



STRANDED
WITH THE
Damaged
BILLIONAIRE

EVERLEIGH GREEN

NOT ONLY IS ETHAN MY PROFESSIONAL
ENEMY, HE'S ALSO MY BABY DADDY.

Chicago's legal battlefield just got hotter.

His billionaire arrogance is infuriating, but his dominance awakens a hunger deep within me.

I just can't figure him out. He's like a puzzle I can't solve.

Now that we have been assigned the same divorce case, sparks fly hotter than the courtroom.

I try to resist his charm, but I just can't seem to get him out of my head.

Just when I thought I had Ethan figured out, a careless night alone together leaves us with a shocking surprise that neither of us expected.

He's no longer my enemy.

He's the father of the baby growing inside me.

STRANDED WITH THE
DAMAGED BILLIONAIRE

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS BAD BOY ROMANCE

COME TO PAPA



EVERLEIGH GREEN

EVERLEIGH GREEN PUBLISHING LLC

Copyright © 2023 by Everleigh Green

All rights reserved.

In no way is it legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document in either electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is not allowed unless with written permission from the publisher.

Respective authors own all copyrights not held by the publisher.

CONTENTS

1. [Ava](#)
2. [Ethan](#)
3. [Ava](#)
4. [Ethan](#)
5. [Ava](#)
6. [Ethan](#)
7. [Ava](#)
8. [Ethan](#)
9. [Ava](#)
10. [Ethan](#)
11. [Ava](#)
12. [Ethan](#)
13. [Ava](#)
14. [Ethan](#)
15. [Ava](#)
16. [Ethan](#)
17. [Ava](#)
18. [Ethan](#)
19. [Ava](#)
20. [Ethan](#)
21. [Ava](#)
22. [Ethan](#)
23. [Ava](#)
24. [Ethan](#)
25. [Ava](#)
26. [Ethan](#)
27. [Ava](#)
28. [Ethan](#)
29. [Ava](#)
30. [Ethan](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Wait... There's plenty more where that came from](#)

AVA



“Oh, fuck me.”

I snap the folder shut and sit up straighter. I reach for the cup of iced coffee across from me and take a large sip. “You’re never going to believe who I’m going up against in court.”

Rebecca glances up from her tablet and raises an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me it’s *Ethan Black*.”

I set down my coffee with a little more force than necessary, causing some of the liquid to slosh over. “The one and only. God, he’s a nightmare outside of court! He’s going to be much worse when we face off, I know it.”

I reach into the pocket of my skirt and pull out a pack of tissues. I’m mopping up the mess on the table when I hear a commotion on the other side of the cafeteria. When I look up, I see a group of well-dressed women with perfectly coiffed hair and sky-high heels giggling and muttering to themselves. The elevator doors ping open, and Ethan Black walks in. He is in his custom Armani suit with his dark hair styled and a pair of Aviator sunglasses perched on his nose.

Giggles rise through the air.

I roll my eyes and switch my focus back to the table. With a scowl, I stand and walk over to the nearest bin. As soon as I turn and see Ethan a few feet away, I hold my head up higher and brush past him. I don’t look back until I’m sitting at the table where Rebecca is sipping on her drink.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

Rebecca takes another long sip of her drink before setting it down. “Remind me again what the story is between you two?”

“There’s no story. I just hate his guts.”

I’ve felt this way since I graduated law school at the top of my class. Since then, Ethan and I have gone head-to-head outside of court and even gone up for some of the same cases. Well, at least until he became a partner in one of the top law firms in the city.

I, on the other hand, am still trying to get to the top of my game.

Life hasn’t exactly done me any favors or handed me any opportunities on a silver platter. Ethan, however, has taken advantage of every loophole and every opportunity afforded to him as the son of one of New York City’s most powerful attorneys. While a part of me hates that men like Ethan can get by just doing the minimum, another part of me knows I’m a much better lawyer than he is.

Someday, everyone else is going to see that too.

“Did he break your heart or something?”

I stuff the folder into my bag and give Rebecca an incredulous look. “What are you talking about?”

“You can’t hate someone that much for no reason,” Rebecca points out, pausing to toss her blonde hair over her shoulders. She smooths out the front of her shirt and gives me another pointed look. “Come on, you know you can tell me anything. I’m a vault.”

I snort and stand back up. “You’re not a vault. I love you, Bec, but you couldn’t keep a secret if your life depended on it.”

Rebecca’s lips spread into a knowing grin. “So, there is something going on between the two of you. I knew it. There’s no way all of that chemistry is for nothing.”

I hoist my bag up my shoulders. “What chemistry? You’re just sensing the nausea I feel.”

Rebecca snorts. “Oh, come on. Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it. You’re two of the most well-known divorce attorneys in the city. You both work at the top two most renowned law firms in the city, and you’re both known for your aggressive tactics.”

“What’s your point?”

Rebecca stands and pats me on the back. “My point is this practically writes itself. You’ve got the hots for each other.”

“I think you read too many romance novels.”

Rebecca laughs. “Maybe, but I’ve read enough to know what’s happening here. Come on, you can’t tell me that you don’t see it. You and Ethan are a lot more similar than you think.”

I scowl. “I’m not some wannabe lawyer who acts like he’s better than everyone else. Have you even met Ethan?”

Rebecca tucks her file underneath her arms. “Yeah, a few times actually. I’ve even gone up against him in court. He’s good.”

“He’s not as good as he *thinks* he is,” I mutter, with another look thrown in his direction.

Ethan is standing in the middle of the courthouse cafeteria with its glass ceilings and wooden benches on either side. He is surrounded by well-dressed men and women on all sides. A few of the women keep coming up with excuses to touch him, and he is lapping up all of the attention like a cat in the sun.

A fucking smug two-faced cat.

“I don’t know.” Rebecca loops her arm through mine and leads me away. “I’m telling you that the two of you are similar. He knows how to handle complicated cases.”

“So do I.”

“Exactly. Now do you get what I mean?”

Together, we step onto the elevator. It fills up quickly, and I notice a strange smell emanating from one of the occupants. I hold my breath, count backward in my head, and breathe a

sigh of relief when the double doors ping open. Once they do, Rebecca and I step outside and round the corner of a brightly lit hallway. At the end of the hallway, I spot my client on one of the benches, one heel-clad ankle crossed over the other. She has her purse in her lap and is scrolling through her phone.

“Is that her?” Rebecca glances over at my client and back at me. “I expected her to look much different. My niece loves her books.”

I nod. “So does my goddaughter. I had no idea there was so much money to be made in children’s books.”

Or how difficult it would be to secure my client a divorce...

Unfortunately, she is married to one of the most self-centered and arrogant men I’ve ever come across. It certainly explains why, of all the divorce attorneys in the country, Blake Rider chose Ethan Black. As far as everyone is concerned, Ethan is a shark with the Midas touch, turning everything he touches into gold.

“Ms. Prescott.”

Melanie Carmichael rises to her feet, her expression relieved when she sees me. “There you are. I was beginning to wonder if I was in the right place.”

“Thank you for coming in early, Ms. Carmichael.” I offer Melanie a quick smile and lead her back to the bench where she was sitting. In silence, we sit and I flip her folder open. “I’m going to need to go over a few of the details with you before we go in.”

“I thought a deposition wasn’t as important as the trial.”

I look over at her and frown. “They’re different but important. The purpose of a deposition is for both lawyers to question the witnesses and take their testimonies. Whatever is said during a deposition can be transcribed and used in trial later for discovery purposes.”

“What does that mean?”

I straighten my back and twist to face Melanie, blocking out all of the noise and people around us. “It means for the purpose of the case, I need you to act like this is the actual trial. You need to be careful about what you say and how you say it. And no matter what you do, don’t let his lawyer lure you into a false sense of security.”

Melanie’s eyebrows furrow together. “Why would I do that?”

I snap the folder shut and clear my throat. “Blake’s hired a new attorney. Now, I don’t want you to panic because this isn’t unusual. He just realized how awful his previous attorney was and wanted to do better.”

Melanie searches my face. “Is it someone we should be worried about?”

Before I can respond, the elevator doors ping open. Ethan Black steps out with his legion of fans following in his wake. He still has his glasses on with one hand in the pocket of his jeans. Ethan walks in a slow and unhurried manner as if he has all of the time in the world. When he reaches us, he stops and takes his glasses off, revealing a pair of deep blue eyes.

“Counselor. It’s good to see you again.”

I jump to my feet and glare at him. “I honestly can’t say the same.”

Ethan flashes me a smile. “You can’t tell me you’re not looking forward to facing me in court.”

“You really do have a high opinion of yourself, don’t you?”

Ethan shrugs and puts his glasses away. “When you’re the best, there’s no point in pretending otherwise.”

I take a step forward, and my eyes tighten around the edges. “You’re not the best.”

“Still sore about that job you didn’t get, Prescott? The best person won.”

“You mean the best man called in a few favors,” I say through gritted teeth. “Do you honestly expect me to believe

you got that position fair and square?”

Ethan raises an eyebrow. “I had no idea you cared so much, Prescott. I’m touched.”

“I don’t care about you. I care about how you act. Lawyers are held to a certain standard.”

“And what standard would that be?”

“It’s up to us to make sure all parties are being investigated properly so we can allow the legal system to do its job.”

Ethan yawns and checks his watch. “Thanks for the textbook definition, Prescott. I know what a lawyer’s job is. I’ve been doing this longer than you.”

“But not as well,” I point out with a smug smile. “I’m the one who got the *Infinity* case, remember?”

“I didn’t peg you for a sore winner, Prescott.” Ethan shoves both hands into his pockets. “I guess it’s true what they say about power getting to your head.”

I bristle. “I know what you’re trying to do.”

“Enlighten me, please. Since you think you have all of the answers.”

I point a finger at him and feel several pairs of eyes on us. “I don’t have all of the answers, but I know enough about you to know that you shouldn’t be a lawyer.”

“Oh, so you’re a member of the bar association too? Wonders will never cease, Prescott.”

Annoyance and frustration bubble up within me. “You’re trying to get a rise out of me to make me look bad in front of my client. It’s not going to work.”

Ethan takes a step forward, and the smell of his spicy cologne hits me, making my stomach do an odd little dip. “You do that all on your own, Ms. Prescott. Oh and by the way, you’ve got some mayonnaise on your chin.”

Without waiting for a response, Ethan takes a few steps back and turns to his client. Blake Ryder looks smug and incredibly pleased with himself as they step in through the

double doors. I wipe my chin, gesture to Melanie, and we hurry after them. My heart is pounding steadily the entire time.

The benches on either side are full of people, and the smell of lemon-scented air freshener lingers in the air. Ethan holds the door open for me, but I ignore him, motioning to Melanie as I do. She sinks into her seat as soon as we pass the railing, sets her phone down on the table, and looks up at me.

