake. The latest and biggest mistake was thinking letting Charli go without a fight was the right move.

Fuck that.

I want her back, and I'm going to make sure she knows it. Maybe she has moved on. Maybe she doesn't want anything to do with me now. *Maybe*. But I'm not about to give up because of a "maybe".

JAMESON

I'm in uncharted territory here. I borrowed (or stole, depending who you ask) one of Nolan's infamous white boards, snuck it into my office, and began scheming.

Today is step one.

I need to make first contact, which became more difficult when I realized Charli blocked my number. It's fine, though.

I'm standing outside her building with a bundle of flowers. I know, I know. Cleo and Kate gave me shit for not being dramatic enough, but I told them this is just phase one. I've decided a good apology is like a rocket launch. It comes in stages. Some of those stages are fiery disasters and some of them are great. Or something like that.

On my whiteboard, the plan goes something like this: I wait outside her building with flowers all dressed up in my nice suit and tie. I silently give them to her. They are gray, which is an odd choice, so she will ask me why I chose gray. I'll tell her I looked up what every flower color symbolizes, and that gray means new beginnings, hope, and also everlasting love. I may leave off that last bit, depending on whether she's going all lovey eyed or looking a little mad still. A good plan leaves room for improvisation and adaptation, after all.

So far, so good.

I'm in my suit and I've got the gray flowers. I'm in front of her building.

And then it starts raining. At first, I'm annoyed, but I decide I probably deserve a little misery. I decide to just grin and bear it. I wait in the rain as the hours tick by. Yes, hours.

I also didn't quite think that part of the plan through. When you don't know someone's schedule, it can take a long ass time to run into them outside their building. I eventually have to give up when my legs are aching from standing all day, my back hurts, and I'm soaked through from several hours of rain and then several more hours of drying off in the cool night air while shivering my ass off.

And if I have to, I'll come the next day, too.

Grand apology phase one? *Could be going better.*

CHARLI

For three days straight, Jameson has been standing outside my building with gray flowers. What kind of person gives someone gray flowers? I can't figure it out, but I also don't want to risk talking to him.

I used the back door to my building and dodged him completely the first three days. Today is the fourth day, and I'm starting to feel annoyed at myself for already wanting to give in and at least hear him out. He's the one who taught me to stand up for myself. What would Jameson say if he was at my side right now? He'd tell me to tell himself to go fuck himself. And then I'd look at him in confusion, because that would be a really confusing thing to tell someone.

I sigh, pinching my temples as I sit in front of my computer. Jameson is probably still out there with his stupid gray flowers. I pull up an internet search and type, "what do gray flowers mean?".

The first result says neutrality, balance, and a calm, composed atmosphere. *What the fuck, Jameson?* Is he trying to say I'm not balanced or calm? He wants us to be neutral? Is that it? He's out there day after day trying to convince me to calm down?

I'm suddenly pissed.

I'll show him calm.

I stomp down the stairs and yank open the front door. He seems surprised and a little relieved when he sees me. He stands up straighter and extends the bouquet of flowers toward me.

I take them from his hands, smile, and then toss them on the ground and stomp them in an admittedly crazy, tantrum-like show until they are nothing but pulverized petals and crushed stems.

“Calm enough for you?” I ask, then I spin on my heel and head back inside.

Asshole.

JAMESON

Maybe I shouldn't compare my apology plan to rockets. After all, rocket science is complicated and I'm no rocket scientist. Clearly.

After the mild setback I suffered last night, I decided to do a little more research. As in, I looked at more than one source about what gray flowers mean. Apparently, there are multiple meanings, depending where you look. *Go figure.*

Kate and Cleo call me a dumbass and say this is exactly why I am supposed to be running everything by them. *Blah blah.* It's fine. I made a small miscalculation and I'll correct for it now. I'll fix this.

My mistake wasn't the strategy. It was trying to get too complicated.

Chocolate, though? Chocolate is pretty hard to mess up. So I wait outside her building with a box of assorted chocolates. The goal here is to win her back by inches. She's never going to just shrug and say it's okay and I'm forgiven. I've got to very gently, very slowly convince her to give me another chance. I've got to convince her to even listen to me and let me speak.

That's where the chocolate is going to come in clutch.

I'm getting kind of used to the whole waiting thing. I do some air squats when my legs get stiff and jog in place at times. People look at me like I've lost my mind, and maybe I have. I ignore them, though. It's New York City, and a guy doing air squats with a box of chocolates is probably in the bottom ten of weird things they'll see if they go for a walk today.

Charli approaches with a bag over her shoulder. She's got on jeans and a t-shirt with her hair down. I watch her approaching and see she notices me. She hesitates, then starts coming, eyes blazing.

I wonder where she's coming from. Is she working on the book? Did she already finish? Did she apply for a new job somewhere and she's coming back from work? I want to ask her, but I know I can't satisfy my curiosity yet.

She stops in front of me with her fists on her hips.

"Sorry about the flowers," I say, holding the box toward her. "Apparently, the internet is divided on the meaning of gray flowers."

Her lips twitch and I think she's about to smile, but she just takes the box from me and turns, heading inside without another word.

That's progress. Right? I went from flower stomping to chocolate taking. I'll call that a win.

Today is a new day and I'm waiting with takeout from a fancy Italian place she mentioned wanting to try once. It's probably a stretch. After all, she'll still have to pop it in the oven when she gets home, so I'm not sure if it's really the best gesture in the world, but I'm doing my best.

She's wearing a jean skirt and a black shirt with her hair in a ponytail. She stops in front of me. This time, she only puts one

fist on her hip. “What’s this?” she asks, not meeting my eyes.

“A peace offering. It’s Luigi’s. Lasagna. I didn’t know if you like spinach or sausage, so I got one of each. Four-fifty for an hour and it’ll be—”

“Please stop doing this,” she says. “I don’t know what this is. But I’m done, Jameson. I don’t want your flowers or your chocolate or your sausage lasagna.”

“Damn,” I say. “So you wanted the spinach?”

She looks like she is tempted to laugh, but anger wins out. “I want you to leave me alone. I want you to stop making this harder than it already is. I moved on. I’m *trying* to move on. I just want to forget you and get on with my life. Is that so much to ask?”

“I want to make it up to you,” I say. My words sound flat and stupid to my own ears, but they’re all I’ve got.

“Why? So you can convince me to trust you again and break my heart all over again? Why should I believe some random gifts mean anything about you has changed?” She scoffs and shakes her head. “Thanks, but no thanks.” She goes inside, leaving me standing there with the lasagna.

Dammit. She’s right. I know she’s right. She doesn’t want empty gestures. She wants to know I’m not going to win her back and screw it all up again. But how the hell am I supposed to show her that?

CHARLI

I can lie to my friends, but I can't lie to myself. Jameson's efforts the last few days have shaken my resolve. I'm clinging desperately to what I think is the smart plan—the *safe* plan. It's the plan that says letting him back in will be a mistake that ends in heartbreak.

But every time I see him outside my apartment with some new gift in his hands, something in me stirs. He's trying so hard that he *must* be sorry, right?

I'm dwelling on it all while I walk back from my new part-time job. I picked up a job serving coffee while I wait for any kind of news about my book.

I stop in my tracks when I see a poster with a familiar face on it. The format is also familiar. It looks almost exactly like the posters Maddie helped me Photoshop of Vaughn. Except this picture looks real. It's Jameson holding a pair of big women's panties in one hand and whitey-tighties in the other hand. He's smiling wide.

The caption beneath him reads:

“Dirty underwear wanted. Will pay cold hard cash. That's right, dirty underwear for a dirty man. Check the map for where to find me, day or night.”

I'm frowning in confusion as I look at the map and realize the location is right outside my house. *What the hell is this?*

Is he getting revenge on himself for me?

When I make it back to my place, I see Jameson actively talking to a man who looks like he might not have showered in the last few weeks. He's sticking out a concerningly yellowed pair of whitey-tighties toward Jameson and Jameson is handing him a twenty dollar bill.

The underwear goes in a small pile that I'm sure is smelly and unpleasant to sit beside. There's also a small group of teen kids recording the transaction and laughing openly at him.

Jameson sees me, then waves and smiles. "Bring me anything?" he asks cheerily.

I press my lips together and try very hard not to laugh. I wonder what my friends are going to think when I tell them about this one. Maybe even Roxie will soften up on him. *Probably not.* But Dani might.

JAMESON

If nothing else, the last week is teaching me just how badly I want Charli back. If I didn't, I wouldn't be dodging work, dealing with Nolan's increasingly passive aggressive behavior (he hates when I blow off work), and I definitely wouldn't be standing in the sun and rain to pay various people for their dirty underwear.

As part of my penance, I've also been answering every phone call, because I also put up posters explaining how badly I want to have phone sex with men over the age of fifty-five. As it turns out, there are a *lot* of men in the city who want to take me up on that one.

Alright. I don't answer *every* phone call. I'm sure even Charli would give me a pass if she had to listen in on some of those calls.

Just the memory makes me shudder.

But operation "shoot myself in the foot" has so far gotten me the same amount of results as operation "wow her with thoughtful gifts."

I'm at my place in the early hours of the morning trying to decide what I can do differently. I decide it's time to call for advice, so I ring up my sisters and ask them to stop by. I'm

expecting Kate to say she's too busy, but both Cleo and Kate are at my apartment within thirty minutes.

"Okay," Kate says once I've fully updated her on my progress. "So you're not doing terrible. I mean, you kind of are, but you're at least suffering."

"Suffering is good?" I ask.

Cleo taps her chin, thinking. "If your suffering is proving to her that you are sorry and you've changed, I think it could be good. The flower thing is honestly kind of hilarious. That would melt my heart. You did at least tell her what you *thought* gray flowers symbolized, right?"

"No? I am trying not to bother her. *While sort of bothering her,*" I add. "I want her to know I'm ready to talk when she is, I mean."

"I'm pretty sure she has figured that one out, genius," Kate laughs. "The self-revenge is a good angle. I like that. What else did you guys do to Vaughn? Could you take it farther? Maybe she feels like you're holding back on punishing yourself?"

"Um," I say. "I made him look at his ex-girlfriend while she was on my arm in a sexy, slutty Halloween costume. Charli also made him get a lap dance from a bunch of male strippers in front of the whole..." I trail off, shaking my head already. "No. Don't say it."

But Kate and Cleo are both sharing a look and a huge smile.

"I will put that on the 'break in case of emergency' list. But I have one more idea before it gets to that."



I HAVE DECIDED MY MISTAKE WAS NOT BEING THOUGHTFUL enough with my gifts. Flowers, chocolate, and lasagna would be the key to *my* heart, but I need to think about what matters to Charli. She's an author, for starters. I also remembered the giant, heavy bag she was lugging around at the convention full of signed books.

Clearly she likes collecting signed books from authors. In other words, I have the perfect opportunity to do something thoughtful and generous.

I work with authors every day and have access to all kinds of rare signed books. I can call up a few dozen authors and demand they send me a signed copy, for God's sake.

So that's exactly what I did. I also snuck into Nolan's office and a few of our higher-ups to borrow any signed books they were hoarding. Okay, borrowing might not strictly be the correct term, considering I'm planning to give these to Charli, but it's for a good cause. They'll live.

I'm more nervous today than I've been at any point until now. Even the occasional phone sex call or delivery of dirty underwear is hardly fazing me at this point. I'm nervous because this feels a little like my last idea—like my last chance.

If the signed books and my “break in case of emergency” final plan don't work, then what? Am I actually supposed to give up? Just walk away and pretend I'm not going to spend the rest of my fucking life missing her?

At first, I figured it would get easier to be without her over time. I thought the memories of her would fade with time—growing worn at the edges and distant.

Instead, it has only gotten worse. I can't stop thinking about her. I can't stop tossing and turning at night wishing I hadn't

fucked things up—wishing she was lying right there beside me. I torture myself with thoughts of what I'd trade for a single smile from her.

