



WOOD BROTHERS

NAILED

ABBY KNOX

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NAILED

Buck

The second that Grace walks into my construction trailer, it's all over for me. Sure, it's risky to hire an unknown person to stage our latest historic rehab project. The bottom line is, Wood Brothers Construction is desperate for skilled professionals, and I'm flat-out desperate for more of Grace in my life. Professionalism goes right out the window on day one, so she'd better be ready for me.

Grace

I might not be the sharpest tool in the shed for lying to Buck on my resume. But I've got to do something with my art history degree, or else crawl back to my dad for a pity job at his law firm. Fake it 'til you make it, right? But I've got another secret: I've seen the handsome Buck around town, and the way other women in Fate stare at him is downright annoying. I have to shoot my shot, and maybe get a decent job while I'm at it. Hopefully, none of my lies blow up in my face.

CHAPTER ONE

Buck

My baby sister's staging company has backed out of my latest rehab project, and I'm starting the day grumpier than usual.

"Are you fucking for real, Susan?"

The high-pitched buzz of electric saws just outside my office window gives me a perfect excuse to holler at my sister.

My family is made up of all good people, but sometimes they really chap my hide. Like right now, my sister is leaving me in the lurch.

The voice on the other end of the phone is sympathetic to my plight, but firm. "I'm sorry, Buck. There's no way Gold Hill Sisters can attach our name to a product in Fate. It's...not our brand."

Susan and her staging company in our hometown of Gold Hill have been my go-to for the last five years.

"Fate is up and coming, Susan. You're going to miss a huge opportunity. I'm doing you a favor."

Susan snorts. "You're desperate for contractors in that dirty little podunk town. You need to cut and run, brother, before you sink any more money into the old Paget Mansion."

My sister has a huge ego but she's not wrong.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "You're behaving no better than the typical Gold Hill snob, and you're missing the boat."

But suit yourself. Wade, Harley and I will stage it ourselves.”

I know my baby sister, and I can practically see her rolling her eyes. “DIY-ing design is a whole different thing than DIY-ing a plumbing problem.”

“Oh yeah? Come down here and prove it.”

“Nice try, but no.”

Just then, there’s a knock on my construction trailer door.

“Come in!” I bark.

The door creaks open, and the first thing I see is a pair of red, four-inch open-toe heels that have no business on a construction site.

“Um, hi? I’m looking for Mr. Buckland Wood?” The voice is soft and hesitant. For the moment, I forget I’m on the phone with my sister.

My eyes take the scenic route to her face even though I know it’s ungentlemanly of me. Gorgeous gams, black pencil skirt, and matching fitted blazer straining to stay buttoned under a pair of magnificent tits. Her hair is pulled up in a professional bun, but loose chin-length tendrils frame a young, eager face. Her chestnut hair and freckled cheeks set off her striking eyes, which, if I’m not mistaken, are sizing me up at the same time.

My day just got a hell of a lot better. And prettier.

Suddenly I feel the powerful urge to chug a Gatorade. With my curiously dry throat I tell the visitor, “Call me Buck.”

“I’m Grace Winchester. May I have a minute of your time?”

She smiles wide, and I spot one slightly crooked tooth in front that I find completely charming.

Grace...Grace Winchester...can have a lot more than one minute.

She sees the phone in my hand and winces. “Oh, I’m sorry for barging in! I’ll wait outside until you finish your call.”

Refusing to take my eyes off this beauty, I abruptly end the phone call. “Gotta go, sis,” I blurt. I vaguely hear something like “good luck” on the other end, but I quickly hang up, tossing my phone on the desk. “There! Done. Have a seat. What can I do for you?”

The woman looks around curiously, “Um...”

And now, I realize that this is not a standard office, and I do not have anything for her to sit on. “Shit! Hang on.”

Five seconds in the presence of an angel and I’m a bumbling idiot. You’d never know I’m the founder of Wood Bros. Construction and a Marine corps officer. The stack of roof tile samples taking up one beat-up folding chair gets shoved into a corner of my office, and I dust off the seat.

“There, sit, please. Can I get you anything? A water? Gatorade? Mountain Dew Code Red? Really terrible coffee?”

Grace moves like warm honey into the chair, a leather portfolio perched on her lap.

“Did we have an appointment?” I ask, leaning against the edge of my desk.

Her glossy red lips fall open. “Um, no. Not exactly. I sent you an email a while back. I live here in Fate, and when I saw that Wood Bros. Construction was rehabilitating the old Paget Mansion, I was very interested in helping you stage it.”

There’s a reason this town is named Fate. For being a tiny place full of oddball characters—the mayor is a golden retriever, for starters—I’ve heard story after story about people moving here and instantly finding the love of their life.

I chalked up all those tales as an exaggeration.

Yet here I am—stuck without a staging company while I’m up to my neck in change orders on the biggest money pit project of my life. And wouldn’t you know it, in walks a bombshell of the highest order, claiming to be a professional stager.

“You’re hired, Ms. Winchester.”

Her eyes widen and she looks at me sideways like I've lost my marbles. "Don't you want to look at my portfolio?"

She unzips the leather case, and my hands sweat as I imagine her pretty hands unzipping my fly.

"Sure, let's see." I take the portfolio from her and flip through it for five seconds. "Yep. Perfect. You're hired."

"Oh! Well, do you have any questions about my experience? My schedule? Timetables?"

"Nope to the first question, and when can you start?"

Shit, she caught me staring at her boobs, and now I've made her blush. "Um, well, that depends on when the construction is finished, I guess."

She's being too kind. "Shit, yes. Of course," I laugh, embarrassed. Of course, I know how this works. My sister has done this job for us at least two dozen times over five years. "Obviously you can't stage a house until it's done or you'll end up with sawdust all over everything."

Grace's tinkling laughter speaks to my soul. "Right."

Damn, she's sweet. So pretty my chest aches. I haven't talked to a pretty girl like this in years, and my overeager cock hardens in response to Grace's...everything.

When nobody says anything for several seconds, she says hesitantly, "So, should we set up a time to meet to go over the blueprints?"

Blueprints? Oh. Yeah, I know what those are.

"Yes, let's meet tonight at Other Brother Ben's," I say, automatically naming the favorite date night spot in town. "Say, 7 p.m.?"

She blows out a sharp breath like she's just shocked herself by winning a prize, a pink color filling her round cheeks. "Perfect! I live in a studio right up the street from there," she says.

"So, yes?"

Grace laughs, and I'm relieved she doesn't hate my forwardness. "Yes. Sorry. Um, here's my address."

I know the exact house she means, as I've had that one on my list for a while. It's a beat-down three-story Victorian with a sagging porch and splintered shutters. I see so many people coming and going from that building; I should have guessed it was an apartment house. I mentally cross that off my list because I did not go into this business to put renters out of their homes.

But if Grace wants to come and live at my place while I fix hers, I'm into that idea all the way. No, Buck. Stop making up fantasies with your dick.

My brother Wade has the worst timing. "Whose clunker is blocking my parking spot?!" Wade shouts as he flings the trailer door open, letting in a rush of brisk autumn air. The sudden breeze flutters the loose hairs around Grace's face, and I'm transfixed as some strands stick to her glossy lips.

Grace's sweet face turns pale. "Oh, gosh. That's me. I'm so sorry!"

She drives a clunker? We'll have to fix that problem pronto.

In the meantime, my brother can kick rocks about a parking space for the truck he paid way too much for. The vain little idiot.

I reach out my hand to stop Grace from rushing out to move her car, and I snap at Wade. "Keep your panties on, brother. I'm in a meeting with a new staging contractor."

I turn to Grace and use my best professional voice, more for the benefit of my brother, who will undoubtedly bust my balls for hiring a hottie.

"As you were saying?"

She looks flustered. "Oh, um, I...look forward to seeing the plans? And the house! It's a really pretty old house. Um, mansion."

I nod and cross my arms over my chest, ignoring my brother who's making a skeptical expression behind Grace. "And," I add, "we should have the interior walls fixed or replaced by next week. Then I should be able to come and measure you."

The blush surges in her cheeks. Wade spits his coffee.

"I meant, I meant...flip it, reverse it. You come. You measure me. I mean, measure the rooms!"

Grace bites her lip and looks away shyly. I watch, mesmerized at her manicured hands smoothing down her pencil skirt. "Seven o'clock. See you then."

Electricity, sharp and hot, fires through me when Grace comes closer and shakes my hand. Her soft skin gives off a clean-scented perfume, and the stirring in my jeans is on overdrive now.

I escort Grace outside to her car and hear Wade mutter "Dumbass" as we sweep past him.

"Oversized baby," I throw at him over my shoulder.

Seconds later I'm watching Grace drive away in a Chevy sedan that has seen much better days. I don't like that for her.

"What the hell are you doing, man?"

I'd forgotten for a second that Wade had interrupted the meeting. "I told you," I say through my teeth, glaring at his terrible parking job next to a fire hydrant.

"But Susan is the best at staging."

"Susan dumped us."

"Then get her back. She's our sister, and she's the best."

"No need. I hired Grace," I say, watching her car make the corner, axles creaking.

Wade gestures wildly at the street. "Her? Nobody knows her!"

I shrug. "So? We didn't know half the guys on this crew when we decided to buy the Paget Mansion. We didn't have

the original plans; we didn't know the historical director. But we took a leap of faith. I'm asking you to take a leap of faith with me regarding Grace. Besides, nobody else in Gold Hill will touch this project. So you're just going to have to live with Grace."

Wade scoffs. "I ain't living with nobody. But it seems *you're* scheming to live with Grace before too long."

"If she wants that, yep."

The chortle from my brother makes me want to slap him upside the head. "You're right. Sound, logical business decisions always originate below the belt. I'll meet you back here when she fails, and we're upside down on our investment, brother."

"It's not going to go that way," I tell him. I just know it.

I know it, because Grace walked into my life, bringing with her something to look forward to. What could go wrong?

CHAPTER TWO

Grace

“You actually got the job?”

I don’t want to make eye contact with my neighbor down the hall, Presley, who’s stopped by to warm her feet on my radiator since hers isn’t working.

“Yep,” I say blandly as I scour my closet for something to wear. Presley moved in about a month after I did, and I’d been dying for another single woman to talk to in this town. We’ve been inseparable ever since; she knows almost every detail about my life. She knows all about my nonexistent dating life and my bad luck applying for jobs since I graduated college with an art history degree. My parents raised me in Fate, but since moved their law practice to Phoenix. More growth, more litigations, more money.

They wish I would have followed in their footsteps, and the number of times I’ve heard them say my art history degree is worthless should send me into therapy.

“But you don’t know anything about staging a house to sell,” Presley says. “Do you?”

“Nope.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Google exists,” I say, walking past her to rifle through my dresser, hoping to find something else to wear, knowing that I

have nothing because I just wore my best outfit to the interview.

Maybe I could wear the pencil skirt again but with different shoes, and a sweater instead of the blazer? No, that won't work.

“What are you looking for? Your leggings and tee shirts are right there on the bed.”

“You didn't have to fold them for me!” I say.

Presley shrugs. “Well Toby was in the laundry room being a creep and he makes me nervous so I stood there and folded my things while he rambled on about *Red Dead Redemption*.”

“Cool game.”

“Grace.”

“I know, I know. If Toby's such a creep, why didn't you just grab my shit and go upstairs?”

Presley shifts around strangely, her arms crossed over her chest as she stands between the two narrow arched windows, the only natural light source in this single-room apartment. “There was...someone waiting for me on the outside landing that I really didn't want to see.”