“Is he going to be a problem?”

I roll my shoulders and set my bag down. “No, don’t worry. We’ve got this.”

Melanie looks skeptical as she turns her attention back to her phone. When the judge comes in, a stern-faced older woman in black robes with wisps of silver in her hair, we all rise to our feet. Once we sit back down, my knee is bouncing up and down underneath the table.

I dig my nails into my palms, suck in a deep breath, and count backward.

Once I’m done, I rise to my feet and pull my blazer down. “Good morning, your honor. Thank you for seeing us again on such short notice.”

Ethan undid the first button on his jacket. “Your honor, I’d like to ask for a continuance. I was just brought on as Mr. Ryder’s attorney, and I need a little more time to prepare the evidence.”

“Here we go,” I mutter under my breath. “Your honor, the defense has no problem granting counsel a continuance.”

“Granted. You have one week, Mr. Black. Dismissed.” The judge bangs her gavel, stands back up, and leaves through a side door.

Ethan’s eyes are on me as I gather my things and usher Melanie out the door. There’s a spring in my step.

Game, set, match, Ethan Black.

ETHAN



“*R*emind me again why you took this case. You’re a senior partner, and you own like half the company.” Jackson rolls up his sleeves and flashes the women at the other end of the bar a bright smile. “This guy’s not your usual MO.”

“Yeah, but his wife is legit.” I toss back the shot and exhale. “It’s a lot of publicity, and you know there’s no such thing as bad publicity.”

At least, not as far as I’m concerned.

Blake Ryder is a small-time musician who is more known for his outbursts than his music, but there’s no denying the kind of buzz surrounding the case. Although I was initially reluctant to take the case, after doing some research on him and his wife, I knew there was more to the story.

Pissing Ava Prescott off is just a bonus.

Jackson swings his gaze back to me and leans against the counter. “Are you sure this isn’t to piss off that hot brunette attorney? What was her name again? Aviana?”

“*Ava*,” I correct before gesturing for another drink. “And no, I already told you that I don’t like her.”

Jackson tosses back his drink and smacks his lips together. “I heard she’s a beast in court. Kind of like you, huh?”

“We’re nothing alike.” I pause to turn around in my chair and survey the pub with its fluorescent lighting, a small crack in the ceiling, and country music wafting through the overhead speakers. “For starters, I know how to have fun.”

Jackson chuckles. “You’re telling me. I’m pretty sure that all of your guests from last week’s party need like a year to recover.”

I shrug and lift the glass up to my lips. “It’s all in a day’s work.”

But now that I have a big case to focus on, I know it’s time to reign things in. When it comes to my work, I have a strict adherence policy. In the beginning stages of a case, I dedicate myself completely to my client and the case. No big parties, no distractions, and nothing that can compromise the quality of the work. However, as soon as I’m done with the case, I know exactly what to do to let loose.

Something I’m sure Ava isn’t familiar with.

Earlier today, I took the time to study everything about her, from the way she walked to the way she presented her evidence, to the way she spoke and interacted with her client. Although we’ve been running in the same circles, I’ve always been just one step ahead of her, and I know it bothers her to no end.

Women like Ava don’t know how to let loose, and they definitely don’t know how to have fun.

Ava is as uptight and high-strung as they come.

Jackson turns around and claps me on the back. “Speaking of parties, you headed to the one Ken is throwing later in the week?”

I shake my head and finish my drink. “You know I don’t party hard when I’ve got a new client.”

“Right, yeah. What about those women checking us out?”

I smile and turn to face my oldest friend. “Lead the way.”

For the rest of the night, I sit back and let Jackson shine. I watch as two out of the three girls fawn all over him. Near the end of the night, they drag him to the middle of the dance floor and begin to grind against him. Jackson is smiling so hard that he looks like he’s won the lottery. I, on the other hand, keep checking my phone for updates and signaling for drinks.

A pleasant buzz is forming in the back of my skull and the center of my stomach when one of the women, a bleached blonde with dark roots, places a hand on my arm and leans in.

“What’s the matter? Need some help loosening up?”

I look up at her and eye her, starting at the top of her head, down to her scantily clad body, and ending with the soles of her feet.

“Thanks, but you’re not my type.”

“Aren’t you that billionaire lawyer or something?” She leans forward, offering me a generous view of her cleavage. The sickly sweet smell of her perfume wafts up my nostrils. “I’m a big fan of your work.”

I take her wrist in mine and gently push her away. “Thanks, but I’m really not interested.”

“I can make you forget about her,” she calls out to my retreating back. “All you have to do is give me a chance.”

I ignore her, brushing past Jackson and the others on my way to the bathroom. There, I wash my hands and splash cold water on my face. When I come out, the music is louder and a few more people are gyrating against each other. I spot the blonde from earlier dancing against a tall and bulky man in a flannel shirt and dark jeans. With a slight shake of my head, I leave a few bills on the counter and leave.

Outside, the cool night air hits me in the face and I inhale.

I drape my jacket over my arm and glance down both sides of the street. My silver car pulls up next to the curb, and I whistle as I climb down the stairs. A uniformed driver holds the door open for me. Settled against the leather seats, I pour myself a generous amount of whiskey and lift the glass up to my lips.

“I’m starving, John. Where can we go that’s open?”

John looks at me in that rear view mirror before turning his attention back to the road. “There’s a burger place nearby, sir.”

I take a sip of my drink. “Great. I can work up a sweat in the morning.”

After dropping me off in front of the apartment building, John left to park the car. I stagger up the front steps, give the doorman a bright smile, and press the elevator button a few times. In the elevator, a tall redhead with cool green eyes keeps throwing glances at me. Before I know what I'm doing, I push her up against the wall and pin her arms up over her head.

She giggles and wraps her legs around me. "I knew you'd come back."

I press hot, open-mouthed kisses down the side of her neck and over her jaw. "I thought we agreed there would be less talking."

"Fuck, that's sexy. You're so hot, baby."

Suddenly, I see Ava in front of me, her dark hair framing her smooth, angular face and her hazel eyes full of emotion. My stomach churns as I push the image away and fumble with the zipper on the back of Clarissa's dress.

I stop kissing her and drawback. "Okay, this isn't going to work."

Clarissa pouts but doesn't pull the straps back up. "Why don't I come over to yours and we can figure something out?"

I shake my head and run a hand over my face. "Thanks, but I've got some work to finish."

Once the doors ping open, I hurry out before I can change my mind. I feel Clarissa's eyes on me as I walk down the carpeted hallway toward my door. When I get there, I fish my keys out of my pocket, and it takes a few tries for me to get them in the lock. I push the door open, pour in, and kick the door shut with the back of my leg.

I leave my clothes in a heap on the floor by the door.

In my boxer shorts, I step into the kitchen and rummage through the fridge. I pull out a bottle of water and down it all when I'm standing. With a frown, I switch on the coffee machine and wait for it to finish. While it does, I study the case folder on the desk by the kitchen counter.

I've got my work cut out for me, but I'm already looking forward to the challenge.

A few cups of coffee later, I've worked up a sweat, and I've got ketchup and mustard dripping down my chin. I pause to wipe my mouth, boot up my laptop, and stretch my arms over my head while I wait. As soon as the screen comes to life, I sit down and flip through the papers.

Damn it, Blake. What have you gotten yourself into? There's a reason NDAs and prenups are signed. The wife is going to squeeze Blake for all he's got, and it isn't even much.

When my phone rings, interrupting the silence, I am doing push-ups and still flipping through the file. "Are you drunk-dialing me?"

"You're missing the party," Jackson says, his voice rising toward the end. "Those women we met at the bar took me back to this place. You've gotta stop by."

I rise to my feet, reach for the towel draped over the back of the high chair, and use it to wipe my face. "I don't think so. I'm sobering up and focusing on the case."

"Come on, I need my wingman."

I reach for another bottle of water and take a long sip. "You don't need me there. You want someone to make you look better."

"That hot blonde was asking about you." There's loud music and conversation in the background. Jackson's voice keeps coming in and out of focus, so I set the phone down on the marble kitchen counter and set it on speaker. "She looks like she could keep going all night."

"That's exactly the kind of distraction I don't want," I reply in between sips of water. "Why don't you have fun for the both of us? I'll see you at work."

"Any chance I can get out of that meeting in the morning?"

"Not a chance in hell. Happy partying."

With that, the line goes dead, and I'm left staring at the phone. I pick it up off the counter and set it down on the desk.

I'm in the middle of my opening statement when my phone rings again. With a frown, I snatch it up and growl.

“What is it this time?”

“Is that any way to speak to your mother?”

I press two fingers to my temples and sag against the chair. “Sorry, Mom. I thought it was Jackson trying to get me to go out again.”

“It's Friday night, sweetheart. You should take a break.”

“I like to stay focused when I have a new case,” I reply, pausing to switch the phone from one ear to the other. “How about you? How are things going with your charity projects?”

“You really should stop by, darling. I'm sure you'll like the work I'm doing, and a lot of the ladies have been asking about you.”

“Because your friends want to set me up with their daughters or nieces or whatever. Thanks, but no thanks. Anyway, let's talk about something else. How are you? How are things?”

The last thing I want is to be stuck with another Clarissa.

And if I'm going to beat Ava at her own game, I have to keep my eye on the prize.

AVA



“*M*r. Ryder, isn’t it true that you never believed in my client’s talent as an author?”

Blake, who is dressed in a pair of dark jeans and button-down shorts, looks appropriately offended at my statement and shakes his head emphatically. “Is that what that bitch told you? She’s lying through her teeth like she always does.”

“Mr. Ryder, I’ll remind you that you can’t use that kind of language in court,” says the judge with a stern shake of her finger. “Now, please answer the question in a manner befitting of this court.”

“My apologies, your honor. My client is just so overcome with emotion over such a ludicrous accusation,” Ethan interrupts with a smile tossed in the judge’s direction. “Maybe if the defense wasn’t trying to paint my client in such a negative light...”

I stride over to my desk, give Melanie a confident smile, and take a piece of paper out of my folder. “I’m not trying to paint Mr. Ryder in a negative light. I’m simply trying to prove that he isn’t trying to lie to court. Your honor, I’ve got some new evidence that I’d like to bring to light. Here’s a copy for you, counselor.”

Ethan’s face remains smooth and impassive as I walk away from him.

“Mr. Ryder, I’d like you to read what was written here.” I set the paper down in front of him on the witness stand and

point at the highlighted paragraph. “Can you read this in a loud and clear voice please?”

Blake leans forward and swallows. He glances over at Ethan before swinging his gaze back to mine. “I don’t want to read this.”

I shrug and withdraw the piece of paper. “No problem, Mr. Ryder. I can read it myself. My apologies for the language, your honor. *You whiny little bitch. I’ve got more talent in my pinkie finger than you do in your entire body. No one is ever going to read your books because you’re a hack.*”

A heavy silence settles over the courtroom.

