



SINCERELY,



UP

YOURS

A ROMANTIC COMEDY



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PENELOPE

BLOOM

SINCERELY, UP YOURS

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DARCY

There was a bounce in my step, a smile on my face, and I'd even worn my favorite pair of neon pink panties. Today, the city of Manhattan was my oyster. Actually, oysters were disgusting, so Manhattan was my slice of pineapple and ham pizza with crumbly bacon sprinkled on top. I felt like shooting finger guns and winking at random people I passed on the street. Hell, I would've even moonwalked into my favorite coffee shop on the way to work if I knew how.

I settled for smiling and pulling open the door to the sound of happy, jingling bells.

My phone buzzed and I read the text that came through.

Charleston: Today is your big day, girl! Keep me posted!

For some reason he followed that with eggplant emojis, birthday hats, and firecrackers. Today wasn't my birthday, there was *definitely* no eggplant in my recent past or near future, and I didn't think there'd be fireworks. But I smiled and texted back a long row of thumbs up emojis and stuffed my phone back in my purse.

If my life was a movie, this would be the part where all those sad, depressing scenes from earlier finally paid off. It

was the part where the downtrodden heroine got her shit together and something good finally happened to her. It *had* to be that part, actually. Because if all the crap I'd trudged through to get to this point was for nothing, I was going to kick someone in the balls. Then I was going to scream. And *then* I was going to find a giant jar of peanut butter to drown my sorrows in—extra crunchy, of course.

But I didn't need to worry about any of that, because today was my day.

I took a nice, long breath and smiled to myself as I waited in line. I barely even noticed or cared when a huge man in a suit cut in front of me. I tilted my head back a little to look up at him. The bastard was big—like curse your luck when you realize he's in front of you at the movie theater big.

Normally, I might have cracked a sarcastic comment. *Oh sure, cut ahead. Nope, I'm definitely not in as big a rush as you are.* Not today, though. I wasn't going to let anything sabotage my good vibes.

I studied the back of his head and decided you could definitely tell if a guy was hot from behind. The hair was clean cut and well maintained. Brown. *No*, it was coffee with a touch of creamer. That was also a sign of hotness. If something was pretty enough, you couldn't just call it what it was. Red sunsets were shortcake stained by strawberry, and the ocean was a spread of blueberry jam, *and I was apparently very hungry.* Maybe I just wanted to take a bite out of the man in front of me. Nothing but a little nibble.

I continued roaming his large body with my eyes. His neck was thick and smooth and I could even see just a smidge of his jaw from the back. I could picture him storming into fancy boardrooms, slamming down a stack of papers, and

doing some sort of bossy type stuff. Maybe he'd demand everybody produce their quarterly reports, *now*.

I grinned at myself, then shook my head and tried to stop being a weirdo.

Except all I managed to do was lower my gaze to his long legs as he stepped forward, bringing us a little closer to the counter. He was wearing a French blue suit that was probably tailored, or maybe everything just fit the rude bastard perfectly off the shelf. He was like a mannequin that you could throw the cheapest t-shirt on and make it look like a thing of envy.

My phone buzzed a few more times and I saw more texts from co-workers congratulating me and wishing me luck. I smiled, fired off some replies, and put the phone away again. When I finished, the guy who cut in front of me was ordering, and *wow*.

The idea that you could sniff out hotness from the back of someone's head may be up for debate, but no warm blooded woman could hear that voice and not be certain the man was pure fire in a skillet-and not the kind you could easily snuff out. This was the kind of skillet fire that burned down kitchens, apartment buildings, and a girl's favorite pair of neon pink panties. If his hair was coffee with cream then his voice was like hot caramel drizzling all over my naked body-and yeah, that voice brought me straight to naked bodies and erect nipples. But then I tuned into what he was actually saying.

"...Quickly, and don't fuck it up."

Wow, I thought. Why did all the pretty ones have to be so miserable and rude? Normally, I was the poster-child for non confrontationalism. But today was my freaking day, right? I felt offended on behalf of every man on the planet

who hadn't been blessed with such perfect genetics, because this douche nozzle had everything and still found a reason to be a prick. I bet nobody ever called him on it either because they were scared, or they wanted to get in his pants.

I was reaching up to tap the guy on the shoulder before I knew what I was doing.

"Hey," I said as firmly as I could manage.

The guy turned and my brain shut down. He wasn't just hot. He was what you'd get if you rubbed a genie lamp and asked for your own personal sex god. Narrow, slitted eyes that were a mesmerizing emerald color. Full lips, a blade of a nose, and a perfect jaw dusted with stubble. If he asked me to jump off a bridge at that moment I would've muttered something about how I always keep a condom in my purse because you just never know.

"What?" he asked. He looked down at me while somehow giving me the impression he wasn't seeing me at all.

"You, uh-" I stammered. "She's-" I lifted a limp finger toward the barista, who was watching me with clear concern. She probably thought I was having a stroke.

The man shook his head and stormed off, leaving me standing with my finger raised. I sighed and let my arm flop to my side. "I was going to tell him to be nice to you," I said once I'd remembered how to speak.

The girl shrugged. "It's alright. He's not the first asshole to order a coffee from here. He might be the prettiest though," she added with a twinkling look in his direction.

I followed her gaze to where he was brooding in the corner of the coffee shop with his phone in one hand and his other jammed into his suit pocket. "Pretty like one of those dish

detergent pods. Looks sweet as candy but deadly if you put it in your mouth.”

The girl was giving me a weird look. “Uh, yeah. Sure. Did you want your usual, or?”

“The usual is good,” I said, paying and then taking a seat as far away from him as I could. My perfect day was already starting to feel just slightly spoiled, so I tried to salvage my mood by imagining all the things I should’ve said to him. I should’ve told him they spit in everybody’s coffee who is rude. Or maybe I should’ve just said he needed to apologize to her.

I’d run through about a dozen scenarios by the time he got his coffee. I watched him stride up to the counter, lift the lid, sniff it, and take a cautious sip. Instead of thanking them or saying it was good, he just took those long legs of his straight out of the shop without a word.

I watched him go and felt a surge of annoyance with myself. Something about the guy had been weirdly familiar, almost like I recognized him from somewhere. But how the hell would I forget a face like that?

I was still thinking about it when I thanked the girl who gave me my coffee and headed back out into the street toward the office. Within a minute or so, I’d put the asshole in the suit completely from my mind. Okay, *almost* completely. It was possible I’d shoved just a little memory of him in my “dirty dreams for later” mental closet, but that was beside the point.

I had a delicious pile of sugar with a pinch of coffee in my hand, a dream in my head, and the day I’d been anxiously awaiting ahead of me. My phone buzzed again and I was surprised to see a text from my dad this time.

Dad: Have you heard back from *The Union Coast* yet about your application?

I cringed. *The Union Coast* was the end-all-be-all of prestigious publications. It was news, opinion pieces, politics, and just about every intellectual on the planet read it. A full-time job for *The Union Coast* had always been my dad's dream—a dream he never quite reached.

I hadn't actually sent that application in. But I fibbed and told him I was still waiting, then felt my mood drop several octaves. I'd finally texted him last night to explain how important today was. After months of working for *The Squawker* and working on various articles, my boss told me to come up with my own idea for a weekly article written exclusively by me. It was everything I'd been hoping for and working toward for the last two years. So ever since she told me, I'd been up late busting my ass to come up with the perfect pitch after I got home from work. All I had to do was explain my idea today and she'd virtually promised the opportunity was mine.

I'd told my dad as much in several carefully crafted sentences that were supposed to convey just how much this meant to me. And his response? He was asking whether I was any closer to getting a "real" job.

I felt my face contorting into a scowl and I made myself breathe as I walked. I tried to manufacture something more like a smile, but it felt forced.

By the time I made it to *The Squawker* building my perfect morning mood was thoroughly tainted. I was still brooding about my dad's text, and stupid Mr. Blue Suit was practically ramming down the door of that "dirty dreams for later" closet I'd tried to shove him into. He was in real danger of busting straight into "dirty daydreams for now" territory, and I couldn't have that on a day like today.

I pretended I knew how to meditate, closed my eyes, and focused on clearing my mind. It sort of worked.

Our magazine was located in a historic section of downtown Manhattan and sat on top of a two story apartment complex. A few decades ago, someone had renovated the second floor apartments and knocked down most of the walls to make room for a huge printing press. Now we still used the old press with some modern touches and had our offices in the same space. The whole building oozed with charm from the exposed brick walls to the faint smell of old socks. Okay, maybe the smell wasn't exactly charming, but it was part of the building's history and something about that spoke to me.

I stepped in the old rickety elevator at the back of the lobby and my eyes went wide when I saw what had to be a hallucination. Mr. French Blue was rushing toward the elevator with one hand on his coffee and the other reaching toward me.

"Hold that door."

Something clicked in my brain. I smiled sweetly, twinkled my fingers in a girly wave, and then jammed the "close door" button. I lifted my middle finger at him and watched his perfect forehead crease in confusion and frustration as the doors shut just before he reached me.

Suck on that, asshole. I smiled as the elevator jolted and started groaning its way up to the second floor. I may not have handled the situation in the coffee shop like I wanted, but even the minor annoyance of making him wait for the elevator felt like a touch of justice. Maybe my day wasn't doomed to be so bad after all.

For some reason, I felt like if my life came with a narrator, he would've been cackling with laughter at that very

moment.

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DARCY

The bounce in my step was back. It was my freaking day, and how often could I say that? Normally, I'd start work off at my desk. Today was a Monday, so my inbox would be fresh and full of my weekly assignments. Usually, that meant a feature piece for the magazine that would take the bulk of my time. We also got other smaller assignments like writing advertising copy or helping brainstorm headlines and things of that sort. Honestly, it wasn't as prestigious as something like *The Union Coast* and I wasn't interviewing the important people of the world or tackling big issues. But I'd learned to be okay with that. I had fun writing for *The Squawker*, and I was good at it.

I flipped my hair, smiling and waving with a little exaggerated wink at Farhad, one of my co-workers. He rolled his eyes, then broke into a smile and shot me two thumbs up. Elizabeth rushed from her desk to come behind me and mocked rubbing my shoulders like I was a prize fighter about to enter the ring. I humored her, throwing a few unathletic shadow punches.

I headed straight past my station and went for the corner office. Jasmine Marshall was the one in charge of making sure our stories were clean and fit the overall direction of

the magazine. She reported to some higher ups, but as far as we were concerned, she was the boss on the floor. She was also the one who was going to approve or deny my pitch for a new weekly feature.

I opened the door, smiling wide and ready to crush it. My face fell when I saw she had a plastic bin on top of her desk and had already stuffed most of her things inside.

“Woah,” I said. “You look like you’re moving out!” I laughed lightly, but my stomach was already flipping on itself. I went as far as making an emergency “if I puke” plan and decided where to aim it. Definitely the trash bin beside her desk.

Jasmine was beautiful with deeply tan skin and upturned eyes. She was in her forties, and just about embodied everything I wished I could be when I was older. She was calm, collected, didn’t take shit from anybody, and she was a kick ass writer. Of course, none of those qualities would’ve impressed my dad.

“Yeah, well, this is what it looks like, then,” Jasmine said. She gave me a sympathetic smile as she tried to shove a fake potted plant between some paperweights and a row of manilla folders. It didn’t fit, so she made an annoyed sound and thumped it into the trash bin.

“But you’re amazing at your job. They wouldn’t fire you. I-” I stammered, hands lifting uselessly as I looked around the small office, as if there might be some clue in neon letters on the wall. “I don’t understand.”

“We’ve been acquired, Darcy. *The Squawker* is owned by three investors who bought it from the original founder forty years ago. They’re all getting older, and a wealthy businessman made them a generous offer to sell. It’s that simple. I just found out this morning. My options were to

report to this new asshole who calls himself our boss, or resign.” She slammed a jar of pens into her box with a shrug. “And I’m not about to lick somebody’s boots. So it’s greener pastures for me.”

She hoisted the box of things and then paused when she saw what must’ve been the dejected, wounded puppy look on my face.

“Hey, I know,” she said. “This sucks. It really sucks. You were coming in here to pitch your feature to me and I’m sure I was going to approve it. But that’s careers for you. They don’t ever seem to go the way we expect. If you want a recommendation, just let me know. I’m sure I’ll land on my feet somewhere, and I’d love to have you come join me.”

With one last pinched smile, she headed out and left me alone in her office, head spinning.

It felt like a ghost was using me as a punching bag. Everything inside hurt and I couldn’t seem to catch my breath. *The Squawker was acquired?* How was that even possible? Except she’d explained exactly how it was possible, I just...

I took a deep, shaky breath and shook my head. Did I want to follow after her? I could resign too and maybe land somewhere more prestigious next time around. I knew my dad would approve, but what did *I* want?

I flopped down in the chair beside her desk, running through my thoughts.

What the hell did I want?

The answer came straight away. I admired the hell out of Jasmine, but I didn’t want to do what she was doing. She was giving up and running. I had my fair share of setbacks,

even at my young age. I didn't want to run from this one. I put two years of my life into this magazine, and I believed in the weekly feature I was going to pitch to Jasmine. So, *no*, I wasn't going to quit.

I was going to thrive, dammit. Besides, my new boss was probably going to be a reasonable person. All I needed to do was convince the new boss my weekly feature was worth pursuing, and things wouldn't really change that much, right?

I felt like I was in a daze when I left Jasmine's office. Elizabeth saw the look on my face, then followed my eyes to Jasmine, who was waiting for the elevator with her bin of things. She came to me slowly, features slowly forming a wince.

"Yeah," she said, reaching up to give my shoulder a comforting touch. "I heard."

I nodded. Elizabeth was our best comedic voice. Sometimes she helped inject a little humor into our more stale pieces. Unsurprisingly, she was usually just as hilarious in everyday life as she was on the page. She was barely over five and a half feet tall and wore bright blue glasses to match her hair.

"Yeah," I said with a sigh. "It's okay, though."

"Look on the bright side," Elizabeth said. "I saw the new boss. Even if he's completely clueless, he's fucking *delicious*. I just about offered him up all my eggs for breeding the moment he stepped out of that elevator. He was glaring and *god*, it looked like he was about to hate fuck the first thing that walked in front of him. I was very close to offering myself as tribute, Katniss Everdeen style."

“Wait,” I said, connecting the dots as my stomach sank even further. Any more stomach sinking today and the damn thing was going to fall out of my ass. “Was this new boss you saw wearing a blue suit?”

“Blue, black, yellow. I have no freaking idea. My ovaries were practically pushing my eyes out of the way to get a look at him. It was really just a blur of sexy fog.”

“Where is he now?” I asked, looking around. I noticed then how the whole office was in a rare hush. People had gathered into groups of two and three as they leaned their heads together, whispering at their stations.

“He went into the conference room. My guess is we’re going to get summoned for a meeting. Would I be too much of a hoe if I let him see up my skirt during the meeting? You know, long range warfare? Although I’m wearing some ratty ass panties today. *Damn*. Can I borrow yours?”

I blinked, looking toward the conference room. *This wasn’t happening*. I murmured something to Elizabeth about how she couldn’t have my panties and then wandered to my station in a fog. I passed several groups of co-workers who were all clustered together like football players getting ready for the final drive of the game.

I’d signed on at *The Squawker* after an absolute disaster of a college career. I wrote an expose Junior year at Columbia that should’ve been my ticket to an internship with *The Union Coast*, which had pretty much been my life’s trajectory since middle school. But thanks to a very frustrating, sort of long story, that piece ended up getting me expelled from school. I finished out my degree in journalism at a community college and this job at *The Squawker* was all I could land. It had taken me almost two years, but I’d eventually convinced myself this was all for the best.

After all, how did I know writing for *The Union Coast* would be so great, anyway? Once the goal felt out of reach, it seemed more clear that it had never been *my* goal in the first place. That was just my dad shoving me toward the life he wished he'd captured for himself.

Little by little, I'd been building a new life and a new dream at this job. Jasmine Marshall seemed like a permanent fixture in my life, and I'd wanted to prove my value to her more than anything. I wanted my own weekly feature. I wanted to prove you could write something meaningful, even if it was just for an entertainment magazine.

And now? I looked around the office and felt like I barely recognized it. All the easy smiling faces and casual din of conversation was gone. People were tense. They looked like they were getting ready for war, and they might as well be. A new boss would mean restructuring. The magazine was going to change, and anybody who disagreed with those changes was probably going to be first on the cutting block.

I wondered if the magazine I cared about would still exist when the dust settled.

"Hey," Farhad said, knocking on my desk. "You coming? The meeting starts in five."

"Meeting?" I asked.

Farhad looked at me like I was crazy. He was Persian, handsome as hell, and had what might've been the best head of hair I'd ever seen. He mostly helped with the fashion and trends portion of the magazine, which was easy to believe because he always looked amazing. He creased his dark, thick brows. "The email, Darcy. *Come on,*" he said, leaning in and lowering his voice. "I like you, so do your best to survive this thing, okay? That means not missing the first meeting our new boss calls for."

I nodded shakily, smiling before he rushed off with the rest of my co-workers toward the conference room.

I could do this. I just needed to get my head on straight. Most importantly, I needed to resist the urge to berate this asshole during the meeting for destroying everything I loved.

This was going to be a challenge.

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DARCY

There was an unnatural hush in the conference room. In total, I had seventeen co-workers at *The Squawker*. Eighteen if you included the I.T. guy, who was just one big pile of beard, long hair, and glasses with a strong enough prescription that his eyes were magnified to terrifying proportions—just wide, watery orbs of terror. Everybody—even the I.T. guy, was completely silent. Normally, meetings here were raucous and we could barely get anything done because people kept sidetracking Jasmine or too many background conversations were happening.

Something about the way the man in the front of the room stood there shut us all up. He practically radiated command, like it was oozing off him in icy waves that sealed our throats shut and magnetized our eyes to him.

He'd set his blue suit jacket on the back of a chair at the head of the table and had his sleeves rolled up. I was surprised to see tattoos up both of his arms and even some peeking out from beneath his collar. I hadn't taken him for the inked up type, and my stupid vagina practically began penning me an enthusiastic letter about how we'd maybe misjudged him and shouldn't write him off as a complete irredeemable asshole just yet.

Cool it, Vag, I thought.

I folded my arms, glaring at him to remind myself to stay strong. Stupid handsome sex god. So what if he could probably rock my world behind the nearest locked door? That didn't excuse being such a prick. And *why the hell* did he look so familiar?

"Alright," he said calmly. There was that voice again. It was dirty little angels serenading me directly in the ear hole. It was candy on my tongue and warmth down to my core.

I blew out a breath. I needed to get a hold of myself if I was going to survive this, and fast.

"My name is Dominic Lockwood, and I'm going to be your boss from now on."

Oh, fuck. That's why he looked so familiar. Dominic Lockwood. That was one of the main guys in my expose from Columbia—one of the trust fund kids whose daddies used their money to buy admission for their kids. I'd named several other kids in my piece, but Dominic's father was the most powerful and wealthy. He'd also been the one to make sure I crashed and burned for it.

My mouth felt dry. I suddenly visualized myself letting out a barbaric scream, jumping on the table and baring my fingers like claws before charging him. I'd bite him on the neck, tackle him to the ground, mount him, and—

Jesus. I couldn't even have a proper violent fantasy without things turning dirty.

I realized he'd been talking about some logistical stuff and I'd tuned him out for the past minute or so.

"Um," I said, cutting him off. He turned his gaze to me and I felt that near-stroke feeling threatening to come on again.

I pushed through it. “You said you’re our new boss. Jasmine was our lead editor before, but she had people above her. Are you just replacing Jasmine, or are you going to be doing the job of all those people above her as well?”

“There were two people above Jasmine, and yes,” he said matter-of-factly. “I’ll be doing all the work they were doing with my team.”

“What experience do you have in editing?” I asked.

I felt a collective clenching of buttoles across the room.

Dominic tilted his head just slightly. Something about the motion felt ominous as hell. It was like those glacial blue eyes could suddenly see straight through me, all the way down to my traitorous vagina that was practically scribbling out fan mail at that very moment. “What’s your name?”

“Darcy McClain. Little ‘c’ then a big one.”

“I don’t need to know how to spell it,” he said.

I cleared my throat. “You haven’t answered me about the editing experience. I’m just curious what makes you think you’ll be more qualified than Jasmine to supervise all of us. Not to mention taking on two other jobs on top of that.”

If there were any buttoles that remained unclenched in the room, they surely didn’t survive that moment. Even the I.T. guy was breathing hard—then again, I was pretty sure he always did that.

“See me in my office after the meeting,” Dominic said. He turned his attention from me and opened his mouth to continue, but I just couldn’t help myself.

“Is that going to be Jasmine’s old office? Or are you going to build yourself a new one? It’d have to be pretty big to fit

that head of yours." I clenched my teeth. *Too far, Darcy. Way too far.* "I mean," I stammered. "I just was thinking since you'll be wearing three hats, you'd have a big head to fit them all. Not—"

"That's enough," Dominic snapped. "All of you, wait here. You, come with me. *Now.*"

Elizabeth put her hands together as if in prayer. I knew she definitely wasn't on good terms with any deities, so I couldn't count on that prayer saving my ass from the hole I'd dug with the new boss.

I stood and followed after Dominic, who was waiting with one big, stupidly sexy hand holding the door open for me. His eyes were blazing. I was about to walk past him as if my own asshole hadn't joined the puckered club when he stopped me with a hard hand on my stomach. I looked down at it and considered slapping it away, but the feeling of his big hand practically swallowing my abdomen in its spread had me feeling like pure jelly.

"We're going to talk," he hissed in a low tone full of gravel that was low enough for me and me alone.

"Good," I said, meeting his eyes. They were even more intense up close like this. "Because with your hand on me like that, I was starting to worry you had other ideas."

I clapped a hand to my mouth, eyes widening. *I didn't just say that. Fuck!*

His eyebrows drew together and he made a low sound in his throat, but I noticed his hand jerked away from my stomach like he'd been stung. He gestured and slammed the door behind us, marching me straight to Jasmine's office, which was still scattered with the remnants of what

she'd left behind. He slammed *that* door behind me too, then locked it.

For some reason, the sight of him locking the door activated the horny teenager that lived deep inside me—okay, fine, you didn't have to dig that deep to find her, more like get me seven minutes into *The Notebook*. I quivered and said a silent prayer of mourning for my favorite pair of pink panties that would forever bear the memory of this shameful, confusing ass day.

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DOMINIC

Fucking hell.

She was standing there like a figment dragged straight out of every dirty dream I'd ever had. A small, athletic body that made no secret she spent time taking care of herself. Her light brown hair was short and thick, cut to just above her shoulders and it bounced every time she moved. She had jeans, black pumps, and a forest green button down that could've come from a boyfriend for how loose it fit.

She'd also just spent the last few minutes absolutely fucking ruining my first impression with the entire staff. I was clenching my teeth so hard I was about to pop a filling into fucking orbit if I didn't find a way to relax, and soon.

"What the fuck is that outfit?" I blurted.

She bulged her eyes at me, leaning forward and letting her mouth hang open in pure outrage. They were big eyes. Big blue pools that said she was Miss Sweet As Pie and Innocent As A Lamb with everyone but me. Her lips were naturally a light pink and puffy enough to make me wonder how good she tasted.

"Excuse me?" she asked. She planted a fist on her hips, making her many bracelets jingle. "You did *not* just say

that.”

“I’m your boss. What you wear is part of company policy. You won’t wear jeans to work anymore.”

“So let me get this straight-”

“Sit down,” I said, jerking my arm toward the chair in front of the desk-*my desk*.

“No, thank you. So let me-”

“It wasn’t a request.”

“And it’s not your body. I’ll stand if I want to.”

This. Fucking. Woman. I was fuming. I was mad enough to flip the entire desk and punch my fist through the wall. But for some reason I also felt like smiling. All my life I’d watched people duck and dive to get out of my way, unless they wanted in my pants, that is. Normally women let me say whatever the hell I wanted and laughed at the slightest hint of a joke. The moment I showed anger they cowered. The moment I beckoned they came.

It was mind-numbingly boring.

I leaned a little closer, watching the small thing that was apparently dead-set on making my life-among other things-hard.

“Stand, then,” I said.

“Why did you call me in here, Dominic?”

“I’m your boss. It’s Mr. Lockwood.”

She somehow managed to roll her eyes without actually rolling them. Her pink tongue darted out, moistening her already glistening lips. “Mr. Lockwood,” she said slowly-

almost playfully. “Would you like to explain why you needed me in your office, or did you just invite me in here to flirt?”

“Let me make one thing painfully clear, Ms. McClain. I have absolutely no intentions of pursuing any sort of romantic interest in an employee.”

One of her perfectly shaped eyebrows ticked up. “So there is a romantic interest in that cold heart of yours, but you’re choosing not to pursue it?”

“Don’t twist my goddamn words,” I snapped.

She looked like she was trying not to smile, then she shrugged. “Do you remember the entire staff is still waiting in the meeting room for you while we do this?” She cupped a hand beside her mouth, leaning in with a playful wink. “Whatever this is. Flirtation. Non-pursual of romantic interest despite its clear existence. Posturing?”

“This is me reminding you that I am your fucking boss. This is my magazine now. I don’t do things halfway, Ms. McClain. I have a clear vision for how I’ll bring this ragtag company up to shape and start increasing profits. You can either learn to follow my lead, or you are more than welcome to turn in your resignation. A verbal notice would be more than adequate.” I waited, watching her and expecting her to fold.

She scoffed. “Oh, actually, I’m not planning on resigning. Far from it, *boss*. I’ll be here every day, making sure you can’t fire me even though you *clearly* wish you could. But you’re going to realize I’m the best tool you have here, and you won’t be able to help but use me until we’re both raw.” The smug look on her face slipped and her eyes widened. She stared ahead, then looked at the ground in horror for a few moments.

My stupid cock stood to attention like a fucking dog that just heard the words “walk” “treat” and “park” all in quick succession. Yes. In another circumstance—another world, maybe—I’d happily use little Ms. McClain raw. I’d lay her out on my bed like a goddamn trophy and take my time with her. I’d drag it out until she was breathless and begging me to finally let her climax. But—

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Go back to the conference room.” I honestly expected this little meeting to go completely different. I thought I’d drag her in here, wave a little intimidation around, and watch her bow into line. Instead, it just seemed like I’d sparked some sort of wicked stubborn side that I was going to deeply regret and deeply enjoy at the same time.

“Are we walking together, or would you prefer if I dramatically left first and stormed in there so people will think you really put me in my place? Should I try to see if I can make a few tears show up, maybe?”

“*Out,*” I gritted.

She did that magical thing where she rolled her eyes without rolling them again, turned, and headed for the door. I knew I had to be imagining it, but it almost looked like she stuck her perfect, round, tight ass out a little as she pushed through the doorway. My eyes lingered far too long on it, then I stood and looked down, growling at the stupidly large, angry erection I had.

This was fucking ridiculous. Darcy McClain needed to go, and I couldn’t get rid of her soon enough. The problem was I’d just provided her a few years’ worth of motivation to be the best damn employee possible, because she knew I wanted her gone and she was going to do her damndest not to give me a reason.

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DARCY

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ONE DAY SINCE THE DOMINOCOLYPSE, MR. LAMEWOOD.

I chewed the tip of my pencil, glaring toward his office. Some cute young guy in overalls had been setting up framing around Jasmine's former office all morning. As predicted, Dominic's ego was too large to be contained in any normal sized room. He was planning on making the office bigger, which also meant Stinky Steve's workspace had been crammed in directly across from my desk.

Now, if I made the mistake of leaning to either side of my monitor, I saw Steve smiling back at me from mere inches away. And no amount of leaning or careful planning could save me from the ever-present aroma of old socks and garlic breath he constantly radiated. The smell wasn't the worst part about Steve. He also had a bad habit of being a total creep, and it was well documented. That was why his work station had wound up in a corner. Jasmine was a great editor and a kind boss, but she'd been far too willing to believe his excuses about why people were "exaggerating" about him.

In her mind, if he kept doing his work well, she could just put him in the corner and look the other way.

Steve cleared his throat, leaning his head to the side so I could see him from the nose up. "Looks like we're going to

be working pretty close together, huh? No playing footsie with me.”

I cringed, especially when I felt something touch my ankle. It was all I could do not to scream out loud like a hairy spider was crawling up my leg. I put my palms on my desk, took a deep breath, and then spoke. “Never touch me again, Steve.”

“Sheesh. Is it that time of the month?”

“One of us is going to be bleeding if you keep talking,” I said.

Steve seemed to get the hint and his greasy head slipped back behind the monitor.

I rubbed my eyes, wondering if this was an intentional move from Dominic. He wanted to fire me. That much was clear. It didn’t take a detective to guess I wouldn’t want Steve’s desk practically on top of mine. Was he really petty enough to do this on purpose in hopes that I’d quit? Well, the big bastard was going to be very sad if he thought it’d be so easy to chase me off.

I’d barely been at work, but I already felt like I needed a break. I got up and headed across the office to the coffee machine. It was the unofficial “stretch your leg” spot, even if you weren’t making coffee. Seeing someone lingering at the coffee machine was also a clear signal that they were wanting to gossip.

Elizabeth and Farhad spotted me almost instantly. They got up from their desks and came to crowd in beside me.

“Oh my God,” Elizabeth whispered. “It feels like we’re being oppressed by the sexiest dictator in history. Should I try to think of a good nickname for him? Big Daddy? Mr. Cockwood?”

“Probably not wise to give our boss nicknames, Elizabeth,” I said. I felt tired already. Honestly, I just wanted to do my work. I didn’t want to play games with this guy.

Farhad folded his arms. “He moved me off fashion and trends. What the fuck is that? The guy doesn’t even know us and he thinks he should start reassigning us to different articles?”

“What?” I asked. “You’re easily the fashion and trends guy. No offense,” I added.

Farhad frowned. “Why would that offend me?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Because there’s a connotation to being *that* guy. But you’re not him. No offense.”

“Would you two idiots stop trying not to offend me?” he said. “I just want to write what I know. What the hell do I know about politics?”

“Politics?” I asked. “We don’t have a politics article.”

“We do now,” Elizabeth said.

“What have you been doing all morning?” Farhad asked. “He sent this huge, angry email at like two in the morning. Everybody has been groaning about it.”

“I guess I’ve been too busy having my nasal passages assaulted by Stinky Steve’s aroma. He \tried to touch me with his *foot*. His fucking Stinky Steve foot,” I said, shuddering all over at the memory.

“You’d think with all the complaints against him, he’d be gone by now. That guy is such a creep.”

Elizabeth gave a sympathetic pressing of the lips, then took a discreet glance toward my desk. “I did notice that. You think maybe it’s just temporary while our King builds his

royal chambers to an appropriate size for that huge cock he's probably hiding?"

"Jesus," Farhad said, shaking his head in disgust.

"I was actually thinking it's his ego he's trying to find space for."

"Did you see the guys who showed up this morning to meet with him?" Elizabeth asked. "I think you might've been in the bathroom, but they're in his office now. These two gorgeous guys just strolled right through the office and headed in there. Do you think they're his brothers? And how is it that all the mega hot guys seem to travel in packs? Do they meet up at a convention and figure out a convenient schedule then pair off? Is it a ploy by clothing companies to make us ruin our panties so we have to buy more?"

Farhad gave Elizabeth the dry look to end all dry looks. As usual, she ignored him.

"He doesn't have brothers," I said.

"Wait," Farhad said. "How do you know that?"

I sighed. "I actually had a run-in with this guy a while back, but you can't tell a soul, okay? I don't want him to remember me. He already hates me enough after our little chat in his office yesterday. The last thing he needs is more fuel."

Last night, I met both Farhad and Elizabeth for drinks. I'd told them just about everything that happened after Dominic dragged me out of the meeting. They'd been rapt with attention. Elizabeth suggested I should've tried to suck his cock at least a dozen times. I definitely had too many drinks, though, and I was still feeling the dull thump of my hangover between my eyes.

“Okay,” Elizabeth said. “But if you’re going to swear me to juicy secrecy, I need more details. How do you know this guy? Did you two hook up or something? How big was it? It was big, right?”

“Keep it in your pants, Elizabeth,” I said, laughing. “And no. I wrote something for my school newspaper at Columbia.”

“You went to Columbia? What the hell are you doing here?” Farhad asked.

“I didn’t finish,” I said with a sour note. “The piece wasn’t flattering towards our dear leader or his father. His daddy decided to throw his weight around until the academic review board agreed to make a false claim that I’d plagiarized portions of the piece. No amount of indignation or *facts* mattered. I ended up expelled and the internship I was supposed to get at *The Union Coast* was canceled. So, yeah. Not only did this fucker screw my life up once, it looks like he’s going to haunt me like some stupid, sexy ghost and keep doing it.”

“Damn,” Elizabeth said. “Maybe you should sleep with him. That would teach him.”

“What would that teach him?” Farhad asked. “And since when are you so obnoxiously horny?”

“I’m always like this.” Elizabeth managed to sound indignant.

“Well, at least I have a date to look forward to tonight,” I said.

“*What?*” Elizabeth punched my arm hard enough that I had to rub the spot.

I glared at her. “Punches are not punctuation marks, Elizabeth. I don’t know how many times we need to have

this conversation. But, yeah, I went on a dating app last night and set something up. I felt like I deserved a little distraction after yesterday.”

“You were drunk as hell when we left. Were you really in the right state of mind to set up a date?”

“Of course I was.”

We all went dead silent when Dominic and his two shadows emerged from the office. They were all tall pictures of perfection. Dominic was the one who looked like he’d poison you and smile if you crossed him. The man to his left had wild, dirty blonde hair and stubble to match. He was a little bigger and had more of the *I’ll toss you out a window if you piss me off* look. I decided he was the brute. The other man was black haired with sleek features and had a kind of graceful air to him. My first impression was he was the one who would simply laugh it off if you crossed him.

The three of them were quite a sight, and my insides went rigid when I realized they were done talking to the contractor and headed straight toward us.

“Should we run?” I asked, trying not to move my lips too much.

“What? No. Maybe we should lift our shirts. Offer our breasts to them and they may take us back to their cave.”

“Jesus Christ. You weirdos are on your own.” Farhad snatched his coffee and stormed off, leaving us to fend for ourselves.

I realized I had my phone in my hand to show Elizabeth the guy I’d matched with. When Dominic was close enough, his eyes went straight to it. “Playing on dating apps at work?” he asked. “Did you already give up convincing me you’re too perfect to fire?”

“Who is this?” The blonde brute asked.

Dominic sighed, as if introductions were beneath him. “Tristan, this is Darcy McClain. Little c, big C. And this is... *uh*,” he gestured vaguely towards Elizabeth.

She crouched a little, knees knocking together as she brought her hand by her cheek and waved. A very weird, breathy noise escaped her. “Hi, Mr. Lockwood. I’m your Elizabeth.”

Did she just say “your” Elizabeth?

He paid her no attention, turning to point at the blonde one. “This is Tristan. He’ll be working on our expansion efforts. And this is Marcus,” he pointed to the one with black hair. “Marcus deals with client relations.”

Marcus reached out to shake my hand. He didn’t smile, but it seemed like his eyes were smiling as I took his big hand in mine and shook. I felt immediately charmed by him.

Dominic stepped forward and to the side, subtly cutting off the handshake and putting himself between me and Marcus. *Was he jealous?*

“Nice to meet you, Little C,” Marcus said. That time he *did* smile.

“You too,” I said.

“Is there a reason you haven’t checked your email? You’ve been at work nearly fifteen minutes,” Dominic asked.

“Hardass,” Marcus muttered under his breath.

“Well, I was trying to get used to having someone’s desk practically on top of mine,” I said. “It looks like my boss is renovating his office to massage his ego and he tossed one of my co-workers in my lap.”

Tristan looked like he was biting back a smile. “She’s got spunk. Think you can handle her, Dom?”

“She’s got an addiction to insubordination,” he said. “And I think I could simply fire her.”

I folded my arms. “Believe it or not, this job is really important to me. That guy you put across from me would have a million HR complaints against him if we had human resources here. Everybody in the office knows it. He also smells terrible. I’ve spent my time so far today trying not to pass out, alright?”

Dominic took a look toward Steve, who had already broken into a bag of sour cream and onion chips. I was surprised to see how hard he was glaring. Did he really not know anything about Steve before moving his desk across from mine? I assumed it was some kind of prank.

“Jasmine Marshall didn’t do anything about him?” Dominic asked, still staring hard in Steve’s direction.

Steve, completely oblivious, bit another chip and then wiped the crumbs on his shirt.

“She couldn’t,” Elizabeth said. “He’s the son-in-law of one of the big bosses. *Er*, well, he was. I guess he’s not now that you two guys bought them out.

Dominic’s lip curled. He looked toward me. “Has he made a pass at you before?”

“A few times. Not today, but he—” I trailed off, shrugging as Dominic stormed toward Steve’s desk. “What’s he doing?” I asked.

Marcus tapped a finger to his chin. “Not sure. Probably nothing good for Stinky Steve.”

Elizabeth laughed a little too loud, throwing her head back. She cut herself off abruptly and stuck a hand towards Marcus. "Hi," she said, batting her eyelashes. "My name's Elizabeth. *I'm single.*"

Marcus smiled easily, but looked away when Dominic leaned in to speak to Steve.

Steve looked up at him, listened a few seconds, then seemed to bristle with indignation. I guessed he was starting his self-important speech about his right to smell terrible and talk to "the ladies", but Dominic cut him off. This time, I could hear his voice from across the office.

"It's not up for discussion," Dominic said. "Learn some fucking hygiene habits, leave your co-workers alone, or lose your job. And if I hear so much as a rumor that you bothered Darcy McClain, you're done. Understand me?"

For some reason, chills ran across my skin when I heard that. He clearly wanted me gone, so why was he going out of his way to protect me?

Steve bolted to his feet, though he was nearly a foot shorter than Dominic. He slapped a palm on the desk. "This is smellism! I'll report you. You know my father-in-law was one of the founders of *The Squawker*. I can speak to him about this."

"Great," Dominic said. "Move your things over there." He pointed to a corner of the office where a fake tree and a cheesy motivational poster hung crooked on the wall. The light above that corner was also dim and flickering.

"Nobody's desk goes there," Steve said.

"Perfect. You'll have plenty of space." Dominic turned and headed back towards us with his lips curled in disgust. "You," he said, pointing at me. "My office."

“Your office is covered in fresh paint and chemicals,” Marcus said. “They told us to stay out for a few hours, remember?”

Dominic looked like he wanted to punch Marcus, but he settled for making a low noise in his throat.

“We can talk here, can’t we?” I asked, maybe a little too sweetly.

“The smelly one is moving his desk. If you don’t impress me by the end of today, consider yourself on a short fucking leash.”

“I can think of worse things than being on your leash,” Elizabeth breathed.

There was a silent moment between all of us, then the group seemed to agree to pretend we hadn’t heard that. Elizabeth cleared her throat, then started slowly inching away, as if she might not be noticed if she moved slow enough.

Ignoring her, I looked up to Dominic and tried not to notice the two gorgeous giants at his side. I could handle a little conflict, but it was hard to focus when my freaking lady parts were screaming like tweens who just caught sight of Justin Bieber. “I’ll be happy to go to my desk and get to work, *sir*.”

His eyebrows came together and he took a step closer, devouring the space between us until I could almost feel his body through the thin sheet of air separating us. “Good.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Good.”

“Great,” he said.

“Fantastic.”

Marcus and Tristan exchanged a confused look.

“You’re going to have to move if you want me to get to work,” I noted, looking down to where his feet were practically boxing me in against the counter with the coffee machine.

“Then get to it,” he said, stepping aside. “And don’t make me discipline you again today.”

Elizabeth, who had been moving away from the group so slowly that she’d only managed to create a foot or two of separation by now, paused. I could see the look in her eye before she spoke and wished I could lunge and cover her mouth before she blurted whatever it was.

“Helpful hint,” Elizabeth said. “If you want to discipline Darcy, don’t spank her. I tried that at a sleepover once when we were kids and she moaned a little then got super weird. Pretty sure she liked it.”

I clenched my teeth so hard I thought one of them might pop free. If I was lucky, it’d strike Elizabeth right between the eyes and shut her up for good. I bulged my eyes at her. I was going to kill her.

“Noted,” Dominic said, eyeing me in a way that made me feel naked and exposed.

I decided the best course of action was escape. I turned on my heel and rushed back to my desk, shaking my head. Elizabeth embarrassing me was mortifying, but par for the course. The part I didn’t understand was *me*. Since when was I such a sassy mouthed trouble-maker? When I was around Dominic it was like my mouth just started running on its own and all I could do was sit there and watch the disaster unfold, piece of burning debris by piece. I mean, sure, I could be a pain in the ass in the right circumstances.

But I was usually a champion of the people. A defender of the common good. I was practically Mother Teresa with a much less impressive resume. So why was I so far up my boss' butt?

When I reached my desk, Stinky Steve's entire workstation had already been dragged halfway to its destination. Steve was standing in the corner glaring daggers at Mr. Lockwood.

Unfortunately, his cloud of odor hadn't fully faded, so I gagged a little, tried not to pay attention to it, and opened my email.

Just then, a new message appeared in my box from Dominic Lockwood. The subject line simply read "URGENT".

I turned and saw he had his phone out and was staring right at me.

Cheeks reddening, I opened the message and read.

THE ZIPPER ON THE BACK OF YOUR SKIRT IS DOWN.

A JOLT OF EMBARRASSMENT AND SHOCK RAN THROUGH ME. EVEN though he'd been an ass about my clothes yesterday, I didn't want to give him an excuse to fire me. This morning, I'd put on a knee-length skirt that I didn't think I'd worn since a job interview right after college. It had a zipper in the back, and I could've sworn I'd zipped it, but when I reached back I felt it was definitely about halfway down. I tried to discreetly feel around for how much of my underwear was showing and reddened further when I felt the telltale "V" at the top of my thong against my bare skin in the exposed patch.

I pictured Dominic staring at my red thong and wondered if it was a turn on to him or if he just thought I was a total walking disaster—or maybe both. I zipped up the skirt and looked back toward him, but he was in conversation with his two friends.

I sighed and let my face fall in my hands. Part of me wanted to just give up now. I could quit and everyone would be happy. My dad would probably buy a freaking cake for me if I ever left *The Squawker*. My mom would support me because she'd think it was what I wanted. My friends would understand. Jasmine would understand more than anyone, and she'd probably be able to help me get my footing in a new career.

But damn it, I didn't *want* to quit.

I didn't want to let this man chase me out of *my* job. This was my magazine. I'd spent two years here working for this. Why should he get to show up and chase me off just because he was a stuck up prick?

Worse, this asshole had already played a major part of fucking up my life once. I owed it to him to at *least* be a pain in his ass. So I shook out my frustration, pulled up my task list, and reminded myself of the plan.

I was going to be an absolute badass. I was going to dominate every assignment. I was going to make him stay up late at night trying and failing to think of any possible reason to fire me, because I was going to be his best employee. Maybe it was a small form of payback, but it was what I had.

I stiffened when a big figure passed my desk and left a wave of amazing scent in its wake. It was Dominic, of course. He was walking up to the window of his office and

peering in. The cute guy in overalls had moved inside the office and was doing something loud in there.

I was watching Dominic from the back when he turned and caught me looking. I expected him to glare, but there was something else in his expression. He looked almost... *frustrated*. He peeled his eyes from mine and stormed back through the office toward the elevator with anger radiating from every step.

I amused myself by trying to guess what was up his butt now. Maybe when he picked up his coffee this morning, he didn't manage to make the barista cry? Or maybe he hadn't come across any babies or puppies to kick on his way into work?

Whatever his problem was, I decided it was a good thing. A man like that deserved to be frustrated. If the universe wanted Dominic to be annoyed, I'd happily do everything in my power to help, too.

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DOMINIC

My newly renovated office was more my style. I had the beige drywall clad with posters replaced with wood paneling. A floor-to-ceiling bookshelf now dominated the wall across from my desk and the floors were covered with thick, Turkish rugs. I ran my palms across my new desk, appreciating the smooth, unblemished finish.

Then I sighed as the damn image floated into my mind again. I pictured her from a few days ago sitting at her work station with her skirt zipper down just enough to show me that she was wearing a red thong. I'd already taken more of a look at her tight ass as she'd walked off toward her desk than I should have. The vision of the thong completed my mental image, and all I'd been able to do the rest of the day was fight off the fantasies of teaching her who was really the boss here by having her come to me on her knees. I pictured that tight ass of hers from above with nothing but the thong on as she looked up at me with her big eyes.

I'd cup her chin and lift her eyes to mine. Then I'd tell her to do her fucking job and suck her boss' cock.

But even in my ill-advised fantasy, I couldn't completely picture her as submissive. In my fantasy she talked back all

the way to my cock, even stopping to bust my balls before sliding me deep between her lips.

I pinched my nose and brought a fist down on the desk.

Focus, asshole. This wasn't like me. I wasn't the creep who developed sexual fantasies about his employees. Why should I be? I could've gone out into the city as soon as I got off work and found a woman at a bar if I wanted to get my dick wet.

Sex was fine, but it didn't drive me. It never had. I was driven by the desire to prove myself. I wanted to make this business hum like a well-oiled machine, no matter what my dad thought. If not for the scandal three years back, he would've happily kept me from any real responsibility within his company. He needed me for now, and I knew this was likely my only chance to grab my share of power. Eventually, I'd be out from under his thumb, and *The Squawker* was my only ticket to that future.

But deep down, I knew why Darcy was distracting me, and that was exactly why this was pissing me off so badly.

Darcy was haunting my thoughts because she wasn't anything like those women I'd find at the bars. They were always like sheep—ready to come with me after nothing but a crook of my finger. Darcy was the prey that didn't just run from me, she would lie in wait and try to ambush me. She'd fight back.