“Who?” I turn from my dresser and narrow my eyes at her.

“Uh...an ex. Not a big deal, just awkward, you know?”

I shake my head. “Toby needs to get a code lock for the outside door.”

Presley stares into space and nods her head. “Yeah.”

“Pres, do you happen to have anything cute I can borrow? Cute, bordering on professional. Or vice versa?”

This gets her attention. “Why, you got a date?” Her wide brown eyes are finally distracted from whatever is bothering her.

“I wish. No, I'm meeting with my boss tonight to review plans.”

Presley bursts out laughing. “Already? On a Friday night? No, it’s a date.”

I bite my lip and shake my head. “I’m not sure about that.”

“What time is this meeting?” Presley says the word “meeting” like it’s a euphemism for group sex.

“Uh, at 7 p.m.?” And I see how this looks like a date.

“Where are you meeting him?”

“At Other Brother Ben’s.”

“Oh my god! That is a date!”

I sigh heavily. “And there’s one other thing. Buck’s not meeting me there. He’s picking me up here.”

Presley stops and stares at me like I’m too stupid to live. “I cannot with you. Come on.”

Presley seizes me by the wrist and drags me out my door. Curiously, she stops short in the hallway to make sure the coast is clear, evidently still worried about running into someone she doesn’t want to see.

Seconds later we’re standing in front of her closet, which has spilled over into half a dozen wheeled racks in the main room, every rod organized by item and color. The girl is a clothes horse.

“Okay,” she sighs, “Over here are dresses, skirts, business jackets, cardigans, and denim jackets. Over there are vests, sweaters, and hoodies. From there, we work our way into blouses, tee-shirts, and tanks.”

“Why don’t you just fold your tees and sweaters like a human and put them in a drawer? It would save so much space in here?”

“Can it, lady-who-is-woefully-unprepared-for-a-hot-date-with-her-boss.”

Right. Gift horse’s mouth? Not looking in it.

“I don’t know for sure if it’s a date.”

“Sure, sure, but you wish it were. So, we’re dressing you for a date. They say to always dress for the job you want, which means dress like you’re already his fiancée!”

My stomach tumbles with delight at the thought.

But I’m sure it won’t ever get that far. We’re too different. Buck is at least fifteen years older than me and very successful. As a military man who takes no time to ponder major decisions, he’s dissimilar from the lawyers who raised me. A pro-con list maker, Buck is not. The man is impulsive rather than strategic and not the least bit conniving.

Ha. No, the conniving one in this scenario would be me, I think to myself as a knot of guilt forms in my stomach.

While I’m in my thoughts, Presley hands me one of several little black dresses to try on. I hold it up in front of the mirror against my body and it looks like I’m playing dress up.

Just like I’m pretending to be a stager.

I scrunch my nose up. “I don’t think it’s an LBD sort of meeting.”

“You’re right. You look better in jewel tones. Try this.” Presley hands me a blue maxi dress with flowers on it, and that’s an immediate no.

“It’ll look really pretty with the white cardigan,” she says. But again, it’s not me.

“I feel like I’m trying too hard now. I’m going back to my place to throw on some jeans and a sweater.”

Presley sighs, then examines my face for a moment. She’s giving in to my stubbornness. “I can’t fault you for wanting to be comfortable. The top priority is feeling relaxed and like yourself on this date. Just know that I’m here to help. And if that man doesn’t worship your hot ass in those jeans of yours, then he’s not worth it.”

She practically shoves me out the door after giving me a quick hug and a “good luck.”

I trudge back to my place and put on my favorite blue jeans, paired with a pretty burgundy cardigan and matching

striped tee shirt. I dress it up with jewelry, ankle boots, and a designer handbag that costs more than my rent. That handbag was a gift from Presley simply because I complimented her on it. Weirdly, she'd moved with a vast assortment of fancy clothes from New York to a small town with none of her connections. Surely, she could sell some of her clothes and shoes and afford a cooler place in a bigger city. Ah, well. None of my business. I dab on lip gloss, drag a comb through my hair, and I'm done.

I have the overwhelming urge to be as authentic as possible with Buck. Real, up to the point of telling him I'm not a professional stager. The truth is, I've seen him around town, and I just wanted to meet him. The dating pool is shallow around here, and he's the best-looking guy I've seen...maybe ever.

Delusion is a hell of a drug, I tell myself. There is no way Buck Wood will be interested in me once he figures out I'm a fraud and a virgin with no real job prospects.

So, why did I apply for the job? Now that shit's getting real, my motives seem highly ridiculous.

Yesterday, I'd driven past the job site twice because I was totally stalking him. The first time, the mayor of Fate had evidently gotten loose from Rex and Juniper's house, because Buck was down on one knee giving Flash scratches behind the ear.

The second time I drove by, I noticed Buck's foreman, Nick, taking his lunch break with Ruby from the diner and their four year old daughter, Claribel. When Buck approached to talk to Nick, I assumed it was to warn him that a construction site is not the place for little ones. Instead, Buck presented Claribel with a kid-sized hard hat, which she immediately popped on her head and squealed. And yes, my ovaries exploded.

If my libido is a terrible reason to want to work for a construction boss, then so be it.

My visit with Buck in his office only cemented his appeal. The only problem is, I wasn't expecting to get a job. At best, I

thought I was only shooting my shot. I didn't expect this much immediate and enthusiastic attention. The man is much more than I bargained for, and now I'm in a tangled mess of my own making.

Buck picks me up at 7 p.m. sharp; his promptness earns his plus column one mark.

When he exits the truck and strides toward me, I suck in a breath. He is gorgeous. And so out of my league. He was attractive when I saw him earlier today, but he's showered and shaved and wears a crisp button-up shirt with the cuffed sleeves rolled up, a belt, and pressed trousers. Oh gosh. I am way underdressed for tonight.

Buck also has a look of concern on his face. "Why didn't you wait for me inside?" Buck asks.

Confused, I answer, "Oh. Uh...it's a nice night."

He shakes his head. "You shouldn't be alone at night on the street. It's not safe."

The sun has barely gone down. "It's Fate. Population 1,000. No, population 1,001—Izzy who works at city hall just had her third baby. And I've lived here all my life. There's not any crime to worry about. Nothing happens here except the occasional teenage dare of breaking into the Hall of History and letting the big ball of yarn roll down the street...oh gosh. I'm babbling. I'm sorry."

Somehow, I missed that Buck closing in on me, so close I can smell his clean shirt. He chuckles. "Don't apologize for talking. I like the way you talk. Shall we?"

He gestures toward his truck, but I hesitate. "Want to walk instead? It's just up the street on the next block."

"Sure, I'd love to walk with you. Let's go."

Buck offers me his arm and I flush red. He smiles and waits for me to decide whether to take his arm. This is going to feel awkward. Finally, I slip my hand inside the crook of his elbow, and I couldn't have been more wrong.

Walking and talking with Buck is as natural as anything.

“So, tell me about some of your former rehab projects? I think what you do is fascinating,” I ask, hoping to fish for clues about historic restoration that can further perpetuate this charade.

“This is our first one,” he says.

“Really? That’s a big project to pick as your first one,” I say.

“Yeah. We have an established business in Gold Hill and wanted to expand across the river. But not just slap our names on a new neighborhood of cookie-cutter houses, you know?”

I know exactly what he means. I’ve always wanted to get into historic renovations, but my pockets aren’t deep enough for it.

“So when my brothers and I completed our service in the military, we went back home to Gold Hill and took over our dad’s construction business so he could retire.

“When I saw a post on social media about the Paget Mansion in desperate need of a buyer to restore it to its original glory, I knew that Wood Brothers had to jump at the chance. I could not stomach the idea of that place ending up as rubble.”

Chill bumps rise on my arms when I hear Buck speak passionately about old houses like this.

“I wish someone like you would come along and rescue the house I live in. I love it on the outside but it’s falling apart on the inside. And it’s been divided up into five units without much thought put into preserving its history. It’s a shame, really.”

Buck catches me off guard by replying, “You should buy it.”

I almost forget that he thinks I’m an established decorator and real estate stager—or at least one who is up and coming and has probably enough to put down on a house like this.

“Oh! Right, well, um,” I say, stalling for time to think of something to say. “I have lots of ideas on decorating it.” That

part is true. I may have fudged my résumé, but I have a vision of what that place could look like. “But it would be a huge undertaking, and I wouldn’t want to put anybody out of their rentals.”

Buck winces. “Sorry, I must sound completely out of touch.”

I reach my hand over to pat him on the bicep. “You’re not out of touch.”

We’re standing in front of the restaurant and brewery now, and I wonder if we’ve left anything light and fun to talk about now that the date is just beginning.

But it’s not a date. This is a business meeting.

Buck blows out a breath. “The last thing I want to do is offend you.”

I roll my eyes. “Please. The only offensive thing is how hungry I am right now.”

“Then by all means, order the biggest thing on the menu.” His smile warms me to my toes.

If this is only a business meeting, I’m in big trouble because I am already falling for my client, who believes a whopper of a lie about me.

CHAPTER THREE

Buck

Grace thinks this is strictly a business meeting, and I've screwed this up entirely.

While we wait for our steaks, we go over the sketches of the house's interior, papers spread over the six-top table.

"So, I see you're going with all white and stainless steel for the kitchen. I'd like to do something to make it cozy. Can you build a shelf in front of this window here, for some small herb pots? Something in a nice warm wood." She pulls a rolled-up magazine from her bag and turns to a page of sleek kitchen photographs. "And I was thinking about these window finishes. Modern but also sunny, don't you think?"

"Anything you want, Grace. We'll be done with major reno next week, so after that, the place is yours."

She smiles and sips her wine. "I just want to make sure we don't go over budget."

"Trust me, we won't go over budget."

She looks like she wants to say something important, then changes her mind. "You're putting a lot of trust in someone you've never worked with before," she says.

Is she trying to talk herself out of a job?

"I have an instinct about people. You're perfect for me."

This has the intended effect. Grace's cheeks turn pink, and she sits back and crosses one leg over the other. "For you? Or for the house?"

"Both," I say.

We stare at each other for a long moment, and finally, she says, "Buck, there's a lot of things you don't know about me ___"

"So why don't you tell me more about yourself."

I've flustered her by being so forward. But I need her to understand I want to get to know her. As wrong as it is to strike up a romance between a contractor and a client, I absolutely do not care.

"Oh, um. Okay. So, I grew up here, in Fate. My childhood was more or less normal. My parents are lawyers and recently expanded their practice, and now live in Phoenix. My two sisters live on opposite ends of the country. I moved back here because it's one of the few places on the planet where the cost of living isn't crippling to a new college grad."

Oddly, she's leaving out the parts about how she got into staging homes, but I don't care. From what she's shown me, I wholeheartedly believe in her.

"And that's about all there is to know about me."

"Grace."

"Yes?"

"Tell me your biggest, boldest dream, and I'll make it happen."

Confused, she asks, "For the Paget Mansion?"

"Sure, why not. Let's start there."

She thinks for a moment. "Well, I think what would help it sell at the best price for you would be—"

"No, girl. Tell me what would make you, Grace Winchester, fall in love."

"Excuse me?"

“In love with the house.”

Hesitating, she points out, “But...it’s not *for* me. I can’t afford to buy this house.”

“But you love it.”

“Sure. Everyone loves that old place.”

“I am trying to get to know *you*. So tell me what you love.”

Our server approaches with the steaks, and I clear the table of the papers.

I never knew watching a woman eat could get me stiff, but here I am with my cock straining against my zipper.

“I love red meat,” Grace moans digging in.