“Did I read that right, Mr. Ryder?” I set the paper back down in my folder and snap it shut. “Now I’m going to ask you again, did you or did you not try and convince my client that she wouldn’t make it as a writer?”

Blake’s face turns red as he sputters. “Yes, but you’re taking my words out of context. Melanie was never supposed to become successful. The only reason her books were sold was because her friend owns the publishing company.”

I hold my hand up. “Mr. Ryder, please. Let’s not go off on any wild conspiracy theories.”

“You’re one to talk!” Melanie snaps, her voice rising toward the end. “Your parents have paid for everything you have. You’ve never had to work hard a day in your life.”

Blake glares at Melanie and folds his arms over his chest. “At least I know how to enjoy life. The last time you had any fun was when you blew me for my birthday two fucking years ago.”

Judge Bloom bangs her gavel. “I will not have that kind of language in my courtroom. Counselors, control your clients right now.”

I spin around, hurry over to Melanie, and give her a pointed look. “You need to calm down or this case is going to be thrown out.”

Melanie curls her hands into a fist over the table. “Have you heard the things he’s saying about me? I can’t just sit here and take it.”

“You have to,” I hiss.

I look over my shoulders at Ethan who is bathed in soft particles of light as he talks to Blake. Blake looks like he wants to reach across the stand and strangle his lawyer.

“This is how attorneys like Ethan work. He’s trying to make you lose your cool so the judge will rule in Blake’s favor.”

Melanie’s expression turns dismayed. “This is my hard work. He shouldn’t get half of my royalties just because he was there.”

I place a hand on her shoulder and look into her eyes. “I’m going to do my best to make sure that doesn’t happen, but I need you to help me, okay? Can we do this together?”

Melanie studies my face in silence.

“Take a deep breath for me,” I instruct with another quick look in their direction. “Whenever you feel the urge to say anything, just write it down or drink some water.”

With that, I push the glass of water closer to her and spin around. On his way past, our eyes lock and Ethan doesn’t break our gaze until he sits back down. He is the picture of poise and confidence in his expensive suit. Frowning, I flip the folder open and roll my shoulders. I wrench my gaze away from Ethan and ignore the twinge in my stomach.

Come on. You can do it. You eat attorneys like Ethan for breakfast. This isn’t any different, okay? You already know what Ryder’s weak point is. Now, go in for the kill.

“Mr. Ryder, isn’t it true that my client has spoken in support of you and your band in spite of the controversial music you release?”

Blake stiffens. “Yeah, so?”

I stroll over to him, a remote in my hand. “Isn’t this a picture of the two of you at one of her events with the rest of

your bandmates?”

Blake refuses to look at the screen, and a muscle ticks in his jaw. “Yes.”

“And aren’t there several more posts like this where she is supportive and loving, using her platform to help elevate yours?”

Blake’s expression darkens. “Because she wanted to be able to brag to her friends.”

“Yes or no answers only, please,” I urge before flipping to another picture on the screen. “Mr. Ryder, I think it’s safe to say that you’re wasting valuable time and money by dragging this one out. Simply put, you have no case for yourself, and you’re just grasping at straws trying to ride on my client’s coattails.”

Ethan is on his feet in an instant. “Objection, badgering the witness.”

“Withdrawn.” I hold both hands up and take a few steps back. “I have nothing further to add.”

“She would be nothing without me!” Blake added, spittle flying out of his mouth as he half leans out of his seat. “You don’t even know what you’re talking about. You don’t know me.”

“Mr. Black, I’m warning you to control your client.” Judge Bloom gives Ethan an angry look. “One more outburst, and I’ll hold you both in contempt.”

Ethan shoves a hand into his pocket. “Your honor, I’d like to request that Mr. Carmichael and her attorney be found in contempt. They’re making my witness hostile and making this entire thing difficult.”

My mouth falls open as I twist to face him. “Oh, I’m making your witness hostile? Have you seen your witness, counselor? Have you read up on him and the kind of trouble he likes to get into?”

Without missing a beat, Ethan turns to me, his expression cool and unfazed. “You should know better than to go

snooping on the internet, Ms. Prescott. It's a dark and unflattering case."

I dig my nails into my palms. "And you should know better than to try and pull a stunt like this. This is your client's fault for not being able to stick to the line of questioning."

Ethan steps out from behind the table and comes to a stop a few feet away. "Because your client is the picture of poise and control? I knew the second I laid eyes on her that she wasn't going to be able to keep it together. Where's that legendary Prescott killer instinct? A law student could do a better job than this."

I bristle. "You arrogant, presumptuous, self-serving son of a—"

The sound of the gravel slices through the air, bringing us both back to the present with a jolt. Horrified, I turn to the judge who is red-faced and leaning so far out of her chair that I'm worried she's going to fall. I take an involuntary step forward and freeze when the judge narrows her eyes at me. I see a vein bulging in her neck.

"Counselors, this is completely unacceptable behavior. My chambers now!" She stands, and her robes make a low swishing sound as they trail behind her. Once the door clicks shut, I try not to wince or look over at Ethan. After a quick look at Melanie, I hurry out of the room with Ethan hot on my heels.

"Try and keep yourself from having a meltdown in there, Prescott," Ethan tells me in a low voice. "I would hate for you to be found in contempt."

I stop outside of the judge's chambers and give Ethan the dirtiest look I can muster. "Fuck you, Black. Why don't you crawl out of whatever hellhole you came from and leave the work to the professionals?"

Without waiting for a response, I knock on the door and push it open. Ethan and I squeeze in, exchanging angry looks the whole time. On either side of us, there are brown walls with shelves filled with books and a single mahogany

rectangular desk. Judge Bloom is polishing her spectacles and muttering to herself when we come to a stop on the other side of the desk.

“Neither of you needs to be told how to behave in a courtroom,” Judge Bloom says tightly without looking at either of us. “Would either of you care to explain to me why you were behaving like irate children in there?”

“Your honor, Ms. Prescott is clearly at fault,” Ethan begins, keeping one hand in his pocket while the other gestures. “My client is already going through a difficult time. She doesn’t need to—”

Judge Bloom holds a hand up, interrupting the rest of his sentence. “Mr. Black, I changed my mind. I don’t want to hear whatever piss-poor excuse you’re going to give me. What I want is for the two of you to clean up your acts and make sure your clients do the same.”

I clasp my hands behind my back. “Your honor—”

“Not a word out of you either, Ms. Prescott.” She gives me a cold look and leans back in her chair. “This is the last deposition of the day, and I’m sure we all want to go home. I know I do. If the two of you cannot figure out a way to respect my court, I will find both you and your clients in contempt. Am I being clear?”

I swallow and straighten my back. “Yes, your honor.”

“What about you, Mr. Black? Any objections?”

Ethan’s expression is reserved and solemn. “No, your honor. I understand completely.”

“Court is adjourned for the day. We’ll pick this up again tomorrow.” Judge Bloom places her spectacles back on her face. “Tomorrow better be different, counselors, or both of you are going to regret it.”

With that, she dismisses us with a wave of her hand.

I walk out first with Ethan trailing behind me. Once the door clicks shut, I wheel around to face him and take an involuntary step back when I realize how close we are. “I

know what you're trying to do. You think you're smooth, but I've got you figured out."

Ethan raises an eyebrow. "What are you talking about?"

"You think you can skate by on your good looks, your charm, and your name." I point a finger at his chest and narrow my eyes. "It's not going to work on me."

Ethan looks down at my finger and back up at my face. "Getting a little paranoid, Prescott? Didn't take you for the type."

"I'm going to rip your client to shreds, and I am going to feed them to you," I tell him with a lift of my chin. "Don't get in my way."

ETHAN



“*A*nd she had the nerve to say that I use my money and my good looks when I’m at court!”

I shake my head and rip open the pack of sugar. After stirring my coffee, I throw the wooden spoon away and twist to face Jackson who has dark circles under his eyes and a forehead glistening with sweat. “You okay? You look like you’re going to be sick.”

“I need to stop letting gorgeous women talk me into things.” Jackson collapses into the nearest chair and brings his head to a rest against his arms. “I don’t know why I keep doing this to myself.”

“Because you’re acting like you’re still in your twenties,” I reply, eyeing him over the rim of the glass. “You need to start acting your age.”

Jackson lifts his head and red-rimmed eyes are fixed on me. “Fuck you, man. I don’t need that kind of negativity. Also, you should just screw Ava already and get it out of your system.”

I choke on my drink. “What the fuck are you talking about? I don’t want to screw her.”

Even if I have thought about her naked...

Most of my thoughts of Ava veer between wanting to push all of her buttons just to watch her bristle to wanting to rip her clothes off and take her against a wall. While a part of me can’t deny that watching her in court is having a strange effect on me, the other part of me knows I’m not going to react to it.

I'm not about to let physical attraction get in the way of my case.

Not with all the publicity it's getting already and with the pressure the other senior partners are putting on me to win.

Jackson snorts and picks up his mug. "Yeah, sure. You keep telling yourself that. Next thing you know, you two are getting divorced and she's suing you for alimony."

I set down my drink and give him a pointed look. "You're thinking of yourself. I'm not interested in her like that. I don't even like her."

It didn't matter that my stomach did odd little flips whenever I was around her. With a slight shake of my head, I turn my attention back to my drink. I spot a familiar head of hair over Jackson's shoulders. When Ava twists in her seat and flags down the waitress with a half-smile on her face, a shiver races up my spine.

Goddamn it.

Even on my day off she won't leave me alone...

Ava turns back around, tucks a dark and curly lock of hair behind her ear, and turns her attention to the guy sitting opposite her. I lean sideways in my seat, see the khakis and the button-down shirt, and frown. My eyes travel up to his face, and I see the predatory look in his green eyes. Before I can stop myself, I'm pushing my chair back with a screech and walking over to them.

Ava is gawking at me when I come to a stop next to the table.

"It's good to see you, counselor. I was hoping we'd get the chance to talk about the case," I begin, giving her date a dismissive nod. "How's right now? Since we're both here."

Ava recovers and snaps her mouth shut. "I'm in the middle of breakfast, and it's the weekend. We can talk about this on Sunday."

I pull a chair out and sit at the head of the table. "It'll only take a minute."

“Buddy, you heard the lady. She told you to scram.”

I lean back against my chair, fold my arms, and give her date a bored look. “The adults are talking now, so I’d suggest you stay out of it.”

“I’m Westley Knight,” he replies in a thick accent. “Who the hell are you?”

“Ethan Black,” I tell him and wait for comprehension to dawn on his face. “A lawyer’s job is never done, Winston.”

“It’s *Westley*,” Ava corrects through gritted teeth. “And this can definitely wait until Sunday.”