Apparently that was all it took. Something about her rebellious glares and the amused curve of her lips had me obsessed. All I wanted was to have my hands on her—to show her how I could wipe that smug look from her face with nothing but a single fingertip. I wanted to feel that control over her. I wanted to hear what it sounded like when she moaned.

And I also knew I could never do anything of the sort. Darcy McClain was my employee, and my fantasies needed to stay in my head. Better yet, I needed to find a way to be rid of them—to be rid of *her*. I wasn't sure what would happen if I had to endure her presence for much longer, so I needed her gone. I needed her to slip up.

My office door opened and Tristan came in. His dirty blonde hair was trimmed short on the sides and pushed back on top in a single swoop. "Good news," he said. "We're going to be on more shelves. I worked out a deal with New York's biggest grocer last night. I've got meetings with a handful of big bloggers today. *The Squawker*—is that name permanent? Should we try to change it to something less ridiculous?"

"Maybe," I said with a sigh.

"Anyway, I've got people working on a web structure. We'll have a subscription service and I'm recruiting bloggers to put the word out when it goes live."

"Good," I said. "Did Marcus work out that thing with the newsstands?"

"What thing?"

"They heard about the acquisition and they're trying to stage a sort of boycott."

Tristan nodded knowingly. "Because of the thing with *IntelliCorp*?"

"Yeah," I said. Three years ago, my father acquired a tech startup just as they were about to launch their big funding push to investors. He had inside knowledge of the product and also knew the men and women they were going to pitch to. So he went to the investors, confirmed the money to be made, and made an aggressive buyout. One of the

founders of *IntelliCorp* didn't want to sell, even for the seemingly ludicrous price, but his two partners folded. My father took over the company and fired everyone as quickly as he could. It all made him a fortune, but the press caught wind when *IntelliCorp's* original founder told his story.

Basically, the Lockwood family was on public notice. We'd gone from relative invisibility with the average person to public enemy number one in many circles. It was partly why my father decided to put me on this project. On the one hand, I hadn't been in any kind of public spotlight before taking this job, which meant I was far less hated. On the other hand, I'd studied journalism and business at Columbia and this sort of project was right in my wheelhouse.

Either way, I knew I had to be more careful than he'd been with *IntelliCorp*. That meant I couldn't just fire employees at a whim. They had to give cause that would stand up under scrutiny. Of course I planned to fire most of the staff here eventually, but I needed to wait for them to slip up so I could bring my own people in.

I was confident it wouldn't be an issue. The only problem was it meant I couldn't fire Darcy unless she gave me a reason. All it would take would be one employee blabbing to bring the scrutiny of the media on me.

Tristan's phone chimed and he looked down at it. "Gotta take this."

"Yeah, go ahead," I said, waving him off. Tristan had set up a temporary office outside the building with Marcus. I was working on plans to buy out the first floor. The old historic building was more apartment complex than business center, and part of me wanted to scrap the whole place entirely to move somewhere more professional. But if I could buy out the tenants on the first floor, I could convert

it into some proper offices for myself and my team. It would also mean Darcy wouldn't be prancing around right outside my window all day.

I shifted in my seat, annoyed. Of course I could just close the blinds on my windows and door. But I didn't have the willpower. I also wanted to watch her to see if she was going to get off task, but the damn woman had lived up to her promise ever since that first morning when I moved Steve away from her workspace. She came into work, went to her computer, and grinded all fucking day.

I had the hairball from I.T. install monitoring software on all of the computers in the office so I could view employee's screens at any time. I let them all know they could be watched and made a habit of flicking through their screens, hoping to find someone egregiously off-task so I could start building a case to fire them. Most of them occasionally got on social media, or in one case, worked on a weird ass blog about how to train your cat to flush the toilet for you-not how to use the toilet on their own, simply how to get them to flush after you'd done your business.

Weird ass employees.

My own day was mostly consumed by the articles being sent to me for edits and approval. When I wasn't watching over the employees or editing, I was continuing to perfect my broad strategy for the magazine. This job was my chance to prove I could build something from nothing. Sure, *The Squawker* had a somewhat respectable following, but only in state. I wanted to make it national. I wanted to widen the scope. I wanted it to give readers everything they could want from intellectual junk food to a side of political informity.

That was the trick, as I saw it. We'd lure them in with the junk food and trick them into getting informed.

I was smiling to myself when my door opened again.

Darcy visibly swallowed, then closed it behind her with a soft click. She had on a white blouse that was *just* transparent enough for me to see the outline of a white bra beneath. I wondered if she knew, or if the lighting at her place was different.

Ever since I'd given her shit about the jeans, it seemed like skirts were her weapon of choice. I almost regretted ever saying anything. The truth was those fucking jeans had been distracting as hell for me. Her ass and legs were absolutely incredible, and I knew I wouldn't be able to focus if she was prancing around like that all day. Was I an asshole for setting the dress code because I couldn't keep my eyes to myself? Of course I was. But I was also a *dumb* asshole, because the skirts were worse.

She had a goddamn arsenal of them from tight blacks to frilly grays and even a baby blue one with flowers that was just short enough to be criminal. I wanted her gone because she made me feel out of control. I was always in control. I always had a tight leash on my emotions and my body. But not around her. She got straight past my defenses and into my head, and I wanted to punish her for it.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Did you have a chance to look at my pitch yet?"

She'd sent me some long ass email with a bunch of attachments late one evening last week. I had enough on my plate, so I'd stuffed it in the "maybe never" folder.

"No," I said. "I have a lot of work to do."

Darcy looked uncharacteristically meek. She actually wringed her hands and still hadn't taken a full step into my office. Her back was against the door like she was ready to

bolt at a moment's notice. In fact, I'd barely interacted with her since the day I had Steve's desk moved. She just came in, sat down, worked her ass off, and never got off task. I'd never once checked her screen and seen anything but her researching for a piece or actually writing it. I had to admit I was already impressed, but I wondered how long she could keep this up.

I hadn't seen this nervous side of her, and some dumb part of me wanted to relieve her of whatever was stressing her. I wanted to promise I'd take a look at the pitch, but I was stronger than that. Maybe I could've simply given in. I could've been the nice boss for a change, but I knew what a slippery slope that was. I had mountains to prove at this magazine my father thought was beyond saving. If he thought there was a chance I could actually turn it around and make it profitable, he wouldn't have dared leave me in charge of things.

No. My father expected me to fail here. He thought I'd come crawling back to him with the seared in knowledge that I couldn't hack it on my own—that I needed my dear old man to hold the wheel. It was a power play, and I intended to turn it on its head.

To do that, I needed to run things here without mercy. I couldn't make the "nice" decision because it felt good. I couldn't overlook underperformers because I didn't want to hurt feelings. I needed to be ruthless, *especially* when it came to Darcy McClain. Because whether I wanted to admit it or not, she was a distraction. The sooner she was gone, the sooner I could get myself back under control.

I watched her sitting there holding my gaze while I said nothing. She was undeniably gorgeous with that upturned nose, full lips, and the cheeks reddened from a weekend probably spent in the sun. Then I imagined how incredible

she'd look in a bikini and had to pinch the bridge of my nose, willing the image to flee from my mind.

This was why I needed Darcy McClain gone. Maybe it wasn't fair. It definitely wasn't her fault—other than the mouth she seemed unable to stop running at the wrong times. But it was the truth. So I kept my mouth shut and continued to wait until she finally broke the silence.

"Before you took over," she said. "I was supposed to pitch this to Jasmine. She was going to give me my own weekly article. Actually, the day she quit was the day I was going to make the pitch. I just thought you could maybe take a look. It might fit with what you're wanting to do with the magazine, or I could take feedback and try to tweak it for the new direction. It'd just mean a lot if you looked at it."

I stared. Every impulse in me was screaming to be an asshole. Dismiss her. Say something so unforgivable that she storms out and can't keep up the act. *Make her crack.*

But I was an asshole, not a monster. I clenched the armrest of my chair. She'd kept her head down all week. She hadn't so much as crossed me or looked my way. Maybe there was a world where we could have some sort of cease fire agreement. Of course, I'd have to learn to stop eye-fucking her every chance I got, but that was my problem. That was the truth, wasn't it? If I really cared about sticking it to my father and proving I could turn this place around, I should at least look at the pitch, shouldn't I?

I sighed from what felt like the depths of my soul. I knew I was making a dangerous choice, but I could feel something deep inside pulling me to do it anyway. "I'll take a look. Is that all?"

Darcy brightened so quickly it was like rain clouds parting to reveal the sun. She smiled and took a few quick steps

toward my desk, bounced on her feet, then rushed over to my chair and actually *hugged* me.

I sat there frozen, trying and failing not to notice how fucking good she smelled or how her short brown hair was tickling my chin as she leaned into the hug.

“Alright, alright,” I stammered, clearing my throat. “Get the fuck out of here.”

“Thank you!” she said, bouncing once more before practically running out of the office.

I smiled, then realized I was smiling and forced myself to frown. When I looked down, I made a sound of disgust. *Jesus Christ*. I needed to have a serious sit down with my cock at some point and explain this was not going to go the way it was hoping. We were not going to fuck Darcy McClain, little c, big C. She was an employee, and I was going to get my shit together and act like an adult, not a hormonal teen who can't keep it in his pants.

She caught me looking at her through the window and smiled, waving.

My stupid cock twitched again in excitement and it was all I could do not to bury my face in my hands.

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DARCY

Day Fourteen since the Dominocolypse, the dawn of Lamewood's takeover.

Little by little, things were changing. It started when Lonnie got fired last week. He'd apparently been a serial violator of the no slacking policy. From the sounds of it, Dominic had caught him working on some weird blog about cat training several times and let him go. Lonnie had been our graphic design guy. His work was never *exactly* my cup of tea, but I still felt an instinctive negative reaction to Dominic making changes.

Lonnie's replacement had showed up the following day. Her name was Pollie. She was in her early twenties, offensively pretty with bouncy blonde curls and ridiculously seductive, slitted blue eyes. My first thought was that she couldn't possibly design anything because her boobs were too big to see the keyboard, but the damn woman didn't even need to *look* when she used the keys. Worse, her first revamps of some of our designs were actually good. *Really good*. And even more frustrating, she was super nice, too.

You get credit for making a good business decision just this once, asshole, I'd thought.

Then he fired Alek, who had been one of my favorites. He wrote a kind of silly crime piece every week that was a fan favorite. It was usually more bullshit than truth, but that wasn't the point. It was a fun piece that I was going to miss, and he'd brought in some slick guy in his forties who was a political science major. Apparently, he'd be working with Farhad on the new politics section.

But the message was clear. The magazine was changing, and we were all on notice.

Still, it was at least something that he'd agreed to read my pitch. That was yesterday, and I was still trying to remember to play as nice as I possibly could so I didn't piss him off before he got a chance.

Farhad swung by my desk as he was heading out for the evening. "Hey, we're grabbing drinks at *The Otter's Rock*. You coming?"

"Who's going?" I asked.

"The usual suspects. But Grace can't make it so I asked Pollie if she wanted to come."

"Ugh, you did?"

"You can bring that date of yours. Did it work out?"

I gave him a sour face. "One drunken dating app decision. *One*," I said, jabbing a finger at him. "Can we let it die in peace like it deserves?" The date had been completely forgettable. Not only was the guy creepy and overconfident, I'd been unable to stop thinking of Dominic the whole time. I told myself it was kind of like what happened when I watched scary movies and couldn't stop freaking myself out. It was a *bad* obsession. That was Dominic. He was my recurring nightmare, even if he

sometimes invaded my dreams and did horrible, dirty things to me.

“Sure, but, uh, I forgot my wallet.” Farhad pulled a face, clearly trying to impersonate my bad date. “Do you happen to-”

I slapped him on the chest, grinning. “Shut up.” I had given Farhad and Elizabeth a full run-down of the disaster of my date. Aside from not clicking with him, my date was also a borderline conman when it came to getting free meals. The conversation had been single syllables from his end and long rants about my career and father from mine. I left feeling emptied out and unheard. He left with a free steak dinner and a few beers. Then I’d made the mistake of telling my friends about it, and now they couldn’t stop giving me shit.



EVER SINCE THE HANGOVER FROM HELL FOLLOWED ME INTO A DAY of working for Dominic, I decided I was going to be a one drink girl for the foreseeable future. I ordered something fruity and girly with a little umbrella and sipped it at the bar while listening to Elizabeth rant about how some survival show she watched was pissing her off.

“Seriously, it’s obnoxious. Like she claims she has a sort of British accent because she ‘grew up’ in the UK. But she was born in the US and didn’t move to the UK until she was way older. Like twenty or something. You don’t just get an accent like that.”

“I’m pretty sure I heard it’s seven years old,” Pollie said. “Like if you live somewhere under the age of seven, you’re more likely to develop a permanent accent. But after seven it’s not really likely.”

“See?” Elizabeth said, jabbing a finger at Pollie. “Science has my back on this. The lady is full of shit. One second it’s bollocks this and rubbish and the next she sounds like she’s straight out of the midwest. I’m going to lose my mind if she’s not off the show soon.”

“You could try watching something with substance instead,” Farhad suggested.

“Ew,” Elizabeth curled her lip at him. “Like what, nature documentaries where monkeys hump each other?”

Farhad shook his head. “Believe it or not, there’s a pretty wide range of content out there between reality TV with accent confused women and monkey humping. Explore it sometime. You may find something you like.”

“Why do we bring him again?” Elizabeth asked me. “And that’s not a rhetorical question, Darcy. You’re being too quiet tonight. Please, make a case for Farhad’s continued existence in our friend group. If you fail, he’ll be immediately exiled.”

I rolled my eyes but pushed my drink back and took a breath, thinking hard. “Okay, well... Farhad doesn’t hit on any of us, but he’s great to have around when creeps try to flirt and we want them to get lost. So he’s basically a portable pretend boyfriend. He also-”

“Really?” he asked. “You’re going to lead with that as my best quality?”

“Hey, you have to know your audience when debating,” I said. “I’m just focusing on the things Elizabeth will appreciate most.”

He sighed. “Fair.”

“He’s also pretty good at telling us if our outfits suck or if they’re cute. Uhh,” I put my finger to my chin, pretending I couldn’t think of anything else. I winced and gave him an apologetic shrug.

Everyone laughed and Farhad shook his head at me, grinning.

“Exiled!” Elizabeth shouted loud enough for the whole bar to hear.

There was a lull in the conversation that turned into dead silence when we saw who was entering the bar. Mr. Lockwood, Marcus, and two beautiful women came in through the door.

“No fucking way,” Elizabeth whispered. “Shit! I didn’t even shave down there tonight. I was planning on getting wasted and busting out the toy collection with a good book instead of dealing with an actual man. Does anyone have a razor and some shaving cream? Hell, I’ll settle for a pair of tweezers.”

“He’s with two women,” I said drily, turning my attention back to my drink. Even without looking, I could feel his presence in the room. There was a heaviness to it. Like a weight or a magnetic force that made me aware of him at all times. Judging from the relative quiet in the bar that had just been noisy moments ago, I sensed I wasn’t the only one feeling it. Every woman in the building was probably visualizing a fantasy future where Dominic fed them grapes and pumped them full of babies—and why the *hell* was I joining them?

I physically shook my head, trying to get my senses back.

“So?” Elizabeth asked. “They could be his sisters, and here I am rocking the wild untamed garden. Maybe I could just

prepare to blow him if things went well. I could play hard to get if he wanted more.”

“What world do you live in?” Farhad asked. “The guy gives off serial killer vibes to me. Look at the way he is with those women. He’s barely paying them any attention.”

“Maybe they are just friends,” I suggested.

“As if,” Elizabeth said. “When you look like him, there’s no such thing as just friends. There’s only people who want to fuck you but haven’t figured out how yet, and people you’ve fucked.”

“Or married women,” Farhad suggested.

Elizabeth snorted. “You think a little ceremonial commitment before gods and men is going to stop any red-blooded woman from jumping on that sea snake if they get the chance? If you do, you’re delusional.”

“Let me write that down so I can read it to your husband-to-be at your wedding.”

I risked a look over my shoulder and saw they’d all scooted into a corner booth. Marcus and Dominic were in the center and a woman was beside each of them. The one with Dominic had shampoo commercial black hair cut into an aggressive swoop that went from above her ears to her perfect little chin. She smiled and slid her eyes toward him, then rested a hand on his arm. Farhad was right. Dominic barely seemed to notice.

He lifted his head and looked straight at me.

“*Oh shit!*” I blurted, turning quickly along with Elizabeth, Pollie, and Farhad. It couldn’t have been more obvious we were talking about and watching them if we’d tried. I felt my cheeks burning hot and put my hand to my forehead,

ducking down like it'd make me harder to notice. "Is he still looking?" I asked.

"Yes," Farhad said.

I was about to suggest we all simply leave the bar when I heard a familiar voice.

"Darcy? No fucking way!"

I looked up to see the shaggy-haired, bearded bad date from the other week. He was with a guy friend and his eyes lit up as he came to sit right beside me. I suddenly wished I'd opted to sit between Farhad and Pollie instead of on the edge.

"Oh, hey," I said, trying to sound friendly enough to not be a bitch but not so friendly that I'd encourage him to stick around.

"What are we drinking?" he asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

His friend took the seat beside him and leaned in, smiling as if he was trying to get Pollie's attention.

"That's up to you," I said. I couldn't even remember the guy's name. It was something strange and monosyllabic, like a caveman noise. Thar? Mar? *Jar*. His name was *Jar*. I remembered now because I'd gone on a drunken rant about it to Elizabeth and Farhad, cracking myself up. I think I'd guessed that maybe his mother's name was Vase and his father's last name was Potter.

Jar tapped his chin, smile widening. He got the bartender's attention. "She's getting me a Jack and Coke! Thanks," he looked at me and gave a smile and a wink.

Apparently drinks were on me?

Something prickled at the back of my neck and I turned. Dominic was glaring at Jar like he wanted to rip his head clean off his shoulders. I focused back on my drink, chewing my lip. I'd seen what looked like jealousy when I shook Marcus' hand the day we'd met. Now a guy at the bar pays me a little attention and Dominic looked like he wanted to go ballistic.

This wasn't my first rodeo, and I knew exactly what that implied. But I definitely didn't understand it. He acted like he wished he could shotgun my ass straight out the window of *The Squawker* any time he set eyes on me. I mean, sure, sometimes I wished I could shotgun *him* straight into my bed. The man may be cold at best and downright abrasive at worst, but there was no denying he was the whole package. Okay, the whole package minus a parcel or two, like a functioning heart and a drop or two of kindness.

But if you were looking for a little eggplant over the weekend, he was actually kind of perfect. A guy like that wouldn't be clingy. He wouldn't go full *Jar* on you and appear randomly to mooch drinks off you when you were trying to unwind from work. He'd get in and then get out—pun intended.

I chewed my straw, then my cheeks went red when I realized I was falling right into my damn vagina's trap. Ever since his first day, my lower half had been planning an insidious misinformation campaign. Random, inexplicable thoughts would pop into my head.

Sleeping with your boss isn't that bad.

Those are big hands. I wonder what it'd feel like with one on each of my ass cheeks.

He's a big man. I bet IT is big.

He is obviously attracted to you. Who says you can't just get it out of your system and move on?

Letting him put his penis in you wouldn't be that big of a deal. I mean, how different is that really from a handshake? It's just two people touching!

But I knew exactly where those thoughts were coming from, and I'd been doing a pretty good job of shutting them down until now.

Jar made me go stiff when he put a hand on my shoulder and leaned close, even though the bar wasn't so loud he needed to. "Hey, I'm sorry things kinda went nowhere on our date. I was going through some shit at the time but I've still been thinking about you. Honestly, I've been thinking about you a lot."

I gave a tight smile and tried to lean away, but he just grinned and leaned in closer.

Farhad, Pollie, and Elizabeth were too engrossed in some conversation about whether it was pointless to put those little plastic swords in sandwiches and burgers or not to notice my situation. I really wished one of them would just jump in and save me from this guy so I didn't have to be the asshole, but I was nearing my tipping point.

And then Jar simply wasn't there. I stared in confusion at the empty stool beside me for a split second before I heard the thump of him hitting the ground.

And there was Dominic standing over Jar looking like an angry God.

Oh, shit.

DOMINIC

Maybe I overreacted.

The guy was squirming on the ground like a worm, confusion plain in his eyes.

My fucking chest still felt like it was on fire. I'd only been able to watch about a minute of him interacting with Darcy before I'd bolted from the booth and came over here. "Get lost," I gritted.

"Who the hell are you?" asked the guy on the ground.

His friend got out of the stool beside him and puffed his chest out at me. Darcy still looked like she didn't know what was going on, and her friends had all turned in their stools to stare with wide eyes.

"What the fuck, man?" the guy's friend asked.

The one I'd pulled from his stool was back on his feet and the two of them looked like they were considering a fight, but I felt Marcus move to my side. Maybe they thought they could take me together, but they clearly saw they had no chance against both of us.

“Hey, it happens,” Marcus said. He walked up to the guy I’d roughed up and patted his shoulders, dusting him off. “Hell, I’ve fallen out of these damn stools before even getting a single drink in me. I think that one is rigged, actually. It wobbles just so they can laugh when people fall out of them. Bullshit, if you ask me.”

The guy gave me one last angry look, then moved his eyes to Darcy. “Come on, baby. Let’s get out of here.”

I stepped forward, inching Marcus out of the way as I took a handful of his shirt. “She’s not interested.”

He looked back at me, eyes searching mine.

“What my friend means,” Marcus said smoothly, easing my hands from him. “Is we work with these people. We’ve all got an insane deadline coming up. We’re just blowing off a little steam before we need to get back to the office.” He checked his watch. “Soon, actually. So,” he shrugged, giving a little wink and a shoulder slap to the guy.

I was ready for them to start swinging, but as usual, Marcus had used his supernatural ability to soothe conflict. The two of them shook their heads and stormed out of the bar.

“Um, thank you,” Darcy said in an uncharacteristically meek voice.

“I’m not going to watch my employees get harassed,” I said. I felt a little silly by this point. I’d caused a scene and everyone in the bar was still keeping an eye on me. This wasn’t me. I didn’t play knight in shining armor. I didn’t make excuses for myself. Maybe I was just hoping for a fight. God knew I had enough pent up frustration on Darcy’s account to take a swing at half the guys in this place.

Christine and Allie came to join us. Both women were Marcus' sisters. He had six in total, which I am fairly sure was why he had to learn to resolve conflicts so effectively. Otherwise, he would've died in the crossfire of a catfight by now. I was closest to Christine and Allie, but I saw the rest of his sisters a few times each year.

"Cleaning up Dom's messes again?" Christine asked. She had wide set eyes and curly black hair. Christine worked for a winery in the New York countryside called *Julianne Rows*. She split her time between being on location and coming to the city to work on pitching their product to various restaurants in hopes of finding regular customers.

"Dom doesn't make messes," Marcus said, grinning as he squeezed my arm. "He just imposes his will on the world and sometimes the people in his way get a little dusted up. But that's why he's lucky to have such a diplomatic best friend."

"Yeah," I said. "Except I wish you hadn't been so diplomatic. I really wanted one of them to start swinging."

"Your boss is just kidding," Marcus said, leaning past me to address the four employees all sitting in a row at the bar. "He's a professional who doesn't start bar fights for fun."

I made a point of getting to know my staff, so I knew all of them well enough by now. Pollie was one I hired recently. She was young, ambitious, and talented. Elizabeth's writing was genuinely funny, and I made a mental note to try to keep her around once I read a few pieces she worked on. She was in her early twenties, lived in a shitty part of the city, and didn't seem to be in a relationship.

Farhad was in his thirties. I'd read his work, too, which was why I moved him to politics. I needed to see if he could adapt. His piece on fashion and trends had been well

written and showed an understanding of the market, but the content was a waste of his abilities. If he could learn to adapt and learn under Kirk—the poly sci major I hired—then he could stick around too.

And of course I knew Darcy. She was the beautiful little thorn in my side. The worst thing about her was that she'd grabbed my attention so fully that first day and then mostly made good on her promise. She had been a model employee. She worked her ass off and was clearly one of the best all-around writers at *The Squawker*. Her pieces all had a voice that was just the right blend of chatty and approachable without leaving professionalism behind. It was a unique blend that she wove well. I couldn't help but admire her eye for stories, too. Whether she was writing about some obscure and ignored charity or a gossip piece, she knew how to find an angle that captivated.

I didn't *want* to admire Darcy. I wanted to fire her. She was too damn attractive. Too damn distracting.

"Well," Darcy said. "Are you proud of yourself, Mr. Lockwood?"

Her friends at the bar all seemed to shrink back. Normal people didn't like making eye contact with me, let alone taunting me. Of course, Darcy wasn't normal. That was half of the problem.

"He had it coming," I said.

Allie stepped forward, extending her hand. "I'm sorry about him. He's your boss, right? I'm Allie Fitzroy, Marcus' sister."

Darcy's eyes shifted between us in a way that made me realize she assumed we were together. Was that a spark of

jealousy? *No*. She acted like I didn't exist ever since our first few confrontations.

Darcy caught my eye. "Can I talk to you for a minute? Alone?"

Everyone else had been starting to mingle, but the tone of her voice caused a hiccup in conversation. I sensed several pairs of eyes on us.

Apparently, I was allergic to common sense because I shook my head. It felt like she was challenging me, and I wanted to remind her she wasn't in charge. "No," I said. "If you have something to say, you can say it here." Call it payback for when she refused to speak with me in private on her first full day. I'd wanted to try to dissolve some of the tension before things got out of hand, but she stubbornly refused to let me get her alone, and now here we were.

The entire group was waiting, eager to hear whatever it was she wanted to say.

Darcy folded her arms. "Alright. I was going to tell you it would be nice if you made up your mind. Either fire me, chase me off, or stop trying to play hero for me. So which is it, do you want me gone, or are you trying to protect me, Mr. Lockwood?"

"I'm not *looking* to fire anyone," I said. It was a bold-faced lie, of course, but I couldn't openly admit I was hoping to prune most of the existing staff in front of Pollie, Farhad, and Elizabeth. "Any capable employees will find they're more than secure in their jobs at *The Squawker*."

"And what would you call me, Mr. Lockwood?"

Obnoxiously attractive. A pain in my ass. Her eyes were big and accusatory with just the faintest flicker of flirtation. I knew we were being watched, but I could only see her. I

only saw that heart-shaped face and that short sexy hair of hers that was growing more my type by the day.

“Insubordinate,” I gritted.

The corner of her mouth twitched upwards. “Is that a fireable offense?”

“We’ll see.”

“You know what I think?” she asked. She draped her arm over the back of the barstool and tilted her head. “I think you are full of shit. You *wish* you could fire me, but you realize you shouldn’t.”

“I think you overestimate yourself.”

Marcus cleared his throat. “Boys and girls,” he said, moving to step between us. “I think this is going nowhere good. Maybe we should all go to our table in the corner and get some appetizers. I think it might be physically impossible to be mad while eating appetizers.”

“Let him finish,” Darcy said, never taking her eyes from me.

The air between us might as well have been charged with electricity. I could feel the hairs on my arms starting to stand and an excited chill running up my spine. What the hell was this effect she had on me? Even while crossing me and testing my last nerve, it was like my body was priming itself for a night of mind-blowing sex.

“You think you can’t be replaced. I think you’re wrong,” I said.

“Yeah?” she asked. “I think I’ve got my finger on the pulse of this magazine in a way you clearly don’t. Hell, I bet I could even make an interview with *you* sell.”

Marcus snorted, then covered his mouth. His sisters made no attempt to hide their amusement.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked. Once again, common sense eluded me. I knew exactly what she meant, but I wanted to see if she had the balls to say it to my face. *Of course she did.*

“I mean you’re a stuck up, arrogant man whose hobbies probably include organizing spreadsheets and kicking puppies. You’re unsympathetic. You’re cold. You are exactly the kind of person nobody wants to read an interview about, but I could make it work, and that’s why you need me.”

“Then prove it,” I said. My voice felt cold.

For once, it seemed like I’d actually managed to surprise Darcy McClain.

Darcy’s eyebrows bunched together. “You want me to actually interview you?”

“You said you can do it. Prove you can. If the article doesn’t land well with readers, I fire you. If it does, I get off your back.”

She studied me, those blue eyes of hers searching my face to see if I was serious. Then something in her expression hardened. “Alright. Fine. But you need to let me interview you as much as I see fit. This doesn’t count if you constantly blow me off.”

“Do we have an agreement?”

She stuck her hand out, gaze locked on me and eyebrows drawn together seriously. “We do.”

And just like that, I gave one farewell wave to logic and reason. There was one woman I knew I needed to avoid

above all else if I wanted to keep my focus on making *The Squawker* into what I believed it could become. There was one woman who had the potential to fuck everything I'd been working towards up. She was the one who could prove I was no better than my father assumed I was.

And my dumb ass just gave her permission to request private meetings with me whenever she wanted.

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DARCY

It was a chilly, but not uncomfortable night in Manhattan. Soft, experimental music played over the speakers. Greenery hung from the trellises outside *d'Orsay Gallery*. I checked my phone to see if he'd responded and saw the asshole had simply given my question a thumbs up. What did that even mean?

Elizabeth nudged me in the side. We were standing beside a table with drinks and finger food. Elizabeth had on a simple but sexy blue dress that matched her hair. It had a plunging neckline and a hem just below her knees. If it wasn't for the combat boots, she would've looked like she belonged with the well-dressed guests. "Anything?" she asked.

"A thumbs up."

She laughed. "Does that mean he's coming?"

"Honestly, I don't even know. Let's just find my sister and worry about Dominic if he shows."

"I don't get why you invited him here, though. I'd just interview him at work or something."

“That’s like taking on a jaguar in the jungle. I need to get him out of his element if I’m going to have any chance of this interview going the way I want.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow and gave me a slow, approving nod. “Look at you, Miss Strategy Pants. That does make sense.”

I batted my eyes and flipped my hair, grinning. “Yeah, I know. Call me highly motivated. I don’t just want this to work because I want Mr. Lockwood off my back. I want to show him he’s not as in control as he thinks. I’m sure he believes these interviews are going to be grunt sessions where I get nothing. But I’m going to teach him otherwise.”

“You hope. Although, I don’t know if you should be so quick to pass on a grunt session with Mr. Lockwood. I’d grunt with him any night of the week.”

I rolled my eyes. “Still? You have had a chance to see this guy in action for two weeks and you still haven’t been put off yet?”

Elizabeth was about to pop a cracker with some spread on it in her mouth and paused, eyeing me. “Really? You think seeing him for an extended period of time is going to make me want to ride his serpent *less*? Are you sure you’re human?”

I sighed. “I meant with the whole toxic personality thing. It doesn’t make him less attractive to you?”

“I wouldn’t say his personality is *toxic*,” she said carefully. We began walking toward the gallery doors together. “He’s just... *troubled*. And serious. Honestly, it just makes me want to get closer so I can help him heal. With the power of my pussy.”

I snorted. "I don't think there is a vagina in this world that could heal that man."

"Don't underestimate my pussy, Darcy. But in all seriousness, I am actually thinking I'd rather bonk one of the other two. That Tristan one is interesting. I think he could probably throw me a solid five to six feet away. And Marcus, he—"

"Wait." I pushed open the doors for Elizabeth, following her inside the gallery. The walls were lined with impressionistic art and people studying the pieces with drinks in hand. "What does him throwing you have to do with anything?"

"Oh. I have this rule. If a guy can throw me three feet, I ignore three red flags. Four feet means four flags, and so on. I think Tristan could throw me super far, so there's really no amount of red flagging to scare me off him."

I stopped in the hall, staring at her. "The scary thing is I'm pretty sure you're serious."

"I am. And don't look at me like that. I never said I'd marry the guy. I just mean I'd let him smash. Do you want to be in the retirement home some day thinking of all the fine men you passed on?"

"To be honest, that wasn't one of my top concerns going into retirement."

She gave my forehead a little flick. I cursed at her and rubbed the spot. "Well start thinking about it, Darcy. When our vaginas hang it up for good, I want us to both be able to look back and say we fucked without mercy and without reservation."

"I'm pretty sure I don't need to be able to say that."

"Your loss." She shrugged.

I spotted my sister, Eloise. She had on paint stained, baggy beige pants and an oversized smock of a t-shirt. Her red hair was a mess and part of her bangs were caked to her temple with a mix of red and blue paint. “Darcy!” she shouted, rushing over to crash into me with a hard hug.

“Hey,” I said, smiling.

“I’m so glad you came.”

“You know I don’t ever miss these things.”

“I know, but that doesn’t mean I can’t be glad. And you brought Elizabeth!” She hugged Elizabeth next, who patted her awkwardly on the back.

My little sister was... *enthusiastic*. It was endearing to me and I loved the heck out of her, but it also made me feel like I needed to keep a constant watch on her. Without regular supervision, she had a tendency to get roped into all sorts of questionable situations. She was nineteen, pretty enough to draw all the wrong attention, and incredibly talented. A few times a week, she brought her guitar to coffee shops and got paid well to sing and play. When she wasn’t doing music, she was making art. I didn’t exactly understand her style when it came to art, but I did my best to support her as much as I could.

“You guys need to meet Basil.”

“Oh, we’ve met,” Elizabeth said. “I like him on my pizza. Sometimes if I’m feely saucy I’ll even sprinkle him on my pasta.”

Eloise scrunched up her freckled nose, shaking her head. “No, silly. *Basil*. He’s my boyfriend. We met at this concert under a bridge a few days ago. He’s *amazing*.”

“You met this guy under a bridge?” I asked slowly. “Kind of like a troll?”

“His name is Basil?” Elizabeth asked. “Is his dad’s name Herb? Son of Berry Bush?”

I tried not to smile as I subtly gave Elizabeth’s ankle a kick. She shot me a guilty, but amused look.

“I haven’t met his parents yet,” Eloise said, either ignoring or brushing off Elizabeth’s jokes. “Come on, I’ll introduce you two.”

We followed Eloise through the hallway. A few people stopped her to compliment her work. She beamed, thanking them before drifting onwards. We ended up in a darkened, circular room with black and white paintings lit by aggressive overhead spotlights. Each piece reminded me of nightmares and bones. The images were skulls and indistinct shapes that all seemed somehow tortured and surreal.

“Wow,” Elizabeth said. “I could use one of these for my bathroom.”

“Your bathroom?” I asked.

“I’ve been kind of backed up lately. I could use something to scare the shit out of me at the appropriate time.”

I shook my head, smiling. Eloise didn’t seem to get the joke or care. She just led us into the room where a man with long, surfer-blond hair and a goatee was standing. He had one arm crossed over his chest and his other raised to his chin where he stroked his facial hair.

“Hey babe,” Eloise said. She went up on her tiptoes to kiss him. He nodded to her, only halfway paying attention. “Guys, this is Basil. My boyfriend.”

He turned toward us with a theatrical slowness, then looked us up and down. "Who are the townsfolk?"

Ugh. If it was possible to choke on pretension, this Basil guy would've been purple in the face already.

"This is my big sister, Darcy," Eloise pointed. "And this is her blue-haired friend, Elizabeth. Why don't you tell them about some of your art?"

Basil gave us all a pained expression like she'd just asked him to explain math to a moldy sack of potatoes. "Well, this piece is my latest. I call it *Home, the Tangled Existential Plane Between Fear and Longing.*"

"Catchy," Elizabeth said lightly.

I could hear her barely holding the laughter in her voice, and it made me feel a fit of giggles coming on. I stifled it though, because I didn't want to hurt my sister's feelings. "Oh," I managed.

The piece in question was a pure black background with specks of white and beige scattered in a vague pattern.

Basil stepped closer, gesturing. "These tortured lines represent my soul, and the black here is to indicate the suffering behind..."

I started to zone out when I sensed something behind us. I turned and saw Dominic striding down the hallway, tall and proud.

Oh, shit. If the mission was not to cause a scene with this Basil guy, Dominic was almost certainly about to fail it spectacularly.

"What the fuck is this?" he asked.

Basil turned a suffering eye on Dominic. "This is my soul on display."

"Your soul is fucking creepy."

That actually earned a smile from Basil. "Why, thank you."

Dominic turned his attention to me, eyes narrowed. "Why did you ask me to meet you here?"

"Honestly? Because I thought you wouldn't come," I said.

He spread his long arms. "It wouldn't be the first time you were wrong."

"Hi," Eloise said. She rushed up and hugged him while his arms were still spread. "I'm Eloise, Darcy's little sister."

Dominic flinched back from the hug like a flea-ridden dog had just started humping his leg. His lips twitched. "Alright," he said finally, brushing off his suit.

"Hi, Boss," Elizabeth said, twinkling her fingers. "Did you bring either of your friends?"

"Are we doing this or not?" he asked me, completely ignoring Elizabeth. I wondered if she was used to that by now.

"You bet your ass we are," I said. "I finally get a chance to unlock the secrets of Dominic Lockwood in a one on one interview. Come on, I picked out the perfect little spot for it. You're going to love it."

He probably was going to hate it, actually, but that was half of the fun.

DOMINIC

I took a seat beneath a wooden trellis lined with hanging vines and Edison bulbs dangling from black wires. Darcy had led us off to a side section of the outdoor area that was secluded from the rest by a well-maintained bush wall and more wooden trellises. The area housed a single wrought iron table and a pair of chairs.

“Did you set this up?” I asked. I gave the area another suspicious once-over. It felt more like the scene of a romantic date than an interview location.

“My sister has art shown at this gallery every few months. I only found this spot a little while ago. I don’t think anybody else knows about it because it’s so off the beaten path.”

I grunted, taking a seat across from her. She looked fantastic. Darcy had on a loose-fitting sleeveless black top tucked into a pair of black, baggy pants. She wore a white cotton cardigan over it all, looking cozy and making an irrational part of me want to pull her in to my arms, keeping her warm against the chill in the air.

Despite the sandals and relatively casual clothes, she looked classy as hell. Maybe it was the short hair and long

neck, or it could've been the golden hoop earrings and matching necklace.

"Thanks for coming," she said.

I nodded, then waited for her to get on with the questions. Instead, she just leaned forward on the table, resting her narrow chin on the tops of her hands. Her eyes seemed to dance with the reflection of lights as she looked up at me, totally comfortable in the silence.

What the hell was she doing?

"Aren't you going to ask questions?"

"Would you answer them if I did?" she countered.

"I hadn't planned on it. Bombing this interview is my easiest path to firing you."

"Honesty. That's new."

"I don't need to hide the truth from you. I want you gone. It's that simple."

"Why?"

I was already talking more than I'd planned, but something about her was making the words slip straight from my brain to my lips. "Because you're dangerous."

That earned a raised eyebrow. "Little old me? Dangerous?" She pulled her chin back, hanging her mouth open in mock offense.

"You are attached to the magazine. You'll fight me on every attempt I make to modernize and expand its reach." *And I want to grab a fistful of that short, silky hair and bend you over this fucking table. I want to see if you can look so untouchable while I'm buried in you to the hilt.*

“And why are you so motivated to change the magazine?”

“Because it can be more than what it is.”

“But why *The Squawker*? Why magazines in general? Most people say it’s a dying art. And if you’re going to try to push some sort of political agenda, why force it on a glorified gossip magazine?”

“I want to reach a new audience. I think there’s a way to bring them news along with their entertainment. People want to be informed, but they don’t want to be bored out of their minds. That’s my vision for *The Squawker*. News and entertainment in a highly digestible format.”

She worked her lips to the side, studying me.

Less than two minutes in, and I’d already probably given her more than enough to write her fucking interview. This was exactly why I needed her gone so badly. I couldn’t afford to keep letting this sort of thing happen with her.

“You sound very driven to prove you can do this. Where does that drive come from?”

Stop answering her questions. I sat back in my chair, glaring at her and saying nothing.

Darcy’s full lips curved into a smile as she gave a sexy little shrug. “Oops. Did somebody realize they were accidentally giving me the interview they didn’t want to?”

She went back to watching me and saying nothing.

“How long do we need to do this?” I asked.

“You’re free to leave at any time. You’re the boss, right? But you did say you’d let me get an interview whenever I wanted. So just keep in mind this won’t be the last.”

I knew I should've simply got up and left without a word, but I couldn't fucking help myself. "Will the next session be this romantic?"

She smiled, biting her lip. "So far I'm one for one on getting information out of you in a romantic setting. So, *yeah*, I think we'll try to stick with the whole romantic first-date vibe."

"Spectacular," I said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Are you going to stay to check out the art?" she asked. Something in her tone told me she was done with the interview. *For now*.

"No. I have work to do."

"Dominic. It's after ten. You're seriously thinking about work?"

"The competition doesn't sleep. Why should I?"

"I'm pretty sure *everybody* sleeps."

Smart ass. I got to my feet and spread my arms at her. "Any more questions, Miss McClain?"

"Not tonight." Darcy flashed a sweet smile, but I knew there was venom behind it. "I'll let you know when I'm ready for you again."

I found myself growling under my breath as I left. How the hell had she managed to get me to talk so much? I needed to make sure that didn't happen again. Next time she scheduled one of these little interviews, she was going to be the one walking away disappointed.

DARCY

Dominic Lockwood was a royal pain in my ass. I'd been working for him for three weeks now. I knew he spent an unhealthy amount of time every day micromanaging his employees. He monitored our screens and was always checking in on our projects. He had endless suggestions and tweaks for our pieces. He was never satisfied with the way things were done and always seemed to want to change this and that.

Worse, his desire for change also meant the people I'd worked with for the last two years were dropping like flies. I admittedly wasn't *super* sad to see Stinky Steve go. He apparently was running some sort of stuffed animal business through eBay and used work hours to keep up with it. I thought the real reason was that Dominic happened to walk by *right* as Steve was trying to get my attention from his desk in the corner.

Then Cathy had been axed. Technically, that one was also probably for the best. Cathy wrote an advice column responding to emails from readers and she'd been going more and more off the rails ever since she discovered the healing power of crystals. And then there was Jack from the research team. Apparently, he'd been caught interviewing

with the competition and badmouthing the new leadership here, so Dominic relieved him of his duties.

Maybe you could argue all the things Dominic did to be a pain in my ass were just him being on top of his job as our boss. But things had been just fine with Jasmine in charge and she'd simply trusted us to get our work done. Maybe I should've appreciated Dominic clearing out freeloaders who weren't putting in as much effort as the rest of us, but I couldn't bring myself to feel grateful towards him for anything—unless he decided to walk off a bridge or jump out a window, that is.

I rolled my neck out and looked at my screen. I'd been grinding on this piece since Monday and the weekend was only hours away. I knew Dominic expected every assignment to be completed by the end of the week, and I *really* didn't want to give him an excuse to get on my ass. I'd barely had to interact with him since Eloise's art gallery at *d'Orsay*. Going to his office and begging for more time might put me back on his radar.

With begging off the table, that meant I was staying late tonight.

Closing time rolled around and my co-workers started gathering their things. Elizabeth stopped by to wish me luck. Farhad gave me a nod and a thumbs up on his way out. Pollie flashed a smile and a wave. Within a few minutes, the office had almost entirely cleared out except for one or two of Dominic's new hires who looked like they were intent on finishing something before they left. That was a sign of how much things had changed. There were now people in my office every day I just thought of as "the new hires". I didn't even remember their names, yet.

I got myself a coffee and sat back down to work. I'd done all the research I needed for my piece on a popular multi-

level-marketing company that was starting to crack at the seams. The piece was a little outside my normal zone of focus, but Dominic was always pushing for that crossover between entertainment and information. I wouldn't have been surprised if he had a motto about it stitched into his underwear. *And I should not be thinking about my boss' underwear.*

I shook my head, physically trying to get rid of the image I'd cooked up of Dominic looming over me in nothing but tight fitting gray briefs. In my mind, he was so rippled with muscle that a beginner rock climber could've scaled his body from one ab to the next.

When I looked around, I realized the last of the new hires had headed home for the night. I was officially alone on the floor. I could see the vague shape of Tristan moving around in Marcus' office and I knew Dominic was still in his office as well, but none of my colleagues were still around.

Marcus and Tristan still popped in the office from time to time, but they worked off-site and sometimes went whole days without showing up at our location. The two of them hardly interacted with staff. They mostly worked directly with each other and sometimes with Dominic, but I got the sense most of their business didn't involve us or him.

I focused back on my task. I hadn't expected to care so much about this story, but my mom got sucked into a multi-level marketing scheme a few years back. She'd been convinced by a friend that it was the new wave of working from home. She thought she could make thousands per week just like the top sellers did. In the end, she ended up with a garage full of poorly made leggings she couldn't sell. It cost her a job and her savings. She never said as much, but I worried it also cost her most of her self-respect. My mom always saw herself as the kind of person who didn't

fall for scams, but she didn't realize the company she joined was nothing more than a pyramid scheme.

So, yeah. I felt like I had a bone to pick with the whole business model, and this new one seemed more predatory than usual. I'd spent most of the week researching and gathering information. I'd even gone farther than I normally do and contacted a few people for interviews. It was exhilarating, to be honest. I felt like I was actually working on something important, and I didn't want to screw it up.

Every time I opened the document to work, I felt my perfectionism kicking in and stopping me from making progress. I knew it needed to get done, but I wanted to do it justice.

I was rubbing my temples when Dominic stopped by my desk. I hadn't even noticed him leave his office.

"Stuck?" he asked simply.

I licked my lips, then looked up. He seemed even more insanely tall when I was sitting. As if he could sense my thoughts, he leaned one butt cheek on my desk, folding his arms and bending his neck to look at my screen.

"A little," I admitted.

"How long are you planning to stay?"

"As long as it takes. It has to be finished by the end of the week. Those are the rules, right?"

He didn't respond right away. Dominic had on a silky gray vest over his black button down today. A scarlet tie was tucked underneath. His dark hair was pushed back and he looked so painfully good it almost hurt to meet his eyes. I never knew I was into vests, but something about the way

that vest hugged his broad chest and made his big arms seem even more impressive as they shot out from the sleeves was just... *Mmm*.