I'm no stranger to standing outside her building by this point. I've even made a few acquaintances. There's jogging guy who likes *very* short shorts. Once, I was almost positive I saw his junk come flopping out in the open. That's one way to make sure every part of you can breathe, I guess.

There's the angry eater guy. He always has some kind of handheld food and he's tearing into it like it just spit on his cat. There's the old lady who pretends to need a walker until she leaves the building down the street. She goes in hobbling with the walker and comes out spry as a spring chicken. My theory is she's in there doing hard drugs that make her forget she's crippled. I'm also aware it's a very bad theory.

I'm pacing in my usual circle with the huge bag of books and a small pile of dirty underwear at my feet.

I bag up the underwear when the day is over and take it to a dry cleaner's to be blasted with industrial-grade cleaners. After some serious sanitation, they come out clean enough to be donated to shelters. I'm not some sappy bleeding heart, mind you, I just couldn't think of what else to do with all the underwear I've been accumulating. It felt like an insult to trash cans to just throw it away, too.

After about three hours of waiting, I realize I'm standing here with a big ass pile of books. I could at least pass the time with a little light reading. I dig through the bag until I find one that catches my interest and start reading. It's good enough that I ignore my rumbling belly for a while and my full bladder until I can't anymore.

I've found that I can hit the Greek place across the street when I get hungry. They have window seating that points directly toward Charli's building. I can spot her coming from a ways off and get out to meet her at the door if she comes while I'm eating.

I keep reading while I eat, and find myself wondering if Charli would like this book, too. I realize we never really talked much about book preferences, but I did read some of her work. Based on what I read, I think she'd like this one. I make a reminder to put it at the top of the stack I give to her.

On all the other days, she has passed me by and at least glanced my way. No words, usually, but I at least get to see her. Today, there's no sign of Charli. I stay a little later than usual, in case she worked late. Based on the uniform she wears, I know she got a job at the coffee place a few blocks down. I get paranoid and lug my big bag of books and dirty underwear down that way to check on her before I head back.

I'm not going to bother her, of course. I just want to peek in the window and make sure she's alright.

But the place is closed up when I pass by.

Damn.

I have a brief pang of fear that she didn't make it home, so I do the totally reasonable thing and head back to her building. Now, it's not as if I've been trying to spy through windows to figure out which one is hers—it's just that she sometimes opens it up in the mornings and evenings and I can hear her badly humming from the street below. She's only three floors up, after all.

I collect a pocket full of rocks on my way back to her building. Once I'm there, I do my best impression of a teen lover and

start pelting her window with rocks. It's harder than you'd think, and I hit just about every window within four or five rooms of hers.

First, an angry balding man sticks his head out and tells me to go fuck myself. Then I get a pissed off teen who records me on her phone and sounds like she's narrating some internet video about how many pervs are in New York. I finally see the light turn on in Charli's apartment. I drop my rocks, pick up the bags, and run for my life before she can see I was the one throwing rocks at her window.

I read a little more and finish the second book before going to bed. Even though it started well enough, it wasn't as good as the first book. I decide it's not good enough to give to Charli and return it to Nolan's office, where I stole it from. After all, if she's going to make me wait, I might as well make sure I'm not just giving her *any* signed books. I want to give her the best of the best.

I repeat the same routine, except it rains today so I have to cross the street and read in the bus stop next to a homeless lady who keeps telling me about the cats she takes care of. She asks what I'm reading, and I eventually decide she might stop talking my ear off if I distract her. Once she gets past the part where I keep buying underwear from people, we seem to hit it off pretty well. She even tells me she knows a guy who probably has some really nasty underwear for me. I thank her, but assure her she really doesn't need to reach out for me.

Instead, I give her the book I finished yesterday and tell her it's a rare signed copy. She could probably sell it for a few hundred once she finishes reading it.

She thanks me profusely and leaves me to my reading and watching.

I fall into a routine over the next few days. Read, wait, watch, eat Greek food, and keep waiting.

It's only a few days in when the real meaning of my signed book stunt sinks in. At first, I was just thinking I'd be giving her some valuable collectibles. I know she likes signed books, so I give them to her. Boom. Thoughtful.

Except I realize it's more than that. I'm basically making her the world's most awesome mixtape. I'm personally reading through a giant stack of books and deciding which ones are good enough to give to her. And best of all, they're all signed, personally approved, and free. Suddenly, I'm not so worried that she has been using the back entrance of her building to avoid me entirely.



TWO WEEKS.

I never thought of myself as a particularly fast reader, but I've worked my way through over seventy books in two weeks. I haven't done it all on my own, and I haven't read them all cover to cover. Sometimes, you just know within sixty pages or so if a book is a dud.

I've also slowly grown my crew of street friends. I'm not sure, but I think most of them are homeless. That, or they're depressingly bored because they have nothing better to do than sit down with me at the bus stop every day and help me decide which books are good enough for Charli.

There's Margaret, who takes care of the cats and happily collects the signed books I deem not to be good enough for Charli. She sells them and has been using the money to set up a kind of cat utopia in a nearby alley. She has all kinds of

foods and little plastic enclosures to give the animals a warm, dry place to hide out. She covers it all in cardboard to disguise what she's doing, but word has spread.

There's Earl, too, who I've started giving a little money because he's apparently saving for a deposit to get himself an apartment. There's Janice and Buck, an elderly couple who work at a grocery store by day and sleep on the streets by night. I give them some money, too, because they were nice enough to offer to help me work through the books. There are some other characters who pop in some days but not every day. There's a teen couple, an old lady who wears a new hat every day and gives every book she reads a gushing recommendation, even though I realized one day she was holding it upside down.

Nolan stops me one morning when I'm rushing out of the office. "Hey, hold up," he says, catching me as I'm slinging my big bag of books over my shoulder. I'm by the elevator and he jogs over, stopping me before I can push the button and slip away. "Hold the fuck up," he says more firmly.

I fold my arms. "Holding."

"Please tell me you've been out of the office every day because you're working on Plan Save Gray Wolfe version 2.0. Because I'm out of patience and tired of watching you rush in here and slink off every day."

"Well, I could tell you that," I say, speaking slowly. "I'd be lying, but I could say that if it would make you feel better."

"Shit," he says, letting his arms fall. He lifts them a second later, running them through his neatly combed and gelled hair.

"Do you even care anymore?"

"I do. Sure. But I found something I care more about."

“Let me guess. Charli?”

I brace myself for him to tell me I’m an idiot or chide me for being immature. I’m surprised when he lets out a sigh and shakes his head.

“I get it,” he says.

“You... get it?” I ask.

“Look. I want the old Jameson back. I really do. But Landmark ate plenty of shit after the stunt Vaughn pulled with Charli’s book. Even without us doing anything different, things are starting to look up. I’d prefer it if my Ace had a plan to really take advantage of this moment, but even if you don’t, I think we could be okay. I even heard one of Griffon Vanderlesh’s biggest advertising partners dropped him when they heard about the scandal.”

That’s all great, but I’m still hung up on the part where Nolan didn’t jump down my throat for still pining after Charli. “You don’t think I’m being a dumbass?” I ask, more or less ignoring everything he just said.

“Oh, I do,” he says. “I’m an ambitious bastard. When you told me you weren’t feeling as motivated, my brain clicked into survival mode. I wanted to make sure I didn’t lose you because I know how much you can bring to the company when you’re engaged. But shit, man. You’re my friend first. If you feel like you need this girl in your life, then yeah, I want to see you go after her. That’s what you’re doing, right? You’re trying to win her back?”

“Sort of. Right now I’m mostly just stealing signed copies from our collection here, reading them at a bus stop, buying dirty underwear, engaging in some one-sided phone sex with

old men, and hanging out with homeless people. But, yeah, the end goal is winning Charli's forgiveness."

Nolan narrows his eyes, and I realize I maybe could've done a better job explaining what I'm doing.

"Trust me," I say. "It's a great plan. I just need to iron out a few kinks. And... well, I also need to find her. She blocked my number and the part of winning her back where I speak to her has kind of been on hold because she has started avoiding me entirely. I'm pretty sure she's using the back entrance to her building so she doesn't even cross my path out front anymore."

"She blocked your number? Damn. You really messed up."

"Thanks for that genius observation. Yeah, I did. So I'm going to take this whole apology tour one step at a time."

"By hanging out with homeless people?"

"It'll work out."

"I heard she has been shopping her book to a few boutique publishers around the city. A friend of mine just told me last week he met with her."

"What? You didn't think I'd want to know about this?"

"I thought you guys were over. Honestly, I didn't want to make it sting anymore by bringing her up."

"Yeah, well, it stings. Whether you bring her up or not, she's always here." I tap my temple. "So I'm going to pull every move out of the book to win her back, because I don't know what I'm going to do if I can't."

He claps my shoulder. "I really am rooting for you. Of course, the whole love thing still looks like insanity from where I'm sitting, but I'm glad you found it."

I did, didn't I? What I feel is love, whether or not Charli feels it back right now. I know that's what I feel.

CHARLI

I should be working on getting my book published, but I'm sitting by the single window in my apartment and looking down at him. He's sitting on a bus stop bench with a small group of raggedly dressed people I'm assuming are homeless. They're all reading books. For stretches of time, they quietly focus on their reading. Sometimes, they take breaks. He still stops to buy dirty underwear from people, which is weirdly sweet. And yes, I know that's probably the strangest thing to call "sweet" in the world, but I think I know why he's doing it.

I've seen Jameson throw a football with the people out there, which was pretty hilarious because none of them could catch. They seemed to decide it was a bad idea when one of the old ladies in his group took a ball straight to the face. Sometimes they play cards. Once, two of the men hauled a big metal barrel after it got dark and they cooked something over a fire I'm pretty sure was running on newspaper and trash.

Mostly, though, they just read.

I can't figure out why they're all so intent on reading the books. There's a level of focus to the reading that seems like it goes beyond pure enjoyment. They're reading with some kind of purpose I just can't tease out.

Every day, Jameson jogs across the street to a Greek place. He either eats by the window or comes back to the bus stop with enough food in paper bags for everyone in the group.

“He’s persistent,” Roxie says. “I’ll give him that.” She’s in my kitchen and currently raiding my fridge. “But I think he was on a better track with the gifts. I’m not sure how all this reading is an apology. Or is he just bored out there and waiting for you to come talk to him?”

“I think it’s romantic,” Gemmaline says from the couch beside me. She gets up every few minutes to join me in watching. They have started to make excuses to come almost every day and we hang out while they go back and forth about what I should do.

“Is it?” Dani asks. “We don’t even know what it is he’s attempting down there. What if he’s planning to mug her the moment she comes out?”

I roll my eyes. “He’s not going to mug me. Maybe he just wants to apologize?”

“Hey,” Roxie warns. “Don’t go getting soft on us. Can you forgive him eventually? *Maybe*. But first comes revenge.”

I sigh. Why does everybody in my life seem to think revenge is so important? “I tried the whole revenge thing with Vaughn, and where did that get me?”

“Happy?” Roxie tries.

“I mean, at times it was fun. But I’m pretty sure you aren’t supposed to use other people’s misery as a source of happiness in your life. At least you shouldn’t expect to stay happy for long if you do.”

“I don’t know,” Roxie says. “It’s working pretty well for me so far.”

I roll my eyes, smiling. “It seems like he’s taking revenge on himself so I don’t have to. He even put up posters asking for phone sex from old lonely men. I mean, it’s pretty obvious, right? He’s doing the same things to himself we did to Vaughn, even though he doesn’t deserve nearly as much grief for what he did. Maybe I could just go hear him out.”

“How did that work for you last time?” Dani asks. She has been on Roxie’s side this whole time. They admitted to me they went around the city telling as many rough looking people as they could that a man was trading books for companionship at the bus stop. Roxie thought it would be a hilarious way to annoy him into leaving me alone.