“Not a chance, Prescott.” I lean backward in my chair and glance around the café with its wooden tables on either side, a glass display with baked goodies, and a few framed pictures on the beige walls. “Why don’t I get us all something to eat?”

Ava pushes her chair back with a screech, revealing long tanned legs hidden underneath a knee-length skirt and a flowery blouse that shows off her figure. I forget what I’m going to say next when she places a hand on my arm and drags me up to my feet. She is weaving in and out of people until we come to a stop outside the bathrooms.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Your date is a creep,” I tell her. “You looked like you needed someone to get you out of there. You’re welcome by the way.”

“This isn’t about Westley. This is about you trying to get under my skin.”

I pick up a bowl of peanuts from a passing tray. “It hurts me that you think that, Prescott. Here I thought we were starting to understand each other better. I’m only trying to help a colleague.”

Ava points a manicured finger at me and narrows her eyes. “Stop it. I don’t know if you followed me here or what’s happening, but we are not doing this in public.”

I toss a few peanuts into my mouth and begin to chew. “Doing what?”

Ava bridges the distance between us, and I catch a whiff of her floral perfume. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. Go away.”

“Do you own the coffee shop, Prescott?”

Ava opens and closes her mouth, her face turning a bright shade of red. “Fine, I’ll leave then.”

“There’s plenty of room for both of us, Prescott. No need to be so rigid about this.”

Ava leans forward, and another whiff of her perfume wafts up my nostrils, something floral and earthy that makes my stomach clench. “You’re a jackass, do you know that?”

“Oh, stop. You’re making me blush.”

Ava mutters something unflattering under her breath. She then spins on her heels, pushes her way through the crowd, and storms out of the café. Through the glass window, I see her stop on the sidewalk and fish out her phone. She presses it to her ear and walks away. With a shrug, I make a beeline for her table and the creep who is still sitting there checking his reflection in his phone’s camera.

I sit down opposite him and link my fingers together. “I’d love to tell you that it wasn’t you, but it was definitely something you did, Weston.”

Westley levels me with an annoyed look. “Don’t you have anything better to do?”

“I’ll be right back,” I respond, pausing to push my chair back.

When I turn my back on him, I find Jackson with an amused look on his face. With a smile, I stroll over to him and we exchange a quick look before I join the queue at the cash register. Halfway through, I crane my neck over my shoulders and see Ava’s date scowling to himself. He takes out his phone, and his fingers are moving steadily over the keyboard.

Abruptly, he stands, takes out his wallet, and leaves a few bills underneath one of the cups. He then shoves his phone into his pocket and shoves his way through the crowd. Once I

reach the cashier, I order two croissants and take them over to where Jackson is nodding off.

“Feel better now?”

“Much,” I responded, stopping to pull my chair out. “You should try it sometime.”

“Crashing someone else’s coffee date? Yeah, hard pass.”

“I gotta tell you, it’s a rush.”

Jackson opens up the paper bag and sniffs. “Yeah, and she’s going to bust your ass for it in court. You do realize that, right?”

“She’s going to try,” I tell him with a quick smile. “And it’s definitely going to make things interesting.”

I’ve just saved Ava from having to endure one more minute with that creep. Regardless of whether or not she sees it, I’m pleased with myself. Not only did I get to ruffle her feathers on my day off, but I also got to force the creep to deviate from his plans. All in all, my day has gotten much better, and I have a spring in my step when I leave Jackson to nurse his hangover and munch on his food.

A few blocks away from the café, I have both hands stuffed into the pocket of my jeans and spot the paparazzi. With a slight shake of my head, I duck into a half-empty restaurant and wait for my eyes to adjust. As soon as I spot the blonde sitting out on the patio underneath the late morning sun in an expensive-looking skirt and blouse, I make a beeline for her. I walk past rows and rows of empty tables and a cream-colored ceiling. She looks up when she sees me, and her entire face lights up.

“Hello, darling.” She draws me in for a hug, her Chanel perfume wafting up my nostrils. “You’re right on time. I was just about to order.”

“I would have been here sooner, but I ran into a colleague of mine.” I sit opposite my mother and smile. “I hope I haven’t kept you waiting long.”

Elanor Black picks up her menu and scans it. “How are things at work? I heard you’re handling a high-profile divorce case.”

I pick up my menu and scan it. “Let me guess. Dad has an opinion about that too.”

As far as Thomas Black is concerned, nothing I ever do is right or good enough. Having spent most of my life chasing after his approval, it’s freeing not to worry about it anymore. Unfortunately, now and again, I feel myself in danger of slipping back into old patterns, and it leaves me with a strange feeling in the center of my stomach.

I love my father, but I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in his shadow.

And to a Black, carving your own path is unthinkable, tantamount to betrayal.

It’s why my father and I barely speak, and why my mother and I try to avoid bringing him up during our weekly breakfasts.

My mother sighs and sets her menu down. Her blue eyes are fixed on mine and she says, “You know he loves you. He just doesn’t know how to express it properly.”

“You don’t have to defend him, Mom.” I set down my menu and link my fingers together. “He’s responsible for his actions.”

Her expression softens. “One day, you’re going to have your own kids, and you’ll realize how hard it all is. All he wants is for you to be happy.”

I sit up straighter and study my mom’s expression. “How’s your new charity project going? It was a school for disabled kids, right?”

She twists around and flags down a scrawny-looking waiter with pimples scattered across his face. “You should stop by and see what we have so far. I’m sure you’d love that.”

“I don’t want to take away from the success of the project,” I tell her with a small smile. “You deserve every bit

of the credit.”

And the media has a way of twisting the truth to suit its narrative.

The last thing I want is to shine the spotlight on something else.

Near the end of our breakfast, I receive a message from Ava which has me shaking my head and rolling my eyes. After paying for breakfast, I escort my mother to her car and walk back to my own.

I'm thinking of Ava the entire time.

What is it about her that makes her damn near impossible to resist?

Even getting under her skin leaves me feeling hot and bothered.

AVA



I push myself up on my elbows and place a hand on my client's shoulders. He looks pale and withdrawn underneath the fluorescent lighting, and his orange jumpsuit hangs awkwardly off his frame. With a frown, I reach into my bag, pull out a sandwich, and set it down in front of him.

He twists in his seat and stares straight ahead.

I ignore the lump in my throat. "I just need to talk to my colleague, Devon. I'll be right back, okay?"

A muscle ticks in his jaw, and he says nothing. Slowly, he places his handcuffs over the table and leans forward. I pretend to flip through my file and watch him out of the corner of my eye. I push myself up to my feet and turn around, spotting Rebecca in the doorway to the courtroom. She has a phone pressed to her ear and is raking her fingers through her hair. With a frown, I push past the railing and hurry over to her, my heels clicking steadily against the floor.

"What's wrong? What happened?"

Rebecca covers her phone's mouthpiece. "One of my clients has been arrested. I'm trying to figure out what the charges are."

"Which prison? I can make a few phone calls."

Rebecca shakes her head and removes her hand. She says something in a low voice, hangs up, and shoves her phone into her purse. "I won't be able to see her for another hour anyway. How's your client doing?"

I glance over my shoulders at the solitary hunched figure and my chest tightens. “They’re going to eat him alive if he stays in there. But I’ve got Judge Cartwright.”

Rebecca frowns. “Doesn’t he have a reputation for ruling against juveniles?”

I nod and fold my arms over my chest. “I’ve got my work cut out for me.”

I don’t want to let Devon down again, not when the system has already failed him the first time. It’s been three years since Devon has set foot outside, and in that time, he’s aged into a hardened young man I barely recognize since my time as second chair.

A loud cacophony of voices rises through the air.

Rebecca and I exchange a quick look and turn toward the commotion. Ethan Black rounds the corner in another one of his expensive navy suits and a pair of loafers that look like they cost as much as a house. He’s got his sunglasses perched on his nose and his phone pressed to his ear. A few of the women in the courthouse giggle and try to get his attention. True to his nature, Ethan ignores all of them and heads straight for us.

He stops a few feet away, ends the call, and takes off his glasses. “It’s always a pleasure to see you, counselor.”

“You’re looking a little annoyed, Black. Not enjoying going through the discovery?”

“Sending me all those books is an amateur move, Prescott. My offices will be done going over everything within a day or two.”

“Getting everyone to do your dirty work for you? Why am I not surprised?”

“It doesn’t surprise me that you’re trying to bury me with paperwork,” Ethan replies without missing a beat. “Afraid I’m going to expose your client?”

I give him a frosty smile. “The only person who’s going to be exposed is your client. He’s a fraud, and you and I both

know it.”

“I think your client is rubbing off on you, counselor. You’re starting to sound bitter.”

I cover the gap between us so I’m looking directly into his eyes. A moment too late, I realize how close we’re standing, but I ignore the flutter in the center of my stomach. “I can’t wait to wipe the floor with you.”

Ethan gives me a slow, lazy smile. “You’re going to be waiting a long time because I have no intention of losing.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” I tell him with another saccharine smile. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got actual work to do.”

With that, I spin on my heels and go back into the courtroom where Devon is tearing off pieces of the sandwich. He stiffens when I push the railing open and hurry over to the desk. Devon doesn’t say anything as I pull my chair back and sit. I spend the next few minutes perusing the evidence I already know by heart while people trickle in.

A murmur rises through the crowd, and I glance over my shoulders.

Ethan Black is sitting with one leg crossed over the other and his phone held up to his face. Little by little, more and more women come in, forming a half-circle around Ethan who doesn’t give the slightest reaction.

Rebecca catches my gaze, mouths something, and I shrug. When the bailiff steps forward, we all rise to our feet and wait. Judge Cartwright emerges looking harried, with a thin sheen of sweat on his weathered face. His plain black robe swishes behind him as he sits and leans forward.

“It’s good to see you again, Ms. Prescott.”

“Thank you, your honor.” One hand flutters to my side and the other holds the folder up to my chest. “I know you’re a busy man, your honor, so I’m going to make it as brief as possible so we can all get out of here.”

Judge Cartwright nods and motions for me to continue.

“My client has no prior record, and the circumstances under which he was found guilty are circumstantial at best. I’d like to move for his immediate release and for his case to be tried again.”

Judge Cartwright scratches his chin. “I assume you have new evidence to support your case, counselor?”

“Yes, your honor. I managed to dig up footage of the night in question.” I pick up the remote and wait for the screen to be rolled out. The prosecutor, a short man with thinning hair and a protruding beer belly, leans against his table and squints. He doesn’t look pleased, but he doesn’t voice his objection. I stand straighter, and I feel a few eyes boring holes into the back of my head.

You’ve got this. Ignore them all and focus on what matters.

A strange calm washes over me as I point the remote at the screen and clear my throat. “As you can see, your honor, my client was the one attacked. He was only trying to defend himself, and the reason this footage wasn’t recovered earlier is because the shop owner was threatened by the man attacking my client.”