“Do you need more time?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “Because if I tell you I need more time, then you get to say I’m not hacking it and it’ll be part of why you fire me.”

He looked frustrated—or maybe he’d eaten something that didn’t agree with him. Dominic let out a long breath through his nose. “You can have until next Friday. But take any longer than that, and your ass is mine.” He had started to walk away, but he froze, as if replaying his last words. “Poor choice of words,” he added in a near whisper. Then he went back to his office and closed the door.

A brief but very vivid mental image of Dominic taking my ass in both of his hands invaded my thoughts. My core tensed and my body went warm. Goosebumps prickled up and down my thighs and arms.

“Get it together, Darcy,” I said, blinking hard and trying to think about something innocent, like bunnies hopping through fields of flowers.

Had Dominic Lockwood just shown me mercy? What the hell was going on? I pinched my arm to make sure I hadn’t passed out at my desk and dreamed this. It hurt, and I was still right there in the same spot.

Once what he’d just said sank in, I felt a huge wave of relief wash over me. Excitement rolled through immediately after. I had a whole week to make this story what I hoped it could be. A week to get it perfect. I was so happy I could’ve kissed him. *No, wrong thought*. I was so happy I could’ve got up and danced?

With a sigh, I gave my screen another look. It was blurry and I had trouble focusing. I could keep bashing my head against the piece tonight and probably end up deleting everything I wrote tomorrow, or I could go home and get some rest. I had dinner with my parents on Sunday, but other than that, my weekend was wide open. I'd work on this every chance I got and maybe even get it finished before Friday.

I started gathering my things, but my purse caught on my chair as I stood and half my stuff spilled on the floor. I got on my knees, bending over as I scooped everything up and shoved it back in the bottomless black hole that was my purse. I saw things in that mess I hadn't seen in what felt like years. For about the hundredth time, I lied to myself and said I'd clean my purse later.

When I got up from my knees, something made me look over my shoulder. I saw Dominic standing at his window, staring straight at me—straight at where I'd just been pointing my ass in his direction.

Jesus Christ.

Feeling awkward, I waved. He ignored my wave and walked back to his desk while I rushed to the elevator.

I tried my best to mutter angrily about how creepy him staring at me was as I waited for the doors to close. But I knew the truth. Being stared at like that was only creepy when I didn't want to jump the guy's bones. Knowing Dominic was lusting after me just made every nerve in my body light up like a freaking Christmas tree.

I pressed my thighs together, feeling uncomfortably turned on. I *really* wished I could just be annoyed with him. He was my boss, after all. A boss shouldn't be leering at his employee's ass. But then an employee probably shouldn't

be having regular dirty dreams about playing hide the sausage with her boss, either.

In a completely unrelated string of thoughts, I decided maybe I should invite Dominic to dinner Sunday.

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DOMINIC

Her text came through on my watch while I was doing my morning run. Breathing heavy, I read the words and found myself smiling before I could stop it.

Darcy: Dinner with my parents tonight at 6. Be there. My dad's sort of famous steaks and a romantic back patio for dessert.

I tapped the thumbs up button and continued running. I found myself pushing harder lately during my workouts. I'd nearly torn something in my shoulder last week and now I was running through an ache in my knee. I just couldn't seem to push it hard enough to fully clear her from my mind. No matter how much I lifted or how fast I ran, Darcy was right fucking there.

I was gasping for air and clutching my knees when I finished. Sweat dripped from my chin in a steady drumbeat.

I was supposed to meet Marcus and Tristan for basketball in thirty minutes. I'd let the run go much longer than planned, but I also didn't want to pass up basketball. The only time I ever seemed to be able to shut my brain off from work or Darcy seemed to be when I was physically past my

limit. At first, it had worked. But these last few days it wasn't enough anymore.

Images of Darcy bent over picking up her things in the office or the way she'd smiled when I offered to give her another week for her piece would pop into my brain. I grabbed a towel from my gym bag and wiped away some of my sweat as I headed for the courts.

Marcus and Tristan had already started warming up by the time I got there. We snagged a few guys from nearby and played our asses off until I was too tired to keep track of time. With the run and then the game, I finally got to a point of exhaustion where everything went black. I played and didn't even remember if we won or how it went. I only knew I was tired as fuck and it felt good.

For a while, I'd been numb and wasn't questioning everything I thought I knew about myself.

Marcus and Tristan sat with me on the bleachers to cool off after the game. Little touches of Winter were already starting to creep into Spring. With the sun dipping behind a sheet of clouds, I felt like I could've sat there all day enjoying the feeling of the sweat evaporating and cooling my skin.

"That was some shit," Tristan said.

"Yeah, no kidding," Marcus agreed.

"What was?" I asked.

"You," Tristan said. "You played like a fucking God today. I've never seen you so in the zone."

"Yeah, normally you're pretty shit. But I was happy to pass you the ball every chance I got. What was that?"

I shrugged. I really didn't remember more than a few bits and pieces. "I've just had a lot on my mind."

"Like Darcy McClain?" Marcus asked.

I stiffened. So far, neither of them had called me on it, but I knew this was coming. They saw me that night at the bar when I knocked the asshole off his stool for making her uncomfortable. They probably had also noticed the way I avoided her when I was so busy riding everybody else's ass at work.

"What about her?" I asked.

Marcus and Tristan shared a look and then a grin.

"You want to fuck her," Tristan said with a simple shrug. "So what's stopping you?"

"You know what's stopping me."

"You're not your dad," Marcus said.

"You're right. I'm not. And it's because I don't act on every fucking impulse that comes my way. It starts with one choice. That's how you sacrifice your integrity. *One choice*. His was a different circumstance and it wasn't over a woman, but it was that first choice."

Tristan looked skeptical. "What, you mean that thing with the bribes?"

Tristan was incredible at what he did, but the man had the emotional and social awareness of a rock.

"Yes, dumbass," I said.

"So what?" Tristan asked. "He bribed some senator and got out of some kind of shit, right? Everybody with money does stuff like that."

“Dominic doesn’t want to be that way,” Marcus said. His voice was soft enough that I knew he at least understood this was important to me. “And good for him.” He clapped me on the back, grinning. “But I’ve always thought the thing about employers not dating employees was overblown. I mean, so what? If you both want it, then what’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is I’m her boss. There’s a power imbalance there. Who’s to say she wouldn’t be dating me to fish for a promotion? And what happens if we break up? How am I supposed to stay unbiased about her employment status if I’m pissed at her for something that happened in our personal lives.”

Marcus pursed his lips. “Yeah, I guess so. But are you unbiased right now? From where I’m sitting, Darcy is getting special treatment already. If you are attracted to someone enough, it’s not going to matter whether you act on it. You’re still going to treat them differently. So why not have a little fun while you’re fucking things up, right?”

“I fucked a girl I worked with at a taco shop once,” Tristan noted. “It was fine. But she did start expecting me to close every night so we could hook up in the walk-in. Our boss thought we were going above and beyond so he actually promoted us both. So, in my experience, fucking employees and co-workers is a great idea.”

“Insightful,” I said with a sigh. “Fuck. I don’t even know what I’d want from her if there were no complicating factors. This is pointless.”

“I think you’d have to be blind to not see what you want,” Marcus said.

“Pussy,” Tristan agreed, nodding wisely.

I shook my head. "So what? I should just fuck her and see what happens?"

"He's finally getting it," Tristan said.

"All I'm saying is you are giving yourself a terminal case of blue balls," Marcus said. "Keep this up much longer and you'll be carrying those things around in a wheelbarrow, and nobody wants to see that. Actually, that Elizabeth girl with the blue hair might. She seems like a bit of a freak."

"She doesn't seem so bad," Tristan said with a shrug. "I like the hair."

"So I should pick up some random woman from a bar and fuck *her*. Is that your point?"

"It's on the table," Marcus said. "Or it could be on your desk. Maybe invite her to the office and just close your eyes. Pretend it's Darcy you're fucking and get it out of your system."

"I don't want to fuck some random woman," I growled.

"Aw," Tristan said. "He just wants to fuck Darcy. How sweet. I think it might be love."

"I need to go get cleaned up." I stood suddenly, snatching up my gym bag.

"Hot date?" Marcus asked.

I clenched my jaw and decided it would be wisest not to admit I needed to get cleaned up for dinner with Darcy's parents, followed by a "romantic interview for dessert".

"None of your goddamn business," I said, storming off.

DARCY

My leg bounced and I chewed the nail on my index finger. Mom was going on about some show she was into—apparently it was nearing the finale and she wasn't sure if her favorite contestant was going to make it. I sat on the couch I'd spent so much time reading on as a kid, halfway listening while my thoughts bounced around.

My parents had a McMansion in a suburb a little over an hour outside the city. The only time I used the old beater my dad insisted I keep was when I came to see them. There was a little known, secret parking spot I kept it in. I'd briefly worked in a building with an underground garage that had far more parking than needed for the building. So nobody ever checked permits on the cars there, and so far I'd been able to avoid the major hassle of having a car in Manhattan as long as I was willing to take the train all the way to the garage to pick my car up. Still, one of these days, I knew that old car was going to break down on me. Thankfully, it hadn't this trip.

The lawns were manicured, the houses all looked like they were cut from the same mold, and just about every house was close enough together you could've stuck a hand out your window and given the neighbors a high-five. I still

remembered moving here when I was seven. Dad had just sold a big story to *The New Yorker* and he was convinced the money was going to start rolling in.

Of course, that had been the last big story. After that, it was all financial talk and stress and worry. Mom and dad had to take on jobs as realtors to scrape by, but they were always underwater with the mortgage on this place. Still, dad didn't want to admit he'd gone in over his head and risk embarrassing himself in front of the neighbors and his friends, so they just kept struggling.

I knew it was stupid pride on their part, but I still felt bad for my parents. It was one reason I'd always had a secret dream of making it big somewhere so I could buy them out of their mortgage and let them finally relax. I knew all my dad cared about was bragging rights, though. He wanted me to land a prestigious position at an "important" magazine or journal somewhere. Then, he could brag to his circle of friends from when he'd been involved in the world of academia and feel like he'd somehow been redeemed.

"...and he's just gorgeous," Mom was saying. "But I don't think he'll make it. He really hasn't clicked with anyone else, especially not Jenny, and she's definitely gathering allies to get him out of there."

I realized my eyes had probably been glazed over, so I refocused my attention on mom and nodded, smiling. "Sounds intense," I said.

She nodded back with big eyes. "That's an understatement." My mom had me when she was young. She was in her late forties with an out-of-date poof of brown curly hair she meticulously kept styled and large. In her twenties, she'd been a semi professional tennis player, but a chronic shoulder injury ended her career and landed her on the couch. There were no signs around the house

about her former life and I knew better than to ever bring it up. Tennis had been her biggest passion and dream, but it was taken away from her. Now she lived through other people on her shows, I guessed.

Dad was in the kitchen. The sound of something sizzling rose up with the steam. I smelled butter, garlic, and rosemary, which instantly triggered memories of steak and potatoes for dinner as a kid. I hadn't seen the cracks in my family back then, so my memories of those times were still fond and nostalgic. At the time, I'd just felt supported and motivated to please my parents—especially my dad, who was always in my corner trying to guide me along.

He was ten years older than my mom with mostly gray hair and a goatee I'd literally never seen him without. He was thin and tall, but starting to bend a little with age. He spotted me looking from the kitchen and raised his eyes up over his rounded glasses and flashed me a smile and a wink.

I smiled back.

“So who is this guy you invited?” My dad asked from the kitchen. He had to raise his voice over the sound of whatever was sizzling and crackling in the pans.

“My boss,” I said. I felt a little silly. I'd invited Dominic purely to screw with him and see if I could get him off balance again for the interview after dinner. The part I hadn't really thought about was how this would look and sound to my parents.

My mom narrowed her eyes and gave a little tilt of her head. “And what makes you want to bring your boss over for family dinner? Is something going on?”

Years of training from reality TV and drama shows meant my mom was inhumanly fast at sniffing out any sort of hidden social dynamics. There was no use lying to her because she'd see right through it, so I settled for a version of the truth.

"I mean," I said. "He's obviously really attractive. But no, I don't think there's something going on. I just have to interview him for this piece we're going to put in the magazine, and he's kind of stuffy and reserved. I'm hoping if I bring him out of his comfort zone, I can manage to get a little more honest responses out of him for the interviews."

"Oh." My mom pursed her lips and nodded. "Well, I'm excited to meet him."

"That's smart, Buttercup," My dad called from the kitchen. "That's exactly why your talents are wasted at that *Squawker* place. You've got a nose for how to get the story and the chops to tell it in a way that does it justice."

"Thanks, Dad," I said, but the words felt hollow. I wished I could go back to the version of myself that only saw his words as encouragement. I wanted to go back to not knowing he was struggling financially or seeing how desperate he was for the approval of his friends. At some point, I'd realized my dad wasn't superhuman. He was just a normal human being with faults and flaws. Ever since then, his encouragement felt more like the desperate hands of someone drowning and trying to grab onto something solid to stay afloat. It drained me and frustrated me, but I didn't want to let him know that.

The doorbell rang and I bounced to my feet, heart pounding. My parents' two dogs, Tinkerbelle and Jarvis, bolted from my mom's lap to yap at the door. Both of them might weigh a combined ten pounds if they were soaking wet. Tinkerbelle was some kind of god-forsaken cross

between a chihuahua and a yorkie. I was pretty sure Jarvis was actually just a mutated, oversized rat my parents had mistaken for a dog. He was half bald with little patches of wiry, brown hair that shot off his tiny, wrinkled body in various directions.

“I’ll get it,” I said, following the dogs to the door. I opened it and saw Dominic standing there, looking incredible. He had on jeans and a collared t-shirt. It was the most casual I’d ever seen him and also the best look I’d had at his tattoos. They ran from the backs of his hands all the way up his arms to disappear beneath the deep green sleeves of his shirt. He had one or two buttons undone and I could see more ink rising up his chest and stopping just at the line of his collar bone, except for a single key-shaped tattoo on the base of his neck.

“Hi,” I said in an annoyingly breathless voice. *Stop acting so freaking starstruck, Darcy.*

He raised a bottle of expensive looking wine towards me. “Thanks for inviting me.”

I took the wine and gave it a look. “You didn’t need to bring anything.”

“It’s not every day you meet your best employee’s parents, is it?”

I *knew* he was fucking with me, but my stupid cheeks still flushed and my insides went warm. “No, it’s not,” I muttered. For some reason, my usual ability to bite back and give him shit was short circuiting. All I could think about was how damn good he looked and how insane it was that he was in my childhood home about to meet my parents. How the hell did I think this was a good idea?

“Well, hello there,” my mom said. Her voice dropped several octaves. She straightened the collar on her floral print, deep V-neck. It was a shirt she owned about fifty variations of and I hardly ever saw her venture outside that exact fit and style. “Darcy told us you were handsome. She didn’t say you were *gorgeous*.”

Dominic gave her an easy smile, then his eyes slid to meet mine with a dangerous flicker. “I didn’t know Darcy found me handsome,” he said.

“Oh, stop it,” my mom had somehow closed the distance between herself and Dominic in record time. If Dad was asking her for help in the kitchen, it seemed to take her ages to move on her bad knees. Apparently, Dominic had temporarily cured her of that because she practically teleported to his side. “You must get into all sorts of trouble with your employees.”

“Mom!” I warned under my breath.

“What?” she asked, “Like he doesn’t know?”

“Can you take this into the kitchen?” I asked, pointedly handing her the wine bottle.

She gave him one last look, then took the wine into the kitchen. I heard my dad exclaim something in an excited tone when he saw the bottle. He apparently recognized the vintage.

“You think I’m handsome, McClain?” Dominic asked.

I swallowed hard. “I think *you* think you’re handsome,” I countered.

That earned the slightest twitch from the corner of his mouth. “Why am I here?”

“Because you made the mistake of telling me I could get you pinned down for an interview whenever I wanted. I’m punishing you.”

He smirked. “Is that what you’re into? Punishment? I guess Elizabeth did say something about the enjoyment you got when she spanked you.”

A vivid image of Dominic bending me over his knee and spanking my ass flashed in my head. I blinked it away and shook my head. “I don’t think that implication is appropriate, Mr. Lockwood.”

“You invited me to meet your parents. I’m starting to wonder if you’re *hoping* things get inappropriate.”

Jesus Christ. There was a baritone grit to his voice that made it feel like his hands were on me even though they were folded under his impressive chest.

“We should go help set the table,” I said, fast-walking toward the dining room.

Dominic followed me into the small room. My mom had already stacked plates and silverware in the center of the table along with her trusty Thanksgiving placemats she used for any gathering—no matter the time of year.

I grabbed the plates and Dominic followed me around, setting silverware beside each plate. I was surprised to see he set them in the correct order with forks on the left, knives on the right, and even placing the soup spoon on the right beside the forks.

“Somehow I didn’t take you for a table setter,” I said.

He eyed me from beneath a lock of his dark hair that had fallen loose. “People are full of surprises.”

“Did your father make you do this before family dinners or something?”

“Family dinners?” Dominic laughed at that. “I had an au pair who made sure we had takeout. There wasn’t much place setting in the Lockwood house.”

“Oh,” I said. “For some reason I pictured you at big dining tables getting etiquette lessons from your parents every night or something.”

“Hardly,” he said. Carefully, he straightened one of the forks I’d placed until it was perfectly parallel with the one beside it. “The only etiquette lessons my father ever gave were demonstrations on how not to act.”

I smiled a little at that. “Not a huge fan of the old man?”

“He’s a prick.”

Suddenly, I found myself a *little* less pissed at Dominic for everything that happened to me back at Columbia. I’d always assumed he knew his dad got me expelled and that he knew about the piece I wrote. But if he hated his dad, how likely was he to know? Maybe he never had any idea about the piece in the first place.

There was a knock at the door and I jumped in surprise.

I heard my mom’s voice from the kitchen. “That must be Eloise and Thyme.”

“It’s Basil, Dear,” my father said.

“Oh whatever,” My mom scoffed. She shuffled past us on her way to the front door and gave a little wink and a wave. She already had a glass of the wine Dominic had brought in hand and the rim was painted with several lipstick marks.

“You didn’t tell me they were coming,” Dominic said.

“Because I didn’t know.”

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DOMINIC

Darcy's family was... interesting.

Her mom looked like her hobbies included day drinking, tanning beds, and curling her hair into oblivion. Her name was Lanie. Her dad was clearly trying to cultivate a sort of pseudo-intellectual vibe with the facial hair, attention-grabbing clear frame glasses, and the black turtleneck he had on. His name was Ebert.

Then there was the sister and her boyfriend. I'd met both last week at the art gallery. Her sister Eloise had on some kind of romper suit with more paint stains on it. She also had a smear of white across her forehead and blue on the tip of her nose. Basil was suited up in a pretentious all black outfit composed of a sweater, black jeans, and a puffy little hat.

Ebert's cooking was surprisingly good, but I still found myself imagining how it would feel to slide my hand up Darcy's thigh. She was sitting beside me and wearing a white dress that made her look deliciously tanned and golden. The two of us hadn't spoken much since her parents brought out the food. The topic of conversation was Basil and his latest piece of art.

“So,” Basil said, wiping the corners of his mouth and setting down the napkin. “I think this piece will be my magnum opus. I’m thinking about telling Cecil he can go fuck himself this time. I won’t just put it at the *d’Orsay*. I’ll reach out to the art dealers on my own and see how much interest I can generate.”

“That’s great,” Eloise said. She beamed up at him and I couldn’t help feeling a twinge of disgust. She seemed like a sweet kid. I pegged her at late teens or very early twenties. This Basil asshole looked more like he was thirty, and he didn’t seem to deserve any of the kindness Darcy’s little sister showed him. “I’m hoping to get my stuff out of *d’Orsay* sometime, too,” she added. There was so much desire to please in her voice that I wondered if she meant a word of what she said, or if maybe this asshole convinced her the place wasn’t prestigious enough to be proud of.

“Very impressive,” Ebert agreed. From the way he’d been interacting with the pair, I was starting to gather he actually thought this Basil tool wasn’t full of shit. Maybe there was something I didn’t know, or maybe Darcy’s father was just a shitty judge of character.

“I want to hear more about you, Dominic,” Lanie said. She leaned in and batted her eyelashes at me while resting her chin on the tops of her hands. “How did you start working with Darcy?”

“Oh, I can take this one,” Darcy said with a little too much excitement. “Dominic’s father bought out the ownership of our magazine in a hostile takeover.”

“It was hardly hostile,” I said. “The owners of *The Squawker* were looking to move out of business and retire. We reached a mutually beneficial deal.”

“And Dominic here thinks he knows better for the magazine than Jasmine did, so he’s trying to change everything. I’m pretty sure he also wants to fire all of us, but I did a little research and my guess is the backlash his family got last time they took over a company means he has to be more careful than his daddy was. So he’s just watching us all like hawks and hoping we screw up so he can give us the axe.”

She threw a sickly sweet smile my way, then tipped back her glass and downed some wine.

“That’s not exactly accurate,” I said.

“You don’t want to fire Darcy, though, right?” Eloise asked. “She loves that job. We all thought she was going to get depressed or give up when she got kicked out of Columbia, but ever since she got the job at *The Squawker* she has been super happy.”

My eyebrows pinched together. *What?* When I turned to look at Darcy, she had frozen mid-bite with a piece of potato on her fork raised to her mouth. It fell to the plate with a soft *plop*. “You went to Columbia? When?”

“Around the same time as you,” she said slowly.

“You were kicked out? Why?”

“It’s a long boring story. Not important.”

“She wrote this article for the school paper,” Eloise said. “It was kind of like an expose-”

“Eloise-” Darcy said tightly.

“What?” Eloise said, pressing on. “I think it really sucked. More people should know how they treated you. See, a lot of top colleges basically let parents buy acceptance for their kids. Darcy found out a bunch of kids at Columbia were nowhere near acceptance level based on their high

school performance, but their parents all made big donations and got them in. So she wrote this piece about it and one of those rich parents got mad. So he went to the Academic Review team and paid them to claim she plagiarized pieces of the article. It was total bullshit, obviously, but money talks. Who was the main asshole again? Hardwood? Locksmith?"

"Lockwood," Darcy said slowly.

A cold fist gripped my chest.

Fuck. The pieces clicked together one by one in my head. She'd hated me from the start, hadn't she? No fucking wonder. My dad was the reason she got kicked out of Columbia.

"Yeah," Ebert said with a grimace. "But our girl is resilient, right? You would've had that spot at *The Union Coast* in a heartbeat if they didn't call off the internship. As soon as you're done proving your value at this *Squawker* place, you'll be a shoe-in for something more respectable."

A thousand thoughts were going through my head, but seeing the way Darcy flinched at her dad's words lit something inside me. "You're not proud of her?" I asked. "Have you read her pieces in *The Squawker*?"

Ebert pulled a face, shrugging. "I have a relatively full plate when it comes to my reading diet. I don't really have the time or interest to read gossip pieces." He held up his palm. "I don't mean to offend, but you strike me as a businessman. I'm sure you understand you're not exactly publishing respectable literature at that place."

"You really have no idea how talented your daughter is, do you?" I asked.

Everybody slowly lifted their heads to stare at me. Darcy's eyes were as wide as dinner plates.

"You think I don't know my own daughter?" Ebert asked.

"I think you wouldn't dismiss her career if you'd bothered to read her work for the magazine."

"Dominic, it's okay," Darcy said, touching my forearm. "You don't have to."

"No, I don't," I agreed. "But I took over *The Squawker* with full intentions of replacing the entire staff within six months. Only a handful of existing employees have proven too valuable to replace, much to my annoyance, and your daughter is one of them. Come on, Darcy," I said, standing. My chair screeched and Ebert said nothing. He wouldn't even meet my eyes as he stared down at his plate.

I wouldn't have been surprised if Darcy stayed glued to her seat, but she got up and followed me out to my SUV. Nobody tried to stop us as we left.

"Well, that was kind of a disaster," she said.

"Yeah," I agreed. "I was expecting a romantic dessert. Looks like I ruined that."

She seemed to think for a few moments, then tilted her head and bit her lip. "There's an ice cream place I used to go to as a kid. Would getting some ice cream in you loosen you up for the interview, part two?"

"If they have strawberry flavor, possibly."

She laughed, and *fuck*, she looked beautiful when she smiled. It was rare for those smiles of hers to be visible anywhere in my vicinity. "I didn't take you for a strawberry kind of guy."

“Little known fact. I have a sweet tooth.” My eyes lingered on Darcy a little longer than intended, and by the time I looked away, my words had taken on entirely new meaning. “You navigate, I drive?” I suggested.

“Okay.”

I opened the door and Darcy slid into my car. And just like that, I was once again taking things in a direction I knew I damn well shouldn't. But there was no denying I felt good around her—at least when I wasn't thinking about how guilty and ashamed of myself I was for letting her distract me so much.

I sighed once her door was closed and headed around to the driver's side of the car. Maybe there really was a difference between this and what my father did. I mean, sure, he did eventually destroy his relationship with my mom by sleeping with an employee. But that was after he'd already taken his first steps down the road to corruption. That was after all the bribes and the vicious business moves. It was long past when he left his integrity behind.

Maybe letting myself have a little fun with Darcy wouldn't be the same thing. But I wasn't sure I could sell that story to myself. I'd watched dad sabotage himself time and time again while swearing I'd never be like him. I wanted to prove you could make a business great without playing dirty—that it wasn't about “greasing palms” and “tipping the scales with your thumb” as dad liked to say. I desperately wanted to make *The Squawker* into something amazing with nothing but hard work and good ideas. So what happened to that dream if I let myself start going down this path with Darcy?

I really didn't know, and that scared the shit out of me.

DARCY

Music played from the fuzzy speakers of the ice cream shop in a jolting, carnival-like tune. The place was decorated in 80's era teal, purple, and yellow with obligatory lightning bolts on the backs of every booth. The teenage girls working the counter all wore paper hats and striped uniforms that completed the time warp effect the place had.

Dominic asked if they had strawberry, and the girl behind the counter gave a big smile.

"We don't just have strawberry. We have four flavors of it."

I couldn't help grinning while I watched Dominic sample each flavor with a tiny little plastic spoon. He spent so long frowning between the four containers of ice cream behind the glass that I thought he was making a life-or-death decision.

"Strawberry Cookie Monster," he said seriously.

"Bowl or a cone?"

"Cone," he said flatly, as if she was an idiot for even asking.

His ice cream was strawberry with chunks of real strawberry and vanilla wafers mixed in. The whole thing was topped off with whipped cream and graham cracker crumbles. I took a more normal amount of time deciding between two flavors and ultimately landed on “Blueberry Crush”, which was a neon blue ice cream with chunks of brownies drizzled with caramel syrup.

“This place is exactly like I remember,” I said, stealing a taste of my ice cream while we headed to the back patio. A brief moment of strangeness cut through me. I was practically on a cute little date with my terrifying boss. At least, that’s how I’d seen him before tonight. Maybe it was him losing the suit or the way he’d stood up to my dad, but the butterflies in my stomach made me wonder if this had anything to do with the interview for me.

“It’s nice,” he said. He’d seemed distracted ever since we got in the car and a little distant, but I figured that was just him preparing to stonewall me for the interview.

“Mom and dad used to bring me here after music lessons. This was the table we always got.” We’d headed outside and claimed a picnic style bench in the narrow back area of *Swirlie’s*. There was a grassy area above the patio with cornhole boards, a small playset for kids, a giant *Connect Four* set, and some outdoor party games. The whole area was enclosed in a fence that was painted in bright pastel murals featuring trees and happy face masks hanging from rusted nails. Being back here made me think of childhood.

I noticed they were putting a fresh mural on part of the fence and someone had even taken the trouble to replace the old nails holding up the masks. It made me think about how people always say nothing lasts forever. Maybe that was true in some senses, but not all of them. If people cared enough about something, they could make it last.

They could take care of it, just like this place was being looked after.

I didn't know why, but that thought struck me as important.

"Music lessons, huh?" Dominic asked after a little while. He'd been mostly focused on his ice cream and looking all around, taking in the scene. "What instrument?"

I took a bite of my ice cream, smirking. "I'm supposed to be interviewing you. Not the other way around."

"A good interviewer builds rapport with their subject."

"Touche. It was piano. My dad was a college professor back then and was always trying to get his big break writing for journals."

"Ah," Dominic said, nodding as if he'd already pieced it all together from the sparse details. "Let me guess. You got into writing because it was what your dad wanted?" Without waiting for an answer, he nodded again, smiling to himself. "Yeah, it makes sense now. You hate my guts, but you still like pleasing people. That's one reason you're so obnoxiously good at your job, isn't it?"

"I'm not sure if that was a compliment," I said carefully.

"I don't give compliments."

I rolled my eyes and folded my arms. "Why do you try so hard to be such a grump? It's pretty obvious you're forcing it."

"I wasn't done building rapport." His gaze locked with mine and a spark of fire ran through me. *God*, with one look, it was like he could cut straight to my core and make me feel so... *seen*.

“Well, as a matter of fact, you’re not entirely correct. Dad didn’t necessarily care if I became a writer like him. He just wanted Eloise and me to do something meaningful with our lives. He’d say things like chasing a paycheck was for pawns in the system, or you can’t take money with you after you’re gone, but you can leave your reputation behind. Back then, I wanted to play soccer and basketball, but he’d only get us lessons for things like piano or a private art tutor for Eloise.”

“Do you still play? The piano, I mean.”

“No,” I said. I looked down as a sudden wave of sadness washed over me. “It brings back bad memories, I guess. I spent a few years really trying to get good. Eloise was thriving with art and dad was always so proud. Then there was me, never really managing to do anything but reach ‘expected competence.’ That was his phrase for it. Like when you’re as good at something as you probably should be, given the work you’ve put in. He’d talk about it like it was a knock against me, and it drove me crazy. It never felt like I could try hard enough to make him happy. So when I started getting some emails home from teachers saying I was excelling with writing, everything changed. He let me give up the piano lessons and started giving me mock assignments every night and making me hit deadlines.” I flashed a sour smile. “I’ve been training for this since I was in pigtails, basically.”

Dominic scowled. “Fuck your dad.”

My eyebrows bunched together. “Aren’t you supposed to at least pretend to like my dad? It’s not exactly the best way to start a r-” I hesitated. I’d been about to say it wasn’t the best way to start a relationship, like this *was* a date and not an interview. My cheeks burned red.

Dominic smirked. "I've never pretended to like someone and I'm not about to start now. Fuck pretending. It's a waste of time, and time is one thing I never waste."

Everything about him was always so intense. Maybe it should've been off-putting, but it sort of made me feel like I was seeing life in higher resolution when I talked to him. "Was it really so wrong of my dad to push me to write? I can never completely decide. I mean, couldn't you say he just wanted what was best for me?"

"It was your dad wanting what was best for *him*, from the sounds of it. That's why Eloise does art, right? Your dad pushed it on her."

"Sort of, but sort of not. He pushed her to try it, but she loved it once she started. She always had a talent for it. He brags about her all the time to his old college teacher friends. He had to quit teaching and take up real estate when money got tight and the journals stopped showing interest in his submissions. I know he's super ashamed about it because it's not the kind of thing he sees as 'meaningful.'"

"So he tries to get his daughters to do what he couldn't. That's why he looks down on you working for *The Squawker*? Because of his own insecurities?"

I chuckled, but there wasn't much humor in the sound. "I didn't realize it was so obvious. But yeah, I think you've pretty much figured out why my childhood was so fucked up after hearing my dad speak for about fifteen seconds. That's impressive."

He took a bite of his ice cream, nodding thoughtfully. "I meant what I said, Darcy. About wanting to fire you and not being able to. *Yet*," he added with a rare grin. "With the headaches you caused me, you would've been gone if I had

the slightest excuse. But you're good at what you do, and that's not a compliment. It's a grudging acknowledgment of the state of things."

I smiled, chewing my lip. "It sounded a lot like a compliment, and you can't stop me from taking it as one."

"Sounds like I need to bruise that ego of yours now before it gets too big. Like mine."

I remembered calling him out in front of the staff that first day and cupped my hands around my eyes, ducking my head a little. "Maybe I should apologize for saying you needed a bigger office to fit an ego your size."

"Don't apologize," he said seriously. "People have always avoided speaking their mind to me. I mean, there's Marcus and Tristan, but everybody else..." he pursed his lips and shook his head, as if he didn't know why he'd even brought it up.

I was tempted to press him to continue, but I didn't think I needed to hear the rest to know what he meant. A guy who looked like him coming from the family he came from probably had to deal with either flattery or fear. People probably always wanted something from him. I could see how me being a smartass might actually feel like a refreshing change.

I felt my ice cream drip on my hand and realized I'd been too absorbed in the conversation to touch it for several minutes. I took a quick bite, and decided to change the subject. "Well, I did want to say it meant a lot to me. The way you stood up for me back there. I've never really tried to tell my dad how I feel about him dismissing what I do, but it felt good to know he heard it. Maybe he'll realize what a dick he's been after that."

“Yeah, well... don’t start getting emotional.”

I grinned behind my ice cream, then my attention drifted to a group of teen girls who came to sit outside at one of the other tables. They immediately started giggling and whispering to each other when they saw Dominic. I couldn’t say I really blamed them. As a teen, I probably would’ve had a hormonal meltdown if I saw him. Adult me wasn’t faring much better, actually. It was a constant battle with my body around him. Every bone in my body wanted to jump over the table and mount him. My brain was like a chaperone at a pre-K field trip trying to tell the kids not to jump the fence of the gorilla enclosure to get a closer look. It was a constant, mostly losing battle.

It wasn’t completely physical, either. His straight-to-the-point no-nonsense manner made me feel like I’d been plugged straight into some kind of energy source. My body and brain were buzzing with stimulation, and I wanted more of that feeling. And all of those were very dangerous thoughts. Dominic was only here because I’d convinced him to let me do these interviews, and I needed to make sure I didn’t start complicating things. There was also the fact that his family was the main reason my life was upended two years ago. I was starting to wonder if I had read the situation wrong, though, and decided I could subtly start the interview there.

“So, uh,” I said. “The thing my sister brought up. About Columbia. I realized it was you that first day at the office, but I didn’t want to say anything. I thought maybe you remembered and just didn’t want things to be awkward. You really don’t remember me from back then?”

“No,” he said. “I remember my dad trying to tell me there was some damaging article circulating the campus. I had

no idea he got you expelled over it. He's a complete bastard."

His words were a gut punch. In a few short seconds, I could feel my brain start rearrange the pieces that had been in place for two years. "You really didn't know?" I asked.

"I didn't. My dad does what he thinks is best for himself. He always has. If you wrote something that made our family look bad, it made him look bad."

I nodded slowly. It made sense. I'd never really believed Dominic urged his father to take action against me, but I'd lumped him in as the enemy. They were both Lockwoods, and it had been easier to think all of the Lockwoods were the bad guys.

I was having a hard time processing this new reality. On his first day, Dominic had been the enemy. I had two years of pent up anger ready to unleash on him. But what did I make of this? Did I hate him as much if he was just my grumpy boss who was hoping to be able to fire me? Worse, he was now my grumpy boss who had defended me in front of my dad and even told my whole family I was too valuable to fire. He was dangerously close to being downright likable, and I had no idea what to do with that information.

"Well," I said. "You need to be careful. You've been trying very hard to make sure I don't like you, but if you keep this up..." I shrugged and couldn't quite make myself say the rest of my thought out loud.

Dominic's eyes blazed with some unknown emotion. "It's not that I'm trying to make you not like me, Darcy. I am your boss. I've been working my whole life for an opportunity like this, and I've put a great deal of thought into the way I want my work at *The Squawker* to go. I

decided a long time ago that I wasn't going to be the sort of boss who made friends with his employees."

"Right," I said, once again noticing my ice cream was melting on me. This might be the first time in my life I'd taken long enough to eat ice cream that it even had a chance to melt. Or maybe the energy crackling between us was speeding up the process. "Becoming friends would be a bad idea. But staring at my ass all the time—not such a big deal, right?"

Dominic's jaw ticked. For a second, I thought he was about to grab me by the hair and kiss me, but he took a slow, deep breath and seemed to brace himself for something. "Fine. Let's get it out in the open. I'm attracted to you. Obviously I'm fucking attracted to you, Darcy. And if you didn't work for me, yeah, I'd pursue my attraction. But you *do* work for me."

"I'm attracted to you, too," I said. I had no freaking clue where this boldness was coming from. Maybe it was that extra packet of sugar I put in my coffee this morning because I was feeling spicy. *Damn you, artificial sugar.* "And I've also put a lot of work into this magazine and don't want to screw it up."

"Then we agree we shouldn't do anything about our... *feelings,*" he said. It wasn't exactly a statement. Was I just imagining the question mark dangling there?

"What should we do?" I asked.

"I could think of plenty," Dominic said.

My core clenched and my whole body went into high alert. I felt it then—like the offer was something physical I could reach out and grab. With the right word or gesture, we could be speeding back to whatever fancy apartment

Dominic lived in. Within an hour, I could be pinned beneath his weight and gasping his name.

I had to actually close my eyes for a few moments, forcing myself not to take the bait. I sensed he didn't fully want me to, either. After a few tense heartbeats of silence, I opened my eyes and pointed to his ice cream. "Can I try that? It looks good."

Dominic jumped a little like he'd been stirred from a daze. "Yeah. Sure." He scooped some up on his spoon and extended it towards my mouth. I raised an eyebrow. I hadn't expected him to *feed* it to me, but I leaned forward and parted my lips. My eyes met his as he carefully turned the spoon over and dragged the contents across my tongue.

Holy. Shit.

Our eyes were locked the whole time and I felt like I'd just violated the innocence of the group of teen girls who I now noticed were staring at us with wide eyes and slack jaws.

I cleared my throat and ran my tongue across my lips, shifting a little uncomfortably as my freaking vagina started pounding down the door to my brain and asking if she could take it for a little joyride. *No, Vagina. You are not getting anywhere near my brain when Dominic is involved, because we both know exactly where that joyride would take us.*

"That's good," I finally managed. The truth was I had no idea what the ice cream tasted like. I'd been transported to full blown bliss-town because my boss was spoon feeding me while making erotic eye contact.

If a little bite of ice cream from him was this arousing, I frankly wasn't even sure I would survive a sexual encounter.

“You still have some,” he said, pointing.

I rubbed at my lip a few times and Dominic shook his head. He finally leaned over the table and rubbed his thumb down the side of my mouth. I thought he was about to suck the ice cream from his finger and I would’ve officially melted into a puddle of horny desire right then and there, but he snatched up a napkin and rubbed his finger clean.

I felt like I could finally breathe again. “So we’re both attracted to each other but we’re not going to do anything about it?” I asked. “Just making sure I’m clear on the plan, here.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Why would it be?”

“The look on your face says it might be a problem.”

“It’s not.”

“Good.”

“Great,” I agreed. When I couldn’t think of what to say next, I blurted the first thing that came to my mind. “Did you look at my pitch yet?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“I don’t think it fits the new vision I have for the magazine.”

I felt gutted. That pitch was my creative baby. It was going to be a weekly piece on under-utilized scholarship programs for students. I still owed my brief stint at Columbia to a lesser known scholarship I’d won. My future hadn’t exactly played out the way I expected, but I knew that scholarship was the reason I’d even had a shot at something big. I wanted to find similar opportunities and

give exposure to them every week. It'd be a resource for parents to inform their kids and it might even bring more attention to the scholarships themselves and help increase their funding.

"What's wrong with it?" I asked.

"It's too local. I want *The Squawker* to be national and eventually international."

"Local? There are students all over the country who could benefit if you let me write that piece. And international students are a thing, too."

"I'm not here to argue about it, Darcy. I'm your boss and I made a decision."

"Yeah, a shitty one." Just like that, I was seething with rage.

"That's enough." Dominic stood and threw his napkin down.

I felt a huge lump in my throat as I watched him go. For a few flickering moments, it felt like something was starting to form between us. I had no idea what I would've called it—a bond, chemistry, or even just mutual respect—but with a snap of his fingers, Dominic had ended it.

One of the teens made me jump with surprise when she suddenly plopped down across from me. She had heavy-handed eye makeup like little wings and wore about a gallon of lip gloss. "Oh. My. God. Who was that guy? Is he your boyfriend? Or is he like, your dad or something? Because if he's your dad—"

"We're the same age," I snapped.

"So he's like thirty?"

“I’m twenty-five!” I half-shrieked. I didn’t know why I was suddenly so riled up.

The girl pulled her head back, lips pursed. “Like, okay. Twenty-five, thirty, what’s the difference? So if you two aren’t together, could you get me his number?”

I decided it wouldn’t be very mature of me to dump the watery remains of my icecream over her head. I settled for a tight, very non-genuine smile, and rushed outside.

Then my dumb ass remembered Dominic had given me a ride. He was leaning on his car, waiting for me with crossed arms.

“Temporary truce?” he asked once he saw me coming out.

“No,” I said. “The war is still on.”

He chuckled, then pulled the door open for me. Just as I was about to get in, he slammed it closed and gave me an obnoxious little wink. “Game on, then.” He walked to his side of the car with his hands in his pockets and an amused expression on his face.

Asshole.

DARCY

I had cooled off after my little ice cream date. A warm shower, a little self care, and a few days to let things settle was all it took. At work, we were both pretending nothing had happened. *Sort of*, at least. There was a brief but heated email exchange the day after the ice cream incident. It started when he sent me the following:

MISS McCLAIN,

I hope you will remain professional in the office despite the conversation we had last night. I know I don't need to remind you that we're still restructuring and any insubordination or acting out could be grounds for dismissal, despite our "arrangement".

Sincerely,

Dominic

NATURALLY, I'D READ THE LETTER AND PRACTICALLY HAD STEAM coming out of my ears. Instead of doing the wise thing and

cooling off before responding, I fired off what I thought at the time was a real gem.

MR. LOCKWOOD,

Rest assured, one of us is and has remained a professional.

Sincerely,

Up Yours

IT WAS THE SORT OF EMAIL I KIND OF WISHED I COULD RETRACT AS soon as I sent it, but that wasn't how emails worked. So I had braced myself for his fire-laden response, but it never came. Dominic just kept on going about his business like nothing was wrong, which almost made it worse. It felt like things had cooled and heated up at the same time, and I wasn't sure how that made any sense.

I also knew I still needed to finish the interview with him, and I didn't quite have enough yet-not enough to stake my job on, anyway.

I had a feeling he was going to really shut down on me if I made him agree to meet with me again after the way the ice cream interview ended. But that was okay, because I had the perfect plan to catch him off guard.

I smiled at the genius of my plan as I strapped on a brand new pair of sneakers. I was in a park outside the office. It was some ungodly early hour of the morning and I was disgusted to see that dozens of people appeared to be awake and happy about it. The sun wasn't even awake yet, but my dumb ass was. *Correction.* My scheming, clever, ass was awake. Why, you ask? Because Dominic Lockwood

went for a brisk jog around the park every morning at this hour. I knew as much because I'd bribed Marcus with chocolates and he blabbed.

So I was going to start running at this hour, too. Dominic would admire how similarly fit I was to him. Out of mutual respect, he'd start chatting with me while we ran together around the park every morning. Besides, he probably would be too tired to be guarded while he was exercising. All I'd need to do was keep up with him, and within a few runs, I'd have all the material I could ever want for my interview.

It was pure genius.

The only snag was that I hadn't officially gone for a run in... well, since the last time a P.E. coach threatened to fail me if I didn't. The other times I'd gone over roughly four miles per hour on foot involved spiders and one case of chasing after a guy I thought was a member of a boy band I liked at the time—don't worry, I was way younger. That was at least two or three years ago.

I spotted Dominic starting his jog down the sidewalk by the lake. He was coming my way.

Oh, shit. Game time.

I did a quick approximation of a warm up while I waited. I figured he'd reach me in about a minute or two. I'd only had time to lift my hands over my head and do a little swirl of my hips when I realized the bastard was coming *fast*. He wasn't jogging. He was running like his life depended on it with long legged strides that ate up the distance between us.

He came blazing down the sidewalk toward me and I tried to sprint after him. Dominic passed me, then did a double

take over his shoulder and stopped. He pulled an earbud loose and narrowed his eyes at me. "Darcy? You jog?"

I bulged my eyes, brain in full panic mode. This wasn't how I saw this going. For some reason I'd pictured casually falling into pace beside him and saying something smooth like, "come here often?" But at least he wasn't asking me about the email. Maybe if I pretended it never happened, he would too.

Instead, I was standing there already sweating for no clear reason and my legs were starting to cramp in protest of the mere *thought* of going for a run. "I've jogged before," I said.

"What is this?" he gestured his hands, looking around as if expecting some prank crew to come running out. "Did you follow me here?"

Shit. Shit. Shit. "What? No. Get over yourself, Mr. Lockwood. This is a pretty park and I wanted to start getting a little exercise before work. Is that a crime?"

He stared just long enough to let me know he didn't fully buy my explanation. "Were you trying to catch up to me just then?"

I waved him off, scrunching up my face and laughing. "Uh, no? I was just starting my run until you stopped and interrupted me."

Some emotion glinted in his eyes that I couldn't read. He tilted his head slightly and put his earbud back in. "Enjoy your run, then."

I grimaced and started slogging along once he sped off. What a complete disaster. Now if I left, it'd look obvious that I was following him. If I stayed, it meant I actually had

to jog. Why didn't I factor this in when I made my plans? I hated jogging. Actually, I hated all exercise.

I dragged myself around the path for nearly half an hour. I was sweating my ass off, clutching my sides from cramps, and developing knee problems by the end of it. I also had to watch Dominic go flying by me every few minutes as he lapped me. It was utterly embarrassing.

When I couldn't go any more, I slumped into a bench and tried to catch my breath. My body was upset with me. *Very upset*. Everything hurt and I considered calling a cab instead of walking the few blocks back to my apartment.