Think about puppies and grandmas, Buck. Stop thinking about her mouth.

“How is it? Is the steak cooked to your liking?” I ask. “I’ll send it back. Speak up.” I’ll say anything to get a reprieve from the sight of her lips wrapping around her food.

Grace laughs. “It’s perfect.”

At my urging, Grace finally says more about her dream home. What she would do with the kitchen, the bathrooms, the living room — all of it. “...and I think, if it were my house, I would love to turn the turret into a little fantasy playroom for kids. A mural with a forest, with fairies and twinkle lights.”

“So you want kids. That’s great.”

“One day.”

“How about you?” Grace asks me.

“I want to find a wife and have kids soon. I love being in business with my brothers, but something’s gotta give. I want to go home at the end of the day and concentrate on my family. I want someone to cook with and share chores with. I want a wife to spoil with everything she ever dreamed of.”

I notice now that Grace is sitting there with her fork hovering over her plate, gazing at me.

“I’ve been talking too much. Tell me more about you, Grace.”

She shakes her head. “Sorry, no you were not talking too much. I got lost in my imagination for a second.”

Her cheeks are beet red now.

I can’t hold back anymore.

“I should have been straight with you from the beginning. I like you, Grace.”

“I like you too,” she chirps, tearing into her baked potato slathered in butter. Gosh, she’s cute.

But she still doesn’t get it.

“What that means, for me, is I want to date you.”

Finally, she sets down her fork and knife, studying me hard. “You do?” The barest hint of a smile pulls on her top lip.

“I thought it was obvious.”

She chuckles nervously. “Well, I did think the fussing when you picked me up was a little dramatic. Then, offering me your arm felt like blurring the lines, but I thought maybe you were just an old-fashioned gentleman, like my dad.”

Immediately I lay it all out. “Old-fashioned. Dramatic. That’s me. If you date me, there will be more of that. More than you can handle, sometimes.”

Grace sips her wine and blinks, looking down at the table as she swallows.

She’s thinking.

I hold my breath.

Here it comes, the moment she pulls me up for crossing the line between professional and personal, or she decides to dive in. What’s it gonna be, Grace? A sexual harassment complaint on LinkedIn, or will you give me a chance?

Another moment passes and she says, “You think I can’t handle a man like you, Buck?”

Yes, yes, yes. It's happening. It's her. I knew it the moment I saw her.

I lean forward, unable to keep my wide grin under control. "Oh, you can." My voice is rougher than intended, but the effect on her works for me. She squirms in her seat. "If you let me, I'll put all of me into you."

Her lips part. "All of you...into me?"

"Every. Last. Bit."

CHAPTER FOUR

Grace

His words drip down my spine like honey.

Can I proceed with this, knowing how much deceit is between us?

Buck pays for our meal and steers me out of the bar and up the street toward his truck. His hand on the small of my back feels far too natural, and I'm dangerously close to letting myself feel his protection and assurance. But oh, how good it feels to have that, if just for now.

What happens next? Everything in me hums with anticipation.

The sound of strings floats our way. I glance up the street toward the park to see a live string band playing at the gazebo.

Buck sees me glance that way, and he stops.

He smiles down at me, already knowing what I'm thinking. "Yeah, I could go for some music and dancing."

I didn't have to ask. I love that.

Couples are slow dancing when we arrive at the park as the live ensemble plays string arrangements of romantic classics. Playing lead fiddle is Maya from Ruby's Diner, who moved in with and married Silent Doyle a few years ago. I've always been a little jealous of her creative talents and of her home. Doyle lived like a hermit in one of the oldest historical homes

in Fate. Now, their home is a showpiece on every holiday, and Doyle has come out of his shell in the best way. A brood of little kids surrounds him on the grass as they all watch their mother, Doyle's wife.

At first we just listen. "Can you see ok?" Buck asks with his hand on my waist as he leans against a tree trunk. I'm standing in front of him, and I nod.

"Good," he says, his voice close to my ear. His arms slip under mine, and the next thing I know, Buck's arms are around my waist, and I'm leaning back against him. He's warm and solid, and exactly how I thought it would feel to have a husband. I feel protected. Doted on. Seen.

Don't get ahead of yourself, Grace. He's just one man. It's just a first date.

Oh shut up, I tell that negator that lives on my shoulder.

"This is nice," he says, his arms circling my middle.

"Mmhmm," I affirm.

I shiver as I feel his chest expand on a deep inhale, his mouth and nose pressed against the crown of my head. "You smell good."

A shy chuckle is all I can do because I have no words.

"Am I distracting you? I'm sorry."

"You are not sorry," I chuckle.

"You're right, I'm not. You just feel so good in my arms; I'm having a hard time concentrating on the music."

I turn my face slightly to catch his downward gaze. "There's no rule that says you have to concentrate on the music," I say softly to not disturb other people enjoying the concert.

A strange look spreads over his face, and he angles down to kiss me.

But he doesn't take my lips; not right away. His mouth finds my throat and strings tantalizing kisses along the cords there. The touch of his lips to my skin sets off a reaction in

multiple places simultaneously. My nipples bead under my clothes, I feel heat pulse in my veins, and a yearning in the untouched regions below my waist.

“Buck.”

“Should I stop?”

“No,” I breathe.

A low growl rumbles against my throat, and his hands at my waist tug me closer. Something rigid and long presses into my lower back, and I suck in a breath.

“I mean yes.”

Buck loosens his grip on me and immediately stops teasing me with his mouth.

“Am I going too fast?”

“No,” I rasp, wishing he would keep going. All parts below the waist, hoping for more contact. “I just...I have to tell you something...and you won’t like it.”

He leans in close to listen. “Anything. Tell me anything. This is a judgment free zone.”

I peek at him again and then slide my eyes back to the gazebo. It’s easier to tell the truth if I’m looking away.

“I need to be straight with you. I’m a virgin, Buck. I’ll understand if you don’t want to date me.”

Instead of politely offering to walk me home, he replies at a level only I can hear, “Are you interested in sex?”

I swallow the saliva that pools in my mouth. “Very much.”

He murmurs quieter, his lips close to my ear again, “Are you interested in sex with me?”

On a ragged breath, I answer, “God, yes.”

“Good girl.”

I had no idea what those two words could do to me, and now I know. My sex flutters, spasming around the emptiness where he belongs. This has never happened to me before...no one has ever sparked this reaction in my body until now.

“Sh-should we go then?” I stutter.

When he doesn't answer, I peek at him over my shoulder.

That's when he kisses me for real.

I eagerly accept Buck's mouth against my lips, my blood roaring in my ears. At the touch of his lips, heat crackles low in my body. Buck is soft yet firm. His mouth is hot and sensuous but he remains a perfect gentleman, keeping his hands right where they are, on my waist.

When he pulls away from the kiss, his eyes blaze hungrily. “Turn around,” he murmurs.

Being cradled in his arms face to face while he leans down to kiss me is even better. I'm fully engulfed in his arms. The look, scent, and feel of him is everything. The world around us disappears as we kiss.

“Dance with me,” he says.

I nod, forgetting how to make words. He chuckles and presses a sweet kiss against my forehead.

Hand in hand, we join the other slow-dancing couples populating the makeshift dance floor under the strings of soft party lights. Buck pulls me against him, circling one arm around my waist, his opposite hand wrapping around mine. I let him lead, and he's pretty great at it.

“You're a good dancer,” I say.

He gives me a pleased smile. “I am?”

I nod, ignoring the looks we're getting from people around us. “You make it easy to follow. Other guys don't know how to lead.”

Buck and I move together slowly, my body surging with awareness of our closeness. “Other guys don't know what they're missing,” he says.

I blink up at him shyly. “They've tried different angles, but I was just not feeling it with any of them.”

He lifts one massive shoulder and says, “When I know what I want, I go after it.”

“Even when you find out what you want turns out to be a little different from what you expected?”

His lips quirk in an adorable crooked grin. “You’re an unfolding mystery, and what I’m really interested in is unfolding you slowly. Carefully. Making sure you enjoy every second of it.”

I don’t know if I love the image of me as a piece of paper that this metaphor conjures, but I’ll go with it. My body certainly gets the point. “Funny,” I say. “I thought you were going to end that with something flirty like, ‘and I want to fold you over that park bench.’”

Buck’s eyes flash with heat before his chest vibrates with laughter. “I was trying to go slow with you.”

“Just because I’m a virgin doesn’t mean I’m not ready.” I punctuate that last word with a knowing look.

“Then, can I ask you something personal?”

“Of course.”

“Have you ever given yourself an orgasm?”

I blush and glance around, but no one is paying any attention to us now. “No. I’ve tried, but I think I’m doing it wrong,” I half-whisper.

He groans softly. “Let’s get you home, Grace.”

Ooh, yes, please.

Oh my gosh, it’s happening! I only hope I figure out what to do other than lie there like a dead fish. I float all the way home with Buck’s arm wrapped around me. I feel safe, reassured, and barely able to contain my arousal.

Okay, so he doesn’t know that I’m a great big liar who lies, but that’s totally beside the point.

In my mind, I draw a thick line between personal and professional. Professionally, I did lie to him. Personally, I’m an open book.

The open book in me is eager for more kissing, touching, and everything else.

When we arrive at my apartment door, we spend a surprisingly long time kissing while standing on the welcome mat.

“Do you want to come in?” I say when I pull away from yet another one of his devastating kisses. It’s more as a formality. We both know he’s coming inside.

“As much as I want to, we’re saying goodnight right here,” he says.

My heart plummets. “Oh. I’m sorry. Did I do something wrong?”

“No!”

“It’s because I told you I was a virgin, isn’t it? It’s because I made it sound like I’m desperate for it.” I’m babbling, which I know is not helping my case.

He makes the babbling stop by tilting his face down once more and kissing me hard. The pulse between my legs grows into a throbbing ache. “Grace...”

Buck hisses my name, rough and hot against my mouth. “I do want to come in. So bad.”

Strong arms hitch me higher, my toes now scraping my welcome mat. He lands another kiss on my lips, this time licking the seam, urging me to open. Oh, Lordy, does he know what he’s doing to me?

I can’t help but let go of the whimper of need clawing at my throat. “Then let’s go inside.”

Buck kisses me silly again with tangling tongues and mingling ragged breaths. Then, to my dismay, he pulls back and palms the side of my head.

“Grace,” he says again. “We have to be careful.”

“I’m not afraid,” I say, assuming he means because of the virgin thing. “You’re sweet and kind and I know you’ll be gentle with me.”

Slowly, he sets me back down on the mat and tucks a lock of hair behind my ear, speaking low and steady. “You’re too trusting, Grace.”

“I feel like I know you already, Buck.”

A smile pulls at his lips, now glistening and swollen from our kissing. What I would give to feel those lips everywhere. To feel that sinful mouth play with me. Tease me. Wreck me.

I shiver just thinking about it.

“What we have here is something real, Grace. I don’t want to make any mistakes with you.”

“I see. Well, I’m on the pill, and I assume a responsible adult such as yourself carries condoms, so…”

He laughs softly and kisses my cheek. The heat level of his kisses is lowering inch by inch and I don’t like it. “That’s good to know, but…what I mean is, let’s take some time to get to know each other. I know you don’t feel rushed, but the longer we wait, the better the sex will be.”

I blow out a long, lingering breath, trying to get ahold of my faculties. If that’s what Buck thinks is best, I have no choice. There’s no sense in pushing forward.

“I respect that, Buck.”

“One more hug?”

“Of course.”