Judge Cartwright frowns. “I presume you have the shop owner’s testimony?”

I flip open the folder and take out a few copies. After handing the prosecutor one, I step in front of the bench and wait. I shift from one foot to the other while the judge adjusts his spectacles. He leans forward to pluck the paper out of my hand, and I smile.

“As you can see, there’s no question regarding my client’s innocence, and I’d like to move for a complete acquittal due to the state’s negligence.”

“Your honor, this is preposterous.” The prosecutor jumps to his feet and undoes a button on his jacket, revealing the pit stains seeping through his white shirt. “Counselor is grasping at straws. She has no case.”

“You have no case against my client.” I point at Devon and give the prosecutor my most menacing look. “Do you really

want to drag this on any further and make yourselves look worse?”

He sputters, and his face turns a bright red.

“There is enough evidence here, Ms. Prescott. The court orders the immediate release of Devon Baxter and motion to acquit is approved.”

With that, he bangs his gavel, and the court erupts into a frenzy.

The prosecutor is still gaping like a fish. Devon has a dazed look on his face as he rises to his feet and turns to face me. The handcuffs are taken off, and he immediately rubs his wrist. “I don’t know what to say. I can’t thank you enough, Ms. Prescott.”

“I’m sorry your lawyer failed you the first time,” I offer with a shake of my head. “To be fair, the prosecution did try to bury her in paperwork. I just got lucky.”

Devon’s lips lift into a ghost of a smile. “Now I know why they call you a shark.”

I hold my hand out and give him a firm shake. “I’m happy to help, Mr. Baxter. Try and stay out of trouble.”

On my way out, I see a group of women flock to Ethan’s side. When I step outside, Rebecca is waiting for me with a bright smile on her face. Before she can say anything, Ethan comes out of the courtroom with women flanking him on each side. I place my bag down on the nearest bench and turn my back on him.

“Can you believe how they’re behaving? It’s like they’ve got no sense of self-respect.”

Rebecca snorts. “He’s one of the city’s most eligible bachelors. Everyone is going to want to shoot their shot with him.”

I shuffle through the papers. “Does that include you?”

“It might be fun to date someone that rich, but I have a feeling it would wear off pretty quickly.”

“I’m glad you’re not falling for it.”

Rebecca pats me on the back. “Still haven’t called Westley back, huh?”

I frown. “I don’t even know what to tell him.”

I don’t want to admit that Ethan did me a favor by crashing my date, otherwise, he is never going to let me live it down. It’s bad enough that he undermined me in front of Westley, but I don’t want him thinking he can get away with interfering in my personal life.

“You could just tell him it was a prank or something. He seems nice enough.”

I shove the papers back into the bag and hoist it up. “It’s probably for the best that it didn’t work. I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Rebecca gathers her hair up over her head. “You know, you don’t have to date these men seriously, right? It could just be for fun.”

I spun around to face her. “Yeah, I don’t have time for that either.”

Or the inclination...

The Carmichael case needs to be a slam dunk, and I need to make sure of it.

Rebecca falls into step beside me. “They’re probably trying to invite him to their parties.”

When we brush past Ethan, I feel his gaze on me, and I stiffen. Our eyes meet briefly as I round the corner and roll my eyes.

“He’s not that big of a deal, is he?”

“The press loves him.” Rebecca fishes her phone out of her pocket. “All it takes is a few pictures of him at an event or with someone and their lives change overnight.”

We step onto the elevator, and I shake my head. “No one should have that kind of power.”

Rebecca bumps her shoulder against mine. “Admit it, you’re a little curious about what it would be like to date a man like that.”

I grimace. “I can think of a million things I’d rather experience.”

Rebecca’s dark eyes move over my face. “You know, sooner or later these feelings are going to catch up to you.”

“What feelings?”

Rebecca doesn’t say anything as she steps out on the third floor. “You’ll see. I’ve got to run. Lunch tomorrow?”

I smile at her. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

ETHAN



“*Y*ou look lovely tonight.” I flash her a megawatt smile, and she tucks her arm into my elbow. Together, we glide over the carpet, the blinding white lights making spots in my field of vision. I hear a few snaps and pause, pulling my date closer to me.

In her knee-length black dress, she is gorgeous, and the paparazzi go nuts.

It’s exactly what I’m hoping for.

The double doors of the hotel are pushed open, and we are led down a wide carpeted hallway with hardwood floors and paintings on either side of the walls. At the end of the hallway, we stop, and my date peers into the ballroom. There is a glittering chandelier in the middle. It sparkles and glistens underneath the dim lighting and high arched-ceiling. On the far side of the ballroom, there is a makeshift podium where a live band in matching clothes is playing.

Everyone is dressed in their finest, and the sound of tinkling glasses and laughter rises and falls around me. I spot a few people I know in the back of the room, and I make a beeline for them as my date dutifully follows in my wake. As soon as I reach them, I’m greeted with a chorus of well-wishes and bright smiles.

I’m on my third glass of whiskey when the conversation turns to politics.

Nervous laughter slices through the air and a few more drinks are passed around. Next to me, I can feel my date

growling restless as she shifts from one foot to the other and adjusts the straps of her purse. Our circle gets bigger, and a few more women join the conversation. When my date, a tall blonde whose name escapes me, places a hand on my arm, I try not to shake her off.

She is, after all, here to keep the opportunists at bay and the paparazzi happy.

The last thing I need is another headline about my sad love life or lack thereof, especially not when I'm here to support a fundraiser for the arts.

You could've at least asked someone you liked.

However, I know there is no point, not when most women in my social circle hear my name and see nothing but dollar signs. The few who manage to see past my name and status are either taken or uninterested, leaving me with a narrow pool to choose from. A part of me misses the simpler life I had in law school when the world was at my feet and I had a lot of options to choose from.

Now, as a senior partner who is answerable to a board and the other partners in the firm, I'm not as free as I want to be.

What are you complaining about? You've got the kind of life most people dream about.

With more money than I know what to do with, a challenging job with room to grow, and the respect and admiration of my peers, there is nothing more I can possibly want or need.

Well, except to be seen for who I really am.

With a slight shake of my head, I force my attention back to the present conversation and resist groaning when I realize the topic is the stock market. I signal to a passing waiter, whisper my drink into his ear, and return to the company of people around me. Suddenly, I wish I were somewhere else.

I spot a flurry of movement out of the corner of my eye. I almost gasp when I see Ava step through the door and forget how to breathe.

She is breathtaking in her floor-length gold dress that shimmers and sparkles as she moves. Her dark hair is straightened and frames her angular face, giving her a mysterious and far more alluring look. When she spots me, her hazel eyes give nothing away. In the background, the conversation continues, but I can barely hear a thing.

All I can see is her gliding toward me.

My heart starts back up again when I see a few of the looks she's getting from the men in attendance. I shove my free hand into my pocket and frown. Ava pushes her way steadily through the crowd and doesn't stop until she reaches me. She tucks her white clutch underneath her arm and gives me a dismayed look.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Ava raises an eyebrow. "You really don't remember what you said to me? How could you?"

I take a long sip of my drink and eye her over the rim. "I think I'm missing something."

"Don't be glib," Ava snaps, casting a glance in my date's direction. "I'm sorry to do this here, but when I saw you here with him, I knew I had to warn you."

"Warn me?" My date glances back and forth between the two of us, growing visibly agitated as she shifts from one foot to the other. "Why? What did he do?"

"He's been a complete asshole," Ava tells her with a lift of her chin. "He keeps trying to undermine me at work, and he won't take no for an answer. Can you believe how hard he's trying to get me to sleep with him?"

"Oh."

Ava leans forward and gives my date an apologetic smile. "You'd be doing yourself a favor if you found someone else. He isn't worth the time or the effort, trust me. And he's just going to use you and forget all about you when he's done."

Well played, Prescott. You've got more balls than I thought.

“Also, there’s, you know. His condition.” Ava makes a vague and sweeping hand gesture. “He hasn’t told you, has he?”

I choke on my drink. “Okay, you’ve had your fun. Time to go.”

Ava shakes her head. “He’s too embarrassed to come clean, but I feel like it’s my responsibility to tell you. Oh, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Candice.”

Ava stands up straighter and gives her a grave look. “I’m sorry, Candice. I hope I’m not too late.”

Candice looks at me, but I’m too busy gawking at Ava.

Half of me can’t believe how far she’s willing to take this. The other half is impressed she’s still sticking to her story just to get back at me for my display at the coffee shop.

Damn, she’s better than I thought.

This is the first and last time I underestimate Ava Prescott.

Finally, Candice draws herself up to her full height and walks off. I stare after her for a few moments, debating whether or not I should chase after her. When she is swallowed whole by the crowd, I turn my attention to Ava and signal for another drink.

“Don’t look so pleased, counselor.” I pick up two champagne glasses from a passing tray and hand one over to her. “You have no idea what you just started.”

Ava takes a long sip of her drink and gives me a slow, determined smile. “You’re the one who started this war, Black. Are you suddenly realizing that you can dish it but you can’t take it?”

I snort and polish off my drink. “Prescott, you have no idea what you’re messing with. I eat lawyers like you for breakfast...in more ways than one.”

Ava’s eyes are flashing. “Do you honestly think that’s going to work with me? I’ve had people underestimate me my

whole life, and I've proved them wrong every single time. You're just another person who's going to be left eating my dust."

I raise an eyebrow. "Did you practice your speech in the mirror?"

Ava's eyes tighten. "At least I know how to be prepared. Do you even know how to behave like a lawyer? Or did you just buy yourself the title to make yourself look relevant?"

I inch closer to her, the buzz in the back of my head growing louder. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

Ava throws her head back to look up at me. "And you do? You think you have me all figured out, but you have no idea who you're dealing with."

"Neither do you."

Ava bridges the gap between us, and she's standing so close that I can see each individual lash and the flecks of gold in her eyes. "It's not too late to save face. The great Ethan Black still has a chance not to humiliate himself in court."

My eyes stay on her face, and I ignore the quickening of my pulse. "You're making me an offer because you know we have a case."

Ava throws her head back and laughs. "Oh, please. It'll be a cold day in hell when your client wins over mine. At least I know what I'm doing."

"Enjoy the high while you can, Prescott. Unlike you, I know how to have people eating out of the palm of my hands." I take one more step so our chests are pressed together. Her breath hitches in her throat and a hint of color blossoms across her cheeks.

"You're nothing but a fake pretending to be real," Ava hisses, the words tumbling out of her in a rush. "You wouldn't know how to handle a real case if it bit you in the ass!"

"Look who won't stop talking about my body," I point out with a smirk. I let my eyes move over her and take a step back. "Got something you want to get off your chest?"

Ava wrinkles her nose and takes a few steps back. “You’re disgusting. As if I would ever sleep with you. I’d rather gouge my eyes out.”

“Is that what you tell yourself?”