I was secretly rooting for Jameson when I saw he took his new friends in stride. He has been treating them all like family down there, as far as I can tell, and the little prank fell flat. If anything, he seems happier to have the company.

I was honestly pretty pissed when they told me what they’d done. Pranking Vaughn felt at least sort of right because he crossed so many lines. Jameson still feels like he is more good than bad. Yes, I got scared about committing to a guy when I knew he was capable of lying to me. But I don’t have that same burning hatred toward him I had toward Vaughn.

I won’t admit it, mostly because my friends would lose their minds, but I miss him. I really miss him.

“He’s so cute down there,” Gemmaline says, joining me at the window. “I love how he just made friends with all the homeless people. You can tell a lot about someone by how they treat people with less than them.”

I completely agree with her, even though I don’t voice it. Roxie and Dani have been borderline overbearing since I

broke things off with Jameson. I think they'd put me in a cage if they thought it would keep me safe.

Right now, Jameson is sharing bagels he brought with the half dozen or so people gathered around the bus stop bench.

I've spent more time than I'd like to admit watching him from my window on the third floor, especially ever since he started the whole book reading thing. What the hell is he doing down there? Every day is the same thing.

Jameson walks up with a huge, heavy bag. He sits somewhere and eventually pulls out a book. He sits there and reads, glancing up every page or so toward my building, as if expecting me to emerge at any moment.

At first, he was by himself. After Roxie and Dani's little stunt, things in front of my building have grown more chaotic by the day as the number of people grows.

"I just want to know what he's doing," I say.

"Waiting," Gemmaline says. "It's one thing to text and say you're sorry. But he has been out there rain or shine for over two weeks now, just waiting for you. It's so freaking romantic."

I know it's only a matter of time before I go down there and confront him. If it weren't for Roxie and Dani, I'm sure I would've already gone down there to at least hear him out.

Yes, I'm still pissed at him. I don't even know where an apology would lead. Maybe it would just be salve over the wound he left, but we'd go our separate ways. Maybe it would lead to us in a bed together. I really can't say, because Jameson left behind a complicated tangle of emotions I haven't been able to peel apart.

I've also been busy on two fronts, because I've been learning first hand how becoming an author is unfortunately about more than just writing a book. It also involves the messy business of getting it out into the world and into people's hands—a skill that unfortunately has very little to do with writing. It's like I have to be a good writer *and* a good marketer, businesswoman, publicist, social media guru, and designer.

It sounds stupid now, but I think part of me just imagined I'd finish the book and the perfect landing spot for it would magically appear out of thin air. The first people to read it would be absolutely blown away and beg me to sign a contract with them. I could skip all the other necessary skills in publishing because someone would see my potential and do it all for me.

Technically, that did happen. Jameson Wolfe read a couple chapters of my manuscript almost two months ago and tried to sign me on the spot. The catch is I think he only cared about pissing off Vaughn Vanderlesh. For all I know, he only said my book was good because he knew he could piss off his rival by publishing it. It's a sour thought, and not one I'm sure I entirely believe. Jameson may have lied to me, but I confusingly still can't make myself believe he lied about that. He only lied to help his friend and his business. It wasn't malicious. It was just... him choosing work over me, I guess.

Outside of the book stuff, I've had to admit it may all take longer than I like. That's why I now work forty hours a week at a coffee shop, which is doing little more than prolonging my plunge into poverty.

Going back and begging Jameson or Nolan to publish my book would've been the easy path. It probably would've been

the smart path. But I've been too stubborn. I want to earn this. I don't want it handed to me on a silver platter just because Jameson wants my forgiveness, which is probably what would happen if I asked.

I sent out queries as soon as I finished editing the book. I had a big list made up of all the local publishers in the city because I thought my chances were best if I could personally meet with agents and editors. At first, nobody replied to me. It was all crickets.

But then I sent a second wave of emails where I briefly explained the drama with Landmark and mentioned that Gray Wolfe had "expressed interest" in publishing my story, which wasn't really a lie. Suddenly I had meetings with three different publishers in person.

Those had all been a few weeks ago, but every day that goes by without contact makes my hopes sink further into the gutter. I gave all of them a manuscript to read and crossed my fingers that I'd hear back within the day. Now I'm convinced they all read the book, hated it, and will never reach out to me.

I just can't shake the feeling that everything went wrong when I broke things off with Jameson. I can't get away from the endless line of what ifs that float around my brain every day and night. What if I'd forgiven him? What if I'd let him make it up to me? What if I still had him by my side to help me navigate this mess I've found myself in?

I miss him.

I miss him every time I have more than a few seconds to think. Every time the feeling of longing gets too strong, I remind myself that he lied. If he lied to me once, it means he could do it again. If he could lie to me, how could I ever trust him?

But more and more, I feel like I'm just reading lines to myself. They are the lines I think I'm supposed to say, but they aren't the ones I feel in my heart. My heart is bursting with the desire to forgive and to give second chances, even if it has burned me so many times in the past. I want to forgive because that's who I am. It's who I was before Vaughn tried to burn it out of me and it's who I was before I tried to be someone else by walking away from Jameson before he could hurt me more.

"Hey," Roxie says, snapping her fingers. "Get that puppy dog look off your face. I can tell what you're thinking about."

"No you can't," I say.

"You're thinking about going down there and getting all smoochy with him."

I open my mouth to argue, but can't seem to find the right lie to convince her I wasn't doing exactly that. I clear my throat and stare at my feet.

Roxie and Dani both laugh.

Gemmaline hugs me. "It's okay, Girl. I support you if you decide to go down there and talk to him. I think he's at least earned a listen."

"Quit being a bad influence," Roxie says.

"It's okay to let your guard down sometimes," Gemmaline says. "It's okay to..." she struggles to find the words and starts gesturing in a circular motion.

"Maybe it's always going to be a risk?" I blurt. "I mean... Yes," I point to Roxie. "You have had some real scumbag boyfriends who have really been shit to you. I totally get the whole *us against the world* mentality you have. I really do. But what are we supposed to do instead? Just only date guys who are one hundred percent safe? There's no such thing. And

if there was, it would be boring, right?” It’s more than I’ve said about my feelings since this whole thing started weeks ago. Mostly, I’ve just listened and let my friends tell me what they think. But I finally feel like I’m boiling over with energy—like I’ve got to do *something* and *soon*.

Roxie folds her arms. “There are guys who don’t lie to you and mistreat you.”

“Clay did lie about his body count,” Dani says slowly. Clay is the guy from work she started dating recently. “We talked about it and he told me he’d been with three girls. But we were all drinking at this bar after work and one of his friends blurted out how it was more like ten.”

Roxie glares. “What? You didn’t tell me that.”

“Well,” Dani says slowly. “I really like him. I got mad and we fought, but we made up. He got me a really cool plant.”

Roxie’s face screws up. “A plant? Seriously?” She holds her arms wide. “What’s wrong with you guys? Gemmaline is over here always trying to convince everybody to be a doormat. Dani is apparently forgiving assholes as long as they buy her the right plant. And now Charli is wanting to go make up with the guy who lied and was about to let someone steal her book to help his company’s bottom line. Either I’m going crazy, or you’re all losing your minds.”

“Or maybe,” Gemmaline says softly. “You’re the one who could learn to open up and love again.”

Roxie scoffs. She snatches a bag of shredded cheese from my fridge, stuffs a handful in her mouth, and gestures warningly at all of us. “I’m going to leave, because I can’t just sit here and watch this.”

She storms off and Dani flops down on the couch, letting out a long breath. “She’s just pissy because she likes her new job.”

“What?” I ask. “When did she get a new job?” It’s not like Roxie to tell my sister something before the rest of us.

“She’s working at this little clothing boutique. She was planning to operate some sort of scam—like she’d buy clothes for cheap and agree to buy them for a friend at a profit with the boutique’s bank roll. They were going to split the money, but she’s pissed because she has the hots for the owner’s brother or something and hasn’t gone through with her plan. She’s just working it like a normal job and collecting an honest paycheck. It’s driving her crazy.”

I laugh. “Leave it to Roxie to be mad that she’s happy.”

“Well?” Gemmaline says. “Are you going to go down there and put him out of his misery? Because I really want to watch the big kiss from up here.”

I bite my lip and look out the window. Jameson is digging in his endless bag of books with one hand and holding a bagel with the other.

Maybe it won’t kill me to just go down there and hear him out. I can keep my guard up. I can promise myself not to melt into a puddle of way-too-easily-forgiving goo if he says or does something nice.

Or maybe I’m about to go out there and kick off the biggest disaster yet.

JAMESON

I glance up from my book like I've done a thousand times. The motion has become so habitual I don't even register what I'm seeing until I look up a second time and notice the woman I saw leaving the building is now moving through the crosswalk with a small group of people and coming toward me.

It's not just any woman.

It's her.

It's Charli McBride in all of her glory.

It feels like I'm seeing a fucking dream come to life. I realize I only knew her for about three weeks. That means I've spent more time away from her than I spent knowing her. A month of no contact. Three weeks now of trying to apologize? Or has it been four? I've completely lost track.

All I know is my heart is in my throat just from the sight of her walking my way.

She looks nervous, embarrassed, and more than a little scared. She's wearing jeans and a t-shirt with her hair thrown into a simple ponytail, like she was just hanging around the house and decided to come out to see what I was doing.

I stand up suddenly and my small crew of homeless friends notices my body language.

“Hungry again already?” Earl asks.

Margaret, Earl, Janice, Buck, Petey, and Teddy Two-Toes (who actually has nine toes and claims the nickname stuck because of a misunderstanding, a language barrier, and a healthy amount of alcohol), and Nina are all looking at me and then at Charli.

It’s more than a little silly how much the group has grown over the last two weeks. I haven’t minded the company or supplying my new companions with free signed books, food, and the occasional wad of cash when nobody’s looking. I’ve honestly felt really fulfilled these past weeks. Of course, I’ve always donated to charity and all that shit, but I write a check and hand it to an assistant who figures out the place where my money will have the most impact. It’s impersonal, and I’ve grown disconnected from it.

Hanging out down here with my growing group of companions has reminded me why it’s worth busting my ass to make so much money on a different level. It lets me do shit like this—like promising Earl I’d cover his security deposit and his rent so he can get a place again, which will mean he can get the job he has been trying to land for months.

Watching Charli approach reminds me that I could have possibly spent a little less time playing homeless daddy and a little more time actually thinking about what magical words I could say to earn her forgiveness. *Whoops.*

I’m standing up and she’s right in front of me. It’s a moment I’ve been waiting two weeks for, and I have no idea what to say.

“Hi,” I say. Can’t ever go wrong with a solid, friendly, “hi”, right?

I’m about to say something that I’m sure will be grand and heart-melting when Earl pops to his feet and snaps his fingers. “Boys!” he hisses. “This is what he told us to be ready for. Come on!”

“Oh, shit,” I mutter.

Charli looks confused. “What?” she asks as Earl, Petey, Teddy-Two-Toes all rush between us and start awkwardly twitching, gyrating, and shaking their butts at me. Earl is doing some kind of approximation of beat boxing as he reaches to lift his shirt—which also blasts all of us with a hefty wave of body odor.

“Guys, guys,” I say, standing and trying to move them out of the way. “I said *only if I give the signal*. Did I give the fucking signal?”

Petey and Earl stop dancing and at least look a little embarrassed as they move their attention from me and then to Charli. Teddy is still dancing, hands on his hips as he’s getting more and more into it by the minute.

I laugh a little nervously and rub the back of my neck. Then I unbutton a few of my buttons and show Charli a hint of the ridiculous leather get-up I’ve been wearing under my clothes every day. It’s a bikini-style one-piece, similar to what I convinced Charli to wear to the Halloween mixer. I called in a favor to have that friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend make one in my size. “That was my ‘break in case of emergency’ plan. I get a lap dance wearing this ridiculous suit from the boys. *Uh, for you,*” I add, when she’s looking at me like everything out of my mouth has been pure insanity.