Dominic came to a stop when he saw me sitting. "You're already finished?" He was sweating, but not as much as me.

I threw my hands up. "I might need to research other forms of exercise."

He sat down on the bench, close enough that his thigh was touching mine. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Did Marcus tell you I jog here?"

I sighed. There was no use pretending. My little farce was painfully obvious. "Yes," I said. "I thought maybe you'd be more talkative when you were tired."

"You really want to get this interview right, don't you?" he asked. "I expected you to ask to meet in the office a few times and call it a done job."

"We made a deal. My job depends on making the interview sell magazines."

Dominic looked like he wanted to say something, but he drew his eyebrows together and looked away suddenly.

“Well, if you want to interview me while I jog, you’ve got some conditioning to do.”

With that, he stood and resumed his run.

I wished I could’ve caught up to him just to kick him in that perfectly toned ass of his. But I couldn’t, so I settled for glaring instead.

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DOMINIC

I drummed my fingers on my desk and tried not to let my eyes slide to the window. But the damn things slid, and there she was. She'd curled her short hair into loose waves today. It was Wednesday, and neither of us had spoken all day.

I still found myself grinning when I thought of her ridiculous little stunt at the park. She was wearing brand new shoes and workout clothes that looked just as new. This weekend, we'd had dinner at her parents and ice cream afterwards. Now she was trying to stalk me outside work hours just for the sake of her interview.

I had to admit I was impressed. She thought outside the box and was willing to go the extra mile for projects, and I admired that in her. I'd be damned if I admitted as much to her face, but there it was.

I was also a nosy, privacy ignoring prick, so I knew she'd been busting her ass on the piece from last week with no breaks. It was good, too.

I thought again about where our conversation had gone wrong at the ice cream shop. Why the hell did she care so much if I didn't go for her pitch? Did she think I owed it to

her to accept her pitch just because her last boss would have? That was how a change in management worked. Things were different. Goals didn't stay the same. I shouldn't have had to explain that to her. Sure, maybe some small part of me was stubbornly against the idea because it would also mean entrenching her at *The Squawker* even more. If I ran a weekly pitch from her, I'd need even more to justify firing her. And I sure as hell knew I needed to make that happen. Keeping Darcy around spelled trouble for me, and I couldn't afford trouble if I wanted this operation to run smoothly.

Still, my dumb ass had also been second-guessing the way I'd worded my rejection all week. I was certain Darcy saw me as some kind of heartless troll, but the truth was I felt a pang of guilt about the way our conversation went. Watching her dad be such an asshole felt all too familiar, and then I'd gone and been just as much of an asshole right after playing the good guy.

Marcus interrupted me mid-sowl. He swung into the office with one hand on the doorknob and a smile on his face. His good mood only temporarily faltered when he saw my face. "Uh, hey. Didn't mean to interrupt. My sisters are having a get together this weekend though. They told me to invite you and all the staff. I saved you for last."

"Why would they tell you to invite the whole staff?"

His brows dropped. "Because they are nice? Ally is having them all over at her place and they are all excited for me with the new job and all. They want to meet everyone. I know-it's a strange and unfamiliar impulse, but let me try to explain it in a way you'll understand." He raised both hands, gesturing as he talked slowly like I might lose him if he went too fast. "Some people don't want to bash every new person they meet over the head with a club. *Some*

people enjoy talking to other people. They even enjoy meeting new people.”

I sighed. “Why does everybody make me out to be some kind of barbarian lately?”

“Oh, no idea,” Marcus said. “But you know what they say. If everybody thinks you’re a barbarian, maybe you’re a barbarian.”

“Nobody says that.”

“They should. It really makes a lot of sense. So are you coming or not?”

“Yes, I’ll come. It wouldn’t look good if my whole staff showed up and I didn’t. Is Tristan coming?”

“Why? Do you want to make sure you two don’t wear the same dress? I think he was going with leopard print and black pumps, if that helps.”

“Get out of my office.”

Marcus gave a quick salute and then left.

I templed my fingers, glaring harder at Darcy than I had before. So far, I’d proven relatively capable of controlling myself at work around her. Sure, my eyes wandered, but I did a pretty damn good job of keeping my door between the two of us. Outside of work, my success rate was abysmal.

I rubbed a hand across my face and tried to focus myself back on work. I had a pile of submissions from the staff I still needed to go through again. Every week, about half of the pieces submitted to me ended up in the trash pile. I had a new standard for what passed in *The Squawker*, and once my employees were regularly living up to that standard, I’d be able to move forward with Marcus and Tristan on further expansion efforts.

But at the moment, most of the pressure to raise the bar was on me. It meant I wasn't sleeping great and I was practically living in the office. I would've killed for a fucking nap right at that moment, but I knew rest wasn't in the cards—at least not until the weekend, assuming I was lucky.

I jolted upright when someone knocked at my door.

"Come in."

Darcy let herself in. The subtle scent of her shampoo washed over me as she came and sat across from my desk, eyes intent on me.

"Yes?" I asked.

There was a mischievous glint in her eyes I didn't like one bit. "I wanted to ask if you were coming to Marcus' thing.."

"Why?"

"Because if you'll be there, I don't need to invite you out for drinks tonight to get more for our interview."

"You've been busting your ass on that piece for our next issue. Do you really expect me to believe you're still working on the interview in your spare time?"

"Healthy people take breaks from work." She let her gaze linger on mine a little too long after that. "I'm just gathering information on you right now. *Slowly,*" she added.

I considered calling off the little game right then and there. I could just tell her she was obviously talented enough that I would be an idiot to fire her. I *should* tell her. But I found myself nodding slowly. If I said those words, our awkward but entertaining clashes would almost surely come to an end. "Yes, I'll be there."

“Great. So I’ll see you tonight? Why don’t I give you a ride?”

“What? Absolutely not. That’s a terrible idea.” Part of my reaction was driven by the sudden and vivid image of Darcy sitting on top of me, hands on my chest and eyes closed as she rode me straight into fucking oblivion.

Her voice snapped me back to reality. “You said I could have you whenever I needed for interviews, didn’t you? Well, I request to have you in my car on the way to the party, so that’s settled.”

I felt the temptation to smile. *Here we go again.* All I had to do was shut this down. Call off the interviews. I could call off the silly little game we were playing, but I knew I wasn’t about to do that. Not yet, at least. “If you insist on driving together, I’ll drive.”

“No. If we get in a fight again, I can leave you at the party if I drive.” She smiled sweetly. “I’d rather not be the one stuck calling for a cab or a favor.”

“If you’re so worried we’ll get in a fight, then we should just make our own way to the party.”

“Mr. Lockwood, are you afraid of being alone with me?”

My jaw tensed and I met her eyes. “No. If you really want to be so stubborn, fine. You can drive me to the party.”

“Great. The interview starts in my car. I think there’s a chance you might loosen up on the road. I’ve got to take every advantage I can get since somebody likes to be so tight-lipped.” She got up, raised her eyebrows, and shrugged. “I’m assuming you’ll be here till seven, right?”

“Correct,” I grated.

“Great. I’ll text you when I get here. Put your number in my phone.” She set her phone on my desk and pushed it toward me with her index finger. Her nail had once been teal but the paint was mostly chipped off and the nail was bit down to the quick. Her phone screen wasn’t in much better shape. It was cracked from what looked like multiple accidents.

I should’ve been appalled by the whole package from the fingernails to the screen. They were dead giveaways that she was a nervous wreck and clumsy. Instead, it just reminded me how temptingly real she was. She didn’t hide behind plastic and filters. Darcy was just Darcy, and there was an unapologetic kind of charm to that.

“You didn’t enter the code,” I said.

“Oh, there’s no code. Just swipe on the screen somewhere.”

I lifted my eyes. “Aren’t you worried the wrong person will get their hands on your phone?”

“Why? Do you think I have nudes on there or something?”

My throat went suddenly dry at the thought of nude images of Darcy just a few taps away. She seemed to know exactly what she was doing, because her eyes flitted to my fingertip and then to my face. She bit her lip, eyebrows wiggling. “Feel free to check, *boss*.”

I summoned all the willpower I had and tapped my way to her contacts list. I added myself as “Mr. Lockwood” and handed the phone back to her.

“You know, I really thought you were going to look at my photos.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I am,” she said. “There’s nothing inappropriate in there except the first image. It’s me giving the middle finger to the camera. I was going to say you can’t discipline me for giving you the finger since you shouldn’t have been snooping in the first place. But you *kinda* ruined that.”

“Are you done?” I asked.

She sighed. “Yeah. I still have work to do if I’m going to finish this piece by Friday. So you’ll be ready for me by seven, right?” She paused just long enough to look me over. “Are you wearing that?”

I looked down. “Is there something wrong with what I have on?”

“Oh, no, it’s great. I just wanted to make sure you keep it on. Love the vest.”

And with that, she left my office.

I looked down at my vest and frowned. Was she fucking with me?

Yes, I thought. Darcy McClain was absolutely fucking with me on more levels than I comprehended yet.

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DARCY

This was easily my favorite time of year. The trees around Manhattan were beginning to shift from green to oranges and reds and yellows. The warm, muggy evenings were being replaced by chilly breezes that meant I could bust out my favorite coats and scarves. The coming of cold weather felt like the official transition from the monotony of summer into the magic of the holidays, and let me tell you, I didn't mess around when it came to holidays.

For me, the best holidays came when the cold weather did. I loved the lights, the corny movie marathons, the cozy clothes, and the seasonal treats. The family part? *Yeah*, I guess that was all fine, too, but I looked most forward to that smell in the air. Everything seemed crisp and clean-like a fresh start every holiday season, and *God*, I could use a fresh start.

I checked the time and decided I had time to meet up with one of my best friends, Charleston. As kids, we'd been inseparable, but our paths diverged a little after college. I was grinding away at *The Squawker* and he was becoming Mr. Entrepreneur. It meant we didn't get to see each other nearly as much anymore, and I had a boatload of drama to unload on him since we'd had our last real conversation.

He'd texted yesterday and let me know he was grabbing an early dinner at a place near my work. I was invited, but there was no pressure if I couldn't make it.

So I rushed out of the office around three without even glancing in Dominic's direction. I knew we had a "date" at seven, so I'd be seeing more than enough of him later tonight.

I had to fast-walk a little to the subway to make it on time, but I wound up making my way inside *Bistro 101* just a little after four. A blonde, tall hostess greeted me.

"Do you have a reservation?"

"I'm meeting a friend, actually. Handsome, young, dirty blonde hair?"

She nodded knowingly. "This way."

I followed her through the restaurant. Even at the odd hour, it was already bustling with activity. We entered a private room in the back and I saw Charleston sitting with an appetizer of some kind of flatbread and dip in front of him. He had a drink in one hand and his phone in the other.

The hostess smiled and left.

"Hey, I gotta go," Charleston said, hanging up the call quickly and rushing to his feet to hug me. "Holy shit, you came!"

"Of course I did," I laughed.

We spent a few minutes catching up on small talk while I ordered a drink and something to eat. I'd been mostly keeping him posted on the developments at work, minus all the stressful stuff. I knew Charleston had enough on his plate without me adding to it, so I pretty much just told him Jasmine left and we had a new boss. I'd also sort of glossed

over the part where I didn't get my pitch. I definitely didn't go into any detail about Dominic, because Charleston was infamous for matchmaking.

"So how is this new boss? You've barely told me anything about him." Charleston asked. He looked like a movie star, as always. He had on a pristine white suit with dark blue lapels and a fancy sort of scarf all bunched around his neck that was light gray and shimmery. His fingernails were perfectly manicured and his skin looked so glowing and healthy that he might have tapped his shower into some kind of fountain of youth. Technically, Charleston was bisexual, but watching his dating career up close since we were kids told me it was more like he was gay and prone to moments of horny exploration with women. Still, we'd never crossed the line of friendship, and I was glad for it. Having him as a friend was too important to me. Besides, there were some people I just never saw like *that*, and Charleston was one of them.

"The new boss," I said slowly. "Well, he might actually be as handsome as you are, for starters."

"Bullshit," Charleston laughed, then popped a piece of flatbread in his mouth. "And if it's not, I need to see pictures."

"Believe it or not, I haven't snapped any pictures of my boss."

"Duh. What's his name? I'll look him up."

"Dominic Lockwood."

Charleston had his phone in both hands but he let it fall when he heard the name. "Wait. *Dominic Lockwood*. That asshole from Columbia who got you expelled? *That* is your new boss?"

“It turns out he really had nothing to do with me getting expelled. It was all his dad. But yeah, it’s that one.”

“Shit. He *is* hot. So do we hate him or want to get in his pants? I need to know what to root for here.”

“Both?” I laughed and let my face fall into my hands, shaking my head. “It’s complicated.”

“Complicated is the best. So have you guys hooked up yet?”

“No. Definitely not.”

“Well, what is he like? Is this purely a physical thing, or do you like him?”

“He’s cold and distant. He’s super serious and all business, especially at work.”

“*But,*” Charleston prompted.

“But,” I sighed. I should’ve known Charleston would squeeze more out of me. “I just have this gut feeling about him. Like that’s not all there is. I mean, he stood up for me to my dad. He can be really understanding. And I get the impression he has some shit in his personal life, but I don’t think he really lets anybody in to help him with it.”

“Ah, okay.” Charleston twirled the ice in his drink and sipped. “So this is a rescue operation. He’s the cute puppy at the shelter that growls and bites, and you think you can fix him.”

“It’s not that.”

Charleston raised his eyebrows at me, waiting.

“Okay, it’s kind of that. But it’s not *all* that. It’s kind of cool how much he cares about the magazine, I guess. At first I thought it was all about the money, but he’s got something to prove. It’s really important to him, and he has this vision.

I mean, it's a flawed vision, if you ask me, but I respect the drive I guess."

"What about him? What does he think of you?"

I chuckled. "Well, I'm pretty sure he likes my ass."

"You have a fantastic ass," Charleston agreed.

"Thank you. And unless he's full of shit, he thinks my writing is good. He has been firing anyone who gives him the slightest excuse, and I've given him plenty. But he thinks I'm too useful to let go."

"So he has good taste. Hm. I don't know, Darcy. I think this sounds like at least a sampler situation. You take the dick for a ride, see how things go, and don't make any hard commitments."

"He's my boss."

"That sounds like his problem. If you ask me, the boss is the one who has to be careful about hooking up with employees. He's the one at risk of abusing his power and all that jazz. You just need to let him know you want to take him for a test ride and leave it up to him."

I blushed at the thought of being so shamelessly bold. "I don't even know if that's what I want."

"Oh, come on. It's a dick, not a mortgage. Have him wrap it up and it's no more consequential than shaking hands."

I snorted. "I'm pretty sure sex is a little more consequential than that."

"Fine. *I'll* fuck him. Get me his number and I'll do this one favor for you. I'll let you know if he's worth the hassle."

"Easy there, Charleston. I may not know what I want to do, but that doesn't mean I am ready to share him."

He grinned knowingly. “See? You do know, you just aren’t ready to admit it to yourself yet. That’s called denial.”

“I’m not in denial. I’m in *not knowal*.”

“Well I suggest figuring it out, because from the sounds of it, this guy won’t be off the market forever. Do you want to be old and gray wishing you’d at least given it a shot?”

“Now you sound like Elizabeth.”

“Then Elizabeth must be smart as hell. I still need to meet all your new friends, by the way.”

“Come to my work thing tonight, then. It’s technically for employees, but I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if you came, too.”

“Can’t. I’ve got meetings with my contractors after this. We’re doing a huge reno on this luxury apartment complex. Well, it’s sure as hell not luxury right now, but it will be when I’m done with it.”

“Soon, then.” I glanced at my phone and saw the time. “Oh, shit. I need to go if I don’t want to be late.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just remember to use protection, okay?”

I rolled my eyes and left him, but found myself wishing Charleston could come along tonight. It felt like I could use the emotional support, because I wasn’t myself around Dominic. I never could quite predict what was going to come out of my mouth with him, and that was dangerous, to say the least.

I really did want to finish that interview, though. He’d barely given me anything about himself, but the pieces I did have captured my attention. The man who seemingly had it all, except something was missing. But what? What caused the hole he seemed to be working so hard to fill? Was it a

woman? Was it the troubled relationship with his father? Or maybe it was something else entirely.

Maybe I'd finally get answers tonight.

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DOMINIC

As promised, Darcy texted me just before seven telling me to get my ass downstairs and into her car. I was expecting some kind of sensible city car-like one of those little European numbers that barely used any gas.

Instead, I was greeted by a wood-paneled station wagon that was visibly shaking and puffing out globs of dark smoke. "What the fuck?" I asked.

Darcy leaned across the passenger seat and manually cranked the window down. "You going to get in, or are you allergic to poor?"

I shook my head and pulled on the handle, but the door didn't budge.

"Here," Darcy said. She lifted a leg with impressive flexibility and gave the inside of the door a kick. It gave a metallic groan, but swung open, nearly taking out my shins.

"Is this thing safe?"

"Are you kidding? They used to make cars like tanks. Other than the risk of lead paint or something, I think we're going to be safe."

“Why do you even have a car? Hardly anyone in the city does.” I asked.

“Because it’s nice when I drive out to see my parents. It was my grandma’s, then it was my mom’s, and then it was mine when she got herself a new car. So it’s free except when stuff breaks. Plus, I’ve got a sneaky hookup on a free parking spot that’s always available.”

I decided it was better not to ask. I’d spent the past few hours distracting myself from work with plans on how I was going to *not* fuck things up tonight. I’d let myself be far too familiar with Darcy already. Every time we got together outside work, things got out of control almost immediately. *Not tonight.*

“So this is a party for Marcus, right?” Darcy asked once she pulled out into traffic. The car smelled like old leather and diesel. Every part of the upholstery was cracked and the yellowing foam beneath was showing through.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Is it his birthday or something?”

“I think his sisters are just celebrating his new job. But the family has an ungodly amount of money and throwing parties is sort of a weekly event for them.”

“Really? Where is the money from?”

“They are Fitzroys. Marcus’ great great great grandfather or something was one of the original settlers to move out to Texas. He bought up tens of thousands of acres of land when it was dirt cheap and they’ve been selling it off piece by piece ever since. All the kids get a huge trust fund allowance and they can work in the family business if they want.”

“So Marcus is a trust fund kid, huh? I didn’t picture that.”

“Yeah, well, not exactly. When he turned eighteen he got access to the whole thing. He decided to donate it all to a charity that opposed his family’s business as soon as he got his hands on it. It was something like twenty million, and he’s a dumbass for giving it all away.”

“Wow,” Darcy said. “I’m guessing there was some bad blood with the family then?”

“He doesn’t talk about it, not even to me. But I have to admit I can’t help respecting that level of spite.”

“No kidding. How many sisters does he have? I met the two at the bar. Christine and Ally, right?”

“Yeah. There are six. The youngest is seven and Christine is the oldest at twenty-six.”

“That’s a lot of people...”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

“So would you keep it if your dad tried to give you trust fund money?” Darcy asked.

“Is this part of the interview?”

“Would you?”

I shook my head. She already knew I hated my old man, so there was no use in pretending. “No, probably not.”

“Do you just not approve of the way he runs his businesses, or is it more than that?”

“It’s none of your business.”

Darcy grinned. “You know, I’ve been thinking a lot about my dad ever since you stood up to him at dinner. It was like

a switch kind of flicked on for me. I realized you were completely right. I've been carrying this guilt like he was doing me a favor by pushing me so hard. But when I think about it as him trying to use me to live out some dream he never could, all the guilt goes away."

I grunted.

"So, thank you. You were right."

I narrowed my eyes. "Do you think if you flatter me, I'll suddenly open up to you?"

She shrugged. "It was worth a try."

I looked out the window, grinning despite myself. *So far, so good.*

We had to circle Ally's block for a few minutes before Darcy found a parking spot big enough for her tank of a car. She was surprisingly good at parallel parking. She dusted her hands and gave me a satisfied smile. "Ready?"

"Yeah. I know the way to Ally's place. Come on."

Ally Fitzroy lived in an old mansion that she'd spent a fortune renovating and modernizing. Now it was all clean lines, underlit cabinetry, and matte black countertops. They'd kept some of the original mansion, like a few brick walls and some intricate wood moulding they'd restored. The combination was admittedly appealing.

Inside, I was surprised to find she really had only invited people from work. Christine Fitzroy was there, along with Ezzie and Lizzie Fitzroy, the nineteen-year-old twins. They both had the typical Fitzroy jet black hair and good looks.

I planned to split off from Darcy as soon as I could, but we were practically ambushed as we came inside. Ally hugged and kissed us on the cheeks, asking questions such as if

we'd come together as a couple. Then Christine followed her and the twins came immediately after.

"I'm going to head up to the roof," I said once we'd finally escaped Marcus' sisters. I knew Ally's place had a huge rooftop patio and hoped maybe I could catch my breath up there. Hell, maybe I could just wait out the evening and keep myself away from Darcy until this thing was over.

"Okay, I'll come," Darcy said. She had to practically jog to keep up with me, but that didn't stop her. We passed Farhad and Kirk—the new hire I'd assigned to work politics with him—chatting by a spread of finger foods and drinks at the base of a long floating staircase. Darcy yelled a quick greeting as she passed, laughing a little in her effort to keep up with me.

Upstairs, we passed Pollie and Elizabeth, who were waiting in line for the bathroom, even though I knew there were at least five bathrooms in this place.

"Mr. Lockwood!" Elizabeth called, reaching out to touch my arm. "I'm so glad you made it here. Have you seen Tristan?"

"No," I said tightly. "We just arrived." *We. I'd said "we".* I could see the gears in Pollie and Elizabeth's heads already turning.

"Oh," Elizabeth said, eyes darting between us. "I didn't realize."

"There's nothing to realize," I snapped.

"So you gave Darcy a ride?" Pollie asked.

"I gave him a ride, actually," Darcy said. "It was my turn. He drove last time."

This fucking woman was going to start the rumor to end all rumors.

“We were both at the office late. That’s all,” I said.

“Ohh,” Elizabeth froze, eyes narrowing. “Late night at the office together, huh? Darcy, since when do you keep secrets from me?”

“There’s no secret,” I growled. “I’m going to the roof.”

“Me too!” Darcy said cheerily, following after me.

“What the hell was that?” I asked.

“What was what?”

I stopped at the last staircase that led up to the roof. “You practically implied we were having some sort of office affair.”

“No. I just told the truth. I *did* give you a ride. You’re the one who lied and said we had a late night at the office together. I wasn’t at the office late. I was having an early dinner with Charleston.”

My blood went cold. “Who the fuck is Charleston?”

“Just a friend,” she said, shrugging.

“A guy friend? One you have dinner with?”

“Is that jealousy I’m detecting, Mr. Lockwood?”

“No,” I lied. Yes, it was jealousy. It was burning hot, ready-to-kill-a-stranger jealousy that came out of nowhere. “I’m just wondering why you haven’t mentioned him before.”

“Would you like me to keep you posted on my dating life, Mr. Lockwood? Should I also keep you posted on sexual encounters?”

She was fucking with me. I knew she was, but I still couldn't stop myself from biting. "So you two *are* dating?" *And what sexual encounters? Had she been fucking other guys since she met me?* I felt a headache come on suddenly. Even if she was fucking other guys, it was none of my damn business. I was making a point of trying to keep the line between us clear.

Darcy knew exactly how to press my buttons, and it seemed like that's exactly what she wanted to do. All she did was grin playfully and gesture up the stairs. "Let's see this roof you're so excited to get to."

I rushed up the stairs and pushed open the door. It was an old fashioned, heavy maintenance door. I had to push hard to get it to swing open, then I gestured for Darcy to go up. She gave a little curtsy and headed out onto the roof. I let the door slam shut behind us and was relieved to see Ally hadn't set the roof up for the party tonight. There was just the usual patio furniture in one corner and a heat lamp.

It was nice up here. *Quiet.* There was just a gentle rustle of wind making the dangling strings of Edison bulbs sway in the night. I could hear cars drifting along and the faint sound of conversation from the house and some from the streets below.

"See? Nobody is up here," I said. "Why don't you head back down to the party. I have some work I can get done from my phone. I'll come down later."

"Nice try," Darcy said. "You don't think I realized you were coming up here to escape? Well, if you ask me, this is the perfect setting for our next interview. It's beautiful up here."

It was. The three-story building was dwarfed by some of the surrounding architecture, but we could still see patches

of dark sky and the yellow, twinkling lights of windows all around. It was chillier up here than I'd expected, but I was comfortable enough as I took a seat on the patio chair, stretching my legs out.

Darcy came and sat right across from me, hands on her thighs. She gave them a little rub and shivered. "Kinda cold up here, huh?"

"Yes. You should get back inside before you get sick." Still, I went to flick the switch on the heat lamp, which buzzed to life and started providing a little relief from the cold.

"Okay, Grandma." Darcy laughed, and the sound was infectious.

I caught myself smirking a little and wiped the expression from my face. "Seriously. I need to do some work. If you're really intent on interviewing me, you can come back later."

"You said I could have you whenever I wanted," Darcy said. Somehow, the tone of her voice made those words dirty enough to get my dick hard as a rock.

I shifted on the chair, suddenly uncomfortable. "And you want me now?" I asked. *Stop it, Dominic.*

Darcy's eyes twinkled dangerously. "Yes," she said.

I ran my tongue across my lips. All my plans and determination to stay professional tonight had felt as strong and unbreakable as castle walls—but Darcy was like waves that turned my walls into sand. Every little temptation was another wave washing away my defenses. Every smile and flirtatious word made me question what had seemed so obvious just hours ago.

Of course I shouldn't fuck my employee. The conflicts of interest were obvious. The comparisons to my father were

unacceptable. I wasn't the kind of man who went back on his word, especially not when that word was something I'd promised myself.

I spread my arms, though, as if my body was operating separate from my brain. "I'm all yours, then," I said.

Darcy visibly swallowed. I saw her shiver, too. With a sigh, I moved to sit beside her and took off my coat, draping it around her shoulders. She thanked me, looking down and smiling as she pulled it tighter. She was still shaking and goosebumps spread across her smooth, bare thighs.

"I swear," Darcy said, teeth chattering. "This wasn't a ploy to seduce you. I really just didn't know it was going to be so cold tonight."

She looked up at me and her eyes looked so damn big and innocent. My arm was around her before I knew what I was doing, pulling her in closer to me. She wiggled a little, finding a comfortable spot and then settling in. She tucked her feet beneath her and let her head rest in the crook between my chest and shoulder. I could smell that shampoo of hers again—like fruit and lavender.

"This is highly inappropriate," I said.

"Okay," Darcy said.

"I'm your boss."

"I know. And I'm a cold employee. You're just taking care of your employees."

"What about that asshole you had dinner with?"

"Charleston isn't an asshole. He's my best friend."

"And that's all he has ever been?"

“Charleston is bisexual with a *heavy* lean towards guys. He just fools around with women sometimes.”

“Including you?”

“These questions are highly inappropriate, Mr. Lockwood.”

I grinned, even though my blood was already boiling again at the thought of her fucking around with some other guy.

“Answer me.”

“No. I’ve never fooled around with Charleston. He’s like a brother to me. Happy?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

She pulled back a little, crooking her neck to look up at me. Her lips were parted and a lock of that short brown hair was drifting across her forehead. Some of it had caught in her eyelash, so I reached down to tuck it out of the way without thinking. Suddenly our faces had come closer and all I could see were the soft pink pillows of her lips.

“Tell me to stop,” I said, almost desperately as I moved closer.

“No,” Darcy whispered.

“Last chance,” I breathed.

“I dare you,” she teased.

I pressed my lips to hers, softly at first as I took her lower lip between mine. It wasn’t just soft, it was like velvet. She let out a hot breath and a sound from her throat as soon as our lips met. I slid my hand up her narrow neck and cupped her there, fingers threading into the hair at the nape of her neck as I clutched harder.

Our kiss deepened and I felt the momentum of it threatening to carry me into fucking oblivion. Her hot

tongue teased my lips, flicking into my mouth and twirling with my own. I pulled her closer and the only place she could go was up and onto my lap. She straddled me until her skirt rode up to her hips, giving me a view of her white panties before she pressed her face back into mine.

“We should stop,” I said between kisses.

“Nobody has to know,” she said, kissing her way up my neck until she found my earlobe and sucked it hard.

I groaned with pleasure. My left hand slid up her thigh and around the back to cup her ass like I’d been wanting to for weeks. She bit my lip and grinded her hips into me until she was pressing herself against the shape of my arousal.

I moved my other hand to her ass too, pulling her back and forth across me as I kissed her.

Jesus Christ. I could already feel the arousal from her panties soaking through my slacks and into my underwear. I wanted to fill her. I wanted to fist her hair and bend her over this couch and fuck her from behind. I wanted to slap her ass and hear her gasp my name.

Some distant part of my brain was practically shouting for attention—pleading with me to stop before this went any further. But fuck that part of my brain. It wasn’t in control right now. Right now, Darcy was finally mine, and I wasn’t going to let anything come between us. The consequences could come later.

“You taste better than I imagined,” I said, tilting her chin back to kiss her neck as she continued to grind against me.

“Did you imagine I’d taste bad?” she asked. Her voice was breathy and halting. Her small hands had been working at my buttons and spreading them apart until she had my chest bare.

“No,” I said. “I’ve spent more time thinking about what it’d be like to fuck you than I care to admit.”

“Yeah? How did you imagine it.”

“You on your knees. Crawling toward me begging for my cock. First in your mouth, then I take you from behind and you moan my name.”

Darcy lowered her chin, meeting my eyes and biting her lip. A slow grin spread across her lips—they were already reddened from the intensity of our kisses. “Like this?” she asked, scooting off me and lowering herself to her knees in front of me. Her skirt was still hiked up and I could see the tantalizing triangle of her panties. She planted one hand in front of the other, crawling back towards me, eyes never leaving mine. “I want to suck your cock, Mr. Lockwood.”

Dominic. In my fantasies she’d always called me Dominic. Still, this was close enough.

“Come and get it,” I breathed.

She obliged, crawling until she was on her knees between my legs. She opened up my belt, undid my button, and then lowered the zipper of my slacks. With a forceful tug, she yanked my pants down below my ass. I could see the shape of my erection trying to free itself from my black underwear. She stared down at it, eyes slowly traveling from base to tip, then up to meet my gaze again. “That’s big.”

“Show me how much you can handle, Darcy.”

She swallowed, then pulled the elastic of my underwear down until my cock sprung free. She grinned at the sight of it swinging upright in front of her face, then her amusement faded. She wrapped her fingers around the base of me and her hands looked even smaller. It twitched

at her touch and I arched my back, groaning with relief. I didn't know how badly I'd needed to have her hands on me until now. It felt so good, I wasn't sure how I'd ever stop wanting this, but that was a problem for later.

"In your mouth," I commanded.

She licked her lips again, then parted them and slid the tip of me inside. She was warm, wet, and fucking wonderful. She slowly pumped her hand up and down, matching the movement of her head as she took a little more of me with each pump. I couldn't help myself so I took a fistful of her hair and started to push her head down as I thrust up into her mouth. She put a palm on my thigh, pressing hard when I was too rough, but letting me fuck her face as I gradually found her limits and took full advantage of them. She could handle more of me than I expected, and the sensation of pumping myself into her mouth was unbelievable. Just a few dozen seconds of this would've been enough to make me come, so I slowed down and planned to drag it out.

Darcy had other plans. As soon as I eased my grip on her and stopped fucking her face, she put both hands on my shaft and started to pump her hands clockwise and counter clockwise as her head bobbed up and down. The wet sound of her mouth on me filled the noisy city air and all I could do was throw my head back and gasp.

"Jesus Christ," I hissed. "Slow down. You're going to make me come."

She moaned something with her mouth full of me and didn't stop. She kept pumping and I felt my orgasm rushing forward. I gripped her head, trying to stop her movement, but her hands kept going and she met my eyes as her pink tongue darted out and circled the head of my cock.

"Fuuck," I gasped. My cock twitched and I came. It spurted free, mostly missing her but not completely. She moaned and continued to lick me, lapping it up and sitting back to wipe her mouth with a sexy ass smile when she was done.

I was breathing hard. I put a hand to her cheek and shook my head. "I wasn't planning on coming yet."

"Too bad. Now you'll have to return the favor, I guess. Unless you happen to have a condom with you."

"I wasn't planning on fucking my employee tonight. So, no. I don't."

She gave a little shrug. "Raincheck, then."

"I'm not done with you," I growled. I lifted her and set her on the couch, spreading her legs. Her white cotton panties were absolutely soaked. I let out a low sound at the sight of it as I positioned myself at the other end of the couch. I lowered my head to kiss between her thighs. Darcy leaned back, head upright to watch and leaning on her elbows against the cushions. I kissed her all over, savoring the anticipation. She dug her fingers into my scalp, gripping my hair and squirming.

"Please," she breathed.

"Please what?" I teased.

"Lick me there."

I dragged the tip of my tongue up her inner thigh, prompting a wave of goosebumps to rise there. "You'll need to be more specific."

"Eat me out."

"More specific," I said.

"Eat my fucking pussy, Dominic," she half-shouted.

At that same moment, the door to the roof opened and I heard a muffled gasp. "Oh, shit," Marcus said. "Uh, Dom, when you're done with that, Ally was asking about you."

"Not now," I said, mouth inches from Darcy's pussy. "Fuck off."

"Wait," Marcus said. I heard him coming closer and I wished I could toss his ass off the roof. "*Darcy?* Is that you?"

Darcy slowly lifted her head over my shoulders and waved gingerly. "Hi, Mr. Fitzroy. He started it." My body and head were mostly blocking her from view of Marcus.

"Like hell I did," I said, twisting to glare at Marcus.

His eyes fell down to my waist. "Are you aware your dick is out, Dom?"

Sure enough, my erect cock—still wet from Darcy's mouth—was swinging free. Annoyed, I snatched up my underwear and started sliding it on. "Go back downstairs," I growled at him.

"There's just one thing I want to clarify before I do. Does this mean company policy is that we're officially okay with inter-office relationships now? Because I can go in and update the necessary files. Should I draw the line somewhere? Cunnilingus is okay, but no P in V?"

"Fuck. Off," I snapped.

"Fine, fine." Marcus turned to leave and stopped, yanking on the door. "Bad news, actually. We're locked up here. Should I just turn around, or..."

Darcy was already pulling her dress down and scooting back. I very nearly pushed her dress back up and finished

what I started, but common sense and logic were starting to leak back into my thoughts already.

“You owe me an orgasm,” she said in a low, sultry voice that made every nerve in my body light up.

“I’m not going to be able to stop thinking about picking up where we left off.” We were both speaking low enough that Marcus couldn’t hear.

“Good,” she whispered. “I was getting tired of you pretending you could keep your hands off me.”

“Are you eating her out back there?” Marcus yelled over his shoulder. “Because we could also just call one of my sisters to rescue me and you two could carry on once I’m out of earshot. Not that the comforting sounds of someone stirring a pot of mac and cheese wouldn’t be delightful background noise.”

“It wasn’t what it looked like,” Darcy said. She was standing already and had pulled her dress down.

I reluctantly pulled my pants back on. It was already hard as a rock again and ready for more, but I knew I was going to have to wait now. I was seriously going to kill Marcus later.

“No?” Marcus asked. “Can I guess what it actually was, then? Did Dominic get a sudden rash outbreak on his dick he needed you to look at? He pulled out his dick and you leaned in to look, but you both lost your balance and he fell over with his ass out and his face between your legs on that couch. Am I close?”

“You didn’t see anything,” I said, pressing my palm to his chest.

He grinned, then his expression went suddenly serious. "Dom, you covered for me when you found me with my... *invention* back in 9th grade. I still owe you several times over. But do you really think this is a great idea?"

"Weren't you and Tristan trying to talk me into this in the first place?"

I could sense Darcy standing awkwardly behind me. She was probably mortified. I knew Marcus well enough to know this wasn't going to spread to anyone else, but she didn't know that.

"Did we? I honestly can't remember half the shit I say." Marcus rubbed the back of his neck and shrugged. "Just wondering if it's a good idea. That's all."

"Marcus won't tell anyone," I said. "We can trust him."

"I was actually thinking maybe I could just jump off the roof. I'm pretty sure gravity could help me outrun the embarrassment."

"It's only three stories," Marcus said. "You'd probably just be even more embarrassed when we had to cart your ass to the hospital with broken legs and back problems. But if you want, I could hook you up with my fake identity guy. He's more like an aspiring fake identity guy, actually, but I know he spends half his time watching videos on how to do it. I'm pretty almost sort of sure he'd be able to help you out. *Probably.*"

"We're not faking anyone's identity or jumping off roofs," I said. "This is going to stay between the three of us and nobody needs to be embarrassed. And it's not a bad idea because it's nothing. We were just fooling around. There's nothing else to it, understand? We don't have any feelings for each other. It was just a dumb mistake."

“Yeah, sure,” Marcus said.

“We good?” I asked Darcy.

For some reason, she was staring at her feet and some emotion was tugging at her features. She nodded wordlessly.

“Alright, good. Call your sister and have her come get us the hell off this roof.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Marcus said. “Should we wait for that ridiculously aggressive erection of yours to die down? Or...”

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DARCY

Friday felt like it came too quickly. I checked the clock at work and saw I'd only had another hour before I was supposed to head out for the weekend. Dominic had given me an entire week to work more on this MLM piece and I still felt like it was coming down to the wire.

I leaned back in my chair, stretched my sore fingers, and dove back in. I was trying to do one last editing pass before I sent it to Dominic for approval.

Elizabeth stopped by my desk with her bag over her shoulder and wiggled her eyebrows.

"Leaving early?" I asked. "Did the dark overlord approve that?"

"The dark overlord values my hilarious sense of humor. He lets me get away with a thing or two here and there."

I grinned, still scanning my story with the other half of my attention. "Is that right?"

"It is. Now, I know I'm no journalist, but I can't help but sense some tension between the two of you. Are you going to tell me what happened, or do I need to put on my investigator's hat?"

I chewed the inside of my cheek. The truth was I hadn't told *anyone* about my momentary departure from sanity on Ally Fitzroy's roof. I'd gotten on my knees and blown Dominic Lockwood. Hell, I'd even found some of his "Gentleman's Relish" on my dress, as Elizabeth disturbingly liked to call it. I just hoped nobody I'd mingled with at the party had noticed.

But it felt like talking about it would risk breaking the spell. Even Dominic hadn't tried to approach me since that night. Marcus Fitzroy, on the other hand, kept making lip-zipping gestures and winking at me every time we passed in the office. If not for him, I could almost believe the whole thing had just been some kind of fever dream.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I said. I felt like the world's shittiest friend for keeping secrets from her, but I really did plan to fill her in once everything didn't feel so confusing and delicate. My biggest concern was that it wasn't only my secret. Dominic stood to lose just as much as I did—if not more—from anyone discovering what we did on that roof.

Elizabeth frowned and crossed her arms. She jabbed a finger at me after a moment of thought. "If I find out you two are *fucking*, ohh girl." She pulled her head back, shaking it menacingly. "I will be so mad at you and I might not talk to you for at least a week-*after* you tell me everything, that is."

I grinned. "If there was anything to tell, you know I would tell it to you when the time was right."

Her eyebrows shot up. "When the time was right? What does that mean? Does that mean there's something to tell but you're not telling it yet?"

Farhad must've seen us talking because he appeared at Elizabeth's side. "Is this person bothering you?" He asked.

I was surprised to see his initial annoyance at being assigned to work on politics had faded. Lately, Farhad seemed downright cheerful. I'd even seen him leaving the office with Kirk for drinks after work a few times. The two had become fast friends, and they were always talking excitedly about whatever piece they were writing at the moment.

"Yes," I said. "I have less than an hour to finish this and somebody is dick digging."

Farhad sputtered with laughter and Elizabeth grinned.

"Dick digging?" he asked.

"Yes. She is trying to pry into my mind and find out if I've had any close encounters of the scrotal kind. *And I have not.* I've been a diligent, focused employee who has been hard at work on her assignments. Nothing else."

Farhad and Elizabeth shared a look. He nodded. "Yeah, she's lying."

I threw up my hands in frustration. "Why won't anyone just believe me?"

"Because I'm now dick digging, too," Farhad said. "And I had to move like one grain of dirt to find evidence of a massive dick in your past."

"Yeah," Elizabeth said loudly, leaning in and poking my chest. "Who does it belong to, Darcy? Hmm? Does this dick happen to have a fondness for nice suits and sexy little vests, perhaps?"

"Both of you, leave me alone. I seriously have work to do."

My phone was on my desk and it buzzed. It was a text from Charleston at the worst possible time, and both Farhad and Elizabeth's eyes went straight to the preview.

Charleston: How did your date with Mr. Big Dick Boss go? Did you get lu...

I slapped my hand over the phone, covering the text even though I knew it was too late.

Elizabeth folded her arms and shook her head at me like a disappointed mother. “Unbelievable. So you tell *some* friends about your sexual conquests, but not all of them? Is that how this works? Do we need to pay a subscription service to be Tier 1 friends, Darcy? Are we not good enough for you?”

I couldn't help grinning. She was mostly messing with me, but I knew there was a grain of real hurt underneath the jokes.

“Guys, look. *If* something happened between me and someone at work, it would be pretty reckless of me to go talking about it. Especially at work, right?”

The two of them shared another look.

“But if I was going to tell anybody anything, it'd be you, Elizabeth. And maybe you, Farhad.”

“The fuck?” He muttered to nobody in particular.

Elizabeth ignored him and leaned in, hugging me. She put her mouth to my ear and whispered. “Blink if you hooked up with Mr. Lockwood.” She pulled back, gripping both shoulders and staring intently into my eyes.

Like a normal human being, I blinked. She fist pumped victoriously, winked at me, and yanked Farhad away from my desk by the arm.

“Maybe you?” He said quietly as he left, shaking his head.

I was smiling to myself until I remembered I still had twenty pages to review and a vanishingly small time to do it. My smile completely faded when I remembered the last words Dominic had said on that roof. He'd said it didn't mean anything. Of course, I'd been stupidly hearing wedding bells while I was sucking his cock because I was delusional and way too quick to get attached when I got physical with people.

I mean, wasn't putting someone's penis in your mouth a pretty big step? Personally, if I had to draw a roadmap from dating to marriage, there would be at least one dick in a mouth along the way. Maybe toss a romantic foot rub in there for good measure and *boom*. It was a clear-cut path to marriage and happily ever after. So what the hell did he mean with what he said to Marcus? A dumb mistake? I didn't know about him, but I'd never ended up with a penis in my mouth by mistake.

I wanted to march right to his office and demand he explain exactly what I was to him. But I couldn't ask without making things more weird than they already were. If he'd really meant what he said, I'd be making it obvious that I was hoping he didn't mean any of that. I had to play it cool, which wasn't exactly my specialty. I was about as cool as the bag of shrimp I got last week with my groceries and forgot about on the counter with the bread for two days until my whole apartment smelled like death.

All I could do was look inside and ask myself how I felt about this. Did I *want* Dominic to think what we did was just fooling around? Just a little lipstick on the boss' dipstick?

If there really were no feelings involved, that was kind of good, right? Because that brief experience on the roof had easily been a peak life experience, and he'd barely even got

his hands on me. I knew with every fiber of my being that I wanted *more*. I didn't even know if it mattered how I got it, but I was not going to die happy and satisfied if I didn't at least get that orgasm he owed me.

The part I didn't understand was whether I wanted it to be a no strings sort of deal. If there were no strings, then there was nothing to get tangled up in. We could have our fun and go on with our lives mostly as usual. But what if I wanted a string or two? Strings were kinda fun, weren't they? At least cats seem to think so.

I rubbed my eyes and tried to remind myself to stop getting distracted. I needed to finish this editing pass because I didn't want to send Dominic something with even a single typo. I wanted to prove to him that I could do more than just the average piece. Maybe then he'd reconsider blowing off my pitch, because no matter what he said, I was absolutely not giving up on that one. I knew it would be good for the magazine, even if his stubborn ass wanted to pretend otherwise.

I stole a glance in the direction of his office. His blinds were open, as usual. Tristan and Marcus were in there and the three of them were all standing and gesturing like they were having some kind of argument. Dominic looked especially pissed.

I chewed the end of a pencil, watching and wondering what the hell that was about. My chest went cold when I considered the possibility that it could be about what Marcus had seen on the roof. But Dominic said we could trust him to keep quiet, didn't he?

If it wasn't about us, what had them all so upset?

DOMINIC

Darcy crossed a new line last night. I'd been avoiding her ever since our encounter on the roof at Ally's party, but last night she sent a text. It was just two emojis and a question mark. The first was what I assumed was a raindrop and the second was a check followed by a question mark.

Rain check?

Just looking at the text had made me instantly hard. I knew exactly what she wanted and I doubted she knew just how badly I wanted to give it to her. But things had changed, and I couldn't afford to let things between us go any further than they already had.

I laced up my shoes a little too tight and rolled my neck, working out the morning stiffness. It was Saturday and I planned to work for most of the day, but I needed a run to clear my head. I left my apartment and walked to the park, cycling songs on my phone until I found a playlist that felt right.

It was a misty, cold morning. The air felt wet and clingy and I could barely see the sky between the towering buildings all around. New York always felt like home to me because

nobody here was ever satisfied. There was a sense of it in the air. Everybody moved with a kind of frenetic urgency, as if the thing they were chasing was always just out of reach, but they were going to try anyway.

I could relate to that feeling, except I usually felt like that thing I wanted so badly was to finally separate myself from my father in every way possible. I wanted my own business, my own success, and I didn't want to feel like my father could slip his bony fingers into my life at any moment. But lately, I spent far more of my time thinking about Darcy—about how I wished I could simply take her and have her like I wanted. I wanted to wave my hands and erase all the fog of uncertainty around the two of us—for the correct move to be reaching out and taking what should've been mine.