Ava glances around at the people milling on either side of us. She then drifts closer and presses her mouth to my ear. “You and I both know that the only reason you’re so angry is because I’m not falling all over you like the other women you know.”

I grip my glass tighter. “I don’t give a shit what or who you do in your spare time. None of that means anything to me.”

Ava’s hot breathing is doing strange things to my insides.

It is making me imagine what it would be like to drag her into the nearest empty bathroom and lock the door behind us. I picture myself pressing her against the wall and peppering her long, slender neck with hot, open-mouthed kisses. When she exhales, I see her body glistening with sweat, and I see her mouth parted in pleasure.

Fuck.

“Your poker face is good, but it’s not that good.” Ava steps back and gives me a knowing look. “Have a good night, counselor.”

With that, she spins on her heels and leaves me standing there with a strange tightness in the center of my chest and an intensified buzzing sound in the back of my head. For the rest of the night, I drift from one end of the room to the next, trying to mingle and forget all about Ava Prescott.

Unfortunately, not only can I still smell her on me, but she is everywhere I turn, laughing and smiling as she makes new friends. By the end of the night, the headache in the back of my skull is worse, and my throat is dry. I make my way outside as people begin to trickle out and find my car easily.

Before I get in, I see the top of Ava’s head as she gets into a sleek black limo.

With a little more force than necessary, I get into the car, throw myself against the leather seat, and scowl.

What is the matter with you? Get it together, Black. It's just Ava for fuck's sake.

She knows exactly what to say and how to say it to have me on my knees, and I hate that she's figured that out.

Dealing with her at court is going to be a lot harder than I thought.

And a lot more interesting too. You might've finally found someone who can keep up with you, even if you are ten years older.

AVA



I snap my briefcase shut and glance over at Melanie who is hunched over in her seat and typing furiously into her phone. “Do you remember what we talked about?”

Melanie sighs and reluctantly lifts her gaze to mine. “Yes.”

“Today is not going to be any different. Blake is going to try and get a rise out of you again. You need to rise above it and show the judge you’re a better person.”

Melanie sets her phone face down on the table. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“Do what?”

“Deal with people trying to get a rise out of you, wanting a piece of you,” Melanie whispers, the words pouring out of her quickly. “I honestly don’t know how you do it.”

“You get used to it.” I tug on the edges of my blazer and smooth out my skirt. “The most important thing I need you to remember is that this is the first day of trial. The jury is going to be watching you, and they’re going to be judging you.”

Melanie swallows and looks over at the empty jury box. “How do I get them to like me?”

“You don’t. If you try too hard, they’ll see right through you. What I need you to do is sit here and look as unintimidating as possible. When it’s time for me to call you, I need you to be sincere and approachable.”

“*Approachable?* What do you mean?”

“Just don’t look over at Blake, and you should be fine.” I offer her a small smile. “I know he can get under your skin, but it’s important that we keep our composure.”

Melanie leans back against her seat. “Is he going to be testifying today?”

“Blake isn’t on the witness list so far,” I tell her after a peek at the paper. “But it doesn’t mean his attorney won’t change his mind.”

Melanie links her fingers together and fidgets. “I know you told me not to look him up, but I did. Ethan Black is one of the prominent lawyers in the country.”

I stand up straighter. “You’re in good hands, Ms. Carmichael. Mr. Black might be famous, but so am I.”

Little by little, people begin to trickle in, everything from groupies who are there in support of Blake, to a few well-dressed men and women who are holding up signs in support of Melanie. She twists in her seat to offer them a smile, and they cheer. A few members of the press come in with their passes worn around their necks, and they immediately spring to attention when Ethan walks in.

I hate that he looks like he’s wandering off to a men’s magazine.

With his crisp suit, styled hair, and designer sunglasses, he looks like he should be starring in a Netflix show, not in the middle of an actual courtroom. He doesn’t break his stride or seem fazed by the people who call out to him and swoon. Instead, he narrows in on his client, locks the railing behind him, and nods in the general direction of the bailiff.

I pull Melanie to her feet when the court lapses into silence.

After Judge Bloom is seated, another hush settles over the court. I step out from behind the desk and gesture to Melanie. She quickly stands, the picture of grace and elegance in her knee-length dress, short pumps, and sleek hair. Once she places her hand on the bible, she looks out at me, and I give her a small nod.

“Ms. Carmichael, thank you for taking the time to be here today. I know you’re a busy woman, so I’m going to try and keep this brief.” I walk over to her, the easy smile never leaving my face. “We already know that Mr. Ryder hasn’t always believed in your talent. In fact, on several occasions, he’s tried to discourage you from continuing to pursue your career, correct?”

Melanie leans forward and clears her throat. “That’s right.”

“In your words, why do you believe Mr. Ryder isn’t entitled to royalties from your books?”

Melanie glances over at the jury and back at the judge. She then swings her gaze back to the front and folds her hands in her lap. “Because I don’t think he should be riding on my coattails when I’m the one who put in the hard work. The books were my idea, and I’m the one who went through rounds of edits and put in a lot of hard work before they could be published.”

I lean against the witness stand and nod in the direction of the court clerk and reporter. “Ms. Carmichael, would you say that you’re *not* denying Mr. Ryder anything that’s rightfully his?”

“I’m not.” Melanie’s voice is low and hoarse, so she leans forward and tries again. “The book wasn’t his idea, so I don’t think he should be getting any royalties. Why should he benefit from my hard work?”

A cheer rises through the crowd, and the judge gives Melanie’s supporters a disapproving look. Immediately, they lapse into silence, and Melanie’s smile fades. I hold her gaze and take a step back.

“Thank you for doing this, Ms. Carmichael. I know it couldn’t have been easy. No further questions, your honor.”

Ethan is out of his seat before I sit back down. “Ms. Carmichael, isn’t it true that when you wanted inspiration, you used to sit in on the band’s recording sessions?”

Melanie nods. “I did.”

“And isn’t it true that you found their music to be inspiring, allowing you to overcome your writer’s block? So in a way, Mr. Ryder is a source of inspiration for you, isn’t he?”

“Objection, leading the witness.” I’m on my feet and scowling at Ethan’s back.

“Sustained. Rephrase your question, Mr. Black.”

Ethan strolls over to the witness stand and shoves a hand into his pocket. “Ms. Carmichael, isn’t it true that you admitted to your friend that you found sitting in on their session to be helpful?”

“Yes.”

“So, isn’t it fair to then assume that without your husband’s music, your books would’ve taken much longer and probably wouldn’t have been as good?”

“Objection, your honor. Argumentative.”

“Overruled. Answer the question, Ms. Carmichael.”

Melanie gives me a quick look and sits up straighter. “Yes, Blake’s music did help, but it had nothing to do with the work I put into my books. All art is inspiring. That doesn’t mean everyone inspired by it should share their royalties.”

“This isn’t everyone we’re talking about here, Ms. Carmichael. It’s your husband.”

Melanie lifts her chin, and I see her hands fall to her sides and clench into fists. “Yes, but that has nothing to do with my books. They’ve always been my ideas. I just needed inspiration.”

“You just didn’t want it to be from your husband.”

“Exactly.”

“Because you didn’t want to share royalties with your husband?”

“Yes, I—no, I...what does that have to do with anything?”

“Yes or no, Ms. Carmichael? Make up your mind.”

“Your honor, he’s badgering the witness.”

Judge Blooms shoots Ethan an angry look. “Get to the point, counselor, and watch yourself.”

“I have no further questions, your honor.”

I brush past Ethan on his way past, and I ignore the butterflies in my stomach as I catch a whiff of him. The smell of lavender and old spice is still in my nostrils when I approach Melanie, a reassuring smile already in place.

“Ms. Carmichael, can you tell us about the last conversation the two of you had about you sitting in on his studio time?”

Melanie is a little too eager as she tucks a lock of hair behind her ears. “Yes, I remember him telling me that I was interrupting his process by being there and that he thought I wasn’t getting anything useful out of the sessions.”

I frown. “And why do you think he said that?”

Melanie shrugs. “Blake was always saying mean things about my books and my writing. Sometimes, I think he didn’t respect me as an author.”

“You’re not fucking J.K. Rowling,” Blake mutters, a little too loudly.

An outraged gasp rises through the crowd.

Judge Bloom zeroes in on Blake and gives him her most menacing glare. “Was I not clear about what would happen if you step out of line, Mr. Ryder?”

Blake flinches and lowers his gaze. “It won’t happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t.” Judge Bloom glances back at us and motions for me to continue. “You were saying, Ms. Carmichael.”

Melanie’s eyes fill with tears. “I don’t know what I ever did to make him treat me this way, your honor. I’ve always done my best to be a good and loving wife, and I’ve worked hard to provide a good life for us, asking very little in return.”

Blake's mouth is moving soundlessly. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Ethan kicking him underneath the table and grip his arm. I reach into my pocket and pull out a packet of tissues. Melanie takes one and blows her nose. Several members of the jury nod sympathetically.

That's my girl. You have them right where you want them.

"Thank you, Ms. Carmichael. Women like you are an inspiration." I pat her hand and close her fingers around the tissue packet. "No further questions, your honor."

"I have no further questions either, your honor." Ethan unfastens a button on his jacket before letting his hands fall to his sides.

Judge Bloom picks up her gavel and bangs it. "Court is adjourned until tomorrow morning at nine sharp."

The jury is escorted out through a side door, and the judge exits through the back. As soon as they're gone, Melanie inches closer to me and keeps her head lowered. When we reach the desk to collect our things, Blake is fuming and his eyes are blazing with anger.

"You little bitch. Do you honestly think that little display is going to get you anywhere?"

"Restrain your client, counselor," I tell Ethan coldly. "Or I'll ask that the judge be brought back to put him in chains."

Ethan steps in front of Blake and shoots him a meaningful look. "We wouldn't be in this mess if it wasn't for your coaching, Ms. Prescott. The tears were an especially nice touch."

"The only thing my client is doing is telling the truth."

"You mean *her* version of the truth."

"You're just bitter and angry because you know your client is guilty, and you're trying to help take this poor woman's money."

Ethan scoffs. "There's nothing poor about Ms. Carmichael, and when I'm through with her, all of New York will see that."

“When I’m done with your client, he won’t be able to show his face in any venue. He won’t even be able to book any small gigs to play. All of New York will know what a spineless coward and a leech he is.”

The headache in the back of my head blossoms and pounds in the back of my skull. I don’t wait for Ethan’s response as I take Melanie’s arm and lead her out of the courtroom. She is still sniffing and blowing her nose when I leave her outside the bathroom. Once she’s done, we ride the elevator down together.

Rebecca is sitting outside in the late afternoon sun with a sandwich in one hand and a bottle of flavored water in the other. “You look like you’re going to kill someone.”

“Remind me again what’s the penalty for cold-blooded murder?”