“Your plan was to wear a leather dominatrix suit and get a lap dance. *For me?*” she asks.

“I told him it was stupid!” Margaret helpfully lobs from the bus stop behind me.

My recently acquired friends are all watching with wide eyes and no apparent sense that we might want a little privacy for this conversation. I guess they probably feel like they deserve to watch the drama after they’ve waited with me out here day after day. Teddy Two-Toes gives up his dance, produces a bagel from *somewhere*, and takes a big, noisy bite. I glare over my shoulder at him and he pauses mid-chew, then smiles with his teeth full of cream cheese as if to say, “sorry, Boss, I’ll keep it down.”

“This isn’t going the way I planned it,” I say.

“Oh,” Charli says. “I could go back up to my room and keep watching you from the window if you prefer?”

“No,” I say quickly. So she has been up there watching me the whole time? I knew she was sneaking out the back exit because my growing group of friends have been acting like a network of spies. I *didn’t* know she’s been watching me. “This is good. I would apologize for the crowd, but I heard you might be the reason they’re here.” I hook a thumb over my shoulder and see Earl flash Charli his single-toothed smile.

She smirks. “It’s okay. So, um, what are you doing, exactly? Other than being ready to get a lap dance for me, that is.”

“Well,” I turn around and hoist the big bag, then gesture quickly for Margaret to hand me the book she has. “At first I was just going to give you as many signed books as I could. I noticed you were collecting them at the convention in Arizona. I got bored the first day waiting to give them to you so I

started to read. Then I realized some of them weren't very good, and I thought it would be a pretty shitty gift if I gave you a signed book that wasn't even a good read. So I started reading to decide which ones were good enough to give you."

Her smile is crooked. "So you've been out here reading these books every day to decide which ones are good enough for me? That's... actually really sweet."

I try not to smile. *This is good.* She's talking, for starters, and it's not angry talking or flower stomping. She's standing still and talking to me. She's hearing me out, so I had better not screw this up. "I was also planning to tell you what an idiot I was if I got the chance. And how I've spent every day thinking about how I'd do anything to change what I did and get you back. The book thing was more of a... gesture."

"I've missed you, too." She says the words so quietly I almost don't let myself believe I really heard them. Then she starts speaking again and it's like she's letting out something she's had bottled up for weeks. "I had a lot of time to think about what happened. I mean, you were trying to get me to admit my feelings for you were real the whole time. You were open about how you felt. And I kept pushing you away. And you have this company full of people to worry about and I was just this girl you met a few weeks ago. All that, and you were still planning to tell me the truth, even if you didn't do it right away. So I—"

"Charli," I say, cutting her off. "I was kind of planning to apologize. First, you screw things up by coming out and interrupting us waiting for you to come out. And now you have the nerve to try to out-sorry me? Do you mind?"

Her lips twitch and she adorably clasps her hands in front of her waist, nodding and waiting.

“Like I was saying,” I say. “I thought about all the excuses I could make. I thought about trying to convince you my actions made sense. But ultimately, I think all that matters is for you to know that *I* know I fucked up. I really, really fucked up, because being with you, even for as little time as we had, was easily the best thing that has ever happened to me. I should have never let anything come between us, and I did. If that means you can never forgive me, I understand, and I’ll regret it for the rest of my life. If you can forgive me, then I won’t deserve it, but I’ll spend every day trying to make it up to you.”

“Wow,” she says.

“Wow,” Margaret agrees from behind me in her scratchy, lifelong smoker voice. “If you don’t take him back, I will. God knows I’d never run out of panties if he was my man.”

“Um,” Charli says, leaning so she can see Margaret. “I’ll let you know when I decide, but you can’t have him yet.”

Charli’s eyes lift to mine, then fall to the bag of books by where I was sitting on the bench. “So are those the keepers or the ones that weren’t good enough for me?”

“These are the keepers. You want to see them?” I ask. I didn’t realize how excited I’d be to share these with her, but I am. I’ve spent the last few weeks thinking about almost nothing but making sure the books I select are right for her. I want this to make her happy. *Really happy.*

“I want to see how well you did. If there are any real stinkers in there, maybe I’ll have to think twice about forgiving you.”

I’m trying desperately to read her expression for signs of playfulness, but I can’t figure her out right now. She could be one hell of a poker player.

She flips open the top of my bag and starts pulling out books, checking the titles and making appreciative or contemplative noises.

Her eyebrows shoot up when she pulls out a romance book with nothing on the cover but some words and a big, yellow banana. The title is “His Banana” by Penelope Bloom. She laughs, and turns it toward me for me to see. “Really? You think *this* is what I want to read? What are you trying to imply, Jameson?”

I scratch the back of my neck and shrug, smiling a little. “I thought maybe if I tossed a few slightly dirty books in there, you might get all revved up and be unable to resist coming back to me. Actually, that one isn’t really as dirty as it looks. It’s funny, though. OCD boss and a klutz who gets a job working for him to expose a scandal, and—”

“You really read this?” she asks, looking surprised.

“I read all of those. For you,” I add, showing a lopsided smile.

She looks over my shoulder at the group of homeless people, who are far less raggedly dressed than they were a week ago. Buck is actually wearing a Gucci jacket. I decide I either need to start giving them less cash, or maybe I should set them up with some financial literacy classes if I’m going to keep padding their pockets. My companions all look hilariously nervous. They’re rooting for me, and I’m surprised by how much that realization means to me.

Charli finally breaks her serious act and smiles wide. “I love it. I love all of them.”

I let out a huge breath, but I know it’s not over yet. “One more thing,” I say. “I thought a lot about the nature of my fuck up and all the relationships I’ve screwed up before this. Of

course, none of them really mattered to me or stuck with me except you, but I saw a common theme. I always put work first. I was never able to convince myself that a woman mattered more to me than my job, and that's what I was about to do with you. So I wanted to make you an offer. If you want, I can help you self publish your book. I'll walk you through every step of the process, teach you how to run advertisements, set you up with a cover artist—the whole nine yards. I'll do it all for free and without attaching it to Gray Wolfe in any way.”

She eyes me. “Why would you do all that?”

“Because I want you to see that I care more about you and your book than how it can help my company. And shit, I want you to be happy. I want to see the look on your face when copies are flying off the shelves and people are reading your story. I want you to be rolling in cash and not have to share it with some big stuffy publisher like us. I want you to be happy, Charli.”

“Then kiss me,” she says, biting her lip. “But this time, don't let me even joke about it being pretend. This time I want it to be real. All of it.”

My lips are on hers before I have time to think.

We kiss and the city melts away. The meager whooping and clapping from the small crowd of homeless folks behind us barely registers for me. None of it matters because she's kissing me and she's giving me another chance.

That's all that matters, because I know I'm not going to mess it up this time. I'll do everything in my power to make this work, because I know what it feels like to think she's gone, and I'm never letting Charli go again.

EPILOGUE - CHARLI

My parents have all the old Christmas decorations up. It brings me straight back to my childhood. There's the dangling Santa head with the long, sparkly pointed beard hanging from the dresser drawer. They have the tree up with my dad's patented over-stuffed ornament style, which leaves almost no branch unadorned and makes the whole tree look like it weighs a metric ton. Mom has her Christmas village up above the bookshelves and Troy has helped set up the train, which grows every year. It used to just go beneath the tree, but now it snakes around the couch and weaves in front of the TV like a mobile tripping hazard. I'm frankly surprised it hasn't killed Meemaw yet.

Soft holiday music plays from speakers in the living room and I should be cozy, happy, and feeling warm. Instead I'm gnawing on my nails and worrying.

Three days ago, I "put Jameson out of his misery" as Dani has been saying, and forgave him. Two days ago, he started coaching me on the steps needed to self publish my book. One day ago, I asked him if he would be interested in finally meeting my family, who have been more or less in the dark about him with the exception of Dani and Maddie.

He seemed happy to come, but he also doesn't know exactly what he's walking into, which is why I'm nervous.

Troy emerges from the kitchen with a chunk of chicken in one hand and a pickle in the other. He takes a bite of chicken, chases it with pickle, and sets down both to chug some beer. "Is he always late?"

"He's not late," I say calmly. "I told him seven. He still has thirty minutes before he's late."

"If you're not fifteen minutes early, you're fifteen minutes late," Troy grumbles.

"That doesn't even make sense. What if you're fourteen minutes early?" I ask. "Are you still fifteen minutes late?"

He scrunches his face up and stares at me, obviously not understanding my point.

"I always prefer a man who comes late to a man who comes early," Meemaw declares a little too loudly. She rests her palms on the dining table and looks around the room with a shit-eating grin to make sure we all understand the pun was definitely intended.

Nobody takes her bait, so she sighs. "Like when he orgasms," she says. "You get it? I prefer when they orgasm late instead of—"

"Pretty sure we got it, Meemaw," Dani says.

"Did you warn him about our family?" Maddie asks. She seems like she put a little extra effort into getting herself ready for dinner tonight. She's got on her favorite grungy hoodie and her hair is brushed.

"Why would she need to warn him?" Troy asks.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Maddie says, rolling her eyes. “Maybe because she has a psycho overprotective older brother, a... lovely grandma, a sister who tried to prank his ass, and, well, *dad.*”

“What did I do?” Dad asks, throwing up a hand in outrage as he sets down a roll of paper towels in the middle of the table.

Maddie shrugs, but she’s grinning. “You’re kind of weird. I bet Charli is worried you’re going to try to recruit her hot boyfriend into one of your DnD campaigns, or something.”

Dad holds up a finger like he’s about to argue, then pauses, mouth snapping shut as his head tilts. “Do you think he’d be game?” he asks me.

“Um, I don’t know,” I say. “Feel free to ask.”

My mom comes out of the kitchen and plants her hands on the back of a chair. “I’m just excited to meet the man we’ve heard so little about. Really, Charli, it’s like you’ve been holding national secrets from us over there. We have to find out there was a big dramatic fling and a big dramatic breakup *and* a big dramatic apology after it’s all said and done? Part of the reason I had children was to enjoy the drama. You really can’t be doing this kind of thing to me. *And your father.*”

“And your father,” Dad agrees, though he looks like he’s fully in his head right now, practicing how he’ll try to pitch the DnD game to Jameson.

When there’s a knock at the door, everybody freezes. Troy takes a big lurching step like he’s about to go get the door, so I rush to my feet and have to run to beat him there. I yank open the door a little breathlessly and smile.

Jameson is standing there with three bunches of flowers. He plucks the red ones out and sticks them toward me. “For you,”

he says, smirking.

I swoon. Not only do I love how sweet he is to me, I love that he's making such a good first impression for my family. When Vaughn showed up for the first Sunday dinner, he did just about everything wrong, including showing up in a wrinkled shirt and looking hungover. Jameson is dressed well, as always, and he brought *freaking flowers*?

He hugs me and kisses me on the cheek, then straightens when he notices Troy looming just behind me.

“So you're the guy who broke my sister's heart,” Troy booms. He's using his deep, intimidating voice.

Jameson is taller than Troy, but I have to admit my brother's former powerlifting days probably mean he could simply lay on Jameson and squish him into pretty oblivion.

If Jameson is intimidated, he does a good job of hiding it as he steps toward Troy with a hand extended and a smile on his face. “Stupidly,” he concedes. “Also the guy who swore on everything holy that he'd never do anything to hurt your sister again.”

Troy stares at Jameson's extended hand a few seconds, then grudgingly reaches out and takes it. He's probably squeezing as hard as he can. Jameson winces, but shakes back and keeps his smile.

The rest of my family takes turns introducing themselves. Jameson gives flowers to Meemaw and my mom, who look like they were won over from the moment they set eyes on him. Maddie is uncharacteristically bashful around him, blushing profusely when he gives her a polite hug “hello” and rushing back to the safety of her chair as soon as she can.