He snatches me up in a rib-squeezing bear hug, and my feet really do come off the mat this time. With my face buried in his neck, I inhale his masculine scent. My body memorizes the imprint of his hands. The protection of his arms. His breath in my hair.

I whimper as he sets me down for the last time, then shocks me by swatting me on the butt. “If you don’t go inside now, I won’t get to watch that hot ass walk away.”

I give him one last pout, and he kisses me one last time. A faint growl of frustration vibrates from him into me.

We say goodnight, and once inside my apartment, I lean against the door, catching my breath.

What a dreamy man.

The floating sensation stays with me until I'm in bed and hear my phone ping.

"I take it the date went well."

It's Presley, texting from next door.

"Yes. Very well."

She sends a little dancing woman emoji, and my stomach drops. I text back, "I'm worried we're both in deep enough that I'm really going to hurt him when the truth comes out."

After some time, Presley replies, "Well if you need help maintaining the lie until everyone forgets, I'm at your service."

My brain is too tired to question what that means. Presley certainly has had an exciting life, so who knows.

Me? I'm an amateur at best—at lying, at everything.

And I hope that doesn't blow everything up in my face.

CHAPTER FIVE

Buck

I wait outside Grace's house in my truck at 8 a.m. with a drink carrier on the console.

Lucky for me the new coffee place in town makes a mean triple-shot coffee drink. I sip my rocket fuel and wait.

Despite running on five hours of sleep, I feel incredibly rested and alert this morning. I could have gone to bed earlier, but I'd spent another hour watching Grace's house.

It's a nice house—well, it could be, if someone kept it up better. I don't like that there are so many ways for random people off the street to get inside. Not that there's anybody on the street in Fate at this time of night.

Another tenant bounces down the steps in jogging gear, a short blonde woman whose eyes get huge when she sees my truck. Her whole body freezes like she's in a panic. When I roll down the window and lean out, she relaxes. "Oh! Aren't you..."

"I'm Buck Wood. I'm here for Grace."

The woman laughs. "Of course you are."

"Is she here? To be fair, I don't think I told her I was picking her up for work today."

The woman introduces herself as Presley, her best friend. "And what are your intentions for Grace? She's a good human,

and I'm sworn to protect her."

This makes me laugh. "I intend to pick her up for work, and I intend to date her."

Presley lifts an eyebrow. "Aren't you a little old for her?"

"Yeah, I'm an old, old man of 39. I hope she'll be able to take care of me when my body starts to fall apart in a few years."

Presley laughs again and rolls her eyes. "Hang on, I'll go roust her."

Waiting, I scroll through Grace's social media. I smile at her plain profile photo, and I'm unprepared to see today's version of Grace as she approaches my truck.

Today she wears a long fuzzy sweater dress over patterned tights with matching knee-high boots. Around her neck is a print scarf that ties the whole outfit together.

Even with a confused expression, she looks like an angel.

"Presley said you're here to take me to work?"

"Yep. You're not driving that piece of shit anymore."

She frowns. "It's not a piece of shit."

"No offense. But it's an accident waiting to happen. Get in. I've got coffee and promised to let you measure me."

"Buck!"

"Measure the house! Slip of the tongue."

Kind of, but not really.

CHAPTER SIX

Grace

I thought Presley was mistaken when she informed me that Buck was waiting for me out front in his truck.

But there he is, dressed much like yesterday when we met for the first time at the construction trailer, but I detect a bit more dressing up. Buck wears a freshly pressed flannel shirt and a waffle knit henley under it instead of the white undershirt. His jeans are creased, and his work boots have far fewer dirt smudges than before. And his hair looks...crispy?

“Well, since you have coffee. How can a girl resist?” I declare with a bright smile.

He hands me my coffee and leans down for a kiss, which I gladly accept.

“I calculated correctly, then.”

This makes me chuckle and I take a sip of the coffee. “Thank you, it’s just the way I like it.”

“Triple caffe mocha with whip and a cinnamon sprinkle.” He says it like he memorized it.

Buck spies my curious look and admits, “I stalked you on social media.”

The coffee warms me against the chill air and tastes too good for me to care about his scanning my page for personal details. Yes, the coffee tastes that good. After all, I accepted

his friend request, after which I spent about an hour before bed looking up every detail I could about him—including a long stare at his cover photo of what looks like him with a group of marines in the desert. There’s a story there, for sure.

He holds open the passenger door, and I slide in.

Once Buck is behind the wheel, he leans over and kisses me again. “You look pretty,” he tells me. Raking his eyes over me like that isn’t conducive to a work environment, but it’s exciting.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” I tell him amidst sweet, short kisses.

“Careful, you’ll make me blush,” he murmurs against my mouth.

What a flirt. “Shouldn’t you be at work already?” I ask.

“I’ve been at work since 6 a.m.”

“And you stopped to get me? That’s how much you hate my car?”

“I couldn’t stop thinking about your mouth and wanted to see you.”

I shouldn’t let him turn me on but it’s getting tough now, especially when he talks about my mouth.

“And you needed coffee.”

“Right. And I needed coffee.”

After five, six, seven more kisses, our shared heat begins to fog up the windshield.

“You’re so fuckin’ pretty, Grace. And you smell amazing. And you taste...”

I moan into his mouth and feebly push at his chest. “Don’t I have to do some measuring and let you get on with your day?”

Buck groans, pulls away, and reaches past me to buckle my seatbelt.

“Yeah, we’d better get going.”

When we arrive at the Paget Mansion, Buck takes me through each room, and I record all the measurements I will need.

Other than making shit up as I go along, what I'll do with these measurements is beyond me.

He guides me quickly through the parlor, the kitchen, the butler pantry, and the downstairs guest area. The place is buzzing with activity. Painters cut in with tiny brushes around the restored window frames. Carpenters work to painstakingly fix hand-tooled trim. A plaster conservationist oversees workers as they reinstall a stunningly restored ceiling medallion. All the intricate, skilled work on this jewel of a home is sinking in, and the imposter syndrome is real. Probably because I'm a legit imposter? Geez.

I keep going, though. One thing at a time. One space at a time. The upstairs bedrooms and bathrooms are straightforward enough. But there's so much extra space that I have no clue how to handle it. The landing on the second floor is more spacious than my whole apartment. One room downstairs seems to be a main rec room but then the second floor boasts a game room, and on the top floor is a ball room and a bar. This house is massive from the outside, but the practicalities of filling this place with furniture and decorations are—well, I'm plumb over my head.

Fake it 'til you make it, babe. Don't fuck it up now.

“So, what do you think?”

Staring off into space at the third-floor landing Tiffany windows, I wonder how I'll stay under budget. A trip to Ikea won't cut it. I suddenly snap out of my musings to find Buck, Wade, and Harley staring at me.

“Oh! It's a gorgeous space.”

Wade looks at me expectantly. “And?”

I get the feeling he asked me a question while I wasn't paying attention. “And...This will be a challenge, but it's a dream project. I have tons of ideas.”

Harley stares at me like I have a third head. “He asked about your timeline to start staging. What’s your availability?”

Damn, they caught me spacing out. I glance at Buck, and he nods encouragingly for me to keep going. “I’ll have to look at my schedule, but I’m sure I’ll be able to start as soon as you need me.”

“She’s starting today,” Buck says.

All three heads turn to him. “What?” Harley is incredulous and Wade looks wary.

I stare at him, wide-eyed, and he says, “I didn’t tell you guys, but this is an exclusive contract. We have her working under us, and us alone, until the project is finished.”

What follows is a chorus of shock and surprise.

“We do?”

“She is?”

I chime in, “I am?”

Buck isn’t answering questions at the moment. “You guys get back to work. We’ve got new landscaping materials coming in, and there’s a water problem in the basement that you still haven’t called the guy about.”

“The paint’s not cured, dude. What’s she even gonna work on?” Harley asks.

“She can work around that. Some of the rooms are ready, aren’t they?”

Harley and Wade give us worried looks, then march off looking more than mildly disgruntled.

Recovering from the whiplash of this announcement, I take his hand and let him lead me behind the main staircase to the only room I haven’t measured yet. He pushes open a door and inside I find a massive office with walls of empty bookshelves. In the middle is a gorgeous, early 20th-century oak desk with acres of space to work on. On it sits a laptop that I happen to know was just released.

“Nice office,” I say.

“It’s yours.”

“What?” I spin around to face Buck, expecting him to be joking. But his face tells me he’s not messing around. “I shouldn’t have sprung that on you. But if you don’t mind, I’d love for this to be an exclusive contract. I don’t want you working with anyone else.”

There’s a possession in his voice that pushes way beyond the boundaries of professionalism. But we left professional in the dust about ten miles back.

“Of course I can be exclusive. I’m not seeing anyone else. Professionally or personally.”

“Good. That’s settled then.”

I watch him walk to the other side of the desk and pull out the most expensive office chair on the market. “Try it out.”

The space is so beautiful that I clutch my coffee and don’t dare take a sip for fear of spilling it on something. I sit down, and the chair feels like a hug. Yes, a butt hug.

“Where did you get this desk from? It’s gorgeous,” I ask, and Buck tells me it came from one of the antique stores in town.

The desk fits perfectly with the era of the house, which gives me a jumping off point. If I can source furniture here locally as much as possible, that would be ideal. The woman who owns the antique mall is the mom of an old high school friend. A well-known junker has a massive warehouse on the outskirts of town. I bet he can help me out.

I run my hand over the mousepad on the laptop, and the screen flickers to life. “Now I just need a password to log in to your computer.”

“Just type in your name in the login, and we’ll set up the password later.”

I do as he says, and when the login screen disappears, it boots up like a new computer. “I don’t understand.”

“I told you, it’s yours,” Buck says.

I swivel toward him. “Buck, tell me you did not buy me a computer.”

“I didn’t buy you a new computer.”

My shoulders sag in relief. “But I totally did,” he amends.

The whiplash with this man, I swear!

“Buck! It’s too much.”

“Wait until you see your new car.”

“Buck! That’s not funny!”

“Too much?”

Oh no, he’s dead serious. I know dry humor and he’s not messing with me. “You can’t buy me a car.”

“I already have my assistant on top of it. The dealership is faxing over paperwork right now.”

I stare at him, mouth agape. On one hand, this is wrong. All kinds of wrong. On the other hand, my car is a dangerous piece of shit.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” he says, backing out of the room. “Have a good day, angel. I’ll see you at lunch.”

Buck closes the door to my office, and I sit there and breathe, letting my coffee turn cold.

The assistant that Buck is temporarily lending me pops in every thirty minutes to see if I need anything—coffee, water, snacks. He delivers a bouquet of an assortment of pink flowers that makes my heart ache at how pretty it is. The card reads, “Wood Bros. Inc. is excited to have you on our team!”

My head is spinning, and the guilt is real.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Buck

I'm pacing my construction site trailer like an angry bull while Wade and Harley are giving me shit.

"We don't even know her!" Wade says, gesturing around wildly. "What are you doing hiring your girlfriend!?"

Harley's eyes bulge from their sockets. "You hired your girlfriend? When did you get a girlfriend?"

I turn and stare out the window while my brothers continue their infighting. At least it's not all directed at me.

"Keep up, man," Wade says. "He didn't have a girlfriend until yesterday when this completely unknown woman waltzed into his office, and he started thinking with his dick instead of his brain."

"So he asked some lady on a date he didn't even know?" Harley asks.

Whatever. They don't know Grace. They don't know us. The truth is, I didn't even glance at her résumé or at her portfolio. I know I gave her the job on sight because I needed a stager and because I needed...her. If that's wrong, I don't care.