I started my jog early, weaving around the foot traffic. My feet pounded the pavement and each step helped focus my mind like drum beats.

I was well into the process of turning my brain off when I crossed the street into the park and headed down my usual trail. I passed a few dog walkers and a large group of seniors speed walking. Then I saw a small woman from the corner of my eye coming toward me at slow speeds with high effort. Her arms were pumping and her short legs churned, but it seemed like she was moving in slow motion despite her efforts.

My pace faltered and I turned my head to look.

What. The. Fuck.

Darcy McClain came jogging up beside me in workout clothes. She had on pastel blue leggings and a pink top that bared her shoulders and a distracting amount of cleavage. Her short hair was pulled up in a tiny knot on top. She

pulled out an earbud and looked up at me. We were still running. If I moved any slower, I would've had to break into a walk, but Darcy looked like she was at her top speed.

"What the hell are you doing?" I asked.

"Going for my morning run. What does it look like?" Darcy had to pant each word out between heavy breaths.

"I mean why are you doing this again? I thought you would give up after that last excuse for a run."

"Haven't you realized I don't give up that easily?"

"Maybe you should learn to."

Darcy looked like she was about to die. If she'd worked on her conditioning since the last time she ambushed me on a run, it wasn't evident. She was pumping her arms wildly, head lolling and eyes wild. Sweat was pouring from her hairline and soaking her sports bra. "Fat chance. Bosshole." She breathed each word with effort, then tried to wink but looked more like she was wincing.

I grinned. "How far have you run?"

"Um," she gasped. Her face was screwing up now and she started to hobble, losing speed. "How far do you think it is from that bench back there to here?"

She stopped completely, bending over and clutching her knees. "God," she said. "Why do you run so fast? Do you actually enjoy this?"

All I wanted was to stop and stay with her. I wanted to take her back to my place and give her the orgasm I owed her. I wanted it all badly enough it fucking hurt, but I knew what was coming. I knew I couldn't afford that, not without risking everything.

I slowed my pace, jogging in place while she sucked in air. "It helps to clear my mind."

"From what? Work?"

From you. "Something like that," I said.

"Have you ever heard of meditation? Ice cream?" She put her hands on her hips and leaned back, drawing in more heavy gulps of air and shaking her head. "This is just ridiculous. It's torture."

"Why are *you* here, McClain?"

She held up her palms. "A good interviewer gets inside her subject's head. I thought maybe if I understood what you're about outside work, I would get a new angle."

"Have you?" I waited, one eyebrow arched.

"Yes. You're a glutton for punishment. Sadistic. Or maybe trying to atone for some kind of past, present, or future sins. Maybe all three."

"Hm. Interesting theory. Guess you'll need to keep training if you want to catch up and get answers." I waited until my back was turned to grin. I jogged away from her, feeling like an asshole. I *was* an asshole. But what did she expect? The entire reason I'd come out for this jog in the first place was to get Darcy off my mind. And of course, *The Squawker's* number one employee was working overtime to nail her interview with me. Worse, it was endearing how hard she was trying. I didn't need to feel like anything about Darcy was endearing, adorable, sexy, or anything but adequate.

My mind was racing as I ran around the path. I took my favorite route and put a few miles behind me. By the time I was coming back up on where I started, I was getting tired

and starting to finally turn off my thoughts. But then I saw her again. She was right where I'd left her, sitting on the ground with her hands over her knees. She hopped to her feet when I came around the bend and started jogging in place.

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't help grinning at the look of pure determination on her face. I even slowed my pace as much as I could without making it obvious. She sprinted into motion and came up at my side. "Thought you lost me, huh?" she asked.

"You should stop before you pull something, McClain."

"Nope. Not until you tell me if I was right. Do you run like this because of guilt? Are you running *from*-" she veered off the path and her toe caught on a large tree root. One moment, she was beside me. The next, she was spinning and falling her arms in a rolling fall.

She fell hard and let out a grunt of pain.

"Fuck," I hissed, stopping and kneeling to help ease her back off the ground.

Darcy looked at her ankle and winced, rolling it gingerly then sucking in a quick breath. "Ow," she said.

Somehow, from her three little fifty yard sprints, she was soaked with sweat just like I was. Our skin felt burning hot where it touched. "Let me look," I said.

"Do you have medical experience?" she asked. Even when she was in pain, Darcy was still a smart ass. "It could be broken. Fractured. Contused?"

"That's not how you use the word contusion. And I seriously doubt it's any of those. I think you just rolled it,

which I've done to my ankle before." I bent her knee gently and looked at the ankle. It was already swelling a little.

"How does it look, Doctor Grump?"

I glared at her. "It looks like it'll probably be a little sore but you'll live. But I think this should be your sign to retire from sprinting."

"I wasn't sprinting. I was jogging."

"Yeah, no more sprints for you today," I said. "I'll call you a cab."

"I don't like cabs. I watched a documentary once about this cab driver who drove people to his creepy chop shop by night and sold their meat by day to unsuspecting people on the street from his hotdog stand."

I stared. "Good thing it's not night, then. We'll just skip my usual post run hotdog."

She folded her arms, which had the distracting effect of pushing her breasts up. "Ha. Very funny, Dominic. But I'm not riding in a cab. They're creepy."

"What do you suggest?" I asked. "You want me to call an ambulance? Or do you not ride in those, either?"

I'm not taking an ambulance for a rolled ankle. She got up, wincing as she put weight on her foot. "See? I'm fine."

Instinctively, I reached out and put an arm around her, holding her up and helping keep her off the foot. "Alright, how far is your place from here?"

"Far," she said. "Trying to pin you down for these jog attacks is actually pretty damn inconvenient. I had to take a bus. I hate busses."

“Then I can take you to my place and get you some ice for your ankle. Once you’re good to walk on your own, you can head home, or I can drive you, assuming you haven’t developed some kind of phobia of riding with your boss since our ice cream date.”

She grinned, shaking her head. “I wouldn’t mind riding you. *With you,*” she added quickly, cheeks going bright red.

I pretended not to hear as I took more of her weight against me and started leading her toward the park exit.

“So is this how you operate, Mr. Lockwood?” she asked while we walked. “Is this one of your seduction tactics? Wound your prey and then they have no choice but to go back to your sex cave?”

“Darcy... you’re the one who decided to act crazy and sprint after me. I’m just trying to do the right thing here.”

“If you’re so concerned with doing the right thing, why have you been avoiding me all week? I know you saw my text yesterday, too. So why are you ignoring me?”

There it was. I clenched my jaw, searching for the right words. “Come on. Let’s get you out of this fucking park.”

“To be continued,” Darcy whispered.

“What?” I asked as I helped her up from the ground and guided her hand around my back.

“Nothing.”

DARCY

Dominic didn't live in a sex cave. It was more like a sex palace. His apartment from the lobby to the elevator and all the way down to his massive double front doors just *screamed* "money". And right after the scream of money left your ears ringing, a thousand little voices whispered "sex" all hot and heavy in your ears. It was the sort of place that probably made women throw their panties on their coat rack as soon as they came in and go lay in wait on his bed.

But it took more than money to get my panties off.

He helped me inside and I was relieved to finally get a chance to sit on the couch after hobbling with him for four or five blocks. I'd let myself be distracted from the throb in my ankle by all the envious looks I'd drawn on the street. Just about every woman with a pulse had looked at me like they would've chopped off at least a pinky toe to be in my place. If only they knew how frustrating and confusing the man was, maybe they wouldn't have been so desperate.

"How does it feel?" He asked. He left me on the couch and went to the kitchen where he rummaged in the fridge and produced an ice pack.

“A little tender, but I think I’ll survive,” I said. To be honest, it was probably already good enough that I could’ve walked home, but I couldn’t bring myself to admit that. I was here in his apartment and I felt something in the air—something I wanted to wait and let develop.

He chucked the ice pack my way and I caught it. I pressed it to my ankle and let out a breath of relief as the cold numbed the pain.

“You know, you could’ve just asked for an interview,” he said.

I grinned. “What do you think that text was?”

“Childish emojis that I couldn’t interpret.”

I rolled my eyes. “Liar. But I wasn’t trying to work on the interview this time,” I admitted. “I honestly wanted to figure out what happened. One minute I thought we were on the same page on that rooftop and then it seemed like you’d changed your mind.” *The same page*. That was a good way to phrase it without making things too weird. I didn’t want to use words like relationship or feelings.

Dominic sat on the coffee table across from me, face serious. “I learned my father plans to start playing a role in the work we do at *The Squawker*. He’s going to arrive on Monday and get personally involved, but I don’t know to what extent. If you and I were...” He paused, eyebrows drawing together. “Involved,” he said slowly. “I think he’d figure it out.”

My eyebrows slid upwards. His father was coming to our little magazine? The same father who reached his grubby little hands into my life and tried to snuff me out because I’d caused him a minor inconvenience? I suddenly wondered how much it cost to hire an assassin. Or was that

not the term they preferred? Hitman? Fixer? Either way, I wondered if having someone murdered was a viable reason to take out a loan in the eyes of a bank.

"I know," Dominic said, exhaling. He must've read the look on my face.

"So you're ignoring me because you don't want your dad to know we're involved? Didn't he get involved with co-workers several times?"

"He would care for different reasons. We argued about this assignment. His ego makes him want to deny he's ever going to retire or pass on any of the company to me. He saw me wanting to spearhead the operation as a sort of power grab. But I didn't relent and he eventually let up. He warned me if anything went poorly, he'd step in and take over."

"Is something going poorly?"

"No," he snapped. He spread his hands, head tilting. "Sort of. The sales have taken a slight dip these last two weeks. A local critic in the city is bashing the new direction we're taking, and I think some of the former readers are stepping away from the magazine. But I'm confident we'll bring in new eyes soon."

I chewed my lip, hesitating. "Maybe it would help if we brought back one or two of the weekly pieces you cut?"

"I can't fold on my vision for *The Squawker* just because sales slump in the short term. Change takes time."

I considered pushing more, but I sensed Dominic was only a few words away from putting those big walls of his up again. I decided to save that argument for another day. After all, if we *were* going to pursue anything between us, I

needed to learn to separate personal time and work. “So what power does your dad have over the company?”

“As much as he wants, unfortunately. Strictly speaking, I’m basically a hired CEO working to manage a business he purchased.”

“So he could fire you?”

“He wouldn’t do something quite so obviously bad for the family image. He’d be more likely to quietly move me to another project and take over managing *The Squawker* himself.”

“So your *dad* could be my boss?” I asked. My throat was suddenly dry at the thought. I’d forgiven Dominic for whatever role I thought he had in my expulsion from Columbia. His dad, though? He was still the devil incarnate, and I didn’t want to work for him. I wouldn’t work for him. It was either assassination or quit, and I wasn’t much of a quitter. I wasn’t exactly assassin material, either.

“Only if I fuck up. Like giving him reason to think I’m not taking this job seriously because I’m fucking an employee.”

My cheeks went red. “Well,” I said. “Thankfully we haven’t slept together then. Right?”

He got up and started to pace the room. He looked so impossibly good—like he was built to chop logs or hunt wild animals with his bare hands. “There’s no use in pretending, Darcy. I’ve been treating you differently because of what you are to me.”

My stomach did a little swirl at his words. “What am I to you? You told Marcus what we did was nothing. You called it a mistake.”

He paused his pacing, running both hands through his hair. "Because I wanted to believe that. But it's bullshit."

I swallowed. "So you didn't mean what you said?"

"I wish I did. But no. I can't stop thinking about you. I have every reason in the fucking world to put you out of my mind and keep moving forward, but I can't. Every time I try to focus on what I thought was important to me, you are right there in my mind."

I didn't answer right away. Dominic looked like he wasn't even expecting a response. He turned his back and started making himself some kind of drink from a bar against the wall.

"What if I feel the same way?" I asked. "I'm not saying I do, either. I honestly don't know how I feel. All I know is I thought I wanted to prove I have what it takes to be an amazing writer and make a difference. I thought nothing mattered more, but I keep making decisions like I don't believe that-like maybe exploring whatever is between us might matter just as much, if not more."

He turned, leaving his drink behind. "We can't explore anything, Darcy. He'll find out. My father is a lot of things, but he's not stupid."

"Neither are we. All we have to do is avoid each other at work, right? We've already proven we can do that. I mean, yeah, Elizabeth and Farhad were kind of prying for information about us yesterday. But that's because they saw us at the party together, not because of something at work. Besides, I think us having feelings and pretending we don't will be just as suspicious as if we were actually acting on our feelings. Maybe more so, because we both have all this pent up... *yeah*. I'm just saying we could do this. *If you wanted to*," I added in a more quiet voice.

Dominic was breathing hard and staring at me. I couldn't read his expression. But then I didn't have to, because he was closing the distance between us in a few long strides. He climbed on top of me, careful not to bump my ankle as he planted his hands on either side of me. "In a few seconds, it'll be too late to change our minds on this. Are you sure?"

My heart was pounding at a million miles per minute. My stomach felt like it was auditioning for the circus and I could barely think straight. Still, I nodded quickly. "I'm sure."

Then he kissed me, and all my doubts and fears were blasted away in that warm contact. Kissing him felt familiar. It felt like I'd been kissing him my whole life, and his touch on me was comfortable and reassuring.

He moved his body as our lips met, lifting my legs and spreading them with his weight until I could feel him pressing against me, his hard length digging between my legs through our athletic shorts.

It was already almost too much. I dug my fingers into the back of his neck, pulling him deeper into the kiss and moaning against him.

"We can't make a habit of this," he breathed between kisses, working his mouth down my neck and drawing a hot line of ecstasy with his tongue up my neck. One of his hands was slipping up my shirt, cupping my breast and then circling my nipple with his fingertip. My nipples turned to hard rocks at the first hint of his touch and I was arching my body against him, legs wrapped around his waist—heels pressing hard, urging more of the intoxicating friction.

I let my head roll back, eyes closed. It felt like bombs were going off all around me, like my ears were ringing and my world was coming apart in bursts of red-hot shrapnel. I was really doing this. *We* were doing this.

There was a momentum between us. It was like we were both rolling down a hill and gaining speed with no choice but to keep letting ourselves be pulled toward the bottom, not knowing what waited for us there. But I didn't care. All I wanted was more. More of his hands on my body. More of his body against mine. More of his mouth, his taste.

I reached down and started tugging at the waistband of his shorts and he lifted my shirt over my head. In a few frenzied motions, we both had stripped each other bare and he was sliding on a condom. I didn't even see where it came from, but I supposed having a condom on hand and at the ready for a guy who looked like Dominic made perfect sense. I wondered how many times he'd done this and with how many girls. Did he seem *this* into it with all of them, too? The thoughts swirled around my brain, threatening to devolve into a jealous spiral.

I opened my eyes and saw he was staring down at me, completely rapt. His brows were bunched together and his lips were parted. His big arms were tensed and planted on either side of me and his dark hair hung down in a messy spray over the intensity of his eyes. Looking up at him, I felt like I was his entire world. Nobody had ever looked at me like that before, and suddenly, all the jealous doubts melted away.

Whatever happened before didn't matter. Hell, whatever happened *after* this didn't matter, either. Right now, I was his and he was mine. We were two people grasping at one perfect moment in the chaos of a storm, and that was all that mattered.

He guided himself into me. It wasn't like on the rooftop. There was no sense of playfulness between us. On the roof I'd taken him in my mouth and then he'd been about to take me in his. But as out of control as I felt then, it was nothing compared to now. I needed him inside me and he needed to be inside. We didn't need to speak about it. It was as obvious as the sun on a cloudless day.

I gripped his back, gasping into his shoulder as he eased more of himself into me.

"Fuck," He growled. "You're so damn tight."

"Or maybe you're just big."

I was wet for him. Embarrassingly wet, but if the way his movements were getting faster and more aggressive by the second were any indication, he was enjoying it. I arched my body up against him, grinding into his thrusts as he pumped into me, filling me again and again.

I wanted to keep looking up at him because he was so insanely beautiful, but my eyes kept closing. I slapped a hand down to the bed and took a fistfull of the sheets, biting my lip as moan after moan spilled from my mouth.

He pistoned into me, absolutely tireless and relentless. He was breathing hard, and sweat was beading all over his golden, muscular flesh. I ran my hands across his back, feeling his heat radiate through to my skin.

His pace increased and my ability to think condensed into images. I wasn't even capable of forming words in my own head as he railed me, the sound of our colliding flesh filling the large bedroom.

I saw glitter. Fire. Sparkling motes of light drifting down against a brilliant sunset. I saw white lines of pure ecstasy spreading from my core to my fingertips, filling my body

with pure magma. It was like nothing I'd ever felt before, and when my orgasm came, it came hard enough to make my eyes roll back and my whole body convulse around him.

Distantly, I felt him pump into me and gasp, his cock twitching inside me as he found his release, but it was all too much to comprehend.

I laid back, gasping for air, feeling completely destroyed. Aftershocks of my orgasm ran through me for several minutes as we both laid there, him still inside me, his head resting on his arm beside mine while he tried to catch his breath. "Fuck," he said finally.

"Yes, that was fucking," I agreed.

He chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest straight into me. "I think I know how people who try hard drugs for the first time feel now."

I turned my head, lifting his hair out of his eyes so I could see him. Our faces were so close that I could've counted his eyelashes. "Did you just pay me a compliment, Mr. Lockwood?"

"Come on, Darcy. If my cock is inside you, I formally give you permission to just call me Dominic."

"Hmm," I said, giving a playful little wiggle down there. His eyebrows scrunched together and he gave me a warning look. "Careful. Unless you're ready for more, I wouldn't tempt me."

I grinned. "I feel like my mind is still fumbling around in time and space right now, trying to find its way back to my body."

"Good."

“Does that earn me at least one interview question?” I asked.

He chuckled. “I suppose it does.”

“Alright. Why did you want to fire me so badly?”

“Because the first time I saw you, I knew you were trouble for me. You made me curious. Distracted. *Horny as hell*,” he added with a sexy smirk. “I knew if I didn’t get rid of you, I’d wind up right here. Right now.”

“Hmm,” I said. “Right here and right now doesn’t seem so bad, does it?”

“No,” he agreed. “If only this could last.”

His words hung between us, echoing into a growing silence that stretched out as drowsiness overtook me. I’d woken up insanely early to attempt my second run at Dominic’s park, and I think Dominic just fucked the ever-living sense out of me. A nap sounded absolutely divine, and I felt my eyes getting heavy.

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DOMINIC

I rolled over and saw Darcy asleep beside me. The misty cold morning had turned to sputtering light rain. It pattered on the windows and ran down in rivulets, obscuring everything outside until it felt like this room was the whole world. I wished it was. I found myself smiling at the thought of simply living out our days here—of leaving work behind and all the complications that came with it. It was still Saturday and I wondered if I could keep her to myself all weekend.

Her brown hair was covering most of her face, so I gently pushed it away to look at her. She stirred and moaned softly in her sleep, but didn't wake.

Darcy fucking McClain. She was my dirty little addiction. My smart-mouthed drug. My little forbidden vixen. She was everything I should have been avoiding, but all I wanted to do was keep her close.

I rolled to my back, listening to the sounds of the rain pattering outside as my thoughts ran wild. What the hell *was* my plan, though? As much as I might want to pretend, the real world was going to come knocking sooner or later.

The worst case scenario was my dad figured us out. He'd move me off the project and most likely try to assign me to another business halfway across the country. It would be a pure power play. He'd want to show me that I couldn't have Darcy, and he'd do anything in his power to take her from me. It wouldn't have anything to do with Darcy herself. He didn't even know her. He'd just want me to see that only he could blatantly abuse his power that way—to ignore the rules and fuck around with an employee. He wanted me to play by his rules because it stroked his ego when he had me under his thumb, and that was all there was to it.

Just the thought of my dad trying to split me from Darcy made dangerous feelings well in my chest. I needed to be careful. *Very* careful. I needed to remember this was likely only infatuation. We were just chasing chemicals, and once the high faded, I'd still have to pick up my life from where it was and move on. I didn't want life after Darcy to be one where I'd shit all over my dreams just for a fun ride. Even if that ride might have very well been the best of my life by far.

Darcy rolled toward me and took in a deep, sleepy breath. Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled. "I love the sound of rain."

"Yeah," I said. I was on my back with my hands on my stomach and Darcy had put her head on my shoulder, closing her eyes again. "You know I used to have a brother. He died when I was fourteen. His name was Percy."

Darcy's eyes opened but she just frowned, concern plain on her face. I had no fucking idea where this was coming from or why it was coming out of my mouth. I hadn't talked about Percy in years. It was like picking at an old, unhealed wound. But words kept spilling out.

“He was seventeen,” I said. “We used to ride our bikes down to the docks almost every day. Our favorite days were the rainy ones. We’d slam the brakes and try to skid our way around corners when the streets were wet enough. The two of us didn’t always get along and he could be a real shit to me, but every summer it was kind of like we called a truce. We’d get out of the house as often as we could, mostly to escape dad.

“I remember one time he gave us a thousand dollars in cash and told us to go buy some nice clothes for this internship he was trying to make us do. We took our bikes out on a rainy day like this. We ended up finding a wedding cake shop. We bought one for like seven hundred dollars with the money, just for the hell of it. We couldn’t fit the thing on our bikes so we took it behind the shop and had a cake fight.” I smiled as the memory played in my head. “That was just a couple months before his accident. That’s probably my favorite memory of Percy, though.”

“I’m so sorry, Dominic,” she said, putting her arm around me and squeezing. I was surprised to see her eyes were glassy with tears. “But it’s awesome you have a memory like that. I don’t even know what I’d do if I ever lost Eloise.”

“Yeah, it’s alright. He got a motorcycle when he turned sixteen and he always drove it too fast. Way too fast. Sometimes I wondered if he wanted to crash. Our dad put so much on his shoulders, and Percy was different than me. I always did alright with the pressure, because pleasing my dad has never been what was important. I just wanted to prove I didn’t need him. But Percy wanted to live up to my dad’s expectations. He wanted to make him happy, and that was always going to be an impossible task.” I shook my head and felt stupid when my eyes started to sting. “But

what the hell do I know? It was just an accident. He's gone now and I'll never get the chance to ask."

Darcy didn't say anything for a while. When she finally spoke, her voice was soft. "Why can't parents just be normal? Let their kids figure out their own dreams for once, you know?"

I chuckled. "That would be too easy, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah," she said. Darcy nuzzled closer to me and held me tighter. She didn't say anything, but I could sense the comfort there. It had been so long since I'd confided in anyone about anything. Marcus and Tristan knew about Percy, of course, but they'd been my friends when it happened. They only knew what they thought they knew about how I handled it all. The shit I told Darcy had never left my lips before, and it felt strange. In a way, it was like a weight had been lifted from me, but I also felt an odd connection to her-like knowing that she knew changed something.

I closed my eyes and tried to fall back asleep, but my brain was buzzing. Where was this leading?

I had no clue, but I knew the two of us were headed for a collision with my dad on Monday. All I could do now was enjoy the weekend and hope we found some way to keep my dad from sniffing out the truth.

DARCY

Dominic let me borrow one of his work shirts, which basically served as a dress for me. It was comfy and it smelled like him. I had every intention of stealing it and keeping it, no matter what he said.

I was sitting at a table in his kitchen beside a huge wall of windows. Dominic was rustling around in the fridge, putting together sandwiches for us. It was a sort of late lunch slash early dinner slash hungry after sex meal, and I frankly didn't care what I ate. I was starving.

I watched him and let my thoughts run over the last few weeks. I wished I knew how much of my feelings for Dominic were tied up in the physical chemistry. It was impossible to know. Every time I was near him, it was like my brain dumped every single chemical on hand into my system and sent me into some kind of horny berserker state of mind.

I'd always imagined when I met "the one" it would be so obvious. It'd be like the stories that ended in Happily Ever After. There'd be sparks and flames and certainty. I'd go to bed the night after we met with nothing but dreams of our life together. I'd be gushing about him to all my friends and family at every opportunity. It'd just be *obvious*. So what

was this? I was keeping him a secret, and it was confusing and up and down.

Every guy I'd been with before Dominic felt different. Sure, I'd been attracted to them at the start and even wondered about what the future would hold for us. But those early feelings always faded fast, or the guys would start showing their faults as soon as they got tired of being on good behavior. There'd been the one guy in college who tried to make me listen to an Andrew Tate podcast for the whole ride, all while pausing to make sure I understood every insanely sexist point the guy made. Or there was the one who refused to give oral for religious reasons, but wouldn't stop begging me to go down on him. "A man shouldn't be on his knees, especially not in front of a woman," he'd say. That one had ended quickly.

But even the more normal guys just faded for me. It always fizzled out, and I'd *never* had sex like what Dominic and I just had.

They all felt like drops of water in a hot pan. A little sizzle, but everything dried up in seconds. Compared to them, Dominic was a whole bottle of alcohol in a burning hot wok until flames licked the ceiling.

But how the hell was I supposed to know if that was all it took? Maybe the flames were just blinding me to the reality that I was making a huge mistake. Was I putting my career and the last two years of my life on the line because I was horny?

I let out a breath and decided to drop it for now. The answer wasn't going to come from circling the idea in my head. I'd just have to keep taking one step forward and see where this thing led. But I decided I wasn't going to run out of fear that I was making a mistake. It was better to follow

my heart to a mistake than it was to shut it down and sleepwalk toward my grave, wasn't it?

"Sorry," Dominic said over his shoulder. "I usually eat out after work. I don't have much here, but I think I can manage peanut butter and jelly."

"That's great."

"All I have to go on the side is... more peanut butter and jelly."

I laughed. "That's fine."

A few minutes later he set down a plate of two sandwiches in front of me. They were both cut diagonally across and stacked on top of each other. He had two for himself as well.

"So what's our plan for Monday?" I asked. "I'm assuming we tell nobody, right? I think maybe we should even try not to seem so pissy with each other at work. Like, I know we don't interact really, but maybe we should aim more for indifferent than angry non-contact, you know?" I asked the last part around a mouthful of salty peanut butter, soft bread, and sweet jelly. It had been so long since I'd eaten one of these that I was thinking I might have to ask him for a third. I'd skipped breakfast to get out for the run, had mind-blowing sex, and hadn't eaten all day.

"Yeah," he said. "My dad will also scrutinize business decisions. He'll be looking at articles I've approved and things like my decision to start a political column."

"What do you think he'll say?"

"It depends. Right now, sales are slipping, so he'll probably come in swinging. He'll suggest more aggressive changes

and claim they'll boost sales. He won't make it easy for me to stick to my vision."

"What will you do?"

"Tell him I'm not budging. If I'm lucky, he won't bother taking things to the next level. For now, I'm the CEO he hired to run this magazine. If he wants to intervene, he'll have to make things messy."

"If he finds out about us, you think he'll take it there?"

"Yeah," he said. "He will."

I looked down at my sandwich. "Are you sure you don't want to call this off? It'd be safer."

"I should," Dominic said. He reached across the table and took my hand in his, eyes holding mine. "But I'm not done with you, Darcy. Not even close."

I smiled, cheeks burning. "So am I still going to get fired if I don't nail this interview with my boss?"

"Yes," he said, half smiling. "A deal is a deal."

"Good. I don't want special treatment just because you're becoming obsessed with me."

I expected him to object to my word choice, but all he did was smirk.

"Well, it's rainy and nasty out. I'm sure you were planning to show me how romantic and thoughtful you can be by taking me somewhere special. What's the plan now?"

"The plan was always to get you fed and then get you back into bed." His eyes were like blue flames, and just like that, I felt my body start to heat up from my belly down to my core.

“Oh,” I said. “You’re not worn out from earlier?”

“That was just a warm up.”

Dominic had barely touched his sandwich, but he moved around the table and scooped me up. I laughed and swatted at him, but he carried me away from my delicious, unfinished sandwiches toward his bedroom again.

He took me on the bed slowly this time, like he was savoring every moment of it. All the frantic lust of last time was replaced with a careful, tenderness. He spent a long time kissing me as he peeled me out of the dress shirt he’d let me wear. He pinned my wrists down and kissed my neck to my breasts until my nipples hardened into sensitive peaks for him.

I rolled my head to the side, watching the drops of rain on his windows gather and grow until they slid down, colliding to make streaks on their way down. I felt like one of those drops as Dominic’s mouth roamed the bare skin of my chest and neck. Helpless. Carried along by forces outside my control. It should’ve felt scary, but all I felt was excitement. Sure, there was a little fear in not knowing what the future held, but I was on the ride. I didn’t want to get off.

“This feels better than it should,” he rasped in my ear, stubble tickling my skin.

“I want you inside me,” I breathed.

“Good. But you don’t get what you want until you *need* me. Wanting isn’t enough.”

I chewed my lip and arched my body up against the hard warmth of his.

“You make me so fucking hard, Darcy.”

He cupped me between my legs, rubbing a delicious circle with the weight of his palm and sliding his fingers up with torturous slowness. "I can't get enough of how you feel."

I was already past words, so I just moaned and pressed myself against him.

I closed my eyes, letting Dominic's touch carry me away. I distantly felt him stripping my panties away, then hesitating. "Shit," he said.

"What?"

"That was my only condom." Dominic had his pants on the bed and was digging in the pockets.

So much for my theory about hot guys and unlimited, magical condoms that appeared from thin air. "You don't have a stash somewhere?"

"Believe it or not, I don't do this sort of thing that often."

As much as I wanted to simply be happy that he wasn't a manwhore, I was frustrated. My core was practically aching already and his cock was just inches from me. I wanted him. I sat up, gripping his length and gently tugging him closer. "Are you clean?" I asked.

"Yes."

"So am I. Just don't finish inside me, okay?"

"Darcy... this isn't a good idea."

"Fuck good ideas. But fuck me first," I said, giving him one last tug and laying back. I met his eyes and waited. He was right. Of course he was right. But horny and common sense were like oil and water, and at that moment, the horny was what rose to the top of my cup.

Dominic made a low sound in his throat, then he planted both hands beside me and gripped his cock, guiding it inside.

I moaned. It felt amazing and terrifying. I'd never had a guy inside me without protection. *For good reason*, a voice in the back of my mind whispered.

I shut it all down and enjoyed him, wrapping my legs around his waist and urging him into me harder with my heels. "So good," I breathed.

"Fuck. You're so wet," Dominic gasped.

A reckless part of me wanted to keep my legs around him tight-to dig into him and hold him tight as he filled me with his seed. The idea of him filling me was inexplicably hot, but I silently promised myself I was just going to be a little reckless. Urging Dominic to come inside me would've been several levels beyond reckless. It would've been even more irresponsible and crazy than making eye contact with people who work the kiosks at the mall.

I pressed my palms against his back, sliding them up and under his shirt, pulling him closer to me. I felt so connected to him. It didn't matter that I still hadn't unwrapped the puzzle that was Dominic Lockwood. I may not know all his secrets, but it didn't matter. All I needed to know was that we were intertwined and, for the moment, we were each other's world. There was nothing else.

My climax came like thunder on a sunny afternoon. It was so sudden, powerful, and unexpected that I gasped. Every muscle in my body tensed around him and my core gripped him tighter. Dominic made a sound as I arched up toward him, grinding my body against his even as he pumped into me. He pulled himself out and I felt the hot spurts of his release on my belly and my mound.

“Oh, God,” I whispered.

“Fuck,” Dominic said, almost as if in agreement.

He collapsed beside me and touched a hand to my cheek, turning my face to his. He kissed me deep and soft, then smiled. “We can’t make a habit of that.”

“Yeah,” I said, even though dangerous things were swirling in my head. It was like taking my first hit of an addictive drug and being told not to do it again.

“Any chance I can go and finish those sandwiches? I’m still starving.”

Dominic laughed and slapped my ass as I got up from the bed. “Eat. You’re going to need your strength for tonight. I’ll run out to the store and get more condoms.”

Jesus. The Energizer Bunny could’ve learned a thing or two from this guy.

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DOMINIC

The smell of coffee and toast filled my apartment. I wasn't much of a cook, but I could manage sandwiches, toast, and coffee. She was still in bed, but that was no surprise. I'd never been able to sleep in—not even as a kid. Maybe it was anxiety, but as soon as the first flicker of consciousness hit me, I was awake. There was always too much to do. Too much to worry about.

It was dark out and I'd only turned on the dim lights in the kitchen.

I heard bare shuffling feet as I poured my coffee. I turned to see Darcy sleepily stumbling toward me. Her hair was a tangled mess and her eyes were heavy, but she practically crashed into me, wrapping both arms around my waist and letting her head fall against my chest.

"Morning," she said groggily.

I put my arms around her, surprised by how right it felt to hold her like this—to see the city sleeping outside my windows and to just put my arms around my woman in the kitchen. I had no idea feelings could develop so quickly. Every relationship I'd ever had in the past had been a slow, steady development that followed a logical curve. I'd

started to imagine that was just how it would always be. Some women would make sense as a match and some wouldn't. And even the ones who made sense eventually didn't. I never expected to meet someone who made me operate on an entirely different scale.

I simply wanted Darcy. It didn't matter if it made sense. It didn't matter how much chasing after her could potentially damage my goals. It was beyond that, like the instinct to eat, drink, and sleep. No matter how badly you wanted something, those instincts always grew stronger and stronger the longer you ignored them. Eventually, they won out. That's how Darcy felt to me. I could run from her. I could try to forget about her. I could even lie to myself and pretend I didn't need her. But every passing minute without her just made the need that much stronger.

Yesterday had been like finding a buffet after weeks of starvation. We'd spent almost the entire day in bed.

Darcy made a sound like snoring. I grinned, taking her shoulders and pulling her back softly. She stirred and blinked her eyes open.

"Did you fall asleep?"

"You're comfy," she said, smiling sleepily.

"Go back to bed and rest. Do you want toast? Coffee?"

"Both, with a side of Dominic."

"I can't come to bed. I've got to go for a run first."

"I'll come," she said.

"You're serious? You want to run with me?"

"Haven't you seen me training?"

I laughed. "Yes. I've seen your training. I also just watched you twist your ankle yesterday morning. You're not running on it."

She folded her arms. "It barely even hurts now."

"So it was just a ploy to get me to carry you back to my place?"

Darcy gave an adorable little shrug. "It was a happy accident. And the back to back orgasms yesterday must've had some healing properties, because it's seriously not that bad right now."

"You're still not running on it. I'm going for my run. You don't go anywhere."

She folded her arms, raising an eyebrow. "What if I escape while you're gone, Mr. Caveman? Are you going to find me, club me over the head, and drag me back to your sex mansion?"

"I'll just need to find a way to properly motivate you to stay."

"If you're going to bribe me with more sex, that's going to have to wait. I don't think my body can handle any more for at least twenty-four hours. I'm sore as hell down there."

I grinned. "Was I too rough?"

"No. You're too big, asshole. And I'm only human."

I made Darcy some toast with expertly spread butter and jelly, then prepared her coffee. She liked so much sugar and cream in it that I wasn't sure it actually qualified as coffee anymore. She continued to tease me and flirt while I made my way around the kitchen and I could imagine every morning starting this way.

Sleepy hugs. Back and forth conversation. It felt like a little touch of what home should've been, and that was a feeling I'd only ever experienced in my imagination.

"What is that smile for?" Darcy asked as she took the coffee and sipped.

"It's nothing."

"Spill it, big man. Sleeping with you should definitely give me free, all-time access to that brain of yours."

"Is that right?"

"It is. So, if you want more of this," she wiggled her brows and goofily gestured to her body. She was trying to be silly but it was still wildly sexy because her breasts were practically bursting out of my dress shirt, riding up to reveal the red triangle of her panties. "Then you are going to tell me why you were smiling."

I glanced out the window. The sun was already coming up and my favorite time to go on runs was slipping by. But I took a seat across from Darcy and searched my brain. What had I been thinking about?

"I guess I was just remembering how it used to be growing up. Our house was never really like a home. Dad had maids and tutors and a rotating cast of business partners and friends passing through, but the house was an extension of his career. He saw me and Percy as symbols of his status when people were over-which was almost always. Breakfast was for show. Dress well, behave, and impress. It wasn't enough to blend into the background with him. He wanted us to be ready when called upon to show off to his friends that we were following whatever they were talking about."

"Where was your mom?"

“She left when I was six. Dad had been leaving his morals behind for a while at that point, but the last straw for her was when he slept with a woman from work. She told him to call it off or she was going to walk. It was more of a chance than he deserved. We were on the staircase listening in. I still remember the day. It was snowy and Christmas was in a few days. I had no idea anything was going on. I’d just been trying to hear if they were going to talk about the presents they got us. Instead, I got to hear my dad tell my mom ‘you’re no spring chicken. Do you think you’ll find anyone better if you walk away? I dare you. Leave. I fucking dare you.’”

I blew out a breath. Reliving that moment had stirred up emotions I’d forgotten about for a long time.

“Jesus,” Darcy said softly. She reached over and squeezed my hand. “Nobody should have to hear that at any age, let alone six.”

“Yeah, well, my mom walked. About a year later she met a guy her age who was really into gardening and rock climbing. Now the two of them are living their best lives and kicking ass while my dad is still my dad. I wonder all the time what would’ve happened if she’d been able to keep custody of me and Percy. But Dad had a prenup, so she had almost no resources and his lawyers made sure she only had visitation rights. Dad made those visits so painful she eventually stopped making time for them. Now it has been years since I’ve seen her.”

“What? Really? Where is she now?”

“She lives in Florida last time I checked. I’m not sure if she’d want to see me, anyway. I think it’s easier to forget we ever happened. Seeing me just makes her think of dad and Percy, and both are their own kind of painful.”

Darcy looked like she was about to cry. I chuckled at her and gave her hand a squeeze. "Relax," I said. "It's old shit. I'm fine."

"It would be okay if you weren't," she said. "You know that, right?"

"I'm fine. I've got new priorities and I've moved on."

Darcy looked skeptical, but I appreciated that she didn't push me on it. She just nodded and gave the table a little drum with her fingers. "Well, are you going to go for that run sometime today? Because I'm expecting pizza and rom coms today. In bed. And don't try to tell me pizza isn't allowed in your bed."

I grinned. "If pizza in bed gets you in my bed, it's allowed."

"Good. So go on. Do your little running thing. I'll be here when you get back."

"You'd better be here. If not, I'll come find you."

"Don't make it sound so dirty and fun or I'll leave just to see you do it."

I grinned. "Stay," I said, pointing. "Or else."

"Scary."

I left her there at the table to get my shoes on and couldn't help thinking how much things would change in one short day. Monday would come and my dad would be there at *The Squawker*. He'd be sniffing like a fucking hound dog for any sign of my weakness, and I wasn't confident I could hide Darcy from him. Hell, he'd see her and probably already suspect I was attracted. How hard would it be for him to ask around and learn there was some obvious tension between us?

I tightened my laces and left the apartment. I needed to get all the stress and doubts out of my system, because I'd fully planned to enjoy the rest of today with Darcy. Besides, she thought she was too sore for more sex, but I was going to enjoy showing her there were ways to work around that soreness and still give her the orgasms she deserved.

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DARCY

Dominic came back from his run and hopped straight in the shower. He left the door cracked open and had to know, but didn't care, that I could see him stripping down. I was laying on the bed with my phone and had a straight shot of his firm ass and broad, tapered back. I could even see him scrubbing soap on his hard body in the shower for a little while until the glass fogged up.

I squirmed a little uncomfortably. I didn't know it was possible to maintain such a constant level of arousal. I'd never come close to having sex like we had together. It was just... Different. Dominic seemed like he was completely in tune with every part of me. He knew when I was nearing the edge and he sadistically enjoyed bringing me right to the brink of orgasm and lingering there as long as he pleased.

He was also *big*. I could still feel the ache from where he'd taken me again and again. It wasn't entirely unpleasant, but I really wasn't sure I could handle him again today.

I was idly scrolling TikTok videos and watching one of a little kid who had an unusually strong love of corn—a food he described as a delicious lump with the knobs. I was grinning at the dumb video when an email came through

from Jasmine. I tapped it and read the subject line, heart pounding.

JASMINE MARSHALL

Subject: Job Opportunity

Hey Darcy, I hope all is well. It turns out leaving The Squawker might have been the best decision I've ever made. Last week, I started working as a lead editor for The Union Coast. We just lost two long-time writers on my team to retirement and the bosses are looking for someone young and energetic with a strong work ethic. Sound like anyone you know?

Anyway, I think I can hold the position open for a couple weeks at most. The ladies who left knew they were on the way out for months, so they worked ahead and gave us some material to tide us over while we do a job search. It's not completely up to me, but I'm sure I can get you in for an interview and I can put in a great word for you. Just let me know, okay?

I hope all is well with you (Just not so well that you don't want to come join me!)

Xx

Jasmine

MY HEART HADN'T STOPPED POUNDING. I WAS LAYING THERE IN bed like I'd just run a marathon-or at least like twenty steps with my cardiovascular system. My dad would've been over the freaking moon if I told him about this email. He'd have me doing mock interviews at the house

immediately. He'd be calling all his friends to see if he could put in any additional good words for me.

I should've been thrilled, but...

Dominic came out from the bathroom wrapped in a towel with his hair wet. He used a smaller towel to rub his hair and leaned in the doorway, looking at me. "What is it?"

"Nothing!" I set the phone down beside me and tapped the power button to turn the screen off. "I was just waiting for you to finish."

He nodded and came in to lay on top of the covers beside me. He stared ahead, jaw muscles ticking and brow furrowed.

"What's going on with you?" I asked. "You look stressed."

"I'm fine," Dominic said.

"Okay." I curled up beside him, resting my head on his bare shoulder and breathing in the scent of his freshly cleaned body. Something was definitely wrong, but I didn't think pressing him on it was going to help get the truth out of him. "Hey," I said. "I *really* want some pizza today. Pizza and a rom com. That would be the perfect day for me. Oh, and a box of wine."

He turned, momentarily pulled from his funk to stare at me. "Pizza and rom com. Yeah, I get that part. But boxed wine? You realize I can afford to get the good stuff if you want it, right?"

"No," I shook my head, smiling as I sat up cross legged on the bed beside him. "I want the cheapest, greasiest pizza we can find. And I want boxed wine. It's what me and Charleston used to have on weekends back in high school."

"You're sure you two never fucked?" he asked.

Normally, I found myself getting annoyed quickly when guys were jealous. But with Dominic, it felt more like possessiveness than jealousy. He wasn't so much worried that I would have feelings for another guy. It was more like he had decided I belonged to him and he wanted me all to himself. I could picture Elizabeth or Charleston debating me on how those two were basically the same thing, but they weren't. I kinda liked feeling like I was his, so his question made me smile.

"You have nothing to worry about," I said. "I may not know what this thing between us qualifies as, but I know I like it, okay? And even if you did have something to worry about, it definitely wouldn't be from Charleston. He's literally like a brother to me. There's nothing there."

Dominic held my gaze for a few moments, then nodded. He gently took my chin in his upturned hand, tilting my face up toward his. "I don't know what we are, either. But I know I don't want to share you. Understand?"

I nodded.

"Good girl." Dominic kissed me softly, smiling with a sinister edge. "You're mine until told otherwise."

"Bossy," I said, smiling back up at him.

"So why did you two drink boxed wine? Normal high schoolers steal beers or liquor."

"My dad always kept a few boxes in the pantry for cooking. He said you couldn't tell the difference between the boxed stuff and the good stuff once it cooks down. But it also meant he never really kept tabs on how much went missing, so Charleston and I had free dibs on as much as we could drink when my parents went out. We'd get drunk on the stuff, even though it always gave us headaches. We

got this terrible greasy pizza from a local place and ate it right out of my bed while we watched old rom coms.”

“Threat or not, if I ever find you and this guy in your bed, he’s leaving through a window.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “We were kids. Charleston is an entrepreneurial badass now. We haven’t hung out like that in ages. Now we just meet for lunch when he can squeeze it in. *In a public place*,” I added.

“Good. Well, what kind of boxed wine do you want? I’ll go pick everything up.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“You stay here and rest.”

I grinned. “You fucked me really well last night, but I can walk, Dominic. Get over yourself.”

He chuckled. “I was thinking about your ankle, but fine. You’re still not going out with that on. I can see your nipples, and those are just for me.”

I looked down at the dress shirt he’d let me borrow. Sure enough, my nipples had been standing at attention ever since Dominic started talking like I belonged to him. “Okay, but my clothes from last night are dirty. We could swing by my place.”

“I’ll go. You wait here.”

I sighed. “Are you just dead set on going and fetching something for me? Is that what’s going on here?”

“Yes,” he said, smiling slightly. “So give me your keys and I’ll go pick you something out.”

I folded my arms. I couldn’t remember how much of a mess my place was, but I didn’t take Dominic for the type to be

scared off by that sort of thing. I grabbed my bag from the nightstand and fished out my keys. I texted him my address and gave him a little smack on the ass to see him off.

Once I was alone in his place, I couldn't help but imagine how strange it would be to actually be his girlfriend—to live in an apartment like this. I wondered if he'd expect me to lay around all day in sexy lingerie with the crotch cut out. Maybe he'd want me to feed him grapes while my perfectly curled hair dangled over his face. Or would he want me to get implants and lip filler so I could prance around his apartment like some kind of trophy prize?

I found myself grimacing. I had no reason to think Dominic would expect any of that, so why were the thoughts circling my brain? Was I looking for an excuse to run already?

I shifted uncomfortably. Running was what I did when it came to relationships, wasn't it? I was more than happy to let things get started, but when the faintest whiff of commitment came up, I vanished faster than that werewolf guy from *Twilight's* acting career. In high school I'd bailed on my first serious relationship when he started talking about whether I'd consider applying to the same colleges as him. In college, I'd had a little fun here and there, but I always ended up cutting things short when I had a big assignment coming up. Even after college, I'd been putting off relationships because I was too busy with *The Squawker*.