“Sorry I kinda pranked you,” Dani says when it’s her turn. “It was mostly Roxie’s idea.”

“Water under the bridge,” Jameson says. “Well, that’s not entirely true. I’m actually grateful. I’ve enjoyed meeting all the people you two sent my way.”

“Well, well, well,” Meemaw says. She dramatically hung back, saving her introduction for last. She approaches with the steady click of her walking stick on the wood floor. “If it isn’t the spitting image of my late husband. That’s right,” she says, whipping her attention from Jameson to look at me. “I pulled a guy just like this in my youth. Did I mention the motor-boating thing?”

I cringe, shielding my eyes with my hand. “Meemaw,” I hiss through clenched teeth.

She smiles, then beckons Jameson toward her with two extended arms and twitching fingers. “Come here, Big Boy.”

Jameson shoots me a look, but dutifully bends to wrap his arms around Meemaw. I’m relieved when she at least restrains herself from groping him. “Mhm,” she says, stepping back from the hug. “I can see why she forgave you.”

I have a second to think that, by Meemaw standards, she wasn’t even that outrageous. Then she opens her mouth again.

“Firm in all the right places,” she mutters. “Especially the backside. That’s a sign of good genetics, you know. The butt is the powerhouse of the body, and this boy of yours has quite the powerhouse, Charli-Bug.”

“Can we just eat?” I ask.

“Sure,” Dad says. “Jameson. Mind helping me bring the plates out?”

Jameson smiles and follows after my dad. A second later, I hear my dad speaking softly, but not so softly that I can't hear.

“What if I told you about a very special, unique opportunity to be part of a dream team. A dream team of adventurers, swashbucklers, and heroes?”

“Um,” Jameson says.

I put my face in my hands. This is going to be a long night.



WHEN JAMESON ORIGINALLY BROUGHT UP THE CHRISTMAS party between Landmark and Gray Wolfe, I was almost certain we would never make it that far. It felt like the kind of far off thing people sometimes mention early in a relationship more out of hope than belief.

But my arm is hooked in his, we're in a huge, beautiful hall with classy Christmas decorations everywhere I can see. There's silver, glinting tinsel hanging from the ceiling and looped in a repeating pattern along the walls. There are piles of presents under several different, fully decorated Christmas trees. There's a man and woman dressed as Santa. The woman's Santa costume is full of cleavage and legs, but she also has on a beard.

Just like at the Halloween mixer, Jameson leads us straight for the food table once we're inside.

I watch him pile his plate high and we talk excitedly about publishing while he eats. For the past few weeks, he has been schooling me daily on the ins and outs of self publishing. He's a surprisingly good teacher, but I guess I shouldn't be so shocked. The man did start a publishing empire with his friend

from the ground up. Of course he knows all about how to get a book off the ground.

It feels surreal, but the work is almost done. My book is finished and edited. I have a cover I'm in love with, but still able to tweak up until the last minute. I've written blurbs, advertising snippets, and helped a designer come up with cute images to promote the book. I even set up social media pages and a website. Both are sort of bare bones at the moment, but Jameson tells me I can take my time and build as I go.

"You look happy," Jameson says around a mouthful of carrots. For some reason, he went back for seconds of carrots with ranch, of all things. "I like seeing you this way."

"Get used to it," I say, hugging his arm and biting my lip. "I think it's your fault."

"For once, somebody is blaming me for a good thing. I could definitely get used to that."

"You really think it's ready?" I ask.

I don't have to specify what I'm talking about. As much as getting back with Jameson has been huge, the impending launch of my book has gradually bubbled up to the forefront of both our minds, especially the past couple days. It's getting so close. We're going to launch three weeks after Christmas. Give everyone time to calm down from the holidays and then hit them with the book.

"It's ready. *You're ready*," he adds, squeezing my ass. I'm not sure if the gesture is supposed to be reassuring or if he's just enjoying my ass. I'll take either. "And I'm proud as hell. You had to fight through so much shit to get to this point, but you did it. You're here."

I melt into him, hugging his arm even tighter. “With your help,” I add.

He makes a dismissive sound. “I’m helping with the easy stuff.”

We both go a little more rigid when Vaughn Vanderlesh passes in front of us. He’s walking beside his father, Griffon, and they’re arguing about something.

I haven’t seen Vaughn since the Halloween mixer, and the past few months have not been kind to him. He’s not freshly shaven, his eyes look dark around the bottom and sunken, and his posture is less upright and proud. He looks like a defeated man, and part of me almost feels sad for him.

And then he decides to erase any sympathy I may have when he breaks away from his father and approaches us.

He sneers at me, then at Jameson, then at my hands where they are wrapped around Jameson’s arm. “You two came here to gloat, did you?”

“I came because this is a joint party between my company and your father’s, actually. I brought my girlfriend because she’s my girlfriend, and I actually invite her to social events. I like to show her off.”

Vaughn’s lip turns up at that. “So you complain about me to him, huh? Kind of sad, really. You’d think she would move on after so many months. But I guess it’s hard to get me out of her head.”

I know Jameson probably wants to defend my honor, or whatever he may think of it as, but I decide this one is my pitch. “Actually,” I say. “Remembering you existed was a constant challenge. It was a challenge I would’ve failed if you hadn’t shoved yourself back in my life with your childish

attempt to steal my book. If I had thought of you since the breakup, it would just be to feel bad for you. Because it really is sad, isn't it? You can't even manage to make it as an agent in your father's own company. And when you realized you were terrible at the job, you tried to cheat it. But you weren't even good at cheating—on multiple levels,” I add, sniffing with amusement and disgust. “So, no. It was actually very easy to get you out of my head.”

Jameson gives my ass a reassuring squeeze. That, or he's bored and just enjoying my ass again. I really can't say with him.

Vaughn's face has gone a little whiter by the end of my tirade. The old Vaughn would just puff up larger and spout some arrogant line about how I could kid myself but I really admired him, or whatever bullshit he came up with. The new Vaughn just deflates a little.

“Feel better, now?” Vaughn asks, as if he was doing me a favor by letting me say what I said. “Anyway, I decided to make you an offer. I'll represent you and your book the old fashioned way, if you're interested. I heard you haven't had any big bites since you started shipping it to the boutique publishers. I could get you noticed. I could make the book a hit.”

At first, I just stare. Then I laugh. “You're serious?” I ask.

Vaughn looks uncomfortable now, shifting on his feet. Jameson is crunching a carrot beside me like he's enjoying a show.

“Rejecting me would be a mistake. Think carefully before you answer.”

I can't help but grin. "Um, no. You're the last person I would want to represent me. And the boutique publishers did get back to me. All three wanted to ink a deal, but I politely declined because I'm going to self publish the book."

Vaughn snorts, shoving his hands in his pockets and tilting his head back for an over-exaggerated eye roll. "Oh, *God*. You're one of those, now? You think your little self-published book is going to ever get noticed? Please, Charli. Be realistic."

I'm about to say something, but Jameson makes us all pause when he points a baby carrot toward Vaughn's chest. It's an oddly threatening gesture, especially considering there's ranch on the tip of the carrot. He pushes it forward, leaving a little dot of white on Vaughn's tie.

We all stare at the spot, waiting in confused interest.

"Now you know how it feels," Jameson says simply.

What? I'm standing in shocked silence, trying to figure out what he means when it hits me. I cover my mouth, laughing softly.

"What?" Vaughn demands, wiping at the spot. "I know how what feels?"

"When someone waves their small prick in your face and expects you to be scared. It's really just a joke." He looks down at the carrot in his fingertips and chucks it in the trash. "I already let your father know. This is the last joint mixer Gray Wolfe will be doing with Landmark. I think the tradition has run its course. Besides, Landmark doesn't really seem like a publisher on the right trajectory. In a year or two, you'll barely have enough staff left to make a showing at these things." He pats Vaughn's shoulder, smiling. "No hard feelings."

EPILOGUE - JAMESON

We're in the dry heat of Arizona and it has been exactly a year since the day I met Charli. It feels right to be back here at the convention with her on my arm.

Of course, it's no longer a joint function between Gray Wolfe and Landmark. That would be kind of hard, considering Griffon Vanderlesh lost his lead against us, which pushed him to quit pouring money into the company to float a failing business model. It only took a few months for everything to unravel.

Last I heard, someone had bought the rights to the books Landmark still had under contract and the company was almost entirely dissolved.

Maybe it should have felt immensely satisfying. After all, that was victory, wasn't it? Our greatest rival and competitor for years was nothing but dust. Nobody was there to challenge our command in the city, and all the biggest books and authors were coming our way almost by default.

All this, and I felt like I didn't care the way I would've expected.

That's the magic of Charli McBride, I guess. She's my constant reminder of what is really important.

It's still early in the morning, so it's just authors and people working for publishers setting up booths. Without Landmark to invite, I convinced Nolan to invite all the smaller boutique publishers in the city this year. It'll give them an opportunity to network and grow.

I'm standing in front of a long table with Charli's name on it. She's not technically one of our authors, but nobody is going to complain. A few months ago, her book was a massive success when it hit the self-published market. When she started getting bombarded with offers to buy foreign rights, audio rights, and potentially even movie or series rights, she asked if I would represent her as an agent.

"Are you nervous?" I ask.

Charli looks sexy and adorable at the same time. She's wearing a dress with a white, fluffy jacket to cover her arms. I think she might have been going for an author look, but she's striking me a little more like sexy librarian or teacher.

"Just a lot," she says, shrugging. "Do I look okay? Do you think people are going to laugh at me for having the nerve to assume anyone will want me to sign their books? Like, who is this girl? Why would I—"

I shut her up with a kiss. "People love your book. Nobody is going to laugh. You're going to have a line out the door, okay? Try to enjoy today. You've earned this."

She takes a breath, relaxing and letting me hug her. "I'll try. You should go find Nolan, by the way. He told me to send you over when you got back from raiding the buffet."

I kiss the top of her head and look around. I don't see him, so I start wandering the rooms of the convention center. I check my

phone and have texts from both Cleo and Kate, which isn't a surprise. They know the plan, after all.

Cleo: Well?

Actually, the real text has about a million question marks and emojis.

Kate: Updates? News? How is it going?

I decide texting them back isn't going to help calm them down, so I ignore the texts for now.

I find Nolan helping an author set up his table. I pull him aside.

"You were looking for me?" I say.

"Yeah. Cleo called me and told me what you're planning. What the fuck, man?" He punches me in the chest, but he's smiling. "Really?"

I shrug. "My sisters really suck at keeping secrets."

"You're not supposed to have secrets with me."

"The truth is I'm nervous as hell, man. What if she says no?"

He laughs. "Charli loves you. You see the way she looks at you, right? It's honestly nauseating."

I take a deep breath. "Well, I don't exactly have you to thank for our thriving relationship, do I?"

He bites back a smile. "Come on. You were the dumbass for telling me first and not going straight to her. You had to know I was going to pull something like that."

I grin. We've given each other a hard time about our fight so many times that all the sharp edges have smoothed over. Now it just feels like something to laugh about. "Yeah, I should know my best friend is an asshole."

“See? Now you get it.”

“This is exactly why you lost the privilege of being in on the secret, by the way. You clearly can’t be trusted with them.”

“You do have a point,” he admits. “Well, why are you over here talking to me? Go be with your girl.”

“Because you asked to talk to me, dumbass.” I give him a shove and he smiles.

He pulls me in for a quick hug and pats my back. “You’ve got this, Jameson. I’m happy for you. Seriously.”

I give his back a hard pat and pull away. I raise a two fingered salute, then go back to Charli’s booth.

I’ve got about ten minutes before I need to make an excuse to slip away from her, get on my phone, and make about ten phone calls to coordinate.