A frustrated Wade tries to explain the entire timeline to Harley, and at this point, I'm raging at both of them.

I turn around and start shouting. “Listen. Both of you. I know what I did was totally unethical, but guess what? I do not give the slightest of fucks. As far as I’m concerned, she could hose down the house in zebra stripes, and it would still be better than what Susan left us with, which is nothing.”

Wade starts, but I hold up a palm. “Nope, you listen. Wade, go and meet with the landscape guy; he’s waiting outside. And you, Harley, for the last time, call the basement guy. If I have to yell at you guys again, I’m cracking your heads together.”

I storm out of the trailer and eat up the distance to the back of the house. Behind me, I can hear Wade shouting, “Don’t say I didn’t warn you. This is the biggest project of our career, and we didn’t get this far by getting bamboozled by a hot ass.”

The earth must have tilted the opposite direction on its axis because I do not recall circling back to shove my brother into a mulch pile. But somehow, I find myself standing over him and pointing. “If you ever look at her ass again, if you so much as mention her again, you’re fucking fired.”

Wade is shocked by my behavior but resolute. “I won’t talk about her ass, but you need to get your head out of yours. You have an entire crew to think about, not just yourself.”

This isn’t happening now. I need to get away from Wade before this comes to blows.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Grace

I could be delusional, but I think I might be good at this job.

The beautiful office, the flowers, the constant flow of snacks that other people fetch for me, and the fact that I have a boyfriend responsible for all of it are really helping me feel good about my dubious skill set as a stager.

The fact that I can see Buck's construction trailer from my window doesn't hurt, either.

I'm nibbling on a Reese's and sipping on a Diet Dr. Pepper and feeling in the flow when suddenly, my office door opens abruptly.

In walks Buck, looking like somebody pissed in his Cheerios.

Uh-oh. The jig is up. I shove the Reese's into my face because I know I'm about to get fired and this is the last bit of sustenance I'll see for a while.

Swallowing, I ask, "Hi! Are you okay?"

Buck is pacing the room now like a caged animal. Shit. He's super mad about my stupid lie. God, why did I lie?

"I can explain," I say, standing, my stomach in my throat. I'm about to lose it all. The office, the snacks, the assistant, the job...my brand new boyfriend.

I fucked everything up, and on top of that, we won't be friends after this. I can see that right now. I've betrayed him, and he will never forgive me for leaving his project behind.

Buck marches up to me and stops an inch from my face. "You," he says, low and soft, gently tipping my chin up to meet my eyes, "do not have to explain anything."

I suck in a shuddering breath. Being this close to him and knowing we're about to break up makes a knot appear in my throat. I am so close to crying I could pinch myself. I refuse. I don't need to cry; I just need to admit what I did. But for some reason, Buck doesn't want me to do that.

"I don't?"

"No," he rumbles, his eyes scanning my face. "Because I believe in you, Grace."

"S-so, you're not mad? You're not breaking up with me?"

Buck's beautiful forehead furrows in confusion. "Why would I do that?"

"B-because you look pissed, and I thought—"

"Babe, no." Without another word his lips are on mine, and I melt into his kiss. His mouth claims me, and his arms hold me tight against him. He smells like wood shavings and his natural spice, and I'm intoxicated by the sheer intensity of this man.

I'm surely a mess when he pulls away from the kiss to say, "I just needed to see you," he says softly, eyeing me like a precious jewel, carefully smoothing my hair with one big, meaty hand.

Oh my heart. He's going to tear it to pieces.

"It's wonderful to be seen by you," I say, blushing at how dumb that sounds.

The anger I saw a second ago seems to have abated, and his whole demeanor has changed. Buck closes his eyes and brushes his nose against the tip of my nose, a low hum emanating from his throat.

“Tell me some good news,” he says.

That, I can do. “I have a working plan for the primary bed and bath, the main salon, and the kitchen. And the best part is that between the junk stores and a couple of the higher-end places that just popped up downtown, I should be able to source everything locally. I made some calls, and some of the stuff can be delivered free of charge.”

He smiles. “I like that word, free. You just earned yourself a raise, baby.”

This makes me laugh. “I’m a contractor, not your employee, and you already offered a ridiculous fee to keep me exclusive while I’m on this project as it is.”

He squints down at me, thinking for a moment. I wonder what could be going through his mind, but I’m more interested in the distracting movement of his hands on my lower back.

“How would you like to be a permanent employee with full benefits?”

This is...shocking. “Buck, are you serious? Is that normal? Stagers employed by one company and one company alone?”

He chuckles softly and kisses my forehead. “Nothing about this is normal. You’re extraordinary, and I want you.”

“But you haven’t even seen my work.”

“Babe. You work for me. Do you think I don’t know how to pick my employees?”

This is the most ridiculous suggestion I’ve ever heard. “Do you always kiss your employees until their knees can’t function properly?”

“Only the cute ones,” he replies teasingly.

I playfully swat him on the chest. “How dare you?”

“Be more jealous, babe. It turns me on,” he says, hitching me so close I feel something rigid and thick pressing against my middle.

Gasping, I stare back at him, and the gentle man I saw a minute ago has changed into one with a simmering gaze.

Deciding to play along, I retort, “Well, my answer is yes. I’ll work full-time for you to keep the other cuties at bay.”

Buck growls and captures my bottom lip with his teeth, a move that does crazy things to my lady bits. “You’re the only cutie here. And your juicy bottom lip is going to be really distracting if we’re working together.”

“Then you should get back to it,” I say.

Buck shakes his head and sears me with his gaze as one hand travels from my back to my front, gripping the front of my sweater. “Not yet. I’m still mad at those guys.”

Oh no. I manage to gather enough thoughts in my head to realize that he had had an argument with his brothers. On a shaky breath, I ask, “Was it about me? Do they...do they want me gone?”

The flash of anger in Buck’s eyes cannot be denied. “They don’t get to decide that. I hired you, and any firings have to be unanimous. Anyway, that’s irrelevant.”

The knot in my throat grows more painful. “Maybe it’s best if I go, then. I don’t want to cause a rift between you and your brothers.”

“Listen to me, Grace, because I will only say this once.” His eyes blaze with a frightening ferocity. I try to swallow the knot in my throat. Buck’s hand that fists my sweater relaxes and begins slowly rubbing my stomach. His other hand goes to the back of my neck, cupping me firmly. The overall effect is the feeling of possession. Ownership. This is supposed to be wrong, isn’t it? Why do I like it so much?

“You work for me. Not them. You’re mine. No one else says a fucking word about it. You got that?”

The long, slow drag of his palm over my stomach combines with the grit in his words to turn me into a puddle.

“Got it,” I breathe, barely getting the words out before Buck’s mouth claims me again, fiercely and thoroughly.

Ignoring the throb between my thighs, I ask, “Do-do you want to see the rundown of everything I’ve done so far? I

made some sketches...”

“Later,” he growls, his palm traveling dangerously across my lower belly to the spot that bulges below my navel—the one area I’m most self-conscious about. Anybody else touching my pooch would get their throat punched, but Buck’s warm strokes there are making me all kinds of excited.

I swallow hard, watching his dark pupils double in size. “Oh...okay...so I should let you get back to work then...”

“In a minute...I want to make it up to you for scaring you when I came in here earlier.”

“Oh, Buck, I’m already over that.”

His hand moves lower still, pressing and rubbing against the front of my pussy as he shushes me. “Shhh. Don’t ruin the moment with your work ethic.”

The meat of his palm is under my sweater now, stroking the most sensitive part of me so firmly I might come to pieces any moment.

“Buck...” I say with a gasp, my eyes fluttering closed.

The grip on the back of my neck seems to be the only thing holding me up.

His roaming hand finds its way back up to where he can hook his thumb inside the waistband of my leggings.

“Let me make you come, Grace,” Buck murmurs against my mouth.

I can only answer with a strange little purr as he lowers his hand, that thumb caressing the skin just above the waistband of my panties.

He pauses then. “Open your eyes, baby, and tell me to keep going.”

CHAPTER NINE

Buck

Grace's sweet mouth is slack, her eyes hooded and dazed.

And I'm the asshole that did that to her.

"K-keep going," she breathes. "Please."

The "please" tears a hole in my chest.

My baby will never have to beg for it.

Backing her into the desk, I yank at the waistband of her leggings and shove my hand down her panties. Grace's eyes widen as I slide my middle finger into her warm slit. "Buck!"

She needs to know how absolutely obsessed I am. "Let's get one thing clear. It's my job to meet your every need. Every. Need." I speak these words against the shell of her ear, my hand on her neck holding her in place. Her warm, wet lips coat my fingers in her sweetness as I stroke her sensitive flesh. God, she's so wet for me. I'd better make her come quick. "You got that? If you have to say please, I'm already falling down on the job."

She shivers but gives me a little nod.

"Now, are you gonna come for me, baby girl?"

A quiet squeak emanates from her throat as my middle finger sinks into her tight, wet hole. "What is it, Grace? Talk to me."

“I...don’t know how to come.”

That one simple admission breaks me. So sweet. So trusting. I fucking adore this woman. My cock strains against the zipper of my jeans, begging to be set free to fill her up and let her know just how insane I am for her.

As I savor the salty skin of Grace’s throat with my wet kisses, her sweetness leaks out, coating my fingers. “You don’t have to do anything.”

“Oh-okay...”

“Do you trust me enough?”

“Yes,” she whispers. “I trust you.”

Stroking one digit inside her, memorizing what’s mine, I hiss, “Then relax and let go, angel.”

Grace obeys, and her body slackens against me, letting my fingers stretch her. Her breath hitches.

“Does it feel good?”

“So good, Buck. S-something’s happening!”

This woman is driving me mad for her. She doesn’t try to pretend to be something she’s not; instead, she put her inexperience right out there, and I find that so damn sexy.

“Hold on to me if you need to, Grace...that’s it, grab on to my shoulders...use your nails, that’s okay...god, you’re so wet and tight...you make me so hard it hurts not to be inside you, baby...”

The dirty talk is working so well that she drips all over me, and I’m about five seconds from exploding. Time to speed this up before I...fuck, it’s almost too late for me...

I shouldn’t steal another kiss...Grace’s sweet, soft mouth will only push me closer to the edge. But I can’t resist. Her tongue, her lips. I can’t believe how lucky I am that she’s mine. All this is mine to kiss and touch and explore.

Grace softly whines against my mouth when I pull my finger out of her heated cunt. “I got you, baby.” Sure enough, her smile returns as my touch finds her swollen clit. I rub her

there, gauging her reaction. Slowly, I strum that tight button from side to side, then increase my speed at the urgency of her moans. Grace's hips come off the desk, and she grabs on tight.

"Something strange is happening to me, Buck!" she gasps.

"Let it happen, I got you...I got you," I rumble against her throat, no longer caring how turned on I am, how close I am. I keep my thumb on her clit and let my middle finger pierce her entrance again. I shouldn't, but I need to feel her come.

"Buck!" Grace squeaks, her hips slamming forward. Her muscles tighten around my middle finger. Pulsing. Milking.

It's too much for me to handle.

But I keep going, reveling in how she writhes against me, her breath shuddering between stifled moans. My mouth latches onto her throat and sucks, pulling her soft skin into my mouth, ensuring that I'll leave my mark on her.

My fingers wring out every last drop of her orgasm. "That's it, Grace. That's it, baby girl."

"Buck..."

I stroke in and out until she calms, serene and slumping against me. "What was that?" she slurs.

Chuckling, I carefully withdraw from her leggings and suck her sweet juices off my fingers.