My dad had said you take care of yourself first and worry about everyone else later. That's all I'd been doing. I picked at some of the threads on the shirt Dominic had given me but the damn thing was too fancy and none of them even came loose. I got up in a huff of sudden frustration and opened his fridge, not even knowing what I was looking for.

I found a jar of pickle spears and opened it up, snacking with a glazed over look on my face. I had a million-dollar view of the city. I was wearing my ridiculously hot boss' shirt because he'd let me borrow it after fucking the living shit out of me. Hell, I was practically standing bare foot in one of my daydreams and I still couldn't stop myself from wondering if this was all a mistake.

What was wrong with me?

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DOMINIC

I didn't usually eat greasy pizza, drink boxed wine, watch rom coms, or do any combination of the three in my bed. But there I was with a pizza box on my lap and a bendy slice of Darcy's request-caramalized onions and ground beef-dangling from one hand. The acrid aftertaste of the boxed wine was in the back of my throat, and my TV screen was lit up with an attractive couple looking dreamily into each other's eyes in the middle of a snowstorm.

"What is this one called again?" I asked.

"Snowy With A Chance of Love," Darcy said around a mouthful of food.

"Charming." We were about halfway through the movie and it was everything I expected a rom com to be in the worst ways. The guy ran his family's inn. It was a small mountain town and the girl was driving through to get to a wedding venue to marry a guy she had doubts about marrying. She stayed the night at the inn, got snowed in, and wound up having nobody for company except the handsome innkeeper and their fireside chats. We were at the part of the movie now where the snow storm was projected to clear the next day and her old life was calling."

"I hate this part," Darcy said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because she's going to be stupid and leave Salem behind at his inn. But she *knows* she loves him, not Harrison."

"Hmm," I said.

"What? You think she should go back to him? He was an absolute prick."

"No. I don't think she should. But I'm guessing this gives Salem a chance to make some grand gesture to win her back, right?"

"Of course it does, but she should've just stayed. They both know it's right."

"People are stupid," I said with a shrug. "And from my experience, they are the dumbest when something good is staring them right in the face."

Darcy had been about to take a bite of her pizza, but she gave me a funny look, hesitating with it in her hand.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing." She wolfed down the rest of the pizza and sat back, dusting the crumbs from her hands over my comforter.

As predicted, the movie ended with an over-the-top race to stop the wedding from Harrison and somehow managed to make Darcy tear up, even though she claimed to have seen it half a dozen times already.

I took our trash to the kitchen and left Darcy on the bed with a balled up tissue and a longing look in her eyes. What was it about women wanting tragedy to precede their

happiness? Would it be so bad to simply find the right person and skip all the drama?

I shoved the remains of our pizza in the fridge.

People didn't work like that, though, did they? People were messy and stupid and short-sighted. Maybe tragedy always came before the best love stories because if the feelings were strong enough, it was impossible to be smart. People in love did stupid things, I guessed.

I caught a glimpse of Darcy on my bed from the kitchen. The white light of the screen was flickering across her features and the wall behind her. She saw me and gave a tearful smile and double thumbs up. I smiled back and something inside me felt like it moved—something in a place where I hadn't felt anything move in a very long time. I wanted to go over there and put my arms around her—to tell her I'd never make her cry like that movie did. I wanted to protect her from everything that might ever hurt her feelings.

I desperately wanted to cling to whatever was growing between us, but I wanted to promise myself I wouldn't sacrifice everything I'd worked for, also.

Tomorrow, I had to go back to work. Tomorrow, we both went back to the real world. We went back to *The Squawker*. But this time, my father was going to be there.

If I knew the man at all, he was going to fuck everything up.

DARCY

I was still riding the high of my weekend with Dominic when I got back to work. There was a pleasant buzz at the back of my mind and smiles were coming easier than they should've. Elizabeth picked up on it almost immediately when we ran into each other coming in the lobby of the building. The building was still used as apartments on the first floor, even though I'd heard rumors that Dominic, Marcus, and Tristan were making plans to buy the whole place out and expand the space. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. It would be like my little family turning into some kind of circus act.

"How many?" Elizabeth asked casually as we waited for the elevator.

"How many what?" I asked.

"Orgasms. How many orgasms did he give you this weekend?"

I glared at her.

"Don't be mad that I can see right through you, dude. You're fucking glowing. How many was it, like fifty?"

Something like that, I thought. But I shook my head at her, feeling guilty. I'd told her if there was anything to tell about me and Dominic, I'd tell her. Instead, I found myself reflexively lying. "If any orgasms came, they were at my own hands. Okay?"

"Well, good for you, then. Self care is the best kind of care. That's what my grandma always said, at least, and now I'm wondering if my sweet little Grandma Bobo was diddling her dingleberry every night at the retirement home." Elizabeth looked distant for a moment, then shivered. "I hope she washed her hands regularly."

We stepped into the elevator. "So did you hear Dominic's dad is supposed to be here today?" I asked.

"What? No. Where did you hear that?"

Stupid. If I was going to be a shitty friend and a liar, I needed to do a better job of not letting privileged information slip. "Oh, I'm not sure," I said. "Maybe in the break room last week?"

Elizabeth looked skeptical and a little hurt at the same time. She probably could sense I was hiding things from her, and I hated that I couldn't just make myself tell her the truth. But what would happen if word got out? Especially now that Dominic's father was going to be around the office. I couldn't afford to be careless, even if it meant lying to my best friend.

As soon as the doors opened, I could sense a change in the air. When Jasmine was replaced, everybody had been terrified to speak for over a week. The office was like a graveyard ruled by three hot overlords. Little by little, things had returned to some version of normal. It was never as crazy as it had been with Jasmine around, but

people learned it was okay to talk again, even if most conversations were more work-focused than before.

Today, it was like stepping back in time to that first week. About half of the staff had arrived already and were at their stations. Nobody was talking and nobody was moving their eyes from their screens.

I saw four shadowed figures behind Dominic's half-closed blinds. From the size and builds, I pegged three as the bosses right away. The fourth was a big man, but hunched over at the neck and a little rounder at the edges. I guessed it was Mr. Gregor Lockwood himself, Dominic's dad.

Elizabeth and I shared a silent look, then split to head to our work stations.

I was tempted to keep staring toward the windows of Dominic's office to get a look at his dad, but I knew I needed to play it cool. I needed to be smart. That meant keeping my head down and working my ass off.

Thankfully, I had plenty to work on. Even though Dominic had shot it down, I was still working on tweaks to my pitch. He complained it was too local, and maybe there was some merit to his complaint. I'd been mostly focused on local scholarships and programs in my example within the pitch. If Dominic wanted the magazine to be more global, I needed to show him I could scale my pitch to match his vision.

Admittedly, I'd taken it personal when he first turned down the idea. I knew Jasmine was going to approve it because she trusted my eye for stories, but it didn't make sense to expect Dominic to trust me like that already. If I wanted to seriously think about becoming more than just an employee to him, I needed to learn to separate work from our relationship—if that's what it was. So that's what I was

doing. I was taking his criticism objectively and trying to think about ways to make my pitch more global.

When I wasn't working on my weekly assignments or poking at the slowly growing interview piece, I was scouring the web to find the best scholarships across the country. I was emailing professors and academic advisors at colleges from the UK to Dubai and gradually compiling a list of the best of the best opportunities.

Whether he liked it or not, Dominic was going to approve my pitch. He was many things, but he really did care about what was best for the magazine at the heart of it all. Pretty soon, I knew I'd have a revised idea that he couldn't turn down, even if he wanted to.

I was a few minutes into work when an email notification popped up on my screen. The subject line told me all I needed to know. "Come to my office, now."

It was from Dominic, of course. When I glanced toward the window, I saw all four figures were still, as if they were waiting for me.

With a pit in my stomach the size of a large movie theater popcorn, I got up and smoothed out my dress. I'd put on something extra nice today because I wanted Dominic to notice it. It was stupid, probably. I should've been trying everything I could to stay under the radar, but I did it anyway.

When I opened the door to his office, I felt impossibly small. All four men were well over six feet tall, broad, and imposing in their own ways. The weight of their combined gazes made me want to shrink into a corner, but then the stubborn part of me resented that. I straightened my shoulders and held my head up high, making an effort to meet each pair of eyes. "Yes?"

“You’re Darcy McClain?” the older man asked. I recognized him from a little bit of internet stalking. He was Mr. Gregor Lockwood, a Dutch native who came to the US as a child with nothing and became a self-made millionaire. He was tall, fair-skinned, blue eyed, and had dusty blonde hair. He might have been in his late sixties, but several signs of a handsome youth still clung to his sagging face. He had the same strong chin and chiseled nose as Dominic, even if their complexions were different. There was a similarity in how intense the eyes were, too.

“Yes,” I said, staring up at him. My blood was already boiling. I didn’t realize how much I’d want to punch this man in his face and balls at the same time until I was finally face to face with him—the asshole who got me expelled because I bruised his ego.

“I remember you,” Gregor said calmly. “You wrote a slanderous piece on my family a few years ago.”

I clenched my jaw. *Don’t say something stupid. Don’t say something stupid.* “Yes,” I said carefully. “Although I wouldn’t call it slander. That would imply something in the piece was false.” I smiled as sweetly as I could, even as I was internally yelling at myself to shut up and stop drawing attention. I managed to shut my mouth before I said more.

Dominic looked like he was about to say something, but his father stepped a little closer to me. I could smell the scent of cigars and expensive cologne drifting from him. Up close, I could see a little patch of white hairs on his neck he’d missed while shaving. “Tell me why I shouldn’t have you removed from the building right this moment, Darcy McClain.”

“Because I’m good at what I do,” I said. My heart was pounding so hard I was sure all the men in the room could hear it. I knew I was supposed to bow my head and

apologize. I was supposed to act like *I* was the one who screwed up. But fuck that. “And because you got me kicked out of college already. Do you really need to kick me out of a job, too?”

His eyes flickered and for a split second, I actually thought he was going to lash out and hit me. I stood my ground until Dominic moved between us. He put himself in front of me and faced his father.

“Enough,” he said.

His father studied him with calculated coldness, then smirked. That little smirk told me everything. He’d been testing us to see if Dominic would come to my rescue, and now he knew everything he needed to know. *Just like that.* I felt sick to my stomach.

“Yes,” Gregor finally said. “I suppose if you value this employee so highly, we can keep her around.” He looked at me and made a dismissive “shoo” gesture. “You can get back to work, McClain.”

“Don’t speak to my employees like dogs,” Dominic grated.

There was that grin again. Gregor gave me a ridiculous little bow of his head, still flashing that slimy smile. “You’re free to go, Miss McClain.”

Marcus coughed into his hand and I could’ve sworn he said “asshole” in the middle of the cough. Tristan elbowed him hard in the side and Gregor shot him a look, but didn’t say anything.

I tried not to look back at Dominic as I left, even though I was fairly sure his father had just masterfully figured out we were together after little more than a couple moments. A cold fist gripped my stomach.

I went through the motions of working at my station for a few minutes. When I saw Farhad, Elizabeth, and Polly heading for the break room, I got up and followed.

Farhad was complaining about Kirk when I came in. Apparently, Kirk was acting like he had a stick up his ass ever since Gregor Lockwood showed up.

“Hey,” Elizabeth said as soon as I stepped in, cutting Farhad off mid-sentence. “What was that in there? We all saw you go in with the four of them. What happened?”

“Uh, I’m not sure exactly,” I said.

“I was talking,” Farhad said pointedly. “Anyway, if Kirk wants to suck Gregor’s dick, that’s his prerogative,” Farhad said. “But if he’s going to be this obnoxious, I’ll start working alone.”

Polly grinned. “I used to work with Gregor, actually. That’s where Dominic got me from. I was doing HR for a company he runs out of New Jersey. He’d spend a few weeks in the office and then rotate his time around other companies across the country. There were a few people like that every time. The Kirks, I mean. They kiss up and hope he’ll swoop them off to his main headquarters in California with the cushy pay and the big offices. If it’s any consolation, those people always relaxed once he was out of the office again.”

Elizabeth was idly braiding a strand of her blue hair, clearly annoyed to have to wait to get her ears on whatever gossip I was holding. “Okay, okay. Now let Darcy tell us what happened in there.”

“Okay, I’m about to tell you guys something I really shouldn’t. Me and Domin-Mr. Lockwood-have sort of started seeing a little bit of each other after work, but you can’t tell *anyone*.”

“I fucking knew it!” Elizabeth jumped, fist pumped, and then leaned back with her knees bent like she was firing two finger pistols into the sky in an Old Western town. She was in juicy gossip bliss.

Polly was standing closest to her and she took a few cautious step backwards, probably wisely. If Elizabeth got any more excited she might put someone’s eyes out with those finger guns.

Farhad sighed and walked over, handing Elizabeth a twenty dollar bill.

“Thank you, thank you,” Elizabeth said.

“You guys *bet* on this?” I asked.

“Of course we did.”

“I didn’t,” Polly said.

“You specifically said you weren’t going to bet because you didn’t have any cash on you. Don’t play little miss innocent now.”

Polly’s cheeks went red.

“But don’t turn this around on us!” Elizabeth approached, jabbing her finger at me. “You’re the one who was sneaking around with intimate knowledge about Mr. Lockwood’s cock, body hair situation, and sexual preferences. And you *dare* to keep that from us?”

I was trying not to smile because I wasn’t completely sure Elizabeth was kidding, but my expression cracked into amusement. “I still don’t plan to talk about any of that. I’m only telling you about this at all because I think his dad knows. I think that’s what Gregor is here to do—to check on Dominic and look for reasons to... I don’t know.”

“Gregor is the one who put him here in the first place,” Polly said. “Why would he look for reasons to sabotage Dominic?”

“Because Dominic said there’s this weird power struggle between them. His dad has never wanted to admit he’ll be replaced some day. He just wants Dominic to be beneath him for eternity or something. So if Dominic comes in here and proves he can actually succeed, it’ll be impossible for Gregor to keep thinking Dominic needs him.”

“Well,” Farhad said. “To be fair, I think getting handed a company to run qualifies as getting more than a little help from dear old daddy.”

“Yeah, sure, but I don’t think either of them are worried about that part. Gregor just doesn’t think Dominic can do what he does, or he doesn’t want to believe he can. So he gave him our magazine, which he probably thought had so little potential that Dominic was doomed to fail. At best, he’d just eek out a little more profit, but *The Squawker* was always going to be some local magazine earning pennies compared to his other companies.”

“So he shows up now because he’s worried Dominic is actually going to prove him wrong?” Farhad said. His arms were crossed and he looked thoughtful. “You’re thinking he’s going to try to sabotage him now?”

“Yes. And when he called me in there just now, he made it obvious to all of us that he knew we were together. He basically threatened to fire me to lure Dominic into defending me.”

“Are you asking us to band together to help stop Mr. Lockwood’s dad from screwing him over?” Elizabeth asked.

"I didn't think I was asking you guys anything," I said. "I'm just thinking out loud."

"I'm in!" Elizabeth said. "And when we successfully stop his evil dad from ruining his budding business, he can reward Tristan with his selection of a woman from the office. Obviously, he'll choose me because I'll make sure to flash a little cleavage his way between now and the rescue."

"Elizabeth," I said. "No offense, but you're like an A cup. And probably not even a capital A. How are you going to show cleavage?"

"Some guys are into that, asshole." Elizabeth put both hands to her chest and adjusted... what she had. "I'm just saying I'll make sure Tristan knows I'm ready, willing, wet, and—"

Farhad raised both hands, as if trying to shield himself from Elizabeth. "Gah. Can someone get her to stop?"

Polly slipped behind Elizabeth and put a hand over her mouth before Elizabeth could say more. Instead of fighting, Elizabeth just folded her arms and waited, mouth still covered.

"I guess we should all just be aware and keep an eye out, okay?" I said. "I don't know what Gregor is planning to do, but we've had enough changes in leadership around here. I also don't want to see our magazine torpedoed into the ground over some grudge match between Dominic and his dad."

"And you want Dominic to keep tapping that well of yours with his girthy... bucket," Elizabeth said. "Lost the metaphor a little there, but you get the point."

"This isn't about the two of us. We don't even know what we're calling it. It's just casual, so my main concern is the

magazine.”

“Right,” Farhad said, voice laced with sarcasm. “The magazine.”

Polly pulled down the blinds at the window and sucked in a sharp breath. “Uh. Looks like we should get out there. Gregor is announcing something.”

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DOMINIC

I wanted to grab my dad by the shoulders and chuck him out the nearest fucking window. Before now, the hostilities between us had always stayed bound by some unspoken lines—like the point just between open hostility and passive aggressive shittiness. The way he'd been with Darcy earlier had crossed those lines, and it felt like everything was on the table now. It was war, and the loser might just lose everything.

I scanned the office floor for Darcy and spotted her emerging from the break room with Polly, Farhad, and Elizabeth. The sheepish look she gave me told me everything. She'd been in there telling them about us. I might have been pissed any other time, but I suspected she felt the cat was already out of the bag. She wasn't stupid. She'd seen the messages my dad was sending loud and clear. *I know about you two, and I'm going to put a stop to this.*

Her friends were also giving me extra long glances as they scurried back to their stations.

My father waited self-importantly, hands clasped in front of his expensive suit. He'd always told me as a kid that power was perception. You could be the richest man in the world

and people would think you were nothing if you didn't make sure they knew it. It was why he spent obscene amounts of money on the best clothes. His watch was worth more than most people's homes. His wardrobe was probably well into the price of an entire neighborhood of houses, and I knew for a fact he spent a small fortune having what was left of his hair styled every morning. The man reeked of money.

"I haven't formally introduced myself yet," he said. He spoke loud enough to be heard, but only just. It was another tactic I knew he loved. If they have to listen hard to hear you, you've got their attention captured. He was all about subtle power grabs and control. "I'm Gregor Lockwood. I have been in the business of doing business since I was fourteen."

I tuned him out as he droned on with the speech I'd heard a million times. I knew what he really wanted. He was scanning the employees while he spoke and evaluating everyone's reaction. I knew he was making mental notes of anyone who didn't look properly impressed or willing enough to kiss his ass. He'd do his best to make sure those people weren't part of the company for long.

"When I acquire a new company, I like to treat all of my employees to the wisdom I've earned over the last forty years. That's why you're all invited to fly to California with me this weekend and attend my *You Are The Change* conference. Lodging, food, and travel will all be covered, of course. The conference is optional, but I highly encourage you all to consider." He smiled, gave a little tilt of his chin, and headed for my office.

I cringed. "Optional". I knew what that meant, too. Anybody who chose not to go wasn't loyal.

It grated at me. He gave me this assignment because he thought it would be impossible to succeed. Now that I felt just weeks away from turning the corner and really starting to grow the magazine, he showed up to dip his fingers into everything. If the magazine failed now, he'd claim it was because I started it off in the wrong direction. If it succeeded, he'd try to claim it was because of his "intervention."

Like always, my old man wanted to take control away from me, and my head was spinning as I tried to think up some way to stop it from working, just this one time.

I spotted Darcy, who looked like she was struggling to digest everything she'd just heard. I tried to tell myself I was most worried about losing *The Squawker*. That's where my focus should've been. I didn't want my dad to win. This was finally my shot to prove I didn't need him—that I could run a business differently than he did and still succeed. If I lost this, I didn't know what would be next.

But all I could think about was what would happen if he fired Farhad and Elizabeth—or even Darcy. She wouldn't stand for her friends being let go. She'd expect me to step in, and if I didn't, I'd be lumped in as an enemy right along with my father. *Rightfully so, too*. But directly opposing my father would also give him grounds to remove me, which I knew he wanted.

One way or another, I was going to have to choose between the company and Darcy. I knew that much. My father was too sadistic to see things end any other way.

I was on a fucking tightrope, and one wrong move could cost me everything.



MARCUS AND TRISTAN SAT IN MY OFFICE AFTER HOURS. THE STAFF had mostly trickled out except a few grim faces lit by the blue light of their monitors. The main lights in the office shut off after six and only a few spare fluorescent panels lit the office floor.

“Are you two going to go?” I asked. We’d been talking strategy for the past few hours but hadn’t quite landed on the topic of the conference yet.

“I’ve heard your dad’s speech plenty of times,” Marcus said. “But I also love Cali.” He shrugged. “I’ll probably go. Hell, your old man would likely come after me with his cane if I didn’t, right?”

“He would,” Tristan agreed. “I’ll be there.”

I threaded my fingers, leaning on my desk. I felt tired. So fucking tired. I just wanted to go home and know Darcy would be there in my bed, but she wouldn’t. We both still needed to figure out what we were and what we wanted to do about it. “I want to put together a complete report on our earnings and projected earnings for the next quarter. I’m sure my dad is going to try to claim we’re running this into the ground. We need to have something ready for when he does. I want to be ready to make a case for where we’re taking the company. That means a full list of our plans moving forward and how we expect them to benefit the bottom line. Understood?”

“Yeah,” Marcus said. “I can manage all that for you.”

“Good. What about expansion efforts, Tristan? Anything positive we can tell him is in the works?”

“I’m working with all the biggest online book publishers. I think we can manage to release the magazine in a sort of e-book format every time we have a new issue. I’m not sure if

we'll get publishers behind us or not, but it could potentially be huge—by far our biggest income stream.”

I nodded thoughtfully. I hadn't even thought of that. Tristan was damn good at his job, and I was glad to have him at my side. The same was true for Marcus. Both of them were part of the reason I thought my dad's philosophical playbook for running businesses was bullshit. Real power wasn't shoving people's faces into the dirt. It was finding good people and surrounding yourself with them. It was leaning into people's strengths and letting them supplement your own abilities. It was listening to good ideas and encouraging creativity.

It was... My thoughts drifted back to when Darcy had pitched her weekly piece and I'd blown it off. *Fuck*. I was so worried about not treating her special that I'd gone in the opposite direction. Maybe the pitch wasn't perfect for my vision of the company, but I'd seen the potential and pretended I didn't. Then again, it might be too late now. If I suddenly approved a weekly piece from Darcy, my father would have all the justification he could ever want to swoop in and remove me from my position. He'd accuse me of favoring her because we were fucking and nobody would be able to stop him.

“You alright?” Marcus asked. “You look like you want to punch someone. May I suggest Tristan? I think he could take a punch better than me.”

“It's nothing,” I said. But I kept thinking about how it was all going to come down to a choice. Would I choose Darcy and give my father all the ammunition he'd need to remove me from the company, or would I choose the company and let him sacrifice Darcy to test my resolve?

I wished I fucking knew.

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DARCY

I'd never been to California. I found myself surprised by how much of the landscape resembled a desert. In my mind, the state was an oasis of perfect weather and people pumped full of plastic wearing expensive clothes. Ever since we landed, I got the impression it was more like a few very small islands of perfection surrounded by not-so-perfect. I guessed that wasn't so far off from how my life felt at the moment.

On the one hand, I had these beautiful glimmers of hope and excitement to reach for. I had my time with Dominic, which was only seeming to feel more important and amazing with each passing day. I had the vision of what I could be for *The Squawker*—the ace writer who puts out a brand-solidifying piece every week. I even had the tempting vision of the day my dad finally admitted what I was doing mattered, even if it wasn't his exact goal for my future. It was all right there, so close I could almost reach out and grab it. Except just beyond all of those goals was ruin and misery.

There was Dominic's dad in the picture like black waters rising and lapping at the shores of my little islands of hope. There was my own insecurity and inability to believe I was

worthy enough for a man to commit to because I hadn't really done anything worth doing yet. My dad's constant pressure to "be something" was so grilled into me that I just couldn't picture why someone like Dominic would make any sort of sacrifice to be with me. What more could I be to him than some sort of fuck toy—a fun distraction?

I rubbed my eyes and groaned. I was in the hotel Gregor Lockwood had put us up in. It was top of the line, of course, with excessively large rooms for every employee and a whole floor just for members of *The Squawker*. I dropped my bags off beside the bed a few minutes ago after the flight. We'd all been sent First Class while Dominic and the bosses flew private.

My communication with Dominic had been sparse at best. We'd spent the entire weekend together, then his father showed up on Monday, and aside from a few clipped texts that he was busy and would talk when he could, I had next to nothing. Now it was the weekend again and last week already felt like ages ago. It felt so long ago that I was second guessing if any of it had really happened.

There was a knock at my door. I stretched, rolled out my neck, and padded to the door. I expected the hotel staff to be there and was wondering if it was something I was going to have to tip them for. When I opened the door, Dominic let himself in the room before I had a chance to react and closed it behind himself.

"Oh," I gasped. My heart was already pounding and my vagina had already smashed the "break in case of emergency" glass that apparently allowed me to get wet in fractions of a second.

"I don't have long," he said. He looked so painfully good. I wanted to reach up and take him in my arms, even to just hold him. But all I did was stand there stupidly, staring with

my mouth hanging open. "I'm in a room on the floor up from here. Room 2C. Here's one of my keycards." He handed me a gold, shiny card that felt heavier than the one I had for my room."

"Why are you giving me this?" I asked.

"Because tonight, I have a meeting with the old man and some of his partners in the conference room by the lobby. I'm going to be tied up with shit he has planned for us until after his speech tomorrow. When that's all over, I want you to come see me. We need to talk and figure out how we want to move forward."

I swallowed hard. *Talk*. Right. Talking made sense. My horny ass had been picturing him saying something more like, "I need you on my bed, naked, and ready to die of excessive orgasms." But talking made a little more practical sense.

"What about our interview?" I asked. I wasn't sure where the question came from, but I'd been spending more time picking at the interview piece I'd been writing. Little by little, it was taking shape and I was actually starting to get excited for people to read it. I knew I needed more, though. Dominic had been holding back on me, and I wanted the last few puzzle pieces.

"Darcy... I'm not going to fire you. We can forget the interview. Nobody will want to read about me."

"Beg to differ. We made a deal, and I still want my interviews until the piece is finished."

He lowered his eyes, then nodded. "Alright. We can talk more after the convention tomorrow. About everything."

My throat clicked with a swallow. I didn't know why, but those last two words sent a chill through me. "Okay. See

you then.”

Dominic looked like he was about to kiss me, but he ended up putting the side of his fist against the door frame, almost regretfully. He backed away, then left.

I felt like I could breathe again once he was gone. I flopped down on the hotel bed, lying on top of the comforter and staring at the ceiling. What did Dominic want to talk about? What was “everything”? And why the hell were the water bottles in the room ten dollars?



I STIRRED MY CEREAL AND WATCHED THE MILK SLOWLY TURN chocolatey brown. I was in a large carpeted room strewn with circular tables. This morning, everyone from *The Squawker* had walked from the hotel to this place. Employees guided us past people setting up for some sort of gun show to our right and led us back through a circular hallway to a room full of catered breakfast food on silver platters.

Elizabeth had a little bit of everything piled on her plate until I could hardly see her face. Farhad took about five servings of scrambled eggs, and Polly was poking at a bowl of fruit.

“This is so weird,” I said.

“Yeah, no shit,” Farhad agreed. “What is he going to talk about? Business strategy?”

“I looked it up,” Elizabeth said. She pulled out her phone and turned it to face us. There was video of Gregor standing on stage with one of those headset mics gesturing and speaking enthusiastically. The camera panned to a few dozen people dressed in business casual clothes—probably

his employees. They were all watching with pained expressions.

I grinned as she tucked the phone back in her bag. "So it's like some kind of motivational speech? That's not so bad. I was worried he was going to try to get us to join his MLM and start selling anti-aging cream or something."

Polly chuckled. "Yeah, I've heard about these things. It's like his buy-in. He wants his employees to worship him, and Gregor seems to think this all makes him appear larger-than-life, I guess."

"The eggs *are* good," Farhad said as he shoveled more into his mouth.

"Yeah this food is bomb a.f." Elizabeth had a little mini sausage in each hand and bit the top off both, grinning. "If Gregor Lockwood wants to fly me out for his little dick stroking contests, I'm game as long as he keeps feeding me like this. Did you know room service was covered last night? I had like three cheesecakes on my bed."

I sighed. "Let's just remember we don't actually want this guy as our boss, okay? We want him to move on and leave Dominic alone to run *The Squawker*."

Elizabeth aimed an accusatory sausage at me, narrowing her eyes. "You know, that sounds an awful lot like something a dick-blind woman would say." As if to emphasize her point, she aimed both sausages at her eyes and made jabbing motions, feigning pain and misery.

I grinned. "Fair, but think about it. Dominic wants to prove he can make the company succeed. That's good for all of us. His dad wants to prove Dominic will fail. How would that be good for any of us?"

“At least I’d enter unemployment with eggs in my belly,” Farhad said with a shrug.

“Would you shut up about the eggs?” I snapped.

Polly snorted, but nodded her head. “Darcy is right, guys. I don’t know what we can do about it yet, but we need to make sure we keep our eyes out for any way we can to help Dominic.”

“Also,” I said. “You two should probably not glare at Gregor like you did back at the office on Friday. Did you see the way he was looking at you?”

Farhad and Elizabeth exchanged a look.

“Okay,” Elizabeth said. “Nobody is going to take away my right to glare. You can take my subway card. You can take my morning coffee, even. But if you try to tell me who I can and can’t glare at, we’re going to come to fisticuffs.”

“I just don’t think it’s wise to be so obvious about where our intentions are,” I said.

“Wisdom is overrated,” Elizabeth said. “Have you ever tried impulsivity? Answer me this: put a wise woman and an impulsive woman alone in a room with a hot guy. Which one is getting laid? *The impulsive one.*”

“There’s more to life than getting laid,” Farhad said.

“Coming from the guy who has to clean cobwebs from his dick after he brushes his teeth every morning?” Elizabeth smirked.

Farhad set his fork down, folding his arms to properly give Elizabeth a dirty look. “I don’t talk about my sex life with a pervert like you. That doesn’t mean it’s non-existent.”

“I’ve never seen aliens, so they don’t exist. I’ve never seen proof that you get laid, so you’re a virgin.”

Farhad looked like he was about to jump over the table and tackle her out of frustration, but he slowly picked his fork back up and focused on his precious eggs again. Elizabeth knew how to get under people’s skin, that was for sure.

“Well,” I said. “Dominic wants to talk after Gregor’s little motivational speech. Any guesses on what he’s going to say?”

“So we’re involved in your girl gossip now?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I couldn’t talk about it before because I didn’t want to get Dominic in trouble. But his dad already knows, so that cat is out of the bag.”

“So we can talk about it to anyone we want?” Elizabeth asked.

“No,” I said. “It’s just... less risky now. And I feel bad about keeping it from you guys for so long. I’m sorry, okay? I was just trying to do what I thought was right.”

“Fine,” Elizabeth crossed her arms. “I forgive you. And now I’ll grace you with my infinite wisdom. He’s going to fuck your brains out.”

“Or maybe he actually wants to talk,” Farhad said. “If his dad knows about you two, he may have some idea about what’s coming next.”

“Can’t it be both?” Polly asked. She grinned sheepishly when we all turned to her. “Fucking and talking?”

We all laughed, but I couldn’t shake the cold sense of dread in the pit of my stomach. What I really wanted was to know if I wanted any of this. Lately, everything felt like it was

spinning and I couldn't be sure where I was headed or where I *wanted* to head. My instinct was to cling to the thing I'd been reaching for before Dominic and all his mess. I wanted to prove I was a good writer. I wanted to make a name for myself at *The Squawker* and show my dad that my dream was worthwhile, too.

All I could do was wait, though. Tonight, I'd go up to Dominic's room and maybe I'd actually get something like an understanding on where we stood.

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DOMINIC

I was a fucking ball of nerves. My dad had given his dumb speech to the employees and made them stay after for group sessions. But I knew they were finally being let out, which meant Darcy should be arriving at my room any minute now.

I paced in front of the bed. My dad had put me, Marcus, and Tristan in executive suites on the top floor. I knew he was playing a delicate game. On one hand, he wanted me to know the offer still stood, in a sense. I could be his right hand man so long as I never tried to surpass him. In that world, I'd have to let him force Darcy out of my life. I wasn't sure how I knew that to be completely true, but I felt it in my bones.

My father was a narcissistic, power-tripping asshole. He'd want to punish me for daring to believe I could grow the company in my own way. Taking Darcy from me would be the penance he imposed.

On the other hand, he wanted to remind me that he was still technically in charge of everything I'd started to think of as mine. He could drag my employees to his idiotic conference halfway across the country. He could put us in hotels and dictate our schedules. It was all his, and he

wanted me to remember he could take it away with a snap of his fingers.

I ran a hand through my hair, still pacing.

I heard a sound outside the door. Someone was sliding a key in the reader. The lock gave a mechanical whine and there was a clicking noise. The handle turned and Darcy stepped into the room, closing the door behind her. She wore a simple white top tucked into a black skirt that showed off her long legs and toned arms. Her short hair was pinned back over one ear and it made her look adorable and sexy all at the same time.

“Darcy,” I breathed.

“Hey,” she said.

I wasn't sure how it would go when we saw each other tonight, but I found myself going to her and wrapping my arms around her small frame. It felt good to hold her again. I wasn't sure how long we simply stood like that wrapped in each other's arms, but when we finally broke away, I could see her eyes were troubled.

“What now?” she asked.

“He knows about us,” I said. I moved to sit on the couch at the edge of my room and Darcy took the love seat across from me.

She crossed her legs and folded her arms, frowning. “Yeah, that was pretty obvious after he called me in your office. What do you think he'll do about it?”

“He wants to send me a message. He's going to try to get rid of you.”

“Can he do that if I stay in line?”

I considered. "Yes. He caught the wrong kind of national attention for wrongfully terminating employees en masse already, but I think he could slip one unjustified firing under the rug pretty easily."

She studied her hands. "What if we both just leave? We could walk away and start our own magazine or something. You wouldn't have to worry about your dad anymore."

"Not possible," I said.

"Why?"

I clenched my teeth, feeling annoyed. "Because I've invested too much in this to walk away. And I'm not going to run from my problems. I'll face them head on."

Darcy looked like she wanted to flick me on the nose. "That's dumb macho bullshit. It's not running. And even if it was, wouldn't you run if a train was barreling down on you? Or would you puff out your chest and let it vaporize you?"

"My dad isn't a train. He's just an old man with a fragile ego. I'm sure there's a way to get him out of our hair without burning everything down. I just need some time to figure it out."

She looked like she wanted to argue more, but then she looked up in thought. "What if we made some really positive strides for the magazine? Like if I publish the interview on you and it's popular? Or we revisit the idea of my weekly column? Maybe that could help move magazines off the shelf and give him second thoughts about interfering."

"First of all, nobody wants to read an interview about me. Second, it won't work. The vision I have for the magazine is

information and entertainment—hand in hand. Your piece is all information and no entertainment.”

The look on Darcy’s face told me I’d spoken too harshly. I wanted to backtrack what I said, but I reached for her instead. “Darcy...”

“No,” she said, backing away. “It’s fine. I’m just a convenient place to put your dick when the need arises, but I should learn my place and keep my mouth shut, right? Obviously, I couldn’t ever have a good idea.”

“That’s not what I said.” She was pissing me off. Sure, I’d been a little bit of an ass, but didn’t she realize how much I was already putting on the line by being with her? My stress levels had been at an all-time high ever since Monday, and I simply didn’t have the patience to be tactful. “And if you realized how much I’ve already put on the line to keep my dad from firing you, you’d be on your knees thanking me instead of complaining.” *Too far.* I knew it as soon as I said it, but the momentum of stupidity was an amazing thing, and it had me by the throat.

I expected tears, maybe. Instead, Darcy stood straighter and laughed through her nose. “So this is the real you, huh? I thought maybe you were actually a good guy. But this is it, isn’t it? You feel like you’ve been doing me a favor all this time? Well, good news. I’m done accepting your favors. So you can take them and fuck off.”

She turned and left. I was still fuming, so I let her go. I was pissed at her, at myself, and at my dad. It was all a perfect storm of shit and I just wanted to break something. I didn’t want to talk. I didn’t want to be reasonable or worry about hurt feelings.

“Fuck!” I shouted a few moments later. I slammed my fist down on the table, making the hotel phone give an alarmed

little jump. I planted my palms and hung my head.

Maybe this was good. If things were done between me and Darcy, I could go back to focusing on work. That was what I'd wanted all along, right?

The uneasy swirling feeling in my stomach said otherwise, but I gritted my teeth and pretended not to notice it.

This was good. This was what I wanted.

Maybe if I repeated the thoughts enough times, they'd start to feel more true.

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DARCY

I headed down to the hotel lobby in the early hours of the morning. I couldn't sleep, anyway. My brain was buzzing with energy and I still felt like I was ready to get in a fist fight at a moment's notice. Hell, I would've punched a pigeon if it looked at me wrong right about then.

But I settled for making myself a cup of coffee, even though they didn't have the yellow packets of sugar I liked. Two women were working the desk, but it looked like they were more worried about whatever was on their phones than anything else.

I shuffled to a sofa by the window with my coffee. Fittingly, it was raining. The sound was usually comforting to me, like little tapping fingers on the glass. I stared out through the drops of water at the blurry landscape outside. The night temporarily went white and I saw the outline of trees a moment before I heard the boom of lightning.

I sighed. Was it too much to ask for one of those bolts to fire right up Dominic's ass? I wasn't a praying woman, but I thought that would be a good reason to start. *Dear God, could you please smite Dominic Lockwood? But if you do, I'd just really like to know you got him through his asshole, because anything else would feel too dignified.*

I jumped in surprise when Marcus Fitzroy came in from outside. The sounds of rain temporarily grew louder and another rumble of thunder rolled through before the doors closed. He shook the rain off his coat and ran a hand through wet hair, looking good as always, even when he was soaked.

He spotted me and smiled. "Oh, hey. Little c, big c."

I gave a sheepish wave.

"Uh oh." Marcus took off his coat, gave it a shake, and set it down beside the chair across from me. He sat down and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "Want to talk about it?"

"About what?"

"Whatever is on your mind."

The words I meant to say were "no thank you." After all, Dominic was one of his best friends, and anything I said to Marcus had a high probability of leaking back to him. Instead, I found my mouth running and words pouring out.

"*Asshole*," I said. "He's a fucking asshole of epic proportions. And the worst part? I had no reason to be so surprised. His assholery had been on proud display since the first moment I met him. He'd been a total dick to the people at the coffee shop. He was a dick when he came in and fired everybody who didn't meet his standards. He was a dick when he admitted he just wanted an excuse to fire me because he was attracted to me."

"So we're talking about Dominic," Marcus said, looking a little like he wasn't sure what else to say.

"It was all *right there*," I continued. "Right in front of my face. Did I stop and read the writing on the wall? No. I

went and grabbed some white-out, a few erasers, and rolled up my sleeves. I thought I could fix him like millions of dumb women have thought before me.”

“I wouldn’t say *millions* of women have tried to fix Dominic. More like half a dozen.”

“I mean in general, Marcus. And if you want me to vent, you need to shut up and listen.”

He leaned back in the chair, eyebrows raised, but said nothing more.

“So I thought I could fix him or tease out the ‘real’ him. You know the problem with that? People don’t hide the real them deep inside somewhere. They wear it on their sleeves. But you know what they do? They hide the real them when they want to get in your pants. Once they start getting bored or when you become inconvenient, the real them suddenly rears its ugly head again.” I snapped my fingers. “Just like that.”

I felt out of breath and suddenly out of things to say. I sat back, folding my arms. “Talk now,” I snapped. Distantly, I felt bad being so mean to Marcus. He had never been anything but sweet to me. I was also running on no sleep and I felt like my life was falling apart at the seams, so he’d have to forgive me.

“Well,” he said slowly, almost like he was worried I’d bite his head off if he didn’t say the right thing. “I will have to agree with you that Dominic can be a real asshole. But he’s also my friend, and I wouldn’t be friends with an irredeemable asshole. You want to guess what he was like back in school when we were kids?”

“Probably popular and a bully.”

“The girls always liked him, yeah. But he hardly dated. He was hyper focused on his grades because he didn’t want to be the kid who coasted by on his daddy’s dime. He knew how people would look at him. So he tried his ass off, but he still struggled.”

I frowned. “He seems so good at what he does, though.” I almost added “for an asshole,” but managed to hold that part back.

“He’s smart. He just wasn’t ever good in school. He has dyslexia. It used to be really bad. He’d get these terrible headaches if he tried to read for more than a few minutes at a time. He told his dad about it, but Gregor always told him to stop being a bitch and work it out on his own. So Dominic tried, but it was always hard. A lot of guys picked on him before high school, too. By junior year he’d hit his growth spurt and filled out, so they left him alone. But I don’t think that chip ever left his shoulder. It was like he thought he had to bark the loudest to keep them off his back. And he was always the first to jump in and defend us if someone crossed me or Tristan.”

I frowned. I couldn’t really picture the Dominic Lockwood I knew ever being anything but completely in power. Then my stomach twisted at the memory of the piece I’d written on him back at Columbia. I’d put his grades on display for everyone at school like some sort of proof that he didn’t give a shit and goofed off. In my hunger for the story, it never even occurred to me to wonder if there might be another reason for his poor grades before Columbia.

“Well, that’s great,” I said. “But none of it changes the fact that he’s done with me now.”

“So you two *were* together? I could never get a straight answer out of him.”

"I don't even know what we were. But I do know it's over now."

"I see. And how do you feel about that?"

"How does it look?" I snapped. "Great!"

He grinned. "Yeah. I could talk to him for you, if you want."

"No. I don't. I'm going to keep my head down and try to do my work. If Dominic has a shred of integrity, he'll make sure I don't lose my job just because his dad wants to play games. And if I lose my job, I'll move on and never look back." The words made tears well in my eyes, but I took a deep breath and calmed myself down quickly. He wasn't worth tears. Those were just for the time I'd wasted at *The Squawker* thinking it could be an outlet for all the dreams I had. Instead, it looked like all it would ever be was wasted time.

"Maybe there was some kind of misunderstanding," Marcus suggested. "Dominic has a temper. When he gets stressed, he says shit he doesn't mean."

"Oh, he meant it," I said.

Marcus pulled a sour face. "Well, I should go check on him, then. He's probably drowning in self-pity up there. Anything I can get for you?"

"A flight back home right now?"

He chuckled. "You're on Gregor Lockwood's dime out here. That means you have three more days to live it up in Cali. Go eat at some expensive places, hit the clubs, get drunk, and then expense it all out to Gregor. He'll cover it. There's no reason to go back home yet." He got up and gave my shoulder a sympathetic squeeze. "And I'm sorry about him. I liked the idea of you two together. I was rooting for it."

“Thanks,” I said.

Once Marcus was gone, I sipped my coffee. It had already gone cold. I set it on the table beside me and curled up with my arms around my knees, staring back out the window at palm trees blowing in the rain and lit by occasional bursts of light.

Maybe he was right. Maybe I should focus on making the best of my last three days. After that, I would take my pitch and see if I could inject any fresh ideas into it. Then I’d reach out to Jasmine and see if she was still holding that job for me at *The Union Coast*.

I was going to be completely fine without Dominic Lockwood in my life. And for the next three days, I was going to party his ass out of my system.

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DOMINIC

My head hurt and there was a bad taste in the back of my throat. I thought about calling the front desk for some medicine, but I went back to the wet bar instead. I'd spent a few hours drinking away my frustration last night until I eventually passed out sitting up in an oversized armchair. I still had on my dress shirt and tie and my hair was a mess.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and glanced at the clock. It was noon already. Marcus had come knocking in the middle of the night but I told him to fuck off. To my surprise, he'd listened.

I knew the employees would still be here in California for another three days, but I was already considering flying back early.

I looked at the wet bar again longingly. One of the best cures for a hangover was more alcohol. But I also needed to deal with my dad today, and I needed to be in my right mind to do that. *No*. No more being weak. I'd given myself one night to run from what I created for myself, and that was all I'd get.

Going forward, I needed to face reality sober. I chased Darcy out of my life so I could focus on work again. So I

was going to focus on work.

I lifted up the phone and called for medicine to be brought up from the front desk. I pulled out my laptop and rubbed my eyes again, trying not to focus on the headache thumping between my eyes. With Darcy out of my corner, I knew it would be easier to get my dad off my back. He'd be happy to believe I was going to run the business into the ground without his help. Once he was certain he'd properly thrown his weight and ego around, he'd retreat back into his other businesses and leave me to what he thought would be my ruin.

But I wanted to prove him wrong.

I took the medicine and dulled my headache. I sat at my laptop and reviewed the latest layouts for next week's issue. I reviewed everything Tristan had sent me on expansion ideas and sent back a few additional ideas. I shot off an email to Marcus asking him to connect with a friend of mine from Columbia who went into publishing. I figured maybe she could help us pursue Tristan's idea about turning the magazine into a sort of weekly e-book.

No matter how hard I worked, Darcy popped into my thoughts every few minutes. The immediate reaction in my brain was always regret. I felt the loss of her like a fucking nail straight through my heart. It physically hurt, but I was sure it would gradually dull like everything else. But I'd send an email, then remember the way she had looked so heartbroken when I told her about Percy. I'd finish a call and then see her face and the appreciation written all over it when I stood up for her at dinner with her dad. I'd get up to make myself a coffee and remember the way her moans had sounded and how her breath had been hot against my ear.

It was nearing midnight when I finally came up for air. I'd worked all day from my room and blew off both Marcus and Tristan several times when they tried to come by. I didn't want to be consoled. I just wanted to bury myself in work until I forgot about everything else. To my surprise, my dad hadn't so much as checked in.

I hadn't eaten all day and considered calling for room service. But I wanted fresh air. I headed down to the lobby and heard the laughter and talking before I rounded the corner. I saw a large group of *Squawker* employees just coming in from what looked like a night out. They were all dressed for clubs or bars and everyone looked at least a little drunk.

I saw Darcy with an arm around Elizabeth and Farhad coming in. All three were smiling and laughing about something. Polly was walking backwards telling some kind of story and everyone else was cheerfully saying their goodbyes and heading toward the elevators.