EPILOGUE - CHARLI

The doors have finally opened and people are crowding the convention. Just like Jameson predicted, I have a huge line at my booth. I barely have time to savor how awesome this is because I'm constantly talking, signing, and posing for pictures. It feels surreal.

Just last year, I was at this same convention hoping against hope to get my book noticed by a publisher. My wildest dreams involved an advance that might help me feel less stressed about money for a few months and maybe a decently successful launch.

The book launch has gone so far beyond any of that.

I've obviously seen the numbers. I know thousands and thousands of people are reading it, but so far, those have just been numbers on a computer screen to me. They've been emails and messages on social media. This is different.

These are real people. Real faces and stories and words. It's actual people gushing to me about how much they loved the story and the characters. It's validation more pure than anything I could've ever hoped for.

I'm also halfway through the next book, and I haven't announced it anywhere publicly. I'm having a ton of fun

dropping that little nugget to excited fans and watching them squeal. After only an hour or so of running the booth, people are telling me they've already heard rumors about the next book, making me wonder how far and fast that information will spread after today.

The only thing that could make this better is if Jameson hadn't disappeared. He said he had some kind of work emergency, apologized profusely, and rushed off.

After about two hours, I'm starting to really miss him. I apologize to a nice old woman who is next in line while I send him a quick text asking if he'll be back soon and bragging about how huge the line is for my booth.

Jameson: I'm very aware of how long this line is. I should have brought water or something. See me?

I frown in confusion, then look up and lean a little, trying to scan the crowd of people in front of me. That's when I see him a little ways back in the line. He's towering over the group and smiling, waving with a copy of my book in his hands. He points at it and flashes a big, cheesy smile.

My heart melts. It's silly and kind of pointless, but it's such a sweet gesture for him to get in my line and want me to sign a copy of my book for him. I really do love him.

I'm admittedly distracted as I interact with the next few fans before Jameson's turn.

It feels like an eternity before he finally steps up to my booth and sets the book down. "I'm a big fan."

"Is that right?" I ask.

He nods. "You could say I'm a little obsessed, actually. I can't stop thinking about you. *Dreaming* about you, actually. And they are not PG dreams."

I grin. “Should I call security?”

“You could, but they’re on my payroll. I think they’ll let me do what I came here to do.”

I raise an eyebrow. “And what is that, Mr. Wolfe?”

“Well,” he says. “It starts with you signing this for me.” He pushes the book toward me on the table, palm covering the front cover for a moment too long.

I frown down at his hand, wondering why he’s being weird. Then he pulls his hand back and I see my book’s cover, except the title is different. Everything else is exactly the same, but the title on this one reads, “Will You Marry Me.”

My jaw falls open. I look up at him and then notice the line has fanned out. I spot my dad first and do a double take. He’s clasping his hands in front of his chin like a high school girl watching a really good promposal. He smiles through clenched teeth at me.

I’m still trying to process what my dad is doing here when I see my mom and then my sisters and brother. Even Meemaw is there with both of Jameson’s sisters standing behind her.

Roxie throws me a friendly middle finger from the other side of the crowd and Gemmaline waves.

“What?” I whisper.

Jameson smiles, but I realize he’s actually nervous. Seeing Jameson nervous is a huge rarity. He points to the cover of the book. “I thought it would be more special if the people we care about were here.”

“What would be?” I ask, mind moving at about negative two miles per hour.

“Either my happiest or saddest moment.” He points again to the cover of the book.

I look at the words again, reading.

Will You Marry Me?

If I wasn't already sitting, I would fall down. My knees are useless and my body has forgotten how to breathe.

“I was thinking you would open it,” he urges.

I glance up at him and lift open the cover. The inside of the book is hollowed out in the center. It's a neat, perfectly cut square with a velvety box in the center. The words above the square are printed in fancy, script lettering.

Marry Me?

There are three boxes below.

Yes, maybe, and no.

I grin and pick up the pen I've been using to sign books. My heart is thumping like an overheating engine, but I decide to mess with everyone and let my pen hover over the box that reads “no”.

Jameson visibly gasps, and I feel suddenly bad for even joking. I jerk the pen over to the yes box, check it quickly, and jump up out of my chair, rushing to hug him tight.

He scoops me up, then sets me down and pulls the box from the book, getting to one knee.

“I realize this is getting a bit redundant,” he says. “But Charli McBride, will you make me the happiest, most undeserving man on Earth and marry me?”

“Yes,” I say, watching as he slides the ring on my finger.

Everything else is a blur because I'm kissing him and the world is fading away. I barely hear my friends and family clapping for me or my fans—my actual fans—cheering.

It's a moment of pure, delirious perfection. It's wonderful, and I know it's only the first of many more to come.

EXTRAS



Sign up to my VIP list to get a free copy of one of my books instantly. **You'll also get a silly, fun bonus scene of Vaughn that didn't make the final cut for the book. Meemaw makes Vaughn believe she's going to help him get back at Charli, and hilarity ensues.** [Click here>>](#)

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Not sure what to read next?

My most recent book was *The Big Fake*. Although it took me so long to get this book out that it's a bit of a stretch to call it recent! Either way, please check it out because it was a really fun read!

Get Your Copy of *The Big Fake*>>

DON'T FORGET TO REVIEW!

Please consider leaving a review to share your thoughts on this book! Reviews really help me *and* they help readers who are trying to decide if this book is worth their time. Reading your reviews is also one of my best tools for continuing to improve as an author. I'm always making tweaks to how I tell stories and trying new things. So whether you're a first time reader or a long time reader, your feedback is a huge help for me in deciding what's working and what isn't. Thanks so much!

Flip to the next page for a sneak peak of The Big Fake!

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CHAPTER 1 - PEARL (THE BIG FAKE SNEAK PEAK)

Some days, there was just a feeling in my chest that everything was about to go very, *very* wrong. You could call it a form of “ESPN,” as my cousin would say—like a telepathic connection to the future. Maybe it was just my supreme intellect collecting subtle clues and assembling them in my subconscious. Then again, it could’ve been the text from my friend at work begging me not to come in.

Yeah, it was probably the text.

I rode the elevator up to my floor, fingers twitching against the hem of my coat and feet tapping. My heart was *hammering*. Thump. Thump. Thump. Big, punching beats that practically rattled my bones.

I slid my eyes up to the row of numbers at the top of the old-fashioned elevator. A red arrow slowly slid from left to right, working its way past four, then six, and inching ever closer to ten.

I had no idea what was waiting for me on the tenth floor. Whatever it was, Marley was definitely trying to convince me not to come in today, so it had to be bad.

Now, me freaking out wasn’t exactly national newsworthy material. I had a little bit of a known habit when it came to

being overly anxious. If I saw a friend walking the same direction toward me down a city street, I'd go into defcon four over the decision to wave, smile, or pretend I didn't notice them. A confrontation at work? That was grounds for calling in sick. *All week*. Even rain freaked me out sometimes, because I imagined all the gunk floating in the air getting a public transit ride via a drop of water straight into my eyeball. I wasn't sure if that's how you got gonorrhea, but I didn't see the reason to take chances.

With a little professional help, I managed to transform myself from a constant mess to only a mess when I had an excuse. The problem? There was always an excuse to freak out if you looked for it. Once, I'd read about a little fish that swims up the tip of men's penises. I think it was local to Africa, but if you really thought about it, what was to stop one of them from hitching a urethra-taxi over to the States? How did I know it wasn't in there with a lover, ready to colonize our waters? And why would it only be the penis?

But my therapist would tell me to control what I could control. Take deep breaths. Convince my body we were calm and it would take my lead. Except I was about to step into some real shit. I *should* be on high alert, shouldn't I? I should be ready to use every ounce of martial arts skills I didn't have to attack the problem.

I put a hand over my chest just to make sure I wasn't imagining the racing heart. *Nope*.

One of my co-workers was at the front of the elevator. He must've heard my heavy breathing. He turned around, half-leaning and giving me that pursed lip, eyebrows raised look that said—*Mondays, huh?*

I tried to smile back at him, but in my current state, I think I mostly just showed my teeth as if the dentist had asked me to open up for his tools.

He gave me a confused double take, then rushed out as soon as the doors opened on the tenth floor.

I felt clammy all over and I was definitely sweating. It wasn't a polite, dignified level of sweat, either. I was pretty sure my white button down blouse with the puffy, super cute sleeves was now pit stained and my nose was definitely beading with perspiration.

All of my nerves had been sparked roughly thirty minutes ago. I was minding my own business, as I tend to do. I had my morning coffee in hand—actually, I don't drink coffee, but that's between you and me. I get a coffee cup and fill it with soda. People judge when they see you sipping on a Diet Coke, so I found it easier to just sneak my sodas in coffee cups. Sue me. Actually, please don't do that—I was never more than one thread away from broke at the best of times.

Anyway, I'd bopped out on the streets of Manhattan—a city I still couldn't quite believe I lived in. Like many people, I'd fantasized about living and working in New York for years. I'd imagined it would be romantic and exciting and life-changing. Honestly, it was all of those things. It also stressed me to high hell, but I was getting better about that. A text came through on my phone from Marley, a friend from Pollard who works in finance. I'm paraphrasing here, but the exchange went something like this:

Marley: Are you coming in today?

Pearl: Yep. Why? Are my clocks wrong? Am I late? Is Jonas looking for me?

Marley: No, no, and no. I just thought you could use a day off. I can run it by Jonas for you, if you want.

Pearl: Why would I take today off? I'm already dressed. I've got my coffee. I'm wearing one of my favorite outfits.

Marley: So take your coffee, cute outfit, and go chill in the park. It's beautiful and warm out there today.

Pearl: Why does it feel like you're trying to get me to stay away from work?

Pearl: Is there something I shouldn't see at work?

Pearl: I'M FREAKING OUT! WHAT IS GOING ON AT WORK?!

Marley: Just skip today, Pearl. Please. Trust me.

And that was where the conversation ended. I was no detective, but all of my investigative senses were tingling. *Hard.* The ESPN was blaring at full volume, and something was absolutely amiss.

Pollard Marketing composed the 8th floor through the 12th floor of the Metford building in the Upper East End. Everybody on my floor worked in design.

Every single person on the floor was gathered around the cork board right outside the elevator. I had to nudge and push my way through the crowd. First thing in the morning, I was five foot six in the morning—you lose a little height throughout the day as you squish down and compress, and you can trust me on that because I've measured it. I could barely see anything except the suit-clad backs of my co-workers from my low vantage point.

“Excuse me,” I said, heart still banging away like it was auditioning for *The Blue Man Group*.

Everybody was murmuring and whispering. There was excited chatter like they were gathered around a dead body. *Was somebody dead?*

Was *I* dead? Was this how it happened when you died? You go back in time and show up to work to watch everybody gossiping over your corpse? *No, Pearl.* That was the anxiety talking, and my anxiety had no business talking. My anxiety was like the constantly high friend whose paranoia made them wonder if the house plants were bugged with listening devices and thought the mailman was their stalker because he drove by the house every day, rain, snow, or shine. It was a nearly constant voice of irrational fears I had to work to keep at bay. If that didn't work. I needed to simply ignore it.

The last two men finally parted enough for me to see what the fuss was about. The entire corkboard was plastered with the same black and white image. Little cheerily colored thumb tacks were stuck at the top of each page. Only one paper was different—slathered with thick red text almost like it was written in lipstick.

I squinted, moving even closer until I was in front of the crowd. It took my brain a second to piece together what I was seeing. It looked like a woman was sitting on the copy machine bare ass naked. But that wasn't the worst of it. There were two large, masculine hands planted on either side of her ass and... *Yes.* That was a pair of balls between her legs. It wasn't completely clear from the image, but I would've bet my grandma's knitting collection I knew what I was looking at.

That was P in the V right there. Sure as day. I could see the squished, sad little sack. There was a hint of shaft. There was

some more smooshed up stuff right there in the valley. *Yep*. I didn't even need ESPN for this one.