"I believe that was your first orgasm," I say with a smile, lifting up the hem of my tee-shirt and nonchalantly wiping the rest of Grace's essence into my bare stomach.

"I heard they were good but didn't know they were that good."

"Careful, you're about to give me a big head."

"Hmm? You say you want me to give you head?"

Fuck me. "No," I say. "Not now, anyway. I don't think you have your wits about you, sweetheart."

She pouts. "So, back to the grindstone, I guess."

The throb in my drawers says there's not a chance in hell that's happening.

Chapter

Grace

"I have a better idea," Buck says.

Things go a little blurry. The edges of my world soften. I register the sight of this man licking his fingers clean, then wiping his hand on his stomach, and then my brain buffers. Did he just...and then he...holy shit, I think it's more than what my brain can take.

Still high on endorphins, all I know is Buck has his hand on my lower back and is guiding me across the yard to his truck.

"But...work?"

"I'm your boss, and I'm giving you the day off."

"But I just started!" The protest comes out as an uncharacteristic giggle.

My boss doesn't reply but practically picks me up and sets me in the passenger seat because I'm moving too slowly.

"Did anyone ever tell you you are obsessed with work?" Buck asks as he clicks my seat belt in place.

"Literally no one," I say, pointing to myself with both thumbs. "Disappointing daughter with an art history degree, remember?"

"Hmm," he grumbles, then carefully shuts the door.

He says nothing as we drive across town, his jaw ticking the entire way. He holds my hand tightly.

"Is something wrong, Buck? Where are you taking me?"

“To your place,” he says.

I am concerned because we passed my house about a mile back. And actually, we’re headed over the river into Gold Hill.

“Again, where are we going? Why are you taking me to Gold Hill? I’m from Fate; am I even allowed here?”

But he doesn’t answer any of the dozen questions I throw out there.

Strangely, I trust him, though. Perhaps I shouldn’t, but the truth is, that orgasm did something to my brain. I don’t want to be anywhere where he is not. I feel safe and secure riding next to him.

Soon, the truck pulls into the driveway of a massive 1990s brick house in one of the nicer neighborhoods in Gold Hill. “Where are we? Why did you tell me we were going to my house?”

“Because it’s my house. You live with me now.”

Okay, what the fuck?

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t want you living in that shithole anymore.”

“It’s not a shithole.”

“It is if your onsite landlord is a creep and there’s no security at the main door. Anyone can walk in off the street. Ergo, it’s a shithole, and I wouldn’t be a decent boyfriend if I didn’t move you in with me.”

I sit in the cab and stare for several long moments. I did say that about Toby, and I don’t love the lack of security either. But it’s Fate, not New York City.

Plus, there’s a large part of me that loves, loves, loves being spoiled by Buck.

On the other hand, I’ve never lived anywhere else. What would I do here besides hang out with Buck and ride with him to and from work?

And...is that such a bad thing?

It could be. When he finds out I lied on my résumé and kicks me out, I'll have to go crawling to my parents for help, and I do not want to move to Arizona. Maybe I've been too determined to do everything on my own. Buck is offering me help without any strings attached.

“What’s going on in that head of yours, sweetheart?”

I gaze up at the white brick, the arched recessed entry, the tidy row of boxwoods, and faux shutters. “This house is not very you.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Buck asks good-naturedly.

“Nothing! It’s fine. It’s just not the kind of house I picture you in.”

Buck leans over the steering wheel and aims a questioning smirk at me. “Really? What kind of house do you see me in?”

I smile. “If I’m honest?” Honesty, that’s rich coming from me. I’m such a coward. “I see you in something like the Paget Mansion.”

Buck purses his lips. “Do you think I should live in the Paget Mansion?”

“Well, something like it. Obviously, you need to sell that one to make money for the company.”

“I could buy it for myself.”

“But...can you do that?”

“Sure. There’s no law that I can’t, as a private citizen, purchase property from the company. The brothers will make a profit off the sale either way.”

All this talk about buying houses is making my head spin. “But it’s just you,” I laugh. “What are you gonna do with a giant mansion?”

“Fill it with my harem.”

I shriek and hit him on the arm.

“Ouch!” Buck says, laughing and rubbing his shoulder.

“Don’t give a girl an orgasm if you don’t want her acting like a psycho when you talk about other women.”

I’m not sure how the “psycho” comment will land, but he takes it well. A little too well. All that happens next is Buck leaning his head on his arms that rest on the wheel. He stares at me for several seconds, neither of us saying anything.

Finally, he blows out a breath. “You’re fucking perfect for me, Grace.”

It’s probably the haze of happy hormones still surging through me, but Buck’s words send warm tingles through every cell in my body, down to my very bones.

“You don’t know me that well.”

“Says you.” He sits up, stretches, and gestures with his chin toward the house. “Come on.”

“What are we doing here?” I ask.

“What do you think we’re doing here? I’m feeding you lunch.”

“Oh,” I say, honestly a little disappointed. I’m not even hungry, as I’ve been fueling my sketches and research all morning with a boatload of carbs.

“Right after I feed your other wet hole with my cock.”

“Buck!” I’m so shocked at his choice of words that I don’t know whether to slug him in the shoulder again or climb him like a tree and sit on his face.

Sensing my hesitation, Buck offers, “Unless you’d rather go back to work.”

Well. What kind of a choice is that?

And then more questions swirl through my head. Will we go upstairs to his room? Will I have to undress in front of him? Will I know what to do? Will he tell me what to do? What if I don’t perform? What if he doesn’t orgasm? Or, worse, what if he tries to give me a second one, and it doesn’t happen, and he’s so disappointed that he’s no longer turned on by me?

I'm a mess of questions and guilt over not having told him the whole truth, but mostly, I'm a mess of feelings for this big, bossy, gentle beast of a man.



We toe off our shoes by the door as if this is nothing but a Netflix and chill between an old married couple. Even though this is a perfectly lovely suburban house that doesn't fit Buck's vibe, I'm immediately comfortable being surrounded by what he's done with the place. The art pieces are unique, the tiles and floorboards are immaculate, and the rugs are gorgeous but not too expensive. There are touches of both feminine and masculine, and black and white pictures of family and friends offset the artwork on the walls and shelves.

"It's beautiful in here," I say as we meander through the front living area toward the hallway.

"All Susan," he says.

My jealousy flares, and he catches it. Smirking, he says, "My sister."

"Ah. Right. The other stager. I forgot."

He laughs, pulling me close for a soft kiss. When he lets go of the kiss, I spot a photo on the wall behind him of a group of men, all wearing dog tags. On the left is a younger-looking Buck. "Who's that?"

"That's my unit. Afghanistan, 2015. Best crew in the world. I miss them. Sometimes, I forget what it's like to have people around who really get you. I have my brothers, and we mesh well...most of the time. But my unit in the Marines was different. It was a deeper connection that sort of...left some cracks after I was discharged."

My heart aches, and though I've never served, I know the feeling of missing the people you love.

"Maybe you'll see them again. Have you thought about putting together a reunion?"

“Nah. No time. Everyone has families now. Nobody wants their old CO bothering them. It might...you know...trigger bad memories.”

I rest my forehead against his chest. “I understand.”

He wraps his arm around me and kisses the top of my head. “Thank you, Grace.”

“For what?”

“For filling in those cracks.”

Another kiss follows this, so full of feeling that I am certain he’s holding back words he thinks I’m not ready to hear.

“Thank you for looking out for me, Buck. You have no idea what everything you’ve done means to me.”

He seems embarrassed by my gratitude. I predict he’s a man who doesn’t care for much praise.

Too bad, because he’ll always have my gratitude.

Buck wordlessly leads me into the primary bedroom at the back of the house, his hand on me the whole time like an anchor tethering my racing thoughts to the only thought that matters now: us.

My nervousness around sex dissipates as he eases me onto the bed for a cozy makeout session. Much to my relief, Buck doesn’t immediately start trying to take my clothes off. He makes me feel safe and excited all at once.

My mouth opens to his tongue like so many times before, but his kisses are more drawn out. There is no rush, and I love it. I lose myself in his lips and lazily erotic licks. Buck’s roaming hands caress my pussy, stomach, and breasts. He rubs a thumb over my nipple through the fabric of my sweater, and I shiver at the new sensation.

My resulting moan sparks an uptick in Buck’s urgency, and I feel him grip the hem of my sweater.

“Need to touch your skin, baby.”

Without another thought, I swallow down my self-consciousness and toss my sweater aside. His hooded gaze runs all over my skin, his eyes dark and hungry. With his hands at my back, one pluck of his fingers undoes my bra. I gasp as he gently sweeps each strap off, one shoulder at a time until the lacy thing falls away.

“God, you’re beautiful, Grace. Did you know that?”

I don’t know what to say, so I go with, “I feel beautiful when I’m with you.” It’s such a cheesy line, but Buck doesn’t laugh or scoff or do anything but absorb the sincerity of what I said. “You should feel beautiful all the time.”

There’s no time to process the pang of emotion that brings up because the next thing I know, his mouth is around one of my nipples. I gasp as his wet tongue coaxes my aching bud into a tight peak. The combination of his mouth, his tongue, and his breath spikes an intense ache between my legs. The throb is reborn in my spent pussy. I want to feel his mouth everywhere.

“Buck,” I rasp.

He hums, murmuring sweet nothings as he switches to the opposite nipple, licking and sucking while working over the opposite breast with his rough, work-worn fingers.

I give in to the instinct to touch him, running my hands through his hair, neck, and massive shoulder blades as he plays with me and works me up. I automatically loll my head back and arch into him, pressing my chest forward, letting him know I love what he’s doing. He can keep going with that for as long as he wants. But the moans that escape me let him know I want more. I need more.

My hands tug at the back of his shirt, and I want to cry at the loss of contact when he backs away from me to yank it off over his head.

But then I’m rewarded again when he rolls me onto my back and resumes kissing, allowing my greedy hands to explore every inch of skin I can reach.

On instinct, I hook both legs around him, needing him closer.

“Baby,” he murmurs between sensuous licks to my nipples. “I’m gonna taste you.” On the one hand, yes! On the other hand...I reach down between us and cup his hard cock. He’s holding back. So much. “D-don’t you want to fuck me? You’re so hard, Buck.”

He laughs roughly and softly nibbles a patch of skin on my chest. “I’ve been rock hard since I ended our date last night, Grace. Once we start that, I won’t last long. I want to make this good for you.”

“You already have,” I whine.

He hushes me with his devious mouth, licking into me hungrily. “Don’t be a martyr. You need this part as much as I do. Trust me.”

“I trust you...I...”

I barely get the words out before Buck is wrecking my leggings, forcing them down my thighs and pulling them completely off, along with my underwear.

I watch in awe as his shoulders spread me open; his face looks like a wild man. There is no further preamble or lazy, teasing kisses over my stomach. He’s just...going for it with his whole face buried in my aching pussy.

Buck pays no mind to my shocked gasps. He’s so good and so, so much. I’ve never felt so intensely bathed in attention. I’ve never felt so adored. So worshiped. I don’t know what drugs feel like, but this must be better than that. His tongue, his lips, his teeth...I feel him everywhere. And I hear nothing but scandalous wet sounds of his bathing tongue. He’s feasting on me.

His groan of pleasure and frustration vibrates against my damp folds pushes me deeper into this vortex of over-the-top sensations. “Relax, Grace,” he grits out, sweeping his tongue from the very bottom to the very top. With the barest brush of his tongue against my clit I nearly come apart again, but not

yet. I realize then that I'm white-knuckling the duvet and let go. My body becomes liquid in his hands, in his mouth...