Seeing her happy stung. Sure, I wanted things to end. At least, I thought I did. But I stupidly expected her to be moping in her room. Instead, it looked like she was celebrating her new-found freedom from me. It pissed me off, so I walked straight up to her without thinking and took her arm.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

Darcy glared at my arm and jerked free. "It's none of your business."

"You're staying here on company money. That makes it my business." There I went again. Apparently, the momentum of stupidity was preserved across time and space. It was like I just stepped straight back into the room last night and wanted to pick up where I left off.

“You mean I’m staying here on your daddy’s money, right?” she asked.

I saw Elizabeth and Farhad both wince behind her.

“This is my company,” I said. “And you’re my employee.”

“For now,” she said, never breaking eye contact with me. “If you don’t mind, I have to pee like a racehorse and sleep. If I’m lucky, maybe I’ll have a dirty dream about the guy who was hitting on me at the last bar.”

I saw red, but I managed to keep from blowing up. I just stood there like a statue as she walked past me and the rest of them filtered out of the lobby. I imagined her flirting with some asshole at a bar—her going home with him and fucking him like she’d fucked me. It made me sick to my stomach.

And I deserved every bit of it.

“Rough night?” The voice was familiar.

I turned to see my dad wearing a somber expression. He patted my back and gestured with his other hand to the sofas by the window in the lobby.

All the anger drained out of me. It was replaced by hopelessness. This was what he wanted. He wanted me at rock bottom so he could offer his hand and reinforce the vision he had of being my savior—my superior.

I sat down, head hanging as I listened to him take the seat across from me.

“I know it’s hard, Son. But you did the right thing. I heard you two broke it off. That’s good.”

You don’t know shit, I thought. But I said nothing.

“Without that woman distracting you, I’m confident you’ll turn things around here. Next time you start thinking you can get by without your old man, just remember I’ll be around to help you out of your messes, eh?”

I looked up at him and felt like throttling him, but I still said nothing.

He smiled, and there was just the faintest touch of venom in his expression. It told me everything I needed to know. Like always, there was a conversation happening just beneath his words. *The real conversation*. It was the one that said “don’t forget you’ll never be as good as me. You’ll always need me to come fix your problems. You’ll never be able to do this on your own, so bow down and say thanks.”

There was a lump of disgust in my throat when I thought about how similar that all sounded to what I’d told Darcy in the hotel room. *Fuck*. I was hurting her the way I’d learned to be hurt, wasn’t I?

But I’d already dug my grave. I needed to lie in it. “Alright,” was all I said. I got up and headed outside into the California night. I was going to pick up some greasy pizza and eat it in bed while I worked. Was I being a sentimental little bitch? *Yes*. But I was going to stick to my guns, no matter how much it stung.

DARCY

The trip to California felt like it was months ago. Since then, I'd left my job at *The Squawker* and joined Jasmine at *The Union Coast*. Farhad and Kirk left *The Squawker* along with several others who were fired or quit after Dominic's father came on. Farhad and Kirk were writing an online only project that focused on politics. Elizabeth and Polly were still at *The Squawker* and complained about how miserable it had become nearly every time we met up for drinks with the old crew.

My life had become incredibly busy since those days. I stifled a yawn at my desk. I had an office to myself, now. It was cramped and crowded with stacks of paper and half-finished books, but it was mine. *The Union Coast* was what my dad would've considered an "actual, legitimate publication." There were no articles about celebrity gossip. There wasn't some flavorful local piece full of Elizabeth's contagious humor. There was just news and reporting on facts. It was the kind of stuff you would see men and women in fancy clothes reading. No smiles allowed.

At *The Squawker* I had some autonomy. Every week, we had a running list of categories we needed stories for, but it was somewhat fluid. I had the freedom to dig a little and

sometimes come up with creative angles to fill the assignment. Here, there was a separate research team. The legwork was already done and I was just tasked with transcribing it into a readable, respectable article for my editors.

I'd been getting nothing but praise since I started three months ago, but I was starting to dread coming to work. When I thought about still being here ten years from now or even two years, dread crept in from all the dark corners of my mind.

So I'd spent the last week cleaning up the pitch that seemed destined to never be caught. I was planning to bring it to Jasmine's office today. It was like *deja vu*, except this time, Dominic wasn't going to stride into my life and mess everything up.

At least that was how I kept telling myself it went when I thought back on him. He messed things up. But was that really what happened?

I'd been chasing a dream when Dominic came along—completely blind to my own needs as a woman. I was waiting to start my life until some unforeseen point in the future. I was living for “later” and telling myself it was okay to be relatively miserable in the “now”. But Dominic showed me just how incredibly fun “now” could be. He made me wonder if I was being an idiot. After all, what was the point of throwing away “now” for years and years on the gamble that “later” was going to be amazing? Who said I wasn't just sleepwalking toward a depressing existence of loneliness and dry vaginas?

I rubbed at my eyes and groaned. This always happened when my thoughts drifted to Dominic. I could sometimes get lucky and go a day or two without thinking of him. I could sort of close my eyes and drift through my days,

telling myself I was “working for the weekend”. I’d get to hang out with Polly, Elizabeth, Farhad, and every few weeks I’d even meet up with Charleston when he wasn’t too busy conquering the world. That was enough, right?

But when Dominic popped in my head, it was impossible to tell myself the same lie. Before him, it was like living my life without ever tasting sugar. You could’ve handed me a pepper and I might’ve said, “that’s so sweet!”. But then I had a taste of Dominic, and now everything was tasteless in comparison. He’d fucking ruined me, and I hated him for it. I hated him because we could’ve had something amazing and he decided to throw it away. Did I want it back? *Yes*. Was I way too mad at him to reach out or accept an apology? *Yes*.

I was planning to stew and marinate in my anger. That was me. The girl in a big old pot full of annoyance, frustration, the occasional shameful dirty dream about her old boss, and stubbornness. And I planned to keep my ass right there in that pot for as long as I had to.

I headed to Jasmine’s office with a thumb drive in hand. It had all the elements of my pitch laid out in agonizing detail. I’d researched every damn scholarship on the planet at this point. I’d vetted them and figured out which ones were legit. I even interviewed students who had worked with the legit ones. The thumb drive in my hands represented hours and hours of work. Somehow, it felt like it was also the last dim light of hope in my life. It was what I’d been clinging to before Dominic came along, and if I couldn’t find a way to make this happen, I wasn’t sure what I could cling to.

I took a deep breath, then let myself in Jasmine’s office. At *The Squawker*, it had been completely up to her. She was the lead editor, and any decision about the magazine’s content basically rested in her hands. Here, she was a team

of editors, who reported to a lead editor who then reported to a content analyst, who then fed information up the chain to analytic experts, then a PR team, and finally to the board of directors who reviewed everything. Basically, she had the power to toss the ball up, but several other people had to catch it and keep tossing it upwards after that for the idea to land.

“Hey,” I said.

Jasmine smiled. “I loved your last piece on the kidnapped journalist. I think you really skirted the line between drumming up sympathy without making it feel like you had too much of an agenda. It was really perfect.”

“Oh, thanks,” I said. Honestly, I barely remembered the piece. The work here felt more like moving through motions mindlessly than any kind of creative exercise. “I was actually hoping I could show you something. It’s my pitch from *The Squawker*, but I’ve been really working to clean it up. I even did a fresh pass last week to make it fit more with the direction of *The Union Coast*, and—”

Jasmine gave a tight smile that said everything. She knew this sort of thing didn’t happen. Writers didn’t pitch ideas. We didn’t rock the boat. Everybody just showed up and did the work. The big ideas were for the higher-ups. But Jasmine was nice enough to recover quickly and smile wider, sticking her hand out for the drive. “Well, let’s see what you’ve got, shall we?”

I handed it to her and hovered over her shoulder, giving my practiced breakdown of all the elements. She nodded politely and said encouraging words at several points. When it was all over, she took a long breath and swiveled in her chair to face me with hands in her lap. “I’m going to level with you, Darcy. I can’t pass this along. Do I think it’s brilliant? Obviously, I do. But there are some complicated

politics in management here. One of the guys above me thinks I'm gunning for his job. If I send this along, he's going to think I'm trying to prove I can make bigger calls and want out of editing. He happens to golf with a guy on the board of directors, which means he can shit-talk me out of work as much as he wants."

My stomach suddenly felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. I was surprised when my face twitched and emotion welled up in my throat. *Don't cry. Do not cry.* I smiled and shook my head, even as tears welled in my eyes. "It's totally fine. I get it. I'll just take this and get out of your hair."

"Darcy," Jasmine said, standing and hugging me tight. "I'm sorry. I really am. But this just isn't the sort of place where you'll get to have that kind of voice. It'll be easier if you accept that."

Tears fell freely now. I wasn't just crying because of the pitch. At least I didn't think I was. I was crying because I'd been hanging onto this last little flicker of hope for months now. I'd lost *The Squawker*. I'd lost Dominic. I'd lost seeing my friends every day and traded it for the "professionals" I worked with now, who barely left their offices and never wanted to meet up after work. It felt like I hadn't had a win in so long. I just wanted a win. Was that so much to ask?

Jasmine misunderstood my crying and hugged me tighter. "I'm so sorry, Darcy. You know, if it would help, I could talk to Bryce. Maybe he could take a look and pass it up the line?"

I could tell from her tone she was only trying to help calm me down. She was right. Of course she was. This sort of thing didn't happen at *The Union Coast*. I was spinning my wheels. "Yeah, sure," I said, voice still thick with emotion. "I'll run it by him. It's no big deal."

I went back to my office and locked the door. I sat down with my back against the door and sank to the floor. I'd cried my eyes out in Jasmine's office, but all I felt now was numb. What was next? What now?

Somehow, I felt like the one person on Earth who would understand how I felt right now was Dominic. Even though our dreams had been different, I felt like we were driven by similar forces. He would've understood and known what to say. Then again, knowing what to say and being nice enough to say it were two different things.

I gave a tearful smile when I pictured sobbing my guts out to him only for him to scoff. Then I imagined him telling me to "suck it up, Buttercup. Dreams are for fairy tales, and you're no princess."

I shook my head at the thought. The truth was I didn't actually think he'd have said that. Dominic had been sweet and he did care about my feelings most of the time. The man who stepped in to defend me from my father would've felt for me right now. He would've put his arms around me. Maybe all he would've said was, "I'm here," but God, I could've used that right about then.

I hugged my arms around my raised knees and closed my eyes. How did things get so fucked up?

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DARCY

The bar, like so many others, played their music too loud.

Maybe it was a sign that I was getting older, but I really didn't understand the appeal of music so loud you had to shout all night to be heard. Maybe that was why I always saw thirty-something moms hanging out at more quiet but lame places like chain restaurants with over-priced cocktails. At least the music wasn't so loud and there were fewer desperate guys hitting on you.

We had all taken a booth in the back tonight because Charleston was able to join us, making our group a little too large for the bar. He had his phone out and was handling some kind of work emergency with a grimace on his smooth features.

Farhad was listening to Polly and Elizabeth, but I could tell from his expression that he was thinking about something else.

I'd been zoning out until I heard Polly mention Dominic's name. They weren't stupid, and they knew he was more than sore subject—he was like an infected, abscessed wound I was refusing to go to a doctor to have seen. I perked up at his name and they both froze, realizing their mistake.

“But it wasn’t a big deal,” Polly said quickly.

“What did he do?” I asked.

Elizabeth and Polly shared a careful look. “He’s just being him,” Elizabeth said.

“How has he been, anyway?” I asked. I didn’t want to ask. I shouldn’t have asked. It was like scratching a mosquito bite. Leave it alone, and the itch would pass. Give it one tiny scratch and suddenly it was all you could think about.

“Girl,” Charleston said, setting his phone down. I must’ve been worse than I thought, because Charleston didn’t drop work problems until they were solved. His phone was still buzzing angrily as he stared at me, completely locked in. “You sure you want to go down that road?”

“I don’t know,” I said, hanging my head. “But I just pitched my thing to Jasmine today and it was a disaster. I mean, the pitch went fine, but she pretty much confirmed what I already knew. You don’t make pitches at *The Union Coast*. You act like a good little worker bee and stay in your office. You type and type and type and do everything in your power to keep any emotion out of the piece.” I could feel myself getting emotional again so I stopped and tried to take a steadying breath. “So no, I don’t know if I want to go down that road again. But right now, I am looking back on the little time we had together and thinking maybe it wasn’t so bad. And I’m curious to know how he has been since we split.”

Polly licked her lips, then looked at Elizabeth. Elizabeth looked away, and Polly seemed to understand she was going to have to be the one to give the report. “Miserable?” she finally said. “He basically never leaves the office. He stays super late and gets there super early. When he interacts with people, he’s short with them and mean. He

has fired three people in the last week for the smallest things. The magazine is doing great—Tristan had this idea about turning it into sort of an ebook that published in online bookstores. They couldn't get backed by a publisher so Dominic figured out how to do it on their own. The digital sales have been dwarfing print sales, so they've been shifting everything to the digital side and it just keeps growing. And—"

Elizabeth cleared her throat.

Polly looked down. "And I'm not talking about Dominic anymore. But you'd think he would be happy with how the company is growing. Instead, he just seems more and more mad every day."

"Almost like he regrets losing you," Elizabeth said.

For some reason, that made my heart start pounding and my breath catch. *No, Darcy. You don't care if he misses you or regrets what happened, right? You're settled on the fact that he's an asshole you are better off without.* But I didn't feel set on any of that. I just felt lost and like I missed having someone in my life who understood me. Someone who could hold me when I was sad.

"Good," I said.

Charleston leaned forward, narrowing his eyes. "What's going through your head, Darcy? I can see you thinking."

"If you can read minds, read this." I stared at him and tried to think the words "fuck you" as loudly as I could.

Charleston grinned. "Thinking mean thoughts isn't going to scare me off. I know you get nasty when you're sad."

I couldn't help chuckling. He really did know me well. They all did. So why did I still feel like I was missing some level

of understanding without Dominic? “I think Dominic would have to give the apology of all apologies if he wanted to make things right between us.”

“Wait, so there’s a chance?” Elizabeth said. “I wasn’t asking because I figured there was no chance. But *dude*, if you would take him back, our lives would be so much easier.”

I rolled my eyes. “So you want me to forgive him for your sake?”

“Yes!” she said. Elizabeth smiled and tilted her head. “Seriously, though. I want you to be happy. You’ve been just as miserable as Dominic since you two split. Rule of thumb? If two people break up and they are both miserable, chances are the break up was a mistake.”

“If he’s so miserable, why hasn’t he even tried to contact me?” I asked.

“Because he’s stubborn and he’s a man?” Charleston suggested. “Or maybe he thinks he’s doing you a favor by staying away.”

I chewed my lip. I could picture Dominic twisting things into some stupid, chivalrous version of reality. I also could sort of understand him assuming I would never forgive him. Up until a few minutes ago I didn’t think I would, either.

“I could talk to him,” Polly said.

“Please, don’t.” I rubbed my hands over my face. “I’m just tired and frustrated right now. I’ll get over it. Bringing Dominic into the mix is the last thing I need.”

Conversation drifted to another topic, but I didn’t miss the way Elizabeth kept shooting me curious glances. I had a

bad feeling she wasn't fully on board with the whole "listen to Darcy" train.

Worse, I wasn't completely sure I *wanted* to be listened to.

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DOMINIC

Marcus, Tristan, my dad, and the CEO of one of the biggest publishing houses in the country sat around a conference table with me. We were downstairs in the newly renovated lower floor of *The Squawker* building. Growing the business meant growing the team, which meant we'd long since outgrown the office space upstairs. With Marcus' help, we'd made a deal to buy out the apartments below and the lobby on the ground floor. It was all ours, and we'd saved what we could, but gutted most of it to form the executive offices. Our new lead editor got my old office upstairs and the new HR division I'd set up took over Tristan and Marcus' old offices.

The company was growing at rapid speed, and now it was set to grow even further.

I waited at the end of the table with my fingers templed, half-listening. My dad played no involvement in getting us to this point, other than writing the check for the initial acquisition of the company. I had to grudgingly admit that, but he'd been hands-off save for his one intervention that cost me Darcy four months ago. It felt like it had been longer. The wound from that day seemed to grow every night. I'd lay in bed restlessly replaying everything that had

happened. The memories were worn and smooth at the edges by now. I'd visited them so often they were locked in my mind as clearly as they day they happened.

Dan Orlen, the CEO of *Toll House* publishing was talking and I'd zoned out. I made an effort to listen again. "...prepared to offer what you're earning now plus twenty percent. And we believe we can increase your sales by at least ten percent per quarter for the foreseeable future. With our audience, you could..."

I drifted back out of the moment. At some point, Marcus stepped in and shook the proper hands while my dad beamed like this was all his doing. I should've given a shit. This was my dream, wasn't it? I'd done it without his help, but there he was like a puffed up rooster pretending it was all thanks to his hard work.

But I didn't care. I just felt numb. When I wasn't numb, I was mad.

Those were the only two emotions I seemed to experience anymore. The sad truth was that I'd seen what color my life took on when Darcy was around. She made everything more vivid. More real. She made the things I'd never cared about seem like they were the important things all along—like protecting people who needed protecting or stopping to smell the roses. She'd also made the things I thought mattered feel like dust slipping through my fingers, and that had scared me.

I saw that now.

Darcy had scared the shit out of me. She'd skipped into my life and upended everything I thought I knew. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to pour yourself into work and nothing else. Maybe it would be nice to care about someone—to have a woman to come home to. Maybe there were better

uses for talents than accumulating money and success, like protecting someone you care about.

I ran a hand down my face. The meeting was wrapping up and I went through the motions of thanking Dan, shaking his hand, and even suffering my dad's proud smile. I went upstairs when it was over. I didn't make a habit of going up there much since our offices downstairs were finished a few weeks ago. For some reason, I felt drawn to that space, though. Maybe it was just the pathetic knowledge that Darcy had been there once—like I could cling to some ghost of her memory if I just wandered the floor.

As usual, I drew a combination of stares of terror and averted gazes when I left the elevator. I folded my arms and just stood there, surveying the room and watching the space where Darcy's workstation had been. There was a man there now with dreadlocks and headphones in. He was bobbing his head and hadn't noticed me yet.

I sighed and headed for the break room. I didn't really know what I was doing, but I felt like I'd been slowly drifting out of orbit for the last few months. At first, I told myself I could just pump my legs and find my way back to the surface any time I wanted. I could still see my old life right there, after all. Now there was no use pretending. I was practically in the depths of deep space, drifting further and further every day. I didn't even know how to get back anymore.

A cold, logical voice in my mind whispered Darcy's name. Because I knew the truth, didn't I? Darcy was my line back to sanity. She was the answer. She was fucking everything. But I'd also had plenty of time to look back on how I'd behaved. I was like poison for her.

I couldn't trust myself not to do it again. I'd lured her in, let her hand me a piece of her heart, and then I'd stomped on

it right in front of her. And why? Because I was scared. It was pathetic, and she deserved better. I deserved this empty life I'd carved out for myself, and I fully planned to wallow in it.

And then Polly walked into the break room. She closed it behind her and chewed her lip. "Mr. Lockwood, there's something you should know."

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DOMINIC

I felt like a complete idiot. But I guessed I deserved to feel like an idiot, didn't I?

I was waiting in the lobby of *The Union Coast* building with a bouquet of flowers in my hand. I'd looked up a list of what all the different colors of flowers represented. I obviously considered red, since it would most clearly send a message that I still cared about her. White was the color for apologies, apparently. That was also an obvious contender. But I figured the apology part was sort of implied in the fact that I was giving flowers, wasn't it?

So in the end, I settled on a bouquet of flowers in every color. Because, hell, I'd fucked up in just about every way, hadn't I? Maybe if I mixed them all together I'd nail the right mixture of "sorry".

In the end, I was only hoping to mend the rift between us. If I was lucky, maybe we could be friends going forward. I'd probably be tempted to break the neck of the first guy she dated and told me about, but I'd do my best to keep my act together. Friendship was all I could convince myself I deserved from her. After Polly told me how Darcy was going on and on about wishing we had never split up over drinks, I decided I still couldn't let myself think this was going to

be like a reset button. I wasn't going to go back to her and expect to pick up where we left off. I'd proven I couldn't handle being in a relationship with her, but maybe I could handle being her friend.

In a lot of ways, I felt like an addict going back for one hit and telling lies to myself that I wouldn't get hooked this time. But fuck it. The lies got me off my ass and in this building, and that was a start.

The receptionist smiled when she saw the flowers. "Wow, who is the lucky girl?"

"Darcy McClain," I said. "I think she's on the fourth floor. Can I bring these up to her?"

"Sorry, guests aren't allowed up without an appointment. I could page her and have her come down to get them, if that's okay."

"Uh, yeah. Sure. I'll wait outside. Just send her out when she comes."

The girl smiled and I headed outside to wait on the sidewalk under the overhang. I was pacing and kept checking my watch. How long would it take her? Ten minutes passed and then twenty. She still hadn't come down.

With the way Polly made it sound, Darcy was desperate to talk to me again. I figured maybe there had been a mistake, so I headed back inside. "Excuse me," I said.

The girl looked up and winced when she saw me. "I paged her three times, Sir. She finally sent a message down just a minute ago saying she doesn't want to see you." She gave an apologetic shrug.

I glanced toward the staircase. "Sorry," I said, then jogged toward the stairs and took them two at a time. I ignored the receptionist calling after me. She was probably going to call security, but I just needed to see it for myself. Why would she act desperate to talk to me again and then turn me away when I show up?

I expected a scene similar to the one at *The Squawker* where I'd be able to spot her as soon as I entered the floor. Instead, I was greeted with frosted glass partitions in a maze-like pattern. Every employee was sectioned off in a little glass box and I had no way to know where Darcy was. I started moving through the room, opening doors and finding surprised face after surprised face, but no Darcy.

"Darcy!" I shouted. "Where are you?"

My heart was pounding. I could hear someone heavy jogging in my direction—probably security. "Darcy!"

"Sir," a man came up from behind me and took me by the arm. He was out of shape and several inches shorter than me, but wore a black shirt with "Security" printed over the chest and a little badge emblem. "I need you to leave. This building is private."

"Darcy!" I shouted, tugging from his grip.

The man radioed for backup and I pressed on, moving through the halls shouting her name as curious faces popped up from half-opened doors.

Finally, I saw Darcy come down the hallway toward me. I'd sort of expected a tearful hug when she saw me, but she was scowling and coming my way fast.

That didn't look good.

“What the fuck are you doing?” she hissed once she was in front of me.

“I wanted to apologize. I brought these for you, but the girl at the desk said you refused to see me.”

“Because I did,” she said, tugging me by the arm out of the view of a growing number of people who were gathering to watch the drama.

“That doesn’t make any sense. Polly said you were going on and on about how much you wished I’d apologize over drinks, and...” I trailed off at the look on her face. In a split second, it was painfully obvious to me. Polly had lied to try to get me to do what she thought Darcy wanted. Darcy hadn’t said a word about wanting anything from me. “And she tricked my dumb ass,” I added, shaking my head.

Darcy hesitated. She’d been so angry I thought she was on the verge of hitting me, but for the first time, she looked conflicted. “Look, thank you. I appreciate the flowers. But it’s over. We’ve both moved on. Right?”

She stared into my eyes after that last word. Part of me felt like it was a test-like she wanted me to come out and say what was in my chest. I could tell her I hadn’t moved on. I’d been thinking of her every fucking night and kicking myself for what I did-that I hadn’t touched another woman since I was with her and I didn’t want to. I only wanted her, and I would’ve done just about anything to put things back the way they were.

But I just stood there and nodded my big, stupid head. “Yeah,” I said.

Darcy’s expression fell and she nodded too. “Well, thank you. I hope security isn’t too rough with you on the way out.” She took the flowers with a small smile.

I turned and saw two larger men had joined the security guard and were motioning for me to follow them. One had his hand on what looked like a taser. "You could ask them to let me leave on my own."

She scrunched up her nose. "I think watching them drag you out will be more fun." She sniffed the flowers and gave a dangerously sexy little wave. "Bye, Dominic."

The men took one of my arms each and the other got in front of me, ushering me back the way I came. But all I could think about was that little wave of hers.

Fuck friendship.

Fuck half-measures.

I wanted Darcy back. I wanted every piece of her, and I wanted her all to myself.

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DARCY

I kept catching myself smiling. Charleston had graced me with a rare in-home visit. He was between projects and actually had a little spare time for a change. He was wearing some ridiculously silky pajamas and brought over his favorite pillow and blanket. We were cuddling on my bed and watching *Snowy With a Chance of Love*. I'd suggested it, of course.

The movie had always been one of my favorites, and it also happened to be the only movie I'd ever watched with Dominic. I could quote the whole thing by heart, so I didn't mind talking over it a little.

We were at the part where Salem chases after Sabrina. She made it painfully obvious that she wanted to be with him, but he didn't pick up the signals so she went back to her ex. Salem had a really important meeting with this guy who is going to decide if he gets to keep the inn after a bunch of bogus safety complaints from her ex. But he proved she mattered to him more than any of it and missed the meeting to drive up to where she's with a wedding planner and her ex. He crashed the meeting, told her he doesn't deserve her, but she deserves to be happy and that's not what she'll be with him. Basically, it's a big huge scene and

everybody claps, but the part that really gets her is he risked losing his inn to chase after her.

I swoon every time. I grew up around a dad and a bunch of people who always acted like work was everything. You were only as good as you made your career. So the idea of someone being willing to toss all that away for someone they love seemed like the absolute height of romance.

“So,” I said while Salem and Sabrina were laughing and driving away from the meeting together. “Dominic apologized to me at work today.”

Charleston hit the pause button, sat upright, and tilted his chin down toward me. “Shut. Up. Start talking, woman.”

I grinned and gave a little shrug. “That’s all.”

“I will slap a bitch. Don’t test me.”

I laughed. “Okay, well, he brought flowers.” I pointed to the counter where I’d put them in a vase.

“Wow,” Charleston said. “He couldn’t pick a color? Those are hideous.”

“I thought it was kind of unique. I mean, hasn’t every girl been given roses before? It’s not every day you get... that.”

“So you forgave him? Because it sounds like you forgave him.”

“Actually, I had security drag him away.”

Charleston threw his head back and laughed. “You did not.”

“I totally did. But I couldn’t stop myself from, I don’t know, being a little flirty? I feel like I was on auto-pilot. Like the smart part of me was screaming *no, no, no!* But then this other part of me was just like, *God, I want him back.* Am I a terrible person for sending him mixed signals?”

“No. You are someone who got hurt, and you’re not sure if you are willing to open yourself up to getting hurt again. That’s called being human. And it’s *smart*. Don’t second-guess yourself.”

I sighed and hugged my pillow. I looked out the window. Last week, we’d started getting the first snows of the year. Usually, this was when my holiday mania kicked in. I would’ve had all my Christmas decorations out and I would’ve ice picked Mariah Carey and her Christmas songs out of their two-month purgatory. But my heart hadn’t been in it this year.

Go figure.

“So what do I do?” I asked.

“You wait. Give him a chance to convince you he learned his lesson. It’s not your job to teach it to him. Make him prove he understands how he fucked up and he won’t do it again.”

“But what if I just want him back, even if he doesn’t prove it?”

“Then you come talk to me and I’ll slap some sense into you. You respect yourself, which means you will not accept anything less than complete and utter proof that he deserves you back. And yes, you heard that right. He needs to prove that he *deserves* you.”

I sighed. “I want to be weak, Charleston. I just want to let him hold me again and say it’s okay. He brought me flowers.”

“And you were a boss when you made the security drag him out. Trust me. This is important. A man like him needs to grovel at least once in his life to be bearable long term. You want this to last? Wait it out and let him come to you. If

he's the one, he'll figure it out. I mean, I know it's just a movie, but look at Salem. Hard-headed, dumb as rocks, but does he eventually figure out how to make one hell of a gesture? *Yes.*"

I grinned, reaching over to unpause the movie. That was true. At least in movies, the dumb hot guys figured it out. And Dominic wasn't dumb. He was far from it. So maybe Charleston was right. Maybe I really should just wait and let him come to me the right way.

"Fine," I said. "I will be hardcore and I'll wait. *For a little bit.*"

"Repeat after me," Charleston said, clapping his hands with each syllable. "I will not fuck him until he has properly apologized."

I grinned. "We'll see."

He rolled his eyes at me, but smiled and unpaused the movie.

I watched the rest of it with a lump in my chest. Would Dominic really try to apologize again, or had I ruined everything by having security drag him away?

DOMINIC

Research. The answer to how to accomplish most goals in life was the proper amount of research. When I wanted to run *The Squawker*, I spent months researching all the most successful magazines in the country *and* the least successful. When I wanted to learn to overcome my dyslexia, I dove into the research myself and learned which exercises and mental techniques I could practice to diminish the symptoms. Everything I've ever wanted badly enough, I researched and figured out.

So there I was with greasy pizza on my bed watching *Snowy With a Chance of Love* for about the tenth time since Darcy had me dragged out by security at her office. I had a notepad to my side with notes—some of which were circled and others were crossed out.

She had to have shown me this movie as some sort of clue, after all. That was how women operated. Everything was a test within a test within a test.

But I wasn't sure, even after watching the movie over and over. All it really did was reinforce the thoughts in my head.

Darcy had thrown me out because my apology wasn't good enough. I thought if I could just get her to sit down and

listen to me for a few minutes, I could properly explain myself. Maybe then she'd see where I was coming from and forgive me.

But that didn't feel quite right, either. I'd fucked up gloriously, so I needed to undo my mistake gloriously, too.

I tossed the box of pizza to the side and sat back on the bed, arms crossed behind my head as my thoughts raced. I didn't just want her to forgive me. I wanted her back. I wanted her to know I was over the fucking moon for her and that I'd learned how badly I fucked up. But what kind of gesture could capture all of that in a single moment?

I heard Marcus shuffling around in the kitchen. Tristan was somewhere, too. I'd been keeping them both at arm's length on the problem, but finally decided to fill them in. They both insisted on coming over to look after me, which was ridiculous, but they wouldn't stay away. Apparently, looking after me was code for drinking my beer and eating my food while leaving me alone.

But Marcus knocked on the doorframe and came in. "Pizza in bed? You should be ashamed of yourself."

"It's for research," I said, annoyed.

Tristan joined Marcus, filing into the room and leaning against the wall with a wide grin. "Research?" he asked.

"I'm just trying to figure out how to say sorry."

"Have you tried saying 'sorry'?" Tristan asked. "That usually works for me."

"Then you haven't fucked up as royally as I did."

"Fair," Tristan shrugged.

“It’s about showing that you really care,” Marcus said. “For starters, you gotta understand the woman you wronged. So, let’s take Darcy McClain. She’s sweet, driven, kinda vicious when cornered, and she holds a grudge. But most importantly, she seems to feel like she has something to prove, especially at work. I mean, nobody works as hard as she does if they aren’t fucked up over it somehow, right?”

I nodded. I had to give Marcus credit. He really did know how to read people. “Okay, assuming that’s true, how does it help?”

“There’s more. You have to also break down the nature of your fuck up. You really managed to fuck up in a fascinatingly complex way with very few words. By my read on it, you managed to imply her opinions and instincts for the job aren’t worth considering *and* that you would rather ditch her than risk your career goals. And I guess you kinda implied you weren’t over your daddy issues yet all at the same time.”

I glared. “And?”

Marcus brought both hands out wide and slowly drew them together like he was squishing a giant ball. “You’ve gotta find something that sort of mixes all that together in a tidy little ball of, ‘I get it. I’m an idiot. But I won’t be an idiot anymore and here is my proof that I’ve changed.’” He shrugged. “So, what do you have in mind?”

“I don’t know yet. But I keep thinking about this pitch of hers I rejected. She brought it up twice, and it was kind of what started that last argument. Before that, I think we were both planning to tough it out against my dad. I wasn’t sure how we’d manage to keep her employed, but I was ready to do stupid things to make it happen. Then that pitch came up and it just spiraled. And then it was easier to

let it stay bad so my dad would get off my back. And now here I am, fucking miserable.”

“Rookie mistake,” Tristan said. “If you are sleeping with someone, you gotta take their pitches, man.”

“Actually, this is why you shouldn’t sleep with someone who works for you,” Marcus said. “Was the pitch bad or something?”

“It was fine. It just didn’t fit with my vision for the magazine.”

Marcus put a hand to his forehead and let out a sigh like I was the dumbest man on Earth. “Let me guess. You didn’t give her any ideas to tweak it for your vision, either. You just shot it down?”

I was about to argue with him, but I couldn’t. That was pretty much how it happened. “Yeah,” I said.

He groaned. “Man. You need to have me on bluetooth or something when you talk to women in the future. You’re like some kinda caveman. It’s really not that hard when you boil it all down.”

I sat up suddenly. “Wait,” I said. “I know what I need to do.”

“See?” Tristan said. “He just needed a little help getting there.”

“More like a lot,” Marcus said with a roll of his eyes.

DARCY

Winter was officially here. My walk home from work was now a trudge through mostly shoveled sidewalks while I hunched my head beneath the hood of my thick jacket. It was normally my favorite time of year. I loved seeing the Christmas lights start popping up in stores along with little ropes of holly. It was usually enough to put me in a good mood that lasted roughly three months.

But this year, it just felt different.

I was supposed to meet Elizabeth and Polly for drinks in an hour, but I decided to call it off. I hadn't seen my parents since that night with Dominic, and I felt like I'd put a visit off long enough. Apparently, Eloise and Basil had also split up, and I knew she was staying with them as of a couple days ago.

I'd seen the two of them just a month ago at one of Eloise's art shows. She'd gushed about how some anonymous person had bought out her whole collection and over-bid on every piece. She was using the money to try to find her own place in the city with a studio for her work. She was thrilled, and I'd been happy to see the cracks already forming between her and Basil. She really did have terrible

taste, but at least she didn't stay in the bad relationships forever.

I called and told my friends I was canceling and where I'd be. I took my shitty car out to their house. If it wasn't for my dad insisting I keep the thing, I would've ditched it by now. But I guessed it was better than paying for an Uber all the way out to my parents' place every time I went to visit.

I shot off a text to my parents and let them know I was coming, so when I arrived I was greeted by the smell of apple pie cooking. I smiled. They had their Christmas decorations already up. Little blow ups on the front porch of Snoopy with Santa riding shotgun in an airplane, string lights, and a small tree just behind the front porch window. Dad had already shoveled the sidewalk and driveway, but fresh snow was falling and starting to cover up his work.

I knocked and waited.

My mom answered, wrapping me in a hug. "It's good to see you, sweetheart."

I smiled and hugged her back. It was good to see them. My dad was in the kitchen, already working on dinner. From the smell, I thought it might be his pasta carbonara.

"Hey, Dad."

"Hey Squirt!" He rushed out of the kitchen, dusting his hands on his cooking apron and hugging me. It was more enthusiasm than I was used to from him, but he'd also been over the moon ever since I took the job at *The Union Coast*. The day I told him, he spent the rest of the evening showing me text responses he was getting from old colleagues he'd bragged to about my new job.

I think he was still riding the high of it, which only made what I was about to tell them all harder.

Eloise came down from her room upstairs while I waited at the kitchen table and played a half-hearted game of dominos with my mom.

She rushed up, wrapping her arms around me with a broad smile. "I found the most perfect place in Brooklyn. I'll have to show you pictures later."

"That's amazing. I'm sorry about Basil," I added after a beat.

"Oh, it's alright. He started getting really weird when I sold all those paintings. I think he didn't like the idea that his work wasn't selling and mine was. He started going on long rants about integrity and how real art wasn't about money. It was like he wanted me to be sorry I got paid. It was just too much."

"Well, good for you. He didn't deserve you."

She beamed, then shrugged. "Maybe not!" My dad swatted at her when she snuck a piece of bacon from the cutting board and popped it in her mouth. I noticed there was some fresh paint on her forearm.

"Working on something?"

"Something," she said vaguely.

My phone buzzed and I considered ignoring it. It was probably someone from work asking about the news. But I decided to glance down at the screen. It was from Elizabeth, which got my attention.

Elizabeth: Sorry, girl. He was really persuasive. Please don't kill me.

I texted back an appropriately confused response, then spent the next few minutes trying to puzzle out what that meant. Eloise joined in our game of dominos and the

sounds of cooking grew more furious as dad got closer to finishing up the meal.

I tried to relax into the moment. Ever since I'd left *The Squawker*, I was trying to learn to enjoy the present for a change. I spent my whole life looking ahead, and now I saw the dangers in that. Life was about *now*. I looked around my childhood home and tried to enjoy all the decorations—the little signs that my favorite time of year was coming. Each decoration called me back to various moments of my past, like being six and discreetly rubbing the sparkly, fragile santa head that hung from the cabinet doorknob in the dining room. That year, I was hoping to get a gigantic toy horse for one of my dolls that I probably would've never played with, but at the time I wanted it more than anything. Or there was the star on top of the tree that had a seam running diagonally through it because it cracked when I asked if I could put it on top. I'd been twelve, and my dad warned me it was hard to get right, but I insisted. It started to tip off and I bobbled it, which launched it into the wall and then the ground, where it split. We superglued it and my dad put the star up every year after that.

I sighed. The old memories were nice, I guessed. But what about the ones I still hadn't made? I wanted to make new holiday memories. Maybe part of me had hoped this Christmas would be the one where I made memories of cuddling into Dominic's holiday sweaters and going to parties with him where we drove home late in the snow. I knew I eventually needed to move on and accept that those memories might be made with some other guy, but I just didn't feel ready for that yet.

Dad set the table and brought a big bowl of pasta along with his self-proclaimed "famous" Italian salad. I knew his secret, though. It was just a bag mix with Olive Garden dressing and his homemade croutons.

“So,” he said once he was settled. “What are you working on at The Coast this week?”

He had taken to shortening *The Union Coast* to just “The Coast” even though nobody who worked there did that. I hadn’t had the heart to correct him on it. “Well, I wrote about some new research in psychology. It was something about gender, I think.”

He frowned. “Something about gender? You don’t remember?”

“Well, that is actually what I wanted to talk to you guys about.”

Eloise paused with her fork halfway to her mouth and widened her eyes. We weren’t twins by any stretch, but I think we had a little sisterly telepathy going on. The look on her face told me she already knew what I was about to say and wished she could retreat upstairs before I did.

“I quit today.”

My dad’s fork clattered against the edge of his bowl. He smiled, like he thought I might be joking. “Sorry, what? I don’t understand, Darcy.”

“I wasn’t happy there,” I said. “*The Union Coast* was your dream, Dad. It was always just your dream. I told myself I might want it, too, and I went after it. But I was happy at *The Squawker*. I had a voice there. I could actually research my own pieces and I had creative license. *The Union Coast* was just... It was like a factory assembly line. The research lands on my desk and I put the words down. No emotion. No creativity. It was mind-numbing and soul-crushing.”

“Darcy,” My dad said. He looked so hurt it made me want to cry, but I’d braced myself for this. I knew it would be hard

for him. "I can't believe you quit. That was the opportunity of a lifetime."

"To what end?" I asked. I'd never really pushed back with him like this, and my heart was already pounding. My mom was just watching us both. She had a way of disappearing whenever we disagreed about something, refusing to take sides.

"What do you mean? You were writing for one of the most respected journals in the country. That's good work, Darcy. Important work. Someone needs to do it, and you can take pride in that."

"It just wasn't for me, Dad."

"Does this have something to do with that guy?" Eloise asked. "I know you claimed you two weren't really 'together', but it seemed like you two had a fight and then you left *The Squawker*. What really happened?"

"It's nothing like that," I said quickly. I saw my dad was narrowing his eyes, probably clinging to the possibility that he could somehow "solve" the problem of me wanting to leave.

My dad leaned forward. "You're not leaving The Coast because this guy asked you to, are you?"

"That guy has nothing to do with it. I don't even have another job lined up, okay? I just had to get out of there. I tried to make it work and I couldn't. It was--"

The doorbell rang. We all froze. I got up to get it and my dad waved for me to sit down. "Forget it. It's probably just a package."

I ignored him and headed for the door, anxious for any chance to get a breather from the argument at the table.

I pulled the door open expecting to see a delivery person waiting for a signature. Instead, I saw him.

Dominic Lockwood was standing on my parents' front porch in a long black overcoat with flecks of snow stuck in his dark, perfect hair. There was a grim look on his face and a manilla folder in his hand. "Can we talk?" he asked.

I'd told Charleston I just wanted him back—that I didn't care about apologies or proof that he'd changed. Apparently, that wasn't true. When I saw him, I felt the old anger rise up again. He'd hurt me, and I still hadn't forgiven him for it. He'd taken something good and ruined it. Without thinking, I slammed the door in his face, but I didn't walk away.

I leaned my forehead against the wood, breathing hard.

"Darcy, please," he said, voice muffled and coming from outside. "I promise it won't take long. I just want you to hear what I have to say. You don't even have to speak. Just let me say my piece and then I'll leave you alone, okay?"

I took a deep breath, then pulled the door open. "Why should I?" I asked.

"You shouldn't, but I hope you will give me one last chance." His breath puffed out in white wisps as he spoke.

"Come in," I said reluctantly.

I headed inside and my dad started talking when he heard me. His back was to me and he didn't turn to look. "If you go back to them tomorrow and say you were being rash, I'm sure they'd give you the job back, Darcy. You're just being emotional. Think rationally."

Dominic sucked in a sudden breath and took my arm in his. He seemed to realize he was touching me when I looked

down at his hand on me. He pulled it back, but frowned. "You quit your job?"

My mom and sister had already seen him and weren't saying anything, but my dad turned then. "Oh," he said. "Dominic, right? Sorry, I didn't realize Darcy was bringing a guest."

"I thought you two had some kind of fight?" Eloise said. "Are you back together?"

"We did have a fight," Dominic said. "And I'm trying to make up for it."

"Oh," my mom said excitedly. She rubbed her hands together like she was getting ready for a show.

My heart was absolutely pounding. What was in that folder?

"I didn't expect to do this with an audience, but fuck it," Dominic said. He stuck the folder out toward me. "I spent a long time thinking about how I could find the right words to say I'm sorry. I realized there aren't any. You deserve more than words. You deserve proof, and this is it."

I took the folder and swallowed hard as I bent the little metal flaps holding it shut. I unfolded the top and pulled out a few sheets of paper. They were packed with text, so I scanned through and my eyes caught on a few key words. "Offer", "Partnership", and "*The Squawker*."

I looked up at him. "What is this?"

"It's an offer. With Marcus and Tristan's help, we bought *The Squawker* from my dad. It's completely mine, now. That means I have the authority to offer you a fourth of the ownership. I also bought out the appropriate amount of Marcus and Tristan's share. But there are also two other

offers. That second page would give you all of my shares, too. In that scenario, the shares I acquired for you would transfer back to Marcus and Tristan, making you an equal partner with them in the ownership. The last scenario is I sell my shares and we start a new magazine together.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand.” My voice was quiet. I did understand, of course, but it was all rushing around in circles and none of it was sinking in. “Why would you be willing to give me all of your shares?”

My family was watching all of this like a grand finale tennis match, eyes wide and mouths shut.

“Because you made me realize what actually matters. Fuck success. Fuck what I thought were my dreams of proving myself. None of it means anything if you’re not beside me. I’ll give it all up just for another chance with you.”

“Basil would’ve never said that,” Eloise whispered, almost to herself.

I was surprised to feel a tear roll down my cheek and splash warm against my hand. I wiped at my eyes, still shaking my head. “I don’t...”

“You don’t have to decide now. Just think it over. Oh, and there’s a fourth option. My lawyer said I didn’t need to draft up a document for it, though. The fourth option is you tell me to fuck off and never bother you again. I can’t promise I’ll listen, though. I’m crazy about you, Darcy. Absolutely fucking crazy. You made me better and I didn’t even realize it until you were gone. Every night I think about what an idiot I was for thinking I could get over you if I let you go. And now, here I am, ready to pay any price to undo my mistake.”

He nodded after a moment, then turned to leave. I was still standing there with the papers in my hand. It felt like I could hardly think, let alone speak. My mom chucked a crouton at my head. It doinked off me and landed on the paper. I looked at her, stunned.

“Go get him!” She mouthed, pointing frantically toward Dominic, who was already at the door.

I dropped the papers. I didn’t need to think. I just wanted to feel him hold me again.

“Dominic!” I shouted, rushing up from behind and half jumping to hug him. I caught him on the front sidewalk. He turned just in time to catch me in his arms. The door was still open behind us, leaking warm yellow light into the snowy night. I should’ve been cold, but I barely felt it.

I was crying like crazy and I had no idea why. I was happy-not sad. “I missed you,” I said into his chest.

He pulled me in to him, wrapping me in his warmth. “I missed you, too.”

“I’m sorry I had security drag you out,” I gushed. “Charleston told me it was a real boss bitch move, but I felt really guilty about it. I’m sorry I slammed the door on you, too. That was sort of a reflex.”

“Hey, hey,” he said, shushing me and running his hand down my hair. “I’m the one apologizing here. I deserved all that shit, okay?”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding and sank into him. It felt so good. It was almost like I could feel my life suctioning back together—as if it had fragmented into thousands of pieces without me fully realizing it. I’d been more lost than I knew, and Dominic’s arms felt like home.”

“If we do this,” I said, “I’m your girlfriend. Okay?”

He laughed. The sound was deep and low, rumbling through my chest.

“We never made it official last time. This time, it’s officially official. I’m parading you around at parties and stuff. You’ll hold my hand in public. And you’ll kiss me and say something nice when you leave the house.”

He pulled back, grinning. “The house? Are you moving in with me?”

“Um, well,” I said. “I just quit my job and my lease is up in a week. If I don’t move in with you, you’ll have to come see me here.”

He fished in his pocket and produced a key.

I took it, tucking it into my palm and biting my lip. “You sure you want me to move in with you? I’m a super messy cook. I’ll use every pot and pan you have just to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

I looked around us and held my palm out, catching a few snowflakes. “You know, this whole moment reminds me of the ending of *Snowy With a Chance of Love*.”