Rebecca twists to face me and takes another bite of her sandwich. “That bad, huh? What did Ethan do this time?”

“He had the nerve to suggest that my client was a fraud and that I coached her. Arrogant, self-serving bastard.”

Rebecca pats me on the back. “Just remember that orange really isn’t your color, and there’s no wifi in jail.”

I blow out a breath. “I’ll try to remember that the next time I see his smug little face.”

ETHAN



I lean forward to pick up my drink and bring it up to my lips. Over the pounding of the music, I can barely hear what the others are saying, much less keep up with the conversation. As I sip on my drink, I relax against the booth and study the dance floor below. It's full of people gyrating to the music, covered in sweat and some kind of body glitter.

The music is pulsing somewhere overhead and pounding in the back of my skull. I tilt my head back, down the drink, and search the semi-darkness for our waitress. She materializes on the other side of the VIP booth, leaning against the bar and exchanging a few words with the bartender. When she looks over at me, I lift my glass up and tap it. She hurries over, takes my glass with a smile, and disappears again. I turn my attention to the people seated on either side of me.

Jackson is sandwiched between two women who are giggling and lavishing him with attention. His shirt is rolled up to his elbows, and he's got a Cheshire cat smile on his face. Slowly, he stretches his legs out and drapes an arm over each of the women who inch closer and place their hands on his chest.

I smile and look away.

At least one of us is having a good time.

Even though I've been here for two hours already, I am no closer to relaxing than I was when I first arrived. Nothing, not the plates of food, the company, or the drinks I've been

indulging in is doing anything for my mood. Instead, I feel worse than when I walked in and I know why.

You need to get up and walk away. This is exactly why you keep yourself on a tight leash when you need a new client.

Blake needs all the help he can get, and I begin to wonder, not for the first time, if I'm wasting my time with him. The more evidence that is produced, the guiltier Blake looks, and a part of me doesn't think we stand a chance at all. Not only is he the kind of man who enjoys putting women down, but his wife also has him right where she wants him.

And it doesn't hurt that she has a highly motivated lawyer in her corner.

Fucking Ava Prescott is like a bloodhound going in for the kill.

No amount of trying to disarm her is going to change that.

On the contrary, the more time I'm around her, the more I realize how much she enjoys putting me on the spot. As much as I hate to admit it, she's a lot better than I thought she was, and I have no one to blame for that but myself. When the waitress materializes with another one of my drinks, I ask for some more food and scowl into the glass.

I'm debating whether or not I made a mistake by coming when Jackson claps me on the back, bringing me back to the present with a jolt. "What's with the face?"

"What face?"

"*That* face." Jackson makes a vague hand gesture and reaches for his beer. "You look like you're in pain."

I set my drink down and look over at him. "What are you talking about?"

Jackson takes a long sip of his drink. "Are you pissed because of what happened in court? Man, you need to get over that."

"I'm not pissed. They got lucky. I just need to dig harder, and I'll find something to use."

Jackson studies me. “You do realize that they’re probably going to win, right?”

“Whose side are you on anyway?”

Jackson turns so he’s facing me completely. “I’m not on any side. That’s not how this works. I’m just calling it how I see it.”

“Is that my friend talking or one of the senior partners talking?”

Jackson throws both of his hands up. “Look, man. I’m not trying to piss you off even more. I just think you should be prepared. The other partners think you’ve got this handled.”

I finish my drink and the liquid burns a path down my throat before settling in the pit of my stomach. “Instead of pointing out things that aren’t true, you could try helping me.”

Jackson gives me a knowing look. “I thought you didn’t like when other lawyers interfered.”

I signal for another drink. “Obviously, this isn’t going to work here because I’m sure Ava has outside help.”

Jackson eyes me over the rim of his glass. “From what you’ve told me, it just sounds like she’s prepared.”

I frown. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

Jackson takes a swig of his beer and puts it down on the table. “Nothing. I’m going to take a leak. I’ll be back.”

I scowl at his back as he walks away. One of the women, a busty blonde in a skintight metallic dress, inches closer and places a hand on my waist. I twist my head to look at her and a strange feeling bubbles in the center of my chest. I push it away and give her a million-dollar smile.

Jackson has no idea what I’m talking about.

The board isn’t wrong to place their faith in me, and I’m going to prove it.

While it’s been a while since I’ve handled a high-profile case, due to the hectic nature of my position, I have every intention of bringing home a win. And if that means I have to

tear Ava down in court and hand her ass back to her, all the better for me.

The blonde presses her lips to my ear. “If you want to call your girlfriend, the three of us can have a good time.”

I stiffen. “I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“I don’t care if you do,” the blonde adds in a husky voice. “I’m not looking for anything serious.”

Jackson returns and motions to me. Reluctantly, I pry myself away from the blonde, and he leads me to a secluded area on the VIP floor near the bathrooms in the back. He waits until no one else is around before taking his phone out.

“Have you seen this?”

I peer at the phone and back up at his face. “Why are you showing me an article about me and Ava?”

“They’re talking about the case, and what the two of you are like in court,” Jackson whispers with a quick look around. “The board is not going to be happy with this.”

“How the hell did you even find this? Don’t you have anything better to do than stalk me online?”

Jackson rolls his eyes. “My sister sent it to me, so I thought I’d take a look.”

I snatch the phone out of his hand, turn up the brightness, and scroll through the article. When I’m done, there is a hard knot in the center of my stomach, and I have the urge to put my fist through a wall.

Repeatedly.

I don’t know who wrote the article, but I do know that they’re painting Ava and her client in a sympathetic light while Blake and I come out looking like idiots. After straightening my back, I give Jackson a tight smile and turn away from him. On the way past, he pauses to clap me on the back. With a frown, I pat my pockets until I find my phone and hold it up to my face.

“It’s me. I’m going to send you an article right now. We need to do some damage control. You know that media perception can affect how the jury votes. Blake and I need to do a sit down.”

My lawyer says something, but his voice is garbled and distant.

I yell something else into the phone and hang up. I stride back to the table where half of our company is dancing, and the other half is sitting. I order another round of drinks and avoid Jackson’s gaze. When I look over at the blonde, she gives me a suggestive smile and rises to her feet. I take her hand and lead her down the stairs into the packed dance floor. There, we push our way through the crowd until we reach the center.

As soon as we do, the blonde lifts her arms up over her head and runs them down her body. I notice her green eyes are full of hunger. “How’s this?”

I place both hands on her hips and spin her around. “This is better.”

Her petite, curvy body is pressed against mine, and she smells like sweat and the underlying scent of peaches. I rub my hands up and down her arms, and she shivers. She makes a low mewling sound, and my lips lift into a smile.

This is exactly what I need.

I don’t want to think about Ava, the case, or the board’s reaction when they see the article. I don’t want to think about Blake or the hoops I’m going to have to jump through in order to make my client look good. All I want is to focus on the blonde rubbing herself against me, and the music pulsing through my veins.

Underneath the pulsing lights, I can almost succeed in forgetting what’s waiting for me outside the double doors. The blonde spins around, links her fingers over my neck, and gives me a smile, showing off a row of pearly white teeth. I place my head in the crook of her neck and keep my arms around

her waist. She rubs herself against me, this time a little more suggestively, so I sink my nails into her waist.

I am staring at an unmarked spot in the distance when I spot a familiar head of dark hair. My heart does an odd little somersault, and I stop swaying. When I squint and the brunette in question turns around, a hard ball of disappointment settles in the center of my stomach. With a frown, I untangle myself from the blonde and give her an apologetic smile.

Without waiting for a response, I pick my way through the crowd, weaving in and out until I reach the double doors of the entrance. Outside, I suck in huge mouthfuls of air and glance down both sides of the empty streets. On the other side of the street, my driver is leaning against the hood of the car, peering at something on his phone. Once I whistle, he glances up and puts his phone away. Wordlessly, he gets into the car and it crawls forward.

When I'm settled, I press two fingers to my temples. "John, I want you to take me to that burger place we went to a few weeks ago. That shit was good."

"Yes, Mr. Black."

A few blocks away, we pull up to the drive-through, and John places the order in a quiet voice. He hands me the paper bag full of greasy food before inching out of the parking. He then settles back in his seat and places both hands on the wheel after lifting the partition up.

Alone with my food and thoughts, I find myself thinking of Ava and how much I wish she was there. I shove a handful of fries into my mouth and scowl.

Those are the drinks talking. Get a grip, Ethan. You don't like her.

But I did have a thing for her, and it was much, much worse than I thought it was.

AVA



“*J*s that what you’re wearing?” Rebecca hovers in the doorway and folds her arms over her chest. “Come on, V. I know I’m practically making you go, but you could put in a little more effort.”

“I’m wearing a skirt and a blouse. What more do you want?”

“It is a step up from your usual jeans and t-shirt, but you could at least straighten your hair.”

I hold Rebecca’s gaze in the mirror above the dresser. “You know I like to give my curls a break. Besides, what’s wrong with my natural look?”

Rebecca unfolds her arms and steps into the room. “Nothing, but you know guys prefer a sleeker look, and you look amazing with straight hair.”

“I barely even know the guy, Bec,” I remind her before fastening the other earring. “Remind me again, how do you know the guy?”

Rebecca throws my closet door open and rummages around. “He’s a friend of a friend. Apparently, he read about you in that article and he wanted to meet.”

I spin around to face her. “If he kills me, and I wind up in one of those true crime podcasts, you’re going to have no one to blame but yourself.”

“I’ll turn your room into a shrine, so the money can soften the grief,” Rebecca responds in a muffled voice. She emerges

with a too-short black dress and sky-high pumps. “What about this?”

I shake my head and step out of the room. “I’m not wearing that. Besides, I have to go or I’m going to be late.”

Rebecca follows me into the living room and drapes the clothes on the back of a chair. “Come on, you’d look really hot in it. Don’t tank the date before it even starts.”

I snatch my purse off the counter. “Since you’re already here, and in your pajamas, you might as well feed Brandy.”

“Where is she anyways?”

I adjust the straps on my sandal. “Probably sleeping somewhere. Don’t overfeed her and for heaven’s sake, no catnip.”

“It was *one* time.” Rebecca throws her hands up in the air and gives me an exasperated look. “You really need to let that go.”

“Keep your phone close. If I call you about my sister, then that’s a level-ten emergency.”

Rebecca nods and touches two fingers to her temples. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

With another quick look in her direction, I smooth out my blouse and stride out the door. I take the stairs two at a time and don’t stop until I reach the landing. I push the door open and glance down both sides of the empty street. In the distance, I make out the vague outline of my ride. It is crawling forward at a snail’s pace. I check the license plate on my phone and hurry down the rest of the stairs.

In the car, I place my purse in my lap and grip my phone with both hands. “Twenty second and third, please. Near that Italian restaurant.”