"Good girl," he murmurs against the sensitive flesh there.

Just when I think it can't get any better than this, he hooks one of my thighs under his arm and pushes my knee up against my middle. The overall effect is a deepened, intensified burst of sensation. Another shocked moan from me sends him into a feverish rhythm as he works my clit and feeds my entrance with one finger, then two, stretching, stretching, stretching.

"Fuck me," I breathe.

"In a minute, I'm still eating."

I give in to the urge to reach down and grip his head, digging my nails into his scalp. He chuckles against my sensitive flesh and then devastates me by covering my clit with his mouth and sucking. All the aching, all the throbbing, all the need comes to its apex, and I explode.

He's just given me my second orgasm, and that's it. It's all over. I have nothing left to give him, but I'm thoroughly addicted to whatever the hell he just did to me.

CHAPTER TEN

Buck

Making Grace come is a dangerous addiction.

I could go again and again and wring out every last ounce of energy to make her feel as good as she possibly can.

I'd love to leave her completely spent and go again after a hard sleep.

I'm not sure at first how she'll accept my tongue in her mouth after what I just did, but my Grace is so trusting and sweet. It feels so good to be wrapped up in her arms, her legs.

Hovering over her, my arms caged around her head on the pillow, she opens wide for me without hesitation.

My cock weeps at the touch of her damp heat. If I don't get inside her now, I will lose it. Still, this needs to be perfect for her first time.

"Take it in your hand and feed me in. Go as slow as you want." I spit each word through my teeth, my restraint evident.

She nods bravely, her cheeks flushed.

"You don't have to. We can wait."

This time, she shushes me with her mouth. Her sweet, soft hand takes hold of my aching cock, and the sensation is too gentle, too light.

I say nothing. I don't want to pressure or make her feel like she's doing anything wrong. There's plenty of time for both of us to practice and learn what the other one likes. We have our whole lives for that.

For now, I let go and give in to the sensation of her hesitantly guiding me to her heat.

Inch by inch, she takes me in, pausing every few seconds to acclimate.

“Good?”

She smiles. “So good.”

It's all I can do not to thrust, but I have to keep her comfortable. I don't want to cause an ounce of pain.

“I know you want to fuck me, Buck. Do it.” She lets go and urges me on with her strong legs clamped onto my hips. Slowly, I push in the rest of the way and let her hold me for a moment.

“Buck! You feel so...big!”

“Too big?”

Her muscles tighten around me, and I nearly lose it. “No. You're perfect.”

Our bodies come together in a natural rhythm. I've been holding back for so long. Maybe it's only been a day since we've met, but anticipating this moment feels like centuries. My balls tighten, and my whole being is a champagne bottle with the cork on the popping edge. Her walls fist me so tight that I come after three or four thrusts, cursing heaven.

She combs her fingers through my hair and smiles. “Buck,” she breathes. “I loved it. Don't leave yet.”

I wouldn't dream of it, not with the way her pussy milks me, squeezing out every ounce of cum.

“You are the best thing that's ever happened to me, Buck.”

That simply cannot be true, but I love hearing anything from Grace.

I don't pull out until she's ready, then roll onto my back. She curls against me like a kitten, and I cover her with one arm, trapping her against me.

“Was...that good for you?”

That she even has to ask tears another hole in my chest. “Baby,” I say, kissing her mouth fiercely. “You were fucking amazing. And I should have asked you first.”

She huffs out a hoarse, sexy laugh. “Silly boy. You were perfect. Thank you for making my first time, for making everything perfect.”

As much as I'd love to lie here like this for the rest of the day—the rest of the week—I almost forgot part of my promise.

“Where are you going?” Grace asks with a pout when I get up.

“I'll give you a minute to fix yourself up while I make lunch. Hope you're hungry.”

“After that? I'm starving.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Grace

The lunch of soup, salad, sandwiches, and homemade chocolate chip cookies leaves me absolutely stuffed.

But all the orgasms are now making my head buzz with ideas.

We head back to the office, stupidly trying to sneak past his brothers after our two-hour lunch.

“Nice of you to join us,” Wade snarks as we pass him in the hall to my office. “The basement guy has an estimate for the leaks, and it’s not pretty.”

Buck takes the paperwork Wade holds out to him and frowns.

“I gotta ask about this estimate. I’ll check in with you in a few minutes, baby.” As Wade looks on, frowning, Buck says goodbye with a kiss to my temple and a loving squeeze.

I blush as I breeze past his assistant, who smirks up at me from his temporary workstation.

The next hour flies by in a blur of busy work: ordering several staple pieces, sketching out more ideas, and researching the house’s architectural style.

I take a break to stretch and check my phone notifications.

There’s one from Buck and one from Presley.

Buck: “Hey, babe. I have to deal with a couple of change orders. I’ll be by at 4 with coffee to check on you and review your plans.”

Disappointing, but no big deal. Shit happens on a job site.

I meander through the halls and rooms, the twinge between my thighs making me flush with heat at the recent memory. I still can’t fathom what is happening to me. That entire man was down there, worshiping me like a man starved. Big bonus: I’m no longer a virgin, and my first time was not terrible like Presley described her first time. Sex with Buck is magnificent.

As I’m smiling to myself like a silly schoolgirl, another text from Buck comes in.

“Baby, I’m so sorry I’ll miss our coffee break. Something came up. I’ll make it up to you over dinner. Steak or seafood? You pick, and I’ll make reservations.”

Reservations? I used up my one date-worthy outfit last night. Time to call in the cavalry.

I click over to Presley’s message.

Presley: “Why didn’t you tell me you’re moving out?”

I stare at her message for a minute, wondering what she means. How could she possibly know about my conversation with Buck earlier today?

Feeling impatient and sort of alarmed, I call her up.

She answers on the first ring. “Hey! Gah, watch it! Sorry, I was shouting at the movers who nearly crushed me on the steps with your book boxes.”

Those alarm bells kick up to 200 decibels. “Pres, what the heck are you talking about?”

“You? Moving out? Today? Where are you?”

“I never told him I was moving in with him...not explicitly...and definitely not today. I’m at work, and I didn’t call any movers.”

“Him?” Presley asks. “Are you talking about Buck? Shit, are his brothers single because I’d love for one of them to fall

in love with me and move me out of this dump.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I don’t know if Wade and Harley are single, but you wouldn’t like them. Especially not Wade. He’s a mega asshole.”

“Ooh, I like a grumpy alpha-hole. Maybe I should apply for a job there.”

“You should! I’d love to work with you. I’m sure Buck would say yes if I told him I wanted a permanent assistant.”

“That would be nice, but I don’t want to work for Buck. I want to work for Grumpy Wade.”

“You’re a glutton for punishment.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

A presence looms at the end of the hallway where I’m pacing, and I stop short, my eyes going wide at the brooding face of Wade, staring at me.

“So I’m an asshole, huh?”

Swallowing hard, I make an excuse to say goodbye to Presley and hang up.

“What can I help you with, Wade?”

His brother stands there, arms folded, with thunder in his eyes.

“I was just coming to tell you that the test starts now, and you have to have something to show us by the end of the day. You can do the kitchen or the parlor. Your choice.”

It takes me a minute to parse what he’s saying. “Test?”

He scoffs. “There’s a reason you haven’t signed a contract yet. This is probationary.”

“Probationary? That’s news to me.” Now I’m just repeating things like I’m too clueless to live. Which is exactly how I feel right now.

“Sorry that your boyfriend...I mean, your supervisor didn’t tell you. This week is probationary. If you do a good job in the kitchen or the parlor, we’ll keep you on for the rest of

the job. Provided the Wood brothers are unanimously agreed that you did well.”

I squint at him, severely confused at more than one Wood brother. One has taken it upon himself to move all my shit. The second one is giving me orders.

He is also a co-owner, so...I guess I have to do what he says?

“You’re saying I have to finish a room by the end of the day? But I’ve only just finished my shopping list. I don’t have my own warehouse to pull from.”

Wade looks like he’s won some sort of competition and feels good about putting me in my place. “You could have started earlier. In fact, I came to your office around 1 to brief you on the test, but you weren’t here.”

We both know why, and that fact makes my cheeks heat.

The truth is Wade has won already. I’m going to fail, and he knows it.

On the other hand, I’ve faked it this far. Might as well continue pretending and go out with a bang.

“Both the kitchen and the parlor will be ready by EOB,” I say, using the only corporate abbreviation I know, jutting out my chin at him.

He chortles and swaggers away, calling out, “Good luck. You’re gonna need it.”

With a knot in my stomach, I charge back to my office to make phone calls. Fortunately, I know most of the junkers in town on a first-name basis.

But first, I text Buck. Remembering how he said he would be busy with contractors today, I don’t want to bug him with a phone call, though this is pretty urgent.

Me: Did you send movers to my house to get my stuff?

Buck answers immediately: Yep.

Me: Buck!

Buck: I told you. You live with me now.

I stare agog at my phone. Am I really going to go along with this?

Hmm.

Yeah...I'll deal with him later.

Staring down at my list of tasks, it occurs to me that I completely forgot to ask Presley to pull together a nice outfit for dinner tonight.

Well, crap.

I'll have to wing it like I do for most things.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Buck

I'm picking up Grace much later than I intended to for dinner.

After dealing with the contractor issues, I drove to her old apartment to discover Toby having a hissy fit. We negotiated the terms of breaking Grace's lease, and he eventually saw reason. I also told him I'd be complaining to the city code department if he didn't install a code lock on the outside door.

It's now seven thirty, and I'm hauling ass back to the Paget Mansion.

I bound up the front stairs, push into the front hall, and immediately stop short. Something feels...different in here.

I look up, and above me hangs a Gilded Age chandelier that wasn't here before.

"What the...?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see more. A lot more. To my right, the main parlor has been completely outfitted with furniture and decorated. Everything chosen matches the historical era of the house but with coordinating modern pieces. It's simple but elegant and not overdone. Various vintage prints hang over the fireplace, ferns and plants adorning every corner, and one or two luxurious throws and fringed pillows. There's even a baby grand piano.

She started already? Not the timeline I was thinking, but okay. The girl is a self-starter. Great!

“You’re back!”

My chest expands three sizes when Grace appears at the end of the hall, bounding from the kitchen.

“Babe!” I exclaim, marching to meet her halfway. “The parlor looks incredible. Love it. You hungry?”

“Starving! I’ve been at this for hours!” She jumps into my arms, and though I’m tired as hell from the day I’ve had, I cage her against me, her full weight in my arms as her limbs circle me. This feels so good, as natural as if we’ve been greeting each other like this for a hundred years.

I kiss her silly.

“Hours...baby, you shouldn’t have worked so hard just to surprise me by working ahead.”

Her brow furrows in confusion. “What do you mean, a surprise?” Grace laughs. “This was the test! I take it I passed?”

I study her eyes to see if she’s been hit on the head. “Test? What test?”

Grace blinks at me. “The preliminary. Wade said you would discuss my performance today and decide if I’m worthy to stay on...”

My severe look stops her.

“Wade said that?” I rasp.

Realization slowly dawns on her face. “Um...so...there was no test?”

I shake my head.

“I’m such an idiot,” she groans. She looks tired and as hungry as she said.

“You’re not an idiot; you’re my little rock star. Remember when I said you work for me and only me? You forgot that, didn’t you?”

She nods, her chin shaking. “I’m sorry. I used up a good chunk of the budget, too. I was trying too hard to impress you guys.”

“Your budget just tripled. And so did your salary.”

“Buck, you’re paying me too much as it is.”

A voice cuts through the air. “Yes. You are.”