“It better. I watched that thing like twenty times to make sure I got my apology right.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You what?”

“I knew you liked the movie. I figured it was a smart place to do my research on properly apologizing.”

“I can’t decide if I should be mad that you saw through me so well.”

“You should be flattered, is what you should be.”

“Is that right?” I asked. I tugged on the lapels of his overcoat, pulling myself closer and kicking one leg up. “I’ll be flattered if you can kiss me as good as Salem kisses Sabrina.”

“Will you settle for better?” he asked, cupping my face. His hand was warm enough to make me want to melt into a puddle.

I nodded, eyes locked on his.

Dominic brought his lips to mine and kissed me softly. I gasped against his mouth, tilting my chin back and letting him kiss me deeper. Our tongues slowly touched and I pulled back, biting my lip as goosebumps raced across my skin. They had nothing to do with the cold. “That wasn’t bad. But, I’m going to have to ask you to keep practicing. On me. Multiple times per day.”

He smirked. “We’re moving kind of fast. I don’t know, Darcy. I think I’m getting cold feet.”

I punched him in the chest and took the key, pointing a warning finger up at him. “My heart is very fragile. You’re not allowed to even joke about breaking it again. Understand?”

He nodded. “No more jokes. But you never told me which option you want to choose from the folder.”

“Oh, about that...”

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DOMINIC

I folded my arms and looked around the building. The walls were freshly drywalled and unpainted. The floors had thick paper taped over most of them with hardwood peeking up at the corners. The windows were large with a view of Manhattan. It was our first time in the new office, and Darcy looked like she was in love.

She walked into the center of the large open space, spreading her arms wide and spinning while laughing. "Look at this place! I love it!"

I grinned, going up to put my arms around her. I did that a lot. She was just so damn adorable. It was hard not to want my hands on her—my mouth on hers. I kissed her neck and hugged her from behind, breathing in her scent. "You approve?"

"Of course I do. This is going to be perfect."

"You're sure you want to do this? It's not too late to back out."

She pulled from my arms and faced me, one hand on her hip and a dangerous look in her eyes. "Don't even talk about backing out. I'm all in, Dominic. Are you?"

"I'm in," I said, pulling her toward me by the waist. "But I'm only thinking about being in something else right now—*someone* else."

She rolled her eyes, but smiled and tilted her head. "That someone better be me."

"I was thinking we should christen the place before we get it furnished."

"The contractor is supposed to be here in fifteen minutes."

I shrugged. "Lasting longer than that with you is a sheer act of will, Darcy. Give me fifteen minutes or five. I don't give a shit. Just give it to me."

She giggled as I pulled her in and lifted her to wrap her legs around me. There was nothing to use in the whole open space, so I had to walk her while kissing all the way to the nearest wall. Her back bumped against it and our teeth clattered, but we both laughed.

"Smooth, Romeo," she said.

"Smooth isn't my specialty. I've been called a barbarian before."

"Is that right?" Darcy gave a suggestive little wiggle of her hips against me, grinding into my already rock-hard erection. She had on a dress and it was hiked up to her hips already. I could see a glimpse of her white panties when I looked down between us. "Then take me like a barbarian, Dom." She met my eyes and gave the slightest twitch of her eyebrow. It might've been the sexiest thing I'd ever seen, and I instantly reached down to rip her panties free. I tugged at the side until I felt the fabric tear. Darcy gave a little surprised squeal, but didn't complain.

A moment later, I'd freed myself and was guiding my length inside her. "You're so fucking wet."

"Sue me," she said. "My boyfriend is rich. He can handle it."

I grunted. She had such a smart mouth, and she only got sassier when she was horny. I'd started learning that about her. But one of my favorite parts was when she stopped talking—because that was when I knew I had her. Not many things could make Darcy McClain shut her mouth, but my cock could.

She laced her fingers behind my neck, using the wall as leverage to grind into me as I pumped against her. She was warm, wet, and tight. I already felt like I was close to release. We'd been back together for less than a month and by some unspoken agreement, we'd stopped using protection already. I'd been about to put on a condom last week and she stopped me, chucking it to the side and letting me take her raw.

It was painfully sexy, and I loved how hungry she was to have my release inside her. To tell the truth, I wasn't worried about the consequences. Maybe that was why it was such a turn on. She didn't seem to be worried, either. Just like that, we both knew this was for the long haul, and there wasn't any sort of commitment that was too extreme.

Besides, the thought of her swelling with my baby did things to me. I *wanted* that. I wanted to see her making lemonade for me and our kids while I was doing yard work with them in some suburban paradise. She'd come out in a sun dress with a wide brimmed hat and make a cute comment about her hard working boys—or how her girls were daddy's little helpers.

Fuck if I knew the details. All I knew was I wanted it. I was greedy for it. Absolutely starving.

Darcy's breath was hot against my chest as she gasped out. Her heels dug into me and I knew that meant she was about to come. "Oh fuck," she gasped. "I want to feel it inside me," she whispered.

And just like that, my cock obeyed. I slapped a palm to the wall, body going tense as I felt my release roar through me. She clung to me tight, gasping for breath as she came. I could feel her walls gripping me tight-*milking* me for every last drop.

I finally let out a sigh when I was through and she had gone soft against me. I heard footsteps a moment later and rushed to set her down. Darcy did a sexy little shimmy to pull her skirt back down and quickly fussed with her hair and wiped at her mouth. I cleared my throat and zipped up, cock still wet from her arousal.

We turned just in time to see three men in hardhats coming toward us. It was our contractor, the architect, and an interior designer.

They all smiled and we started our meeting as planned. The whole time, my brain was buzzing with the enjoyment of knowing I'd just fucked the shit out of Darcy right where we were standing and none of them had any idea. From the way Darcy's cheeks kept randomly going red, I had a feeling she was thinking about it too.

"Oh," the contractor said, pointing his pencil at a shredded pair of panties with a dark wet patch on them by our feet. "I'm not sure how those got here. Sorry, Mr. Lockwood."

"No worries," I said. I knelt, picked them up, then stuck them in my pocket with a wink. "We were just checking the

acoustics in here. Top notch," I added.

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DARCY

The new building wasn't completely finished, but it was getting close. We met there and gathered in the mostly empty room that now had a couch or two and a few desks—some of which were covered in cling wrap and not yet assembled. Charleston had brought a mix tape his boyfriend supplied. He had a mobile DJ table set up with huge speakers and a little mixing station. I was pretty sure he had no idea what he was doing, but he looked adorable with his headset held to one ear while bobbing his head.

I wouldn't say we had "poached" employees from *The Union Coast* and *The Squawker*, but once word spread that we were starting our own thing, people came. Elizabeth and Polly had come over to write for us. Even Kirk and Farhad were going to work remotely for us as sort of freelance style writers. Jasmine had come as well, claiming she was over the office politics at *The Union Coast*. Surprisingly, she didn't seem to hold any sort of grudge against Dominic for replacing her at *The Squawker*.

We had a few other new faces as well, and everybody was mingling while Charleston played his music. Dominic was chatting with Marcus and Tristan. They were still with *The Squawker*, but they'd agreed to come to the party and were

still on good terms. After all, Dominic selling his share of the company to them was a huge opportunity in their eyes. Both men were now the two lone partners running *The Squawker*, which was exploding in success and earning them both a fast-growing reputation and swelling bank accounts.

I sat at the edge of the room, temporarily off the radar while everybody was having fun. I smiled, watching it all and feeling a swelling of pride in my stomach. I knew this was something I'd made happen. I always thought my dream was to prove I could write something meaningful. But now I sensed that I'd helped *build* a place where people could do meaningful things. I could still write my own pieces, but I was also giving a voice to dozens of our employees, and that seemed like it meant so much more.

Dominic had given me three choices as part of his apology. Join on as an equal partner in the ownership of *The Squawker*, take Dominic's share and let him prove he'd throw away his right to the business just to have me back, or have him sell his stake in the company all together.

I'd gone with the third option, but with one catch. First, I wanted to make sure he wouldn't be miserable. I didn't want him to leave to prove a point. I wasn't that insecure. I wanted him to leave because *The Squawker* was always going to be something repurposed to both of us. It was a compromise. I realized both of us had been compromising our whole lives. We were chasing some version of our dream that fit within the walls our fathers had put up for us.

And for me, that wasn't good enough.

So, I'd asked him if he'd be willing to sell his stake in *The Squawker* and start a brand new project with me. We'd be equal partners and we could build something from the

ground up, instead of repurposing an existing brand. The idea we'd worked up was to build on the success *The Squawker* had with digital publication. Every week, we'd publish short form stories on various topics. It would be bite-sized stories people could pick up at will. In a lot of ways, Dominic thought the shift was similar to the TV model. TV packages had grown bigger and bigger until the only option was to buy access to 300 channels, even if all you wanted were one or two of them. Then streaming came along and completely upended the stale business model.

We thought maybe our new format might be similar for print and digital media consumption. You could just pick the stories you wanted and not have to pay for anything you didn't.

We were calling it "McClain's Media Bytes." Dominic insisted on using my name. He wanted to get as far from relying on anything his father had built as he could. Elizabeth was excited and already brainstorming comedic themed pieces she could put out under the Media Bytes umbrella. Polly was going to write entertainment pieces, from movie reviews to restaurant critiques. Kirk and Farhad were going to sell us some of the political pieces they'd been publishing on their own, and Farhad said he planned to dip his toes into the world of fashion again, which he sounded thrilled about.

I was pestering my sister to write some pieces on art for us, but she didn't think she was a good enough writer and kept turning me down. I knew I could help her get there, so I planned to keep bugging her about it.

The biggest surprise hire was currently doing an awkward little shuffle while swirling a glass of wine and sniffing it. That was my father, who was officially hired as a writer for McClain's Media Bytes. I don't think he wanted me to know

how much the opportunity meant to him, but my mom told me he'd cried happy tears after we finished our conversation. That was only a few days ago and he'd already blown up my inbox with four submissions. I scanned them and was pleasantly surprised by how good they were.

"You look happy," Dominic said. I hadn't even realized he wrapped up his conversation with the guys.

"You could say that." I smiled up at him.

"How's the piece coming?"

"I've got to do one more re-read, then I think it'll be ready."

He smirked, but looked a little nervous. "You really think anybody is going to want to read that?"

"Um, yes. I put your picture on the front of it. I think every woman with a pulse is *definitely* going to want to read it. I think I'm calling it, *Dominic Lockwood: Unlocked*." I raised my eyebrows theatrically.

He chuckled, nodding his head. "Yeah, that's pretty good. I like it."

"Thank you."

He took my hands and stood me up, looking down at me with that intoxicating intensity of his. "I'm so fucking proud of you, Darcy." He gestured to the room around us. "You built this. You made this happen. You realize that, right?"

"Not without help." I half choked the words out. Why the hell was I getting so emotional? Was it that important to me for Dominic to be proud of me?

He cupped my face, smiling softly and planting a kiss on my forehead. "I love you, and you're incredible. There's also

something I want to show you.”

“I love you, too.” Hearing the words from him made me feel like warm mush on the insides. I’d started to wonder if he was just the sort of guy who didn’t like to say things like that. I’d started telling myself it was okay, because I could obviously tell he loved me. It was so clear from his actions, but hearing it made me feel happy in places I didn’t even know existed.

I was beaming. “What is it?” I asked.

“Come here.”

The music had dimmed and I frowned in confusion, noticing everybody in the room was watching us now. “What is this?” I asked.

“Just come here.” Dominic dragged me by the hand to the windows at the far side of the office. The view of the city was beautiful, although the row of apartments across the street looked like they’d lost power. It was strange, considering the surrounding buildings still had lights on.

“You wanted me to see a power outage?” I asked.

“Just wait.” Dominic looked at his watch. He seemed nervous, which was rare for him.

“What’s going on, Dominic?”

“And...” he pointed out the window just as lights flicked on in the buildings.

I grinned. “Cool. You knew when they’d get power back?”

“Look closer. *Ah, shit.*”

I frowned, not understanding until it hit me all at once. The windows that lit up spelled out letters. “M. R. R. Y. E.”

The letters were huge and spaced out over seven buildings, but two of the buildings were still completely dark. "Mrrrye?" What does that mean?"

"Damn it, hold on. Maybe they--"

Suddenly one of the dark buildings lit up with an "A".

"Marry," I muttered. "Oh my God. Marry me?" I asked, turning and jumping up and down like a dog who just saw its owner grab the leash. I was doing freaking human tippy taps and I couldn't stop it. "Marry me?" I repeated.

"I was going to ask you, but if you insist..." he dropped to one knee and everybody clapped.

Charleston hit a button and sentimental music played. It was choking me up. I was laughing, smiling, crying, and still doing little jumps as I put a hand to my mouth.

Dominic grinned as he pulled out a little box and held up the ring for me. "Darcy McClain, will you do me the honor I definitely don't deserve and marry my grumpy ass?"

He opened the box like he wanted me to inspect it, but I stuck my hand out impatiently. "Yes!" I shouted.

There was scattered laughter, and Dominic got up, sliding the ring on my finger and bracing himself when I threw myself at him, kissing him and laughing at the same time.

"I'm going to marry you so hard," I said. I was talking nonsense, but I didn't care. "And we're going to be so happy."

He laughed. "Yeah. Grumpily ever after."

"That's all I could ever want," I said, kissing him again.

EPILOGUE - DARCY



One year later

I glanced down at my phone and heard the disapproving sound from Dominic at my side.

“Work will be fine without us for one week, Baby.” He put his arm around my shoulders and led me down the boardwalk, gesturing to the sunset on our right. “I want you here with me. All of you.”

I pursed my lips and wiggled my shoulders, leaning into him. “I suppose that wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.”

Work *would* survive without us. I knew he was right. Jasmine had stepped in and been one of the most hands-down awesome managers and lead editors we could’ve ever asked for. She was the first line of defense against stupid submissions and bad ideas. She was also more than capable of standing guard over the business while we were in California for a week. *But*, work was also booming. Our business model had been even more successful than what

The Squawker was doing and we had freelancers and full-time employees from all over the world now. We put out nearly a dozen stories per week, most of which ended up hitting best-seller lists. It was a new way to consume media, and people were loving it.

At first, I thought the pride and satisfaction would fade with time. I guessed it had, in some ways. But I'd also never been this happy. I was *deliriously* happy. I took Dominic's big hand in both of mine and squeezed. I had a surprise for him when we got back to the beach house we were renting. A very big surprise. I was tempted to spoil it now and tell him, but I had been planning this for weeks and didn't want to screw it up.

"I talked to my dad yesterday," Dominic said suddenly.

"What? Seriously? You guys haven't talked since you bought *The Squawker* from him, right?"

"Yeah, we hadn't. I think he was happy to sort of write me out of his life once he realized we were back together. He tried to split us up and torpedo the business and failed on both efforts. Selling to me was a way to wash his hands of it and pretend none of it ever happened. But now articles keep coming out about us. They're making comparisons about how the son has surpassed the father and how there's a new king of business. It's all bullshit, mostly, but it was pissing him off. I guess he called to see if he could talk me down and make himself feel better."

"What did you talk about?"

"He started off by telling me how our idea was a gimmick that wouldn't last. Then he accused me of running away from *The Squawker* when I sold last year because he claimed I knew it was going to fail."

“I’m sorry, Dominic. That must have been hard to hear, even if it was stupid and untrue.”

He shrugged. “Actually, I kind of said everything I’ve always wanted to say to him. It wasn’t much, but I told him how hard he’d always been on Percy and how he never handled it as well as he let on. I wanted him to know how much he put on Percy’s shoulders. He didn’t say much after that, and we ended the call. Fuck. I don’t know if it was the right thing to do, but I did it, and it felt like a weight came off me, like Percy had been wanting me to tell dad for years now. Who knows?” he said, shaking his head.

I hugged him. “That wasn’t easy. I’m proud of you for doing it, though.”

He grinned. “Don’t get all sentimental on me. You’re making it weird.”

I made a smoochie face and hugged him harder, nearly pulling him over as he kept trying to walk. “I’m so proud of my big, strong Dommy-poo.”

When we got back to the rental, I’d managed to get Dominic out of his mood with several minutes of over-the-top swooning and silly voices. He was still the big grumpy man I’d first met over a year ago in a coffee shop. He got frustrated quickly if things didn’t go according to plan. He was notoriously slow to warm up to new people. He also had an irrational hatred of birds that bordered on fear, even if he’d never admit it openly. But he was my big grump, and he was always sweet with me.

When we came inside, a few pairs of our shoes were neatly lined up by the door. A few hours ago, I’d sneakily placed the little baby shoes right next to ours. But Dominic slid out of his sandals and didn’t even notice them.

I'd planned for him being oblivious, though. There were more clues.

We went into the kitchen and he opened the fridge, probably looking for a snack. The man was like a bottomless pit when it came to food. He still took his insane jogs every morning and I had completely given up trying to keep pace. I just brought a bike on the mornings I wanted to join him and pedaled casually beside him.

He actually pushed a baby bottle full of milk out of the way to reach for a bag of grapes.

I put my palm to my forehead. I knew he wasn't the most observant guy in the world, but I was starting to worry he was going to miss every single *super obvious* clue.

I followed him as he leaned on the counter, popping grape after grape into his mouth and chewing with a thoughtful look on his face. "Want to get a little tipsy tonight?" I asked.

He pursed his lips as if he didn't have a strong opinion either way, then shrugged. "Wine, beer, or liquor?"

"Your choice."

He went to the fridge again, moved the baby bottle *again*, then took two beer bottles by the neck and brought them out. He popped the caps and extended a cold, sweating bottle in my direction.

"Sorry, I can't," I said, making eye contact.

He narrowed his eyes. "Are you feeling alright, Darcy? You *just* asked me if I wanted to get tipsy."

"Yeah, you can. But I can't," I said, raising my eyebrows and tilting my chin as I stared up at him. At the rate things

were going, I considered that neon letters spelling it out might not have been clear enough for him.

Dominic frowned like I was being crazy and then he paused. I could see the gears in his brain finally turning. He was smart when he tried to be. He slowly turned toward me. "You can't have beer? Why wouldn't you be able to have a beer? Are you... Wait a second." He rushed to the fridge and pulled it open again. This time, he grabbed the baby bottle and turned around, holding it up for me to see. "What the hell is this?"

"It's a baby bottle. And those were little baby shoes by the door that you missed. Dom. I'm pregnant. We're pregnant. You're going to be a dad." We'd been trying for a little over a year now with no luck. Neither of us ever talked about it aloud, oddly enough. One day, I'd told him not to use a condom and we'd been going that way ever since. At the time, I thought I'd wind up pregnant within days somehow. But weeks turned into months and it still wasn't happening.

I'd taken about ten pregnancy tests and *definitely* missed my period. I wanted to be absolutely sure before I told him, and yesterday I'd been given the final confirmation by my doctor.

"You're sure?" he asked.

"A hundred percent."

Dominic fist pumped, sloshing beer from the bottles in his other hand before rushing over to hug me hard and lift me. A split second later, he set me down carefully and looked at me with concern. "Shit. Sorry. Did I hurt the baby?"

I laughed. "I think it's the size of a kidney bean right now. You can still lift me and hug me. I'm not that fragile yet."

“Fuck,” he said, pacing the kitchen and scratching his head. Dominic was as protective as they came, and I could see the instantaneous shift in his brain. He was protecting *two* people now. That meant he had to be twice as over the top. “We should get back home. You shouldn’t be out here with the baby. Who knows what could happen.”

I laughed. “What?”

“We’re not in a familiar place. What if-” he gestured vaguely.

“What if we get lost and it scares the baby?” I ask.

He glared. “This is serious, Darcy.” He put his hands on my stomach carefully, kneeling to look. “Our little person is in there. I won’t be able to handle it if anything happens to them. That’s our fucking person, Darcy.”

I was melting inside, but I still had to give him a hard time. “Then maybe you should watch your language in front of them.”

“Do you think it’s a girl?” He asked.

“We can find out in two weeks if you want to.”

He paced again. It was adorable seeing him like this. Dominic was always so in control. But I’d caught him completely off guard. His life had changed in a split second and he was still reeling—trying to regain control all at once and flailing around wildly instead from one topic to the next. “Do you think we should? Fuck. I don’t even know whether I want it to be a boy or a girl. What do you want?”

“A healthy baby,” I said. It was easier for me to be calm. I’d done all my freaking out in private when I first realized it might be happening. The truth was I also wanted a girl. I

thought Dominic would be an amazing dad either way, but picturing him with a little girl just felt right.

He raked a hand through his hair. "Should we take classes? Parenting classes or pregnancy classes? That's a thing, right? Not just something they do in TV shows for a joke?"

"It's a thing. And we can take them if you want."

"Yeah. I'll call around and find out where we can get the best ones."

"Dom," I said as calmly as I could. "This is what we wanted. It's going to be amazing, and *you're* going to be amazing. I love you so much."

My words seemed to finally sink in for him and break his little panic streak. He cupped my head and kissed me on top of my hair, breathing in slowly as he rested his chin there. "Yeah," he said, sounding more like his normal self. "We're going to be fine. Have you told anyone else yet?"

"No. You're the first."

"Good. When do you want to share the news?"

"After our vacation. I want to enjoy the rest of this week. Just us. Just our little family."

"That works for me."

"By the way," I said, feeling brave. "Did you ever get that email I sent you? The one where I kinda said 'up yours' at the end?"

"Sincerely, up yours?" He surprised me by grinning. "I think it was one of the moments I knew I was doomed. That I was really falling for you and there was nothing I could do."

“*What?*” I laughed. “I kept waiting for you to unleash some kind of counter-attack after that. The waiting was worse than anything you could’ve done to pay me back.”

“Good. That was the genius of my plan. And now I can gloat that you are sincerely mine.”

“Cheesy, but true.”

“You bet that tight ass it is,” he reached behind and gave a hard squeeze.

He pulled back to meet my eyes, smiling in a way that made me really feel like everything would be alright—everything would be perfect. It was impossible to look into that face and think anything else was true. “I’m never going to let anything bad happen to either of you. I fucking swear it.”

I smiled. “I know you won’t.”

I put my arms around him and thought I might just stay right there in the kitchen for the rest of the night in his arms. I couldn’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be.

-THE END



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SNEAK PEAK: THE BIG FAKE

Chapter 1 - Pearl

I crammed myself into an elevator, heart pounding. I made eye contact with a guy I was pretty sure I knew—Rand, maybe? I smiled, let out a little friendly puff of air through my nose, and clasped my hands in front of my waist. I scooted into the back corner of the elevator.

My heart was *hammering*. Thump. Thump. Thump. Big, punching beats that felt like they were rattling my bones.

My eyes slid up to the row of numbers at the top of the old-fashioned elevator. A red arrow slowly slid from left to right, working its way past four, then six, and inching ever closer to ten.

Now, me freaking out wasn't exactly national news worthy material. I had a little bit of a known habit when it came to being overly anxious. If I saw a friend walking the same direction toward me down a city street, I'd go into defcon four over the decision to wave, smile, or pretend I didn't notice them. A confrontation at work? That was grounds for calling in sick. *All week*. Even rain freaked me out sometimes, because I imagined all the gunk floating in the air getting a public transit ride via a drop of water straight

into my eyeball. I wasn't sure if that's how you got gonorrhoea, but I didn't see the reason to take chances.

I put a hand over my chest just to make sure I wasn't imagining the racing heart. *Nope.*

Rand leaned back to give me that pursed lip, eyebrows raised look that said—*Mondays, huh?*

I tried to smile back at him, but in my current state, I think I mostly just showed my teeth like the dentist had asked me to open up for his tools.

Rand gave me a confused double take, then turned to face the opening doors.

Our little elevator squad shuffled out of the box and into the bigger box, where we'd sit in our boxes within the box and work for the Pollard brothers.

I felt clammy all over and I was definitely sweating. It wasn't a polite, dignified level of sweat, either. I was pretty sure my white button down blouse with the puffy, super cute sleeves was now pit stained and my nose was definitely beading with perspiration.

All my nerves had been sparked roughly thirty minutes ago. I was minding my own business, as I tend to do. I had my morning coffee in hand—actually, I don't drink coffee, but that's between you and me. I get a coffee cup and fill it with soda from this breakfast place. People judge when they see you sipping on a Diet Coke, so I found it easier to just sneak my sodas in coffee cups. Sue me.

Anyway, I'd bopped out on the streets of Manhattan—a city I still couldn't quite believe I lived in. Like many people, I'd fantasized about living and working in New York for years. I imagined it would be romantic and exciting and life-changing. Honestly, it was all those things. It also stressed

me to high hell, but I was getting better about that. A text came through on my phone from Marley, a friend from Pollard who works in finance. I'm paraphrasing here, but the exchange went something like this:

Marley: Are you coming in today?

Pearl: Yep. Why, are my clocks wrong? Am I late? Is Jonas looking for me?

Marley: No, no, and no. I just thought you could use a day off. I can run it by Jonas for you, if you want.

Pearl: Why would I take today off? I'm already dressed. I've got my coffee. I'm wearing one of my favorite outfits.

Marley: So take your coffee, cute outfit, and go chill in the park. It's Fall weather, girl. It's beautiful out there.

Pearl: Why does it feel like you're trying to get me to stay away from work?

Pearl: Is there something I shouldn't see at work?

Pearl: I'M FREAKING OUT! WHAT IS GOING ON AT WORK!

Marley: Just skip today, Pearl. Please. Trust me.

And that was where the conversation ended. I was no detective, but all my investigative senses were tingling. *Hard*. Something was amiss.

Pollard Marketing composed the 8th floor through the 12th floor of the Metford building in the Upper East End. Everybody on my floor worked in design. That meant most of my immediate co-workers on the tenth floor were the artsy types. Artsy types are dramatic, too, if you weren't aware.

Every single person on the floor was gathered around the cork board right outside the elevator. I had to nudge and push my way through the crowd. First thing in the morning, I was five six on a good day—you lose a little height throughout the day as you squish down and compress. I could barely see anything except the suit-clad backs of my co-workers.

“Excuse me,” I said, heart still banging away like it was auditioning for *The Blue Man Group*.

Everybody was murmuring and whispering. There was excited chatter like they were gathered around a dead body. *Was somebody dead?*

Was *I* dead? Was this how it happened when you died? You go back in time and show up to work to watch everybody gossiping over your corpse? *No, Pearl*. That was the anxiety talking, and my anxiety had no business talking. It was stupid.

The last two men finally parted enough for me to see what the fuss was about. The entire corkboard was plastered with the same black and white image. Little cheerily colored thumbtacks were stuck at the top of each page. Only one was different—slathered with thick red text almost like it was written in lipstick.

I squinted, moving even closer until I was in front of the crowd. It took my brain a second to piece together what I was seeing. It looked like a woman was sitting on the copy machine bare ass naked. But that wasn't the worst of it. There were two large masculine hands planted on either side of her ass and... *Yes*. That was a pair of balls between her legs. It wasn't completely clear from the image, but I would've bet my grandma's knitting collection I knew what I was looking at.

That was P in the V right there. Sure as day.

For a split second, I felt relief. This was what Marley was worried about me seeing. She probably thought with my tendency to over-react and freak out, I'd lose my mind when I saw this. But sex? Come on, Marley. I was a big girl—not literally, because I was more like a below average sized girl, but emotionally? Big. Very big.

So what was...

And that's when I saw it. The tattoos on the fingers. The splayed hands of the man next to the naked ass. There were letters inked into the pad of each finger. "S.U.C.K.I.T.D.U.D.E.S." And yes, the last thumb had two letters on it, because the owner of the tattoo had been drunk and thought it was worth breaking the pattern of one letter per finger to make sure *all* the dudes were told to suck it, not just the one.

Why do I know this, you ask? That's easy. Because those stupid hands belonged to my stupid boyfriend. My *former* boyfriend, Eric.

My heart had been pounding a steady, anxious rhythm, but now it shifted from hard to fast. I could feel it in my ears and my eyes. I looked at those big, angry red letters at the bottom of the pages.

"Fuck you, Eric. You said you loved me. I hope you love losing your job, asshole. -Em."

I wasn't sure if Em was the woman whose ass was on display, but I had a sinking feeling it wasn't. Em was probably the *other* woman Eric was cheating on me with. The *other* woman he was telling he loved.

It felt like I was floating a few inches above my body, almost like watching myself from the outside. I drifted back

through the crowd, eyes glazed over. I kept going until I reached an empty area with two long, padded benches arranged in an “L” shape. I plopped down and stared forward.

The word “asshole” kept repeating in my mind, and not just because Eric was an asshole. It was because that image had so perfectly captured that woman’s asshole. It was right there in black and white, plain for everybody to see. And somehow, that felt appropriate. That was life, wasn’t it? We dressed things up and made them out to be romantic. We looked over flaws and faults. But when you really zoomed in and paid attention, everything had its own puckered, dirty little secret. The boss who isn’t as well-off as he pretends. The lifestyle social influencer family that fights every time the cameras are off. And for me, the fact that my boyfriend was going balls deep behind my back at work.

Chapter 2 - Dean

I WAS A MAN WHO PAID ATTENTION TO DETAIL. *RIGOROUS* attention. And when it came to the bodies of women I enjoyed, I was on another level of focus. I knew every curve, freckle, and mole. I knew that weird little spot where their skin didn’t wrinkle because of a birth mark.

So when I saw the pictures hanging up on the tenth floor, I knew. I knew it deep, *deep*, down.

I wandered a little closer, ignoring the crowd of people gathered and whispering about the pictures. I raised a hand, tracing the pattern of dots on the underside of the woman’s ass, which was flattened and plastered to the glass top of a copy machine. I’d called that constellation of

freckles on her left asscheek “the horny runner.” If you tilted your head a little, it kind of looked like a man running toward her ass crack, which had been greatly amusing at the time.

Right now? Not so much. Because in all my attention to detail, I’d never noticed a pair of balls between her legs.

Conclusion? Those balls belonged to another. Another man’s balls between the legs of my girlfriend. I wasn’t great with math, but if my numbers checked out, that meant I was officially single.

A few emotions considered taking hold in my brain. Jealousy. Anger. Despair. But they all flitted right on through, not doing much more than glancing through the windows and passing by. Instead, the emotion that finally sank in was just disappointment, and not even in Anabelle and her freckles or the balls between her legs—and for the record, a smaller pair than mine. Yes, that matters.

I sighed, looked at the flowers in my hand, and chucked them in the trash.

I made my way through the crowd, vaguely wondering if she was even at the office today. Chances were, she’d booked it for home when she saw the pictures on the corkboard. I supposed that meant she was canceling our breakfast in her office plans.

I found a pair of benches in the corner and saw a woman sitting on them, staring ahead like a soldier who had just seen some shit.

I plopped down on the bench across from her, tilting my head her way and drawing my brows together. “Let me guess. You tried the food in the cafeteria? Don’t tell me it was the sushi.”

She kept staring.

I scooted a little closer. "Hey," I said, dropping the charming act. "You okay?"

She stirred, almost surprised by my voice. She looked over at me and barely seemed to see me. Oddly enough, that was kind of nice. Somebody who wasn't eager to please me, for a fucking change.

"Sorry," she said. "Weird morning."

She was blonde with long-ass hair pulled up in an Amazon-like braided ponytail that was thrown over her shoulder. Tan skin dusted with freckles across the bridge of her nose and big, blue eyes. She had naturally red lips and the perfect posture of a woman who danced or did yoga religiously.

Yeah, I noticed. I already mentioned I paid attention to detail, like the way her right index finger was idly scratching a nervous little white patch in her dark blue jeans, or how she wore little snowman earrings in red and green even though we were still four months out from the holidays. *One of those people,* I thought.

I felt my own stupid brain working in its old, disappointing ways. That was the word of the day for me. Disappointment. Because it was starting to feel more and more like a stupid little circle I was running in. Meet a girl, realize she never cared about more than what she could get out of me, end things, repeat. And where was I now? I'd wandered right over to the first beautiful woman I saw and started trying to talk instead of even processing what I'd seen on that fucking cork board.

"Weird is the right word," I said, ignoring my own internal warning bells. They were telling me to walk right the fuck

out of Pollard Marketing, forget about Anabelle, and swear off women for a couple years. Things would be simpler. But I ignored the alarms and kept talking. “What’s with the tattoo on that guy’s fingers? I mean, put aside how dumb it is to get ‘Suck it Dudes’ on your fingers, but why go plural? He could’ve had a neat one letter per finger situation.” I was hoping to get at least a smile out of her. For some reason, the look on this girl’s face was tugging at something deep inside me. For once, it wasn’t the string that led to my cock, either. Maybe that string was connected somewhere in the vicinity of my heart? *Probably not, but maybe.*

The corner of her lip twitched, but it was more of a bitter smile than amused. “He was drunk. And yeah, I always thought it was a really stupid tattoo. Not as stupid as the girl who believes that guy actually cares about her though, I guess.”

Oh, shit. “Those balls were your boyfriend’s?” I asked. *Stupid, Dean.* I should’ve said hands. Bringing up the balls was hardly the most sensitive way to approach this. “The ass was my girlfriend, actually,” I said. “So we have that in common, at least. Both our significant others decided to screw us by screwing each other .”

She frowned. “How do you know it was your girlfriend? I mean, you couldn’t see much. Other than...”

“The freckles,” I said. “They form a pretty distinct pattern. One I recognized.”

She nodded absently.

“I’m Dean, by the way. Dean Slater.”

She barely looked up. “Pearl.”

“Just Pearl? Like Madonna?”

Pearl's big blue eyes lifted to mine in a dry, *that's not even close to funny*, kind of way. I couldn't help grinning at the way she was glaring, and my grin seemed to finally break through something in her.

She lowered her eyes and snorted a quick, little laugh and flashed a smile at her knees. "Pearl Moreno."

"So, uh. Did you see this coming?"

"Someone pestering me while I try to process the fact that my boyfriend-*former boyfriend...*" she trailed off, eyes almost glazing over. She blinked, then continued. "Look, I'm not trying to be rude. But I feel like I just-" She stood and put a hand to her mouth, eyebrows pulling together.

I got up. She was tall, but I still had to bend a little to look into her eyes. "Hey, you okay? You look like you might-"

It happened so quickly I didn't even move. One minute, her big blue eyes were looking up into mine, full of panic. The next, my shirt felt warm and wet, sticking to my chest.

I looked down and saw... *yeah*. "Well, now I don't need to ask if you like eggs," I said.

She turned a literal shade of green and hit me with another round, this time splashing over my shoes.

#

I considered trying to salvage my soiled clothes, but opted to toss them in the bathroom trash can, along with my shoes. It was a few thousand dollars' worth of fabric, but I wasn't going to sweat that. I'd changed into my workout clothes, which had thankfully been tucked in my bag. Small victories, I guessed.

I was washing my hands in the sink, scrubbing as I ran back through the last few minutes. I couldn't help grinning.

What a fucking mess. First, I find out my girlfriend cheated on me in front a few dozen people. Next, I fail at charming a beautiful woman so badly she loses her breakfast all over my clothes.

“Believe it or not,” I called out over the sound of running water. “This is a first for me.”

“I’m so sorry.” Pearl’s voice came muffled through the bathroom door.

I shook my hands off, saw there were no paper towels—of course their weren’t—then stepped out of the bathroom.

I nearly bumped my chest into Pearl’s nose. She jumped back.

“Sorry,” she said. Her eyes ran down me and she looked back up. “Oh thank God you had extra clothes. But those look like workout clothes.” The pace of her words started to increase, like they were a force gaining momentum until even she couldn’t stop them. “You probably don’t pack fresh underwear to workout. But I guess it’s not the end of the world if a guy doesn’t wear underwear. You could be totally fine without. If that’s what you did, I mean.”

A lopsided smile formed on my lips. “Uh, well.”

“Shit,” Pearl held her palms up, closing her eyes and shaking her head. “I’m so sorry. I ramble when I’m nervous. Throwing up on a hot stranger isn’t exactly—” She scrunched her face in frustration, visibly trying to force herself to calm. She lowered her hands and seemed to take a deep breath. Finally, she opened her eyes again. “Please don’t answer any of those questions. Actually, can we just pretend I didn’t say any of that?”

“Sure,” I said. Except my dick wasn’t so ready to forget. That guy had a memory like an iron trap, and he promised

he wasn't going to forget where this gorgeous woman's brain had gone. "Well," I said. "I should probably get out of here. I have a meeting upstairs in an hour or two, anyway."

"Um, yeah. Are you sure there's nothing I can do? Those clothes didn't look cheap. I hope they're not ruined."

"They'll be fine," I said. "And it's okay. Really. But hey, if you know anybody in the market for a fake boyfriend, let me know. I'm not looking forward to my friends all trying to set me up out of sympathy after this shitshow."

She stared. "A fake boyfriend? What even is that?"

I circled my hand. "You know. Like someone who you can pretend to date. Maybe you're trying to ditch a guy at a bar, so you ask this random guy to say he's your boyfriend. Or whatever. But I could sure as hell use a fake girlfriend, or my friends are going to be trying to force feed a woman down my throat in about twelve hours."

Pearl was standing there with her hands clasped in front of her. She had on blue jeans that hugged her curves well. She was built like a woman who knew how to take care of herself but also wasn't terrified to take a bite of ice cream. Just the right balance, if you asked me. And it was all the kind of shit I shouldn't be noticing, but sue me. I was a man, and even if my girlfriend had just tried to rip my heart out and stomp on it, I was starting to wonder if I'd ever given her the chance. Could you really break someone's heart if they never gave it to you?

Fuck if I knew.

"Anyway. I'm sorry my ex and your ex met, I guess," I said. I raised my hand to wave, but Pearl hurried after me.

"Hold on," she said, grabbing my wrist. Distantly, I noticed most of the crowd around the corkboard had cleared.

Maybe it was the duo of janitors cleaning up what was left of Pearl's vomit a few feet away, or maybe the drama wasn't that exciting when it wasn't your own significant other getting caught cheating. "The fake boyfriend thing. I could use one of those."

I raised an eyebrow. "You could?"

"It's my family," she said. "They warned me over and over about Eric. I'm already going to be getting 'I told you' out the wazoo. As soon as they get tired of that, they're going to try to set me up with this guy, Landon. He's the son of a guy my dad worked with forever. They think he's perfect for me, and every time I'm single, it's Landon this and Landon that. He'll magically be at every family gathering and I'll find myself stumbling into him supposedly at random almost every day. But if they thought I was with somebody..."

Holy shit. I'd tossed that thing out as a half-hearted joke. But to tell the truth? Maybe I was on to something. And if Pearl was game, it could be a win-win. "You're serious?"

"I mean, if you are," she said. "It's not like we'd have to *do* anything, right?"

That simple question flooded my brain with a sudden and vivid image of me grabbing her by that braid and tugging it back to tilt her chin up to mine. I saw myself kissing her deep and hard, cupping that tight ass in her jeans with a big hand and pulling her into me.

I blinked. "Yeah. We'd never have to see each other. Just make excuses if anyone asks. You could say I work in another state. Who cares, right? All that matters is we are both in on it."

"For how long?" she asked.

“Honestly? Fuck women. No offense. And not literally. I mean I’m done with all of it. The good ones wind up realizing they’re better off without me, and the bad ones end up like Anabelle. It’s a loss no matter how I play, so maybe I just won’t play anymore. I’m yours as long as you want me.”

Her cheeks went red at that, and my cock—the little bastard—definitely noticed. Clearly, there was mutual attraction between us, but acting on it would be problematic for a number of reasons. One, I was supposed to take some time to clear my head after a nasty breakup, right? You couldn’t trust yourself when you were in a state like this. Two, I really meant what I said. Fuck women. Agreeing to a relationship might as well have been like agreeing to climb into a burning airplane with no parachute. It was going to end in flames, the only question was when. And last but not least, I was tired of the endless dance. Maybe I could just put my head down, focus on work, and actually enjoy life without wondering when my relationship was going to detonate.

“Okay,” she said quietly. “Same. I’m not looking to date again. I don’t think I could handle another Eric. It’s just not worth it.”

I stuck my hand out. “Then it’s a deal? Be mine,” I added with a sarcastic twist of my lips.

“I’m yours,” she said, smiling back as she took my hand and shook.

Her hand was soft and small in mine. I felt like I had to be careful not to break it, but I shook slowly, eyes locked on hers. “Oh, give me your phone,” I said. “I’ll put my number in. If anybody needs convincing that we’re together, just have them call me. I’ll play along with whatever.”

She fished out her phone—a silly little bejeweled case with one of those popper things to hold on the back. I flicked my thumb up and saw she had no password. “You don’t have a password on your phone?” I asked. “What if somebody gets it and finds your nudes?”

Her eyes went a little wider. “Uh, I don’t keep nudes on there.”

“Oh, smart.” I tapped the side of my temple. “You keep them somewhere safer. I like that.”

She didn’t reply as I navigated to her contacts and saved myself in her phone as “Sweet Cheeks”. I fired off a quick text to myself and wrote “Thinking of you” with a few heart emojis and a kissy face. I handed it back to her and she looked down at the phone, read, and her cheeks flushed again. “Really?” she asked.

“Hey, it’s just pretend, right?”

Pearl nodded, gave a little wave, and walked off toward one of the cubicle offices on the main floor. I watched her go and saw a woman rush up and start talking to her quickly, Pearl smiled, said something, and split off from the woman to disappear behind a fuzzy, carpeted partition.

I scratched my head. *Just pretend*. As in, I just had to pretend a very real part of me didn’t wish I’d sworn off women, because I was tempted as hell to give that particular one a shot.

But hey, look at me making good decisions. I didn’t chase after her. I didn’t secretly make plans to seduce her now that I had her number in my phone. All I planned to do was put my cock on lockdown like it was 2019 all over again, go upstairs to meet with Pollard Marketing’s CEO in my exercise clothes, and get to work.

Except I pulled out my phone in the elevator and stared at the text I'd sent to myself from her phone. I grinned, then typed out a quick response. After all, wouldn't it look weird if her "boyfriend" didn't respond when she texted something so sweet?

I snapped a quick selfie of myself winking and smiling, then typed out my message below it. I grinned as I reread it and thought *maybe* I shouldn't, but hey, how many good decisions was a guy expected to be able to make in one day?

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**P.S. THIS SNEAK PEAK IS FROM THE CURRENT DRAFT OF THE book and hasn't been through final edits. There may be some tweaks or changes for the final draft!

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SUGGESTED READING ORDER

I realize that it can be a little overwhelming to click an author name on Amazon and get an entire list of titles going back for more than five years. Which one should you read next and what's the best order?

So that's what this section is here to answer!

If you enjoyed this book, then my suggestions for what to read next are below, in order from most relevant to least relevant. I haven't included *all* of my books because I think the romantic comedies are going to be the best match with this book, but I'll include one of my favorite non romantic comedy books just incase you're interested in diving into that side of my catalog as well.

Which book should you read immediately after this one? Why not jump right into my most recent series? It starts with [Once Upon A Bet](#). I try to write my series so they can be read in any order, which makes it nice if you discover a series in the "wrong" order. In this case, if you read Once Upon A Grump first, you can easily go back to read Once Upon A Bet without feeling like anything was really spoiled for you. The series is a fun small town rom com, and book one is an age gap romance for extra fun!

What should you read after that?

[The Objects of Attraction Series](#). It starts with *His Banana* and is definitely my most successful series of all time. Each book is really fun, irreverent, and guaranteed to make even the stuffiest reader laugh through their nose once or twice. If you want to check out just one book to get a taste, click that first link. If you want a discount on all six books, [click here to look at the bundle](#) (that'll get you all six books for \$9.99 instead of \$16)

After that?

One of my more recent works is a three book series that starts with [The Boss\(hole\)](#), then [the Room\(hate\)](#), and finally the [Ego\(maniac\)](#). There's a little bit of everything in the series and I think the characters are a lot of fun. Travis from The Ego(maniac) was probably my favorite character in recent memory, so I'd say that one is a must-read!

There's more? (Yes!)

My [Mostly Funny Romance Series](#) should be your next stop. It's a three-book series and thematically should feel like a perfect blend of The Boss(hole)/The Room(hate) and The Objects series. Book one, *My (Mostly) Secret Baby*, will really give you some of that same flavor that The Boss(hole) did, as well.

And then?

You'll move out of the world of series and into standalones at this point if you're still looking for rom coms.

If you think BDSM meets Rom Com sounds fun, you'll love [The Golden Pecker](#).

If you enjoy a touch of the paranormal world with vampires and werewolves but still want that rom com flair, I've got

two perfect books for you.

[Kiss Kiss Fang Fang](#) and [I Bite, She Sucks!](#)

What else you got, Bloom?

That pretty much wraps up the rom coms I've written so far. The most recent non-rom coms I wrote were a brief foray into the world of bully romance. If that's your style, check out [Ruthless Love](#) and [Savage Love](#). Both books have more of a young adult vibe in terms of setting and are a little more angsty and drama packed than my usual work.

Do you like BDSM?

I've got plenty of offerings in the BDSM world from my earlier work. [Knocked Up by the Dom](#) is a great place to start. It's light, smutty, and will grab you right away.

Got any single dads?

You bet I do! My favorite single dad book was [Single Dad Next Door](#). It has a little more humor than my other books around that time period did, including one of my favorite scenes to date!

Final thoughts...

I hope this list has been helpful. There are more books beyond what I've listed here, but I was doing my best to keep it at least mostly limited to the world of my rom coms, since that's what you just read and probably what you're most interested in reading more of.

Happy reading!

xx

Penelope

KEEP IN TOUCH!

I've got a little bit of myself in the various "social medias", if you're into that! You can find me on TikTok, Instagram, and I'd especially love it if you joined my Facebook Group - Penelope's Book Bingers! The group and my newsletter are probably the two best ways to keep up to date and get a little peek behind the curtain if that's your jam. But I'd definitely love to have you there so we can connect!

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