For a split second, I felt relief. This was what Marley was worried about me seeing. She probably thought with my tendency to overreact and freak out, I'd lose my mind when I saw this. But sex? Come on, Marley. I was a big girl—not literally, because I was more like a below average height girl, but emotionally? Big. Very big.

So what was...

And then I saw it. The tattoos on the fingers. The splayed hands of the man next to the naked ass. There were letters inked into the pad of each finger. "S.U.C.K.I.T.D.U.D.E.S." And yes, the last finger had two letters on it, because the owner of the tattoo had been drunk and thought it was worth breaking the pattern of one letter per finger to make sure *all* the dudes were told to suck it, not just the one.

Why do I know this, you ask? That's easy. Because those stupid hands belonged to my stupid boyfriend. My *former* boyfriend, Eric.

My heart had been pounding a steady, anxious rhythm, but now it shifted from hard to fast. I could feel it in my ears and my eyes. I looked at those big, angry red letters at the bottom of the pages.

"Fuck you, Eric. You said you loved me. I hope you love losing your job, asshole. -Em."

I wasn't sure if Em was the woman whose ass was on display, but I had a sinking feeling it wasn't. Em was probably the *other* woman Eric was cheating on me with. The *other* woman he was saying "I love you" to.

It felt like I was floating a few inches above my body, almost like watching myself from the outside. I drifted back through the crowd, eyes glazed over. I kept going until I reached an empty area with two long, padded benches arranged in an “L” shape. I plopped down and stared forward.

The word “asshole” kept repeating in my mind, and not just because Eric was an asshole. It wasn’t because that was the word his other, *other* woman had used, either. It was because that image had so perfectly captured that woman’s asshole. It was right there in black and white, plain for everybody to see. And somehow, that felt appropriate. That was life, wasn’t it? We dressed things up and made them out to be romantic. We looked over flaws and faults. But when we really zoomed in and paid attention, everything had its own puckered, dirty little secret. The boss who isn’t as well-off as he pretends. The lifestyle social influencer family that fights every time the cameras were off.

I guess my dirty little secret was that my boyfriend was going balls deep behind my back at work.

Welcome to the asshole club, Pearl.

CHAPTER 2 - DEAN (THE BIG FAKE SNEAK PEAK)

I was a man who paid attention to detail. *Rigorous* attention. And when it came to the bodies of women I enjoyed, I was on another level of focus. I knew every curve, freckle, and mole. I knew that weird little spot where their skin didn't wrinkle because of a birth mark. I knew if they didn't moisturize their feet before bed they'd wake up with crocodile fins. I liked the details, and I learned them like it was my job.

So when I saw the pictures hanging up on the tenth floor, I knew. I knew it deep, *deep* down.

I wandered a little closer, ignoring the crowd of people gathered and whispering about the pictures. I raised a hand, tracing the pattern of dots on the underside of the woman's ass, which was flattened and plastered to the glass top of a copy machine. I'd called that constellation of freckles on her left asscheek "the horny runner." If you tilted your head a little, it kind of looked like a man running toward her ass crack, which had been greatly amusing at the time.

Right now? Not so much. Because in all my attention to detail, I'd never noticed a pair of balls between her legs.

Conclusion? Those balls belonged to another. Another man's balls between the legs of my girlfriend. I wasn't great with

math, but if my numbers checked out, that meant I was officially single.

A few emotions considered taking hold in my brain. Jealousy. Anger. Despair. But they all flitted right on through, not doing much more than glancing through the windows and passing by. Instead, the emotion that finally sank in was just disappointment, and not even in Annabelle and her freckles or the balls between her legs—and for the record, a smaller pair than mine. Yes, that matters.

I was mostly just disappointed that it had happened again. Sure, it wasn't always cheating, but it was always something. Something *always* came along and led to the untimely detonation of my romantic relationships. More and more, I was starting to wonder if that something was me. After all, I was the only common variable, wasn't I?

I sighed, looked at the flowers in my hand, and chucked them in the trash. Too little, too late.

I made my way through the crowd, vaguely wondering if Annabelle was even at the office today. Chances were, she'd booked it for home when she saw the pictures on the corkboard. I supposed that meant she was canceling our breakfast in her office plans.

I found a pair of benches in the corner and saw a woman sitting on them, staring ahead with a blank, haunted look in her eyes.

A little voice in the corner of my mind advised me to leave it alone. I was like a dog who just had his bone taken away, but there was another interesting, shapely bone sitting right there. Except my bones were always being taken away. What was the point in even trying to replace them? Maybe I'd be a happier dog if I just stopped eating bones all together.

But I told that little voice I wasn't a dog, and I could talk to a bone without wanting to put my mouth on it. *Probably*, at least. Besides, this bone looked like it needed some comforting, and what better way was there to comfort myself than comforting someone else?

I plopped down on the bench beside her, tilting my head her way and drawing my brows together. "Let me guess. You tried the food in the cafeteria? Don't tell me it was the sushi."

She kept staring.

I scooted a little closer. "Hey," I said, dropping the charming act. "You okay?"

She stirred, almost surprised by my voice. She looked over at me and barely seemed to see me. Oddly enough, that was kind of nice. Somebody who wasn't eager to please me, for a change.

"Sorry," she said. "Weird morning."

She was blonde with long-ass hair that was in an Amazon-like braided ponytail thrown over her shoulder. She had tan skin with a speckling of freckles across the bridge of her nose and big, blue eyes. Her lips were a natural, deep shade of reddish pink and she had the perfect posture of a woman who danced or did yoga religiously.

Yeah, I noticed. I already mentioned I paid attention to detail, like the way her right index finger was idly scratching a nervous little white patch in her dark blue jeans. It was a well-worn spot, and I had a feeling most of her clothes would have a similar worn spot in the same area. I also noticed how she wore little snowman earrings in red and green even though we were still four months out from the holidays. *One of those people*, I thought.

I felt my own stupid brain working in its old, disappointing ways. That was the word of the day for me. Disappointment. Because it was starting to feel more and more like a stupid little circle I was running in. Meet a girl, find a new and exciting way for things to end, repeat. And where was I now? I'd wandered right over to the first beautiful woman I saw and started trying to talk instead of even processing what I'd seen on that fucking cork board.

Maybe I should've listened to that little voice in my head. Then again, what did a little voice know?

"Weird is the right word," I said, ignoring my own internal warning bells. They were telling me to walk right the fuck out of Pollard Marketing, forget about Annabelle, and swear off women for a couple years. Things would be simpler. Wasn't simple boring, though? "What's with the tattoo on that guy's fingers? I mean, put aside how dumb it is to get 'Suck it Dudes' on your fingers, but why go plural? He could've had a neat one letter per finger situation." I was hoping to get at least a smile out of her. For some reason, the look on this girl's face was tugging at something deep inside me. For once, it wasn't the string that led to my cock, either. Maybe that string was connected somewhere in the vicinity of my heart? *Probably not, but maybe.*

The corner of her lip twitched, but it was more of a bitter smile than amused. "He was drunk. And yeah, I always thought it was a really stupid tattoo. Not as stupid as the girl who believed that guy actually cared about her though, I guess."

Oh, shit. "Those balls were your boyfriend's?" I asked. *Stupid, Dean.* I should've said hands. Bringing up the balls was hardly the most sensitive way to approach this, especially because she had to be aware how unusually small and unimpressive they

were. “The ass was my girlfriend, actually,” I said. “So we have that in common, at least. Both our significant others decided to screw us by screwing each other.”

She frowned. “How do you know it was your girlfriend? I mean, you couldn’t see much. Other than...”

“The freckles,” I said. “They form a pretty distinct pattern. One I recognized.”

She nodded absently.

“I’m Dean, by the way. Dean Slater.”

She barely looked up. “Pearl.”

“Just Pearl? Like Madonna?”

Pearl’s big blue eyes lifted to mine in a dry, *that’s not even close to funny*, kind of way. I couldn’t help but grin at the way she was glaring, and my grin seemed to finally break through something in her.

She lowered her eyes and snorted a quick, little laugh and flashed a smile at her knees. “Pearl Moreno.”

“So, uh. Did you see this coming?”

“You mean someone pestering me while I try to process the fact that my boyfriend—*former boyfriend...*” she trailed off, eyes almost glazing over. She blinked, then continued. “Look, I’m not trying to be rude. But, I feel like I just—” She stood and put a hand to her mouth, eyebrows pulling together.

I got up. She was short, so I had to bend a little to look into her eyes. “Hey, you okay? You look like you might—”

It happened so quickly I didn’t even move. One minute, her big blue eyes were looking up into mine, full of panic. The next, my shirt felt warm and wet, sticking to my chest.

I looked down and saw... *yeah*. “Well, now I don’t need to ask if you like eggs,” I said.

She turned a literal shade of green and hit me with another round, this time splashing over my shoes.



I CONSIDERED TRYING TO SALVAGE MY SOILED CLOTHES, BUT opted to toss them in the bathroom trash can, along with my shoes. It was a few thousand dollars’ worth of fabric, but I wasn’t going to sweat that. There were certain things you could wash out of your clothes, but no amount of detergent could erase the full horror of what they’d seen. I wondered if people were a little bit like that, too.

We got shit on, puked on, and roughed up. Then we’d do our best to move on and start fresh, but we carried a little bit of those memories inside us, just beneath the surface. If that was the case, I should’ve probably chucked myself right in the trash with my soiled clothes.

I’d changed into my workout gear, which had thankfully been tucked in my bag. Small victories, I guessed.

I was washing my hands in the sink, scrubbing as I ran back through the last few minutes. I couldn’t help grinning. What a fucking mess. First, I found out my girlfriend cheated on me in front of a few dozen people. Next, I failed at charming a beautiful woman so badly she lost her breakfast all over my clothes. Staying away from relationships would be a whole lot easier if women stopped falling over themselves to date me. Maybe this was a good thing.

“Believe it or not,” I called out over the sound of running water. She was waiting outside the door to my left. “This is a

first for me.”

“I’m so sorry.” Pearl’s voice came muffled through the bathroom door.

I shook my hands off, saw there were no paper towels—of course there weren’t—then stepped out of the bathroom.

I nearly bumped my chest into Pearl’s nose. She jumped back.

“Sorry,” she said. Her eyes ran down me and she looked back up. “Oh, thank God you had extra clothes. But those look like workout clothes.” The pace of her words started to increase, like they were a force gaining momentum until even she couldn’t stop them. “You probably don’t pack fresh underwear to work out. But, I guess it’s not the end of the world if a guy doesn’t wear underwear. You could be totally fine without it. If that’s what you did, I mean. Like if you aren’t wearing underwear right now...”

A lopsided smile formed on my lips. “Uh, well.”

“Shit,” Pearl held her palms up, closing her eyes and shaking her head. “I’m so sorry. I ramble when I’m nervous. Throwing up on a hot stranger isn’t exactly—” She scrunched her face in frustration, visibly trying to force herself to calm. She lowered her hands and seemed to take a deep breath. Finally, she opened her eyes again. “I didn’t mean to say hot. Not because you aren’t, but because that would be weird. And please don’t respond to any of that. Actually, can we just pretend I stopped at ‘sorry’?”

“Sure,” I said. Except my dick wasn’t so ready to forget. That guy had a memory like an iron trap, and he promised he wasn’t going to forget where this gorgeous woman’s brain had gone. Right below the belt. “Well,” I said. “I should probably

get out of here. I have a meeting upstairs in an hour or two, anyway.”

“Um, yeah. Are you sure there’s nothing I can do? Those clothes didn’t look cheap. I hope they’re not ruined. I’d offer to pay you back for them, but I’m not sure I could afford to. I could do you favors instead, or something. I mean, not like sexual favors,” she said, starting to speak fast again. “Not that you would ask me to. And I don’t do that kind of thing, for the record. I could get your dry cleaning or walk your dog or whatever.” Pearl’s face was bright enough red that people might have mistaken her for an “exit” sign if there was a fire. Frankly, it was adorable.