Wade swaggers in from the hallway. Slowly, I set Grace down and prepare to have it out with my brother.

“What the hell is your problem? Lying to an employee? Stressing her the fuck out on her first day?”

“Someone had to give her a thorough interview. For all I know, you could have hired a fraud.”

Next to me, Grace’s shoulders sag. She seems to shrink inside herself. I reach for her, confused, but she steps away from me.

“Brother, you had best apologize to our stager.”

“But she’s not a stager. Are you, Grace?”

I point a finger in his face. “You don’t talk to her—”

“The home address on her file is the same as the label on the photos in her portfolio!”

“You’re talking crazy, Wade,” I spit out. “And what are you doing putting your hands on her personnel file?”

“Stop it!”

We both turn to see the frazzled, exhausted Grace slump against the wall. She looks at me with tears in her eyes. “Wade guessed right. Somehow, he knew I lied to you on my résumé. Buck, I’m so sorry. I’ve never done this before. I’ve never done anything close to this before.”

I blink at her. This can’t be true, what she’s saying. “But you showed me a portfolio.”

“Did you even look at it? It was pictures of my and Presley’s apartments.”

“Huh?”

“She let me rearrange her furniture, that’s it,” Grace says, her eyes shining with sadness. “I’m not a professional stager.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Grace

I wait for the ax to fall. I wait to get reamed, fired, threatened with a lawsuit over all the money I've spent, threatened with criminal charges for...I don't know, impersonating someone I'm not and fucking the boss? That can't be legal.

But none of that happens.

Buck tosses his head back and barks out a laugh.

"Buck? Aren't you going to fire her?"

But my soon-to-be-ex-boss-and-ex-boyfriend only laughs harder. "You rearranged her furniture?" Now he's doubled over. He's so angry he's laughing because he can't believe what I've done.

"Yeah, that's all I did. I'm not a professional. I'm just a disappointment. To everyone."

His laughter ceases, finally. "Listen to me. Don't you ever call yourself that again? I won't hear it."

The stupid tears I didn't want him to see start to leak out and fall down my cheeks. "I have no experience, and I lied about it. To you. You trusted me. I let you believe I was a different person."

Buck reaches out and cups my face. "Aw, come on. Don't be so dramatic."

Wade tries to interject. “I think drama is called for, actually —”

“Can it, bro.” Buck orders without tearing his gaze from me. “Is your name Grace?”

I swallow as he tenderly wipes a tear from my cheek with his thumb. “Yes.”

“Did you grow up here, graduate from Fate High School with honors, class of 2018?”

I nod slowly, touched that he remembered the year. He doesn’t miss a detail about me, which is a heady feeling to know how closely he pays attention.

“And did you go to state university and earn a bachelor’s in art history, going against your parents’ wishes that you major in law and relocate with the family to Arizona?”

“Yep. That stuff’s all true.”

“And do you love me?”

Wade makes a choking noise and marches away somewhere; I don’t know where because my gaze is trained on Buck. My man. My amazing man.

“I never said I loved you, though.”

Buck towers over me, and I’m trapped between him and the wall. I feel his heat from my face down to my toes.

“Probably because I didn’t say it first. I love you, Grace, and I don’t care that you think you lied to me.”

“I did lie,” I say, my heart in my throat, refusing to absorb those three words.

He shakes his head. “You didn’t. You had photographic proof.”

“Of my best friend’s apartment,” I choke out, half crying, half laughing.

“Yep. That counts as the truth in my book.”

“You’re crazy!”

“Crazy about you.”

“And cheesy as hell.”

He lifts one shoulder. “Then I’m crazy, cheesy, over the top, dramatically in love with you. I’m good with that.”

After a long pause, staring into Buck’s eyes, asking myself if I trust him, I decide.

I take his advice: relax, let it go, surrender, go with it.

The truth is out, and he doesn’t care. He just wants me, all of me.

“I love you too, Buck,” I rasp.

A wide, shit-eating grin splits his handsome face.

“But you can’t just go moving my stuff, it’s crazy—”

He cuts me off with a kiss. A deep, long, claiming kiss that wrecks any remaining resolve.

I love this man all the way down to the marrow in my bones.

More importantly, I trust him. I trust him with my whole life.

And I know it will be one wild, fun, ridiculous ride. I can’t wait.

EPILOGUE

Buck

One year later

Grace wanted a small wedding, but I knew she was just saying that because she didn't want me spending too much money.

I insist on spoiling her rotten every chance I get. I made that promise when we began dating, and I'm living up to that promise. Starting with our house.

I took her suggestion to heart and bought the Paget Mansion from the company. Wade and Harley were dumbstruck about it. But at the end of the day, they both made their money back and plenty on top of it.

Then, I let Grace loose on the interior. The house is the showplace of the entire town now, almost rivaling that of Maya and Doyle's. We've lived together for a year in that house, which suits us perfectly. We combined our family album photos and placed them everywhere around the house. To Grace's credit, she also took the old photo of my unit from Afghanistan, blew it up, framed it, and hung it on the wall in the hallway. Every time I walk past it, I remember how much she loves me. She always does small kindnesses like that.

This year, we hosted our first Thanksgiving, with Grace's parents flying out from Arizona to meet me and the rest of the family. The only thing that would improve the holidays would

be the echoes of children, cousins, and their little friends running up and down the stairs.

I wish Wade and Harley would hurry up and settle down already, but they don't seem to be in any hurry. As for Grace and I, I think she's an old-fashioned girl and simply wants to wait to get married until after we've officially tied the knot.

Grace hasn't slowed down one bit, jumping from the Paget Mansion project right to the next one. Our sister Susan is kicking herself for passing up the opportunity to work on our projects in Fate. Grace is the definition of her name, and will often bring Susan along to help with other Wood Bros. projects around town. The two of them work incredibly well together. Every house they staged together has sold at market or above.

Today, one year since the day we had our first date, I'm marrying Grace in the old mansion's half-acre backyard under the stars.

"You ready, brother?" Wade asks, rubbing his palms together in the library while Susan fixes my tie.

I shoot him a smirk. "As long as the three of us are unanimous."

Over at the bar cart, pouring four shots of whiskey, Harley snorts.

Wade rolls his eyes. "When are you going to let me live that down?"

"Never," I say, grinning.

I'm glad the guys, especially Wade, finally pulled the cob out of their asses and decided to accept Grace as part of the team. Wade apologized for that "probationary test" stunt, and Grace forgave him because she is who she is.

Mom and Dad barge in from the hallway while Harley passes around the whiskeys.

"I hope you saved some for us!" Mom exclaims.

"Boozy hussy," Dad says, winking. "What am I gonna do with her?" Mom scoffs and slaps Dad on the chest.

“You look good, Dad.”

Dad looks me up and down and grunts. “You look like a jarhead,” he jokes about my dress uniform. “That’s Captain Jarhead to you,” I remind him, and everyone laughs.

Wade lifts his shot glass and gives a toast, and we all clink our glasses and shoot them down.

As I’m tossing back my bourbon, a familiar voice from a distant time and place has me frozen to the spot.

“Got any of that left for Timber?”

I swing around to face the door, and to my complete shock, there stands my sergeant.

“Sir,” he adds, saluting.

I can’t move, I can’t talk. Not sure if I’m breathing. Following Timber into the room comes five more guys.

All the jarheads left from that unit are here: Timber, Doc, Jaws, Grizzly, Goat, and Wheels, all dressed in full uniform—all six chests bearing purple hearts—they all line up and salute.

“What the fuck are you guys doing here?” I rasp, swallowing hard.

Still standing at attention, Timber replies, “Sir, your fiancée invited us, Sir!”

Grace got me good. Somehow, she got them all here without letting the secret slip.

I look at all six faces, a bit older now, but still the same friends I remember. I salute back and order them at ease as Harley pours six more shots.

Other than Grace and my family, I can’t imagine anyone more important to be here. Grace picked up on that, and that’s exactly why I knew she was a good one.



Grace

“You’re ruining your makeup!” Presley hisses.

It’s true; I am ruining it. I can’t help it, though, because my ear is at the door of my office where I’ve been getting ready with my mom, two sisters, and Presley, listening to all the commotion at the arrival of Buck’s military friends.

“I can’t believe I pulled it off! He was really surprised!” I say, bouncing on my feet and crying. I just wish I could have watched the reunion, but Buck is an old-fashioned guy who didn’t want to see my dress before the ceremony.

“That was a wonderful thing you did for him,” Mom says. “I’m proud of you, honey.”

I think that might be the first time I’m hearing that from Mom, and my sister shoots me a knowing glance.

“Thanks, Mom.”

Our little moment is interrupted when Dad peeks his head in. “It’s time. The guys are ready.”

Dad comes in as Mom and the rest of the wedding party exit the room. It’s the final moment before my grand entrance.

“Dad,” I say, “I know this isn’t the life you wanted for me. I didn’t go to law school, but I’m happy.”

“I can see that,” he says, biting back emotions like the stoic litigator that he is. “If you’re happy and protected, that’s all I care about.”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a fat envelope. “For your nest egg. Just in case.”

“I won’t need it. He loves me. Buck takes good care of me, Daddy.”

“You never know.”

I can see I won’t win this one, so I take the envelope and decide to blow his mind. “I’ll use it to outfit the nursery.”

His entire demeanor changes. “The...nursery? Grace, are you...?”

“You heard nothing! Understood, counsel?”

He makes a zipped-lip motion, but I don’t know if I trust it.

Within the minute, Dad walks me down the garden flagstone walkway, lit by soft, glowing lanterns as a string quartet plays an arrangement of “Marry You.” White silk bunting woven with flowering white vines and lights gives the backyard a mystical glow, just as I’d planned. But none of it matters as much as looking back at all the faces of people here to support us.

And there is Buck, waiting for me under the vine-covered arbor.

This is my first time seeing him in uniform, and I nearly faint at how good he looks. His face is a little pinkish, and he’s squinting and biting his lip. I know that look; he’s trying really hard not to cry.

Dad hands me off and whispers, “Congratulations,” to Buck.

I nudge Dad, but he ignores me and goes to take a seat by Mom, all smiles.

“Was that your dad or a clone?” Buck whispers when he takes my hands in his.

I shrug as if to say I have no idea what’s happening with him.

Buck leans in and whispers in my ear. “Thank you. For everything.” I follow his gaze out to the crowd and see him nod at six incredibly distinguished-looking men in USMC dress—two of them eyeballing my sisters.

“It was the least I could do,” I whisper back.

Buck laughs. “Knowing those guys, there was nothing easy about getting them all here.”

“I love you, Buck.”

“I love you, too. Never stop surprising me, baby.”

I jump on that thought to deliver one last shocker of the night. “On that note,” I say, rolling up on my toes to whisper in his ear. “You’re going to be a daddy.”

It is no surprise that Buck kisses the fire out of me before we even have the chance to say our vows.

As far as I’m concerned, that’s all the promise I need.

THE END

Thank you for reading Nailed!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Abby Knox writes feel-good, high-heat romance that readers have described as quirky, sexy, adorable, and hilarious.

Abby's favorite tropes include: Forced proximity, opposites attract, grumpy/sunshine, age gap, boss/employee, fated mates/insta-love, and more. Abby is heavily influenced by Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Gilmore Girls, and LOST. But don't worry, she won't ever make you suffer like Luke & Lorelai.

If any or all of that connects with you, then you came to the right place.

Say hello at authorabbyknox@gmail.com

Find links to all my social media pages, and be sure to sign up for my newsletter at authorabbyknox.com to get free stuff!



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