“They’ll be fine,” I said. “And it’s okay. Really. But hey, if you know anybody in the market for a fake boyfriend, let me know. I’m not looking forward to my friends all trying to set me up out of sympathy after this shitshow.”

She stared. “A fake boyfriend? What even is that?”

I circled my hand. “You know. Like someone who you can pretend to date. Maybe you’re trying to ditch a guy at a bar, so you ask this random guy to say he’s your boyfriend. Or whatever. But I could sure as hell use a fake girlfriend, or my friends are going to be trying to force feed a woman down my throat in about twelve hours.”

Pearl was standing there with her hands clasped in front of her. She had on blue jeans that hugged her curves well. She was built like a woman who knew how to take care of herself, but also wasn’t terrified to take a bite of ice cream. Just the right balance, if you asked me. And it was all the kind of shit I shouldn’t be noticing, but sue me. I was a man, and even if my girlfriend had just tried to rip my heart out and stomp on it with that tiny balled creep—yes, I was going to keep fixating on

how small his balls were because that shit definitely mattered. I mean, if you wanted to bake a cake, would you grab the little bag of flour or the big one? You'd grab the big one.

Either way, I was starting to wonder if I'd ever really given Annabelle the chance to rip my heart out in the first place. Could you really break someone's heart if they never gave it to you?

Fuck if I knew.

"Anyway. I'm sorry my ex and your ex met, I guess," I said. I raised my hand to wave, but Pearl hurried after me.

"Hold on," she said, grabbing my wrist. Distantly, I noticed most of the crowd around the corkboard had cleared. Maybe it was the duo of janitors cleaning up what was left of Pearl's vomit a few feet away, or maybe the drama wasn't that exciting when it wasn't your own significant other getting caught cheating. "The fake boyfriend thing. I could use one of those."

I raised an eyebrow. "You could?"

"It's my family," she said. "They warned me over and over about Eric. I'm already going to be getting 'I told you' out the wazoo. As soon as they get tired of that, they're going to try to set me up with this someone. They don't think it's possible for someone to be happy and single. The ideas are incompatible to them, and they'll never stop trying to push some new guy on me, but I don't need that right now. I don't know if I could handle it. So, if they thought I was with somebody..."

Holy shit. I'd tossed that thing out as a half-hearted joke. But to tell the truth, maybe I was on to something. And if Pearl was game, it could be a win-win. "You're serious?"

“I mean, if you are,” she said. “It’s not like we’d have to *do* anything, right?”

That simple question flooded my brain with a sudden and vivid image of me grabbing her by that braid and tugging it back to tilt her chin up to mine. I saw myself kissing her deep and hard, cupping that tight ass in her jeans with a big hand and pulling her into me.

I blinked. “Yeah. We’d never have to see each other. Just make excuses if anyone asks. You could say I work in another state. Who cares, right? All that matters is we are both in on it.”

“For how long?” she asked.

“Honestly? Fuck women. No offense. And not literally. I mean, I’m done with all of it. The good ones wind up realizing they’re better off without me, and the bad ones end up like Annabelle. It’s a loss no matter how I play, so maybe I just won’t play anymore. I’m yours as long as you want me.”

Her cheeks went red at that, and my cock—the little bastard—definitely noticed. Clearly, there was mutual attraction between us, but acting on it would be problematic for a number of reasons. One, I was supposed to take some time to clear my head after a nasty breakup, right? You couldn’t trust yourself when you were in a state like this. Two, I really meant what I said. Fuck women. Agreeing to a relationship might as well have been like agreeing to climb into a burning airplane with no parachute. It was going to end in flames, the only question was when. And last but not least, I was tired of the endless dance. Maybe I could just put my head down, focus on work, and actually enjoy life without wondering when my relationship was going to detonate.

“Okay,” she said quietly. “Same. I’m not looking to date again. I don’t think I could handle another Eric. It’s just not worth it.”

Definitely not, I thought. Not with balls that small. I stuck my hand out. “Then it’s a deal. Be mine,” I added with a sarcastic twist of my lips.

“I’m yours,” she said, smiling back as she took my hand and shook.

My cock twitched, as if it was a dog looking up at its owner to make sure it heard that last part—the part about treats. *Easy, prick. You’re going into an early retirement.*

Her hand was soft and small. I felt like I had to be careful not to break it, but I shook slowly, eyes locked on hers. “Oh, give me your phone,” I said. “I’ll put my number in. If anybody needs convincing that we’re together, just have them call me. I’ll play along with whatever.”

She fished out her phone—a silly little bejeweled case with one of those popper things to hold on the back. I flicked my thumb up and saw she had no password. “You don’t have a password on your phone?” I asked. “What if somebody gets it and finds your nudes?”

Her eyes went a little wider. “Uh, I don’t keep nudes on there.”

“Oh, smart.” I tapped the side of my temple. “You keep them somewhere safer. I like that.”

She didn’t reply as I navigated to her contacts and saved myself in her phone as “Sweet Cheeks”. I fired off a quick text to myself and wrote “Thinking of you” with a few heart emojis and a kissy face. I handed it back to her and she looked down at the phone and read, cheeks flushing again. “Really?” she asked.

“Hey, it’s just pretend, right?”

Pearl nodded, gave a little wave, and walked off toward one of the cubicle offices on the main floor. I watched her go and saw

a woman rush up and start talking to her quickly. Pearl smiled, said something, and split off from the woman to disappear behind a fuzzy, carpeted partition.

I scratched my head. *Just pretend.* As in, I just had to pretend a very real part of me didn't wish I'd sworn off women, because I was tempted as hell to give that particular one a shot.

And look at me making good decisions. I didn't chase after her. I didn't secretly make plans to seduce her now that I had her number in my phone. All I planned to do was put my cock on lockdown like it was 2019 all over again, go upstairs to meet with Pollard Marketing's CEO in my exercise clothes, and get to work.

Except I pulled out my phone in the elevator and stared at the text I'd sent to myself from her phone. I grinned, then typed out a quick response. After all, wouldn't it look weird if her "boyfriend" didn't respond when she texted something so sweet?

I snapped a quick selfie of myself winking and smiling, then typed out my message below it. I grinned as I reread it and thought *maybe* I shouldn't, but hey, how many good decisions was a guy expected to be able to make in one day?

(THIS ENDS THE SNEAK PEAK! I HOPE YOU'RE ENJOYING THE story so far, and please keep in mind this sneak peak hasn't been through final edits yet. I hope I'll clean up and catch any issues you might have noticed before launch!)

>>Click here to get The Big Fake now for free with Kindle Unlimited!

SUGGESTED READING ORDER

I realize that it can be a little overwhelming to click an author name on Amazon and get an entire list of titles going back for more than five years. Which one should you read next and what's the best order?

So that's what this section is here to answer!

If you enjoyed this book, then my suggestions for what to read next are below, in order from most relevant to least relevant. I haven't included *all* of my books because I think the romantic comedies are going to be the best match with this book, but I'll include one of my favorite non romantic comedy books just in case you're interested in diving into that side of my catalog as well.

Which book should you read immediately after this one?

Once Upon A Bet is my next-most recent series and hits a lot of the same notes as this story. Plus, it's got a lot of fun tropes, like an older man and younger woman, a divorced dad who is great with his kids, and some small town fun.

And then?

Sincerely Up Yours and The Big Fake are my two most recent standalone books. If you liked the style of First Comes Revenge, you'll definitely enjoy them both.

What should you read after that?

The Objects of Attraction Series. It starts with *His Banana* and is definitely my most successful series of all time. Each book is really fun, irreverent, and guaranteed to make even the stuffiest reader laugh through their nose once or twice. If you want to check out just one book to get a taste, click that first link. If you want a discount on all six books, click here to look at the bundle (that'll get you all six books for \$9.99 instead of \$16)

After that?

One of my more recent works is a three book series that starts with *The Boss(hole)*, then *the Room(hate)*, and finally *the Ego(maniac)*. There's a little bit of everything in the series and I think the characters are a lot of fun. Travis from *The Ego(maniac)* was probably my favorite character in recent memory, so I'd say that one is a must-read!

There's more? (Yes!)

My Mostly Funny Romance Series should be your next stop. It's a three-book series and thematically should feel like a perfect blend of *The Boss(hole)/The Room(hate)* and *The Objects* series. Book one, *My (Mostly) Secret Baby*, will really give you some of that same flavor that *The Boss(hole)* did, as well.

And then?

You'll move out of the world of series and into standalones at this point if you're still looking for rom coms.

If you think BDSM meets Rom Com sounds fun, you'll love *The Golden Pecker*.

If you enjoy a touch of the paranormal world with vampires and werewolves but still want that rom com flair, I've got two

perfect books for you.

Kiss Kiss Fang Fang and I Bite, She Sucks!

What else you got, Bloom?

That pretty much wraps up the rom coms I've written so far. The most recent non-rom coms I wrote were a brief foray into the world of bully romance. If that's your style, check out Ruthless Love and Savage Love. Both books have more of a young adult vibe in terms of setting and are a little more angsty and drama packed than my usual work.

Do you like BDSM?

I've got plenty of offerings in the BDSM world from my earlier work. Knocked Up by the Dom is a great place to start. It's light, smutty, and will grab you right away.

Got any single dads?

You bet I do! My favorite single dad book was Single Dad Next Door. It has a little more humor than my other books around that time period did, including one of my favorite scenes to date!

Final thoughts...

I hope this list has been helpful. There are more books beyond what I've listed here, but I was doing my best to keep it at least mostly limited to the world of my rom coms, since that's what you just read and probably what you're most interested in reading more of.

Happy reading!

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thanks so much for reading *First Comes Revenge* and I really hope you enjoyed it.

If you follow my social media or are part of my mailing list, you'll probably have heard me explain this before in more detail, but I did want to kind of give a brief explanation of why it has been so long since I wrote anything.

I had an unexpected health issue crop up early this year. Long story short, I'm 35 and otherwise healthy, but a random ear infection managed to permanently damage my auditory nerve and make me deaf on one side. It also came with a healthy dose of very loud, constant tinnitus on that side.

Unfortunately, I let my situation bleed into my writing. I was feeling pretty down and frustrated by the whole thing, and that made it hard to get into the light-hearted mindset I try to write my books with. I kept writing every day, but the content I was putting out didn't feel like "me" anymore. I scrapped almost three full books worth of material since publishing "*The Big Fake*". I decided it was better to wait until I felt like myself again than to force something out that wasn't up to my standard.

Anyway, I'm doing much, much better now. I think I just needed a little time to adjust and get back in my creative

groove. Sorry I was gone for so long, but hopefully I'll be back to my usual self and publishing much more often now.

Thanks for reading and I hope you loved the book!

I could ramble and ramble about this, but I'll try to keep it short and sweet. At the beginning of this year, I randomly and unexpectedly lost hearing in my right ear (I'm only 35 years old and otherwise healthy!). I went through a pretty serious mental slump as I was kind of feeling sorry for myself and dealing with the severe tinnitus that came with the hearing loss (my auditory nerve got very badly damaged). I also spent about 3 months doing daily hyperbaric oxygen chamber treatments that took hours each day and had me in and out of a hospital all week during the hours I normally try to write.

Basically, it was really hard to get myself in the light-hearted, easy-going mentality I think I need to be in to write a Penelope Bloom style book. I actually wrote about 2-3 books worth of words since my last book, but I kept scrapping them because they just weren't really up to the standard I try to hold myself to and they didn't feel like me.

I finally started feeling like me again and adjusting to my new situation a few months ago, which was when I started this book! So hopefully it will be back to normal from here on out!

Anyway, thanks again for reading and, as always, I really appreciate you guys and the amazing help your ARC participation brings!

xx

Penelope