My driver, a tall man with thinning hair and pit stains, nods. He fiddles with the radio and country music fills the silence. A short while later, he is pulling up next to the curb, and I am rummaging through my purse. I hand him the money, scramble out of the back of the car, and straighten my back.

When I walk in through the front door, the smell of tomatoes and spices hits me first.

My stomach grumbles as I give the maître'd the name. He leads me past rows and rows of tables and into a booth in the back in a more secluded part of the restaurant. Matthew is already waiting and examining his teeth in the reflection of a fork. He stands when he sees me and holds his hand out. I give it a firm shake and push back the annoyance when Mathew's eyes move over me.

He lowers himself back into his seat and links his fingers together. "You look different in person."

I set my purse down on the table and reach for my glass of water. "Really? Why is that?"

Mathew's brown eyes don't leave my face. "I don't know. You look taller. Maybe you were wearing heels or something."

"Yeah, maybe." I give him a polite smile. "So, Rebecca didn't tell me what you do for a living."

"I'm a designer. I make video games," Mathew responds before leaning back in his chair and picking up his menu. "It's a thriving market and it's competitive, but I enjoy it."

I nod and pick up my own menu. "Have you always liked video games?"

"Since I was a kid," Mathew responds without looking up at me. "How about you? Do you like defending criminals and manipulating the system?"

I frown and look over at him. "That's not what a lawyer does."

Mathew snorts and flips over to another page. "Yeah, sure. I know that, but it's basically what you do. Like if someone were to ask you to summarize your job, it's what you would say."

"It's not actually. What I do is I try to help people navigate the law. Everyone deserves a fair chance at being represented."

Mathew glances up and surprise flickers across his narrow face. "You really do believe what you're saying, huh?"

I snap the menu shut and sit up straighter. “Yeah, why wouldn’t I?”

Mathew straightens his back and gestures to the waiter. “Yeah, I get it. You have to believe in what you’re doing otherwise you won’t be able to sell it. It’s like that with video games too.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“I’m working on this new game that’s marketed toward disabled people, and I’ve interviewed a lot of people to get a better feel for the market,” Mathew continues as if he hasn’t heard me. “I like the challenge of creating something even though I think it’s a waste of time.”

“Yeah, I think that’s—”

“I know it’s difficult for a lawyer to understand a concept like that,” Mathew interrupts with a sympathetic look in my direction. “But I’m sure you’d be interested to learn the details.”

I signal to the waiter, and he leans forward. “I’m going to need a big bottle of wine.”

The dark-haired waiter glances over at Mathew and back at me, sympathy written all over his face. “Right away, ma’am.”

When we order, Mathew talks over me and asks so many questions about the food I’m sure the waiter’s patience is growing thin. Eventually, he settles on a dish while I’m nursing my second glass of wine and a pleasant buzz. I sip on the wine and stare directly at Mathew. I don’t hear a word he says.

Instead, I keep picturing Ethan across from me with his smooth jaw, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief, and his mouth split into that half smile that makes me go weak in the knees. As soon as I blink, Ethan’s image disappears, and I’m left facing Mathew who has his napkin tucked into his shirt and is slurping on his soup.

I set my cutlery down and push my chair back with a screen. “Would you please excuse me? I need to use the ladies’ room.”

Mathew doesn't even acknowledge my statement.

I make a beeline for the bathroom in the back and wait until the stalls are empty before I take my phone out. Rebecca answers on the second ring. I can hear the TV in the background and the sound of my cat purring.

"How well do you know Mathew's friend?"

"Hold on, let me turn down the TV!" Rebecca yells, forcing me to pull the phone away from my ear. "Okay, that's much better. What were you saying?"

"How well do you know Mathew's friend?"

"Not well, why?"

I peer at myself in the mirror and grimace. "Because this is one of the worst dates I've ever been on. He can't stop talking about his game."

"His sex game?"

I snort. "No, his *video* game. He's a developer, and he keeps talking down to me or talking over me. I've barely gotten a word in edgewise. Becca, you can't keep setting me up on dates like this."

Rebecca's voice drifts off and comes back on stronger than before. "Okay, I'm getting dressed right now. I'll come get you."

"Please hurry."

With that, I hang up, spin around, and stare at my reflection in the mirror. After splashing my face with cold water, I push my hair back and sigh. "You can do this. You are a top defense lawyer. Mathew is not going to be the reason you crack."

After giving myself another nod in the mirror, I pat my hands dry on the back of my skirt. I push the door open and Mathew's voice drifts over to me. Even from where I'm standing, I can see the pained expression on the waiter's face. The waiter is relieved to see me as I pull my chair out and sit back down.

Immediately, he refills my wine glass and scurries away.

Mathew pushes the pasta around his plate. “I’ve had better food, to be honest. They really don’t know how to make penne, do they?”

I eye him over the rim of my glass. “I like their food.”

“That’s because you don’t know any better.” Mathew sets his fork down and clears his throat. “You know, when I was developing the game, I went on this food-tasting spree that—”

“Ava, there you are.” Rebecca is in sweats, and her shirt is on backward, but I’ve never been happier to see her. “I’m so sorry to interrupt your dinner, but it’s your sister.”

I toss my napkin on the table and frown. “What happened?”

“She went into labor. She’s asking for you,” Rebecca continues, her lower lip trembling. “It’s such an emotional moment, and I knew you wouldn’t want to miss it.”

“Can I help?”

“No!” We both reply a little quickly.

I shoot Rebecca a quick look and hike up my purse. “I mean, it’s a private moment, and we barely know each other so I don’t think Stacy will be okay with me bringing along a stranger.”

Mathew sits back down and nods. “Of course. Good luck.”

Rebecca digs her finger into my arm. “You know how impatient Stacy gets. We should get going.”

“Thanks for dinner,” I tell him with a tight-lipped smile.

I let Rebecca drag me out of the restaurant and into a cab that’s waiting outside. As soon as we’re in the back, we burst into laughter and clutch each other. On the way home, we stop to get Chinese takeout and tequila.

I am feeling a little guilty about leaving Mathew with the check but not bad enough to go back. And the further away I get, the better I feel about the disastrous date coming to an

abrupt end. When we climb up the stairs to my apartment, Rebecca and I are still snickering and giggling.

“Do you think he bought it?” I push the door open and flick the lights on. “It didn’t look like he believed us.”

Rebecca kicks the door shut with the back of her leg. “Do you want to send him a picture of your fake sister with your fake niece?”

I bend down to scoop Brandy up into my arms. “Hard pass. Remind me not to let you set me up ever again.”

Rebecca kicks off her shoes and peels off her shirt, revealing a tank top underneath. “Oh, come on. Don’t I get credit for being able to get you out of there so quickly?”

I kiss the top of Brandy’s head, and she purrs. “Considering it’s your fault I was in that mess, you don’t get any credit at all.”

Rebecca laughs. “Fair enough. Let’s eat and get drunk.”

“And watch trashy TV,” I add. “I want to forget about tonight’s date.”

ETHAN



“*B*lake Ryder severely overestimated his appeal, but the case is getting a lot of publicity because of his wife,” I say, pausing to cast a glance around the room. “It’s probably not going to be the outcome we want, but it’ll get us a ton of free press.”

Robert Montgomery sits up straighter and links his fingers together. “That’s not the kind of news we were hoping for, Ethan.”

A murmur of agreement rose through the room.

I push my chair back, stand, and unfasten a button on my jacket. “I know that losing isn’t ideal, but with a case like this, even if we lose, it’s still a win.”

Robert arches a silver brow in my direction. “Would you care to explain? And how does sitting down to an exclusive meeting with a reporter benefit our case?”

Another murmur rose through the crowd.

Ten partners in total, including myself and Jackson, are seated at the round table. It is set up in the middle of a spacious and well-lit conference room on the fifth floor, overlooking the New York City skyline. Everyone in attendance is avoiding my gaze and giving Robert all of their attention.

Since he was the majority shareholder before I came, I’m not surprised.

It's been years since I bought the firm and Robert's shares, yet none of them see me as their equal. On the contrary, they all seem to regard me as if I'm a thorn in their side, a necessary but unavoidable evil. No matter how hard I try, I'm beginning to wonder if they're ever going to accept me as one of their own.

Considering they've all been around for thirty years and have known each other since they were first starting out, I know my chances aren't good. Still, as one of the top firms in the country, I know I'm better off with them than I am anywhere else. And I like knowing they're not going to do me any favors or let me off the hook easily because of my name and status.

I cast another glance around the room while I wait for the laptop to start. Once it does, I connect it to the projector. Jackson pushes his chair back, flicks off the light, and pats me on the back on his way past. I point the remote at the blank projector screen on the wall and smile.

"This is why it was a good idea," I begin, giving them all a winning smile. "Ever since the interview, interest in the case is at an all-time high. I've used my name and my reputation to shine some light on this case. People are eating it up. Look at how popular we are on social media."

Robert leans backward in his chair and a furrow appears between his brows. "It doesn't seem like the public likes Mr. Ryder."

"But they like me enough to entertain the idea that Mr. Ryder might be innocent," I point out. "The public loves a good twist, Mr. Montgomery, and I know exactly how to play to that."

All I need is some time and a whole lot of leeway to do what I do best.

I have every intention of turning Blake Ryder into the public's hero, and if I can't, then at least he'll have a lot more fans. Knowing my client, he's going to jump at the chance to expand his fanbase and make more money.

“Opposing counsel is Ava Prescott,” Robert continues as if he hasn’t heard me. “She’s one of the best attorneys in the city.”

“*Second* best.” I switch off the projector and switch the lights back on. Spots are dancing in my field of vision, but I continue to talk with one hand shoved into my pocket. “You have New York City’s best attorney right here, and I’m telling you, this is going to increase our profits.”

Already, we are being called in for consultations, and we’re being looked at by several high-profile clients.

I have Melanie Carmichael right where I want her, and when I pull the curtains back and expose her, I’ll be all too happy to watch Ava’s indignation.

Or at least that’s what I keep telling myself...

It’s nothing personal anyway. Ava knows that and so does everyone else. Besides, she’d do the same to you if she had the chance.

Robert glances at the other members of the board and nods. “You seem to have things well in hand. However, do remember—”

“Sorry, I’m late.” The door swings open and a tall, powerful-looking man in a dark suit with wisps of silver in his hair steps in. He and I exchange a quick look as he moves to the back of the room and leans against the wall.

“It’s good to see you, Tom,” Robert offers with a quick smile in his direction. “I had no idea you were coming in today.”

“I thought I’d stop by and check on my son. It is a big case, after all.”

“I’ve got things under control,” I respond through gritted teeth. “And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t show up to a private meeting unannounced.”

A tense silence settles over the room.

“I used to be a board member. You could use my expertise and the experience I bring to the table.”

I raise an eyebrow. “If I need it, I’ll let you know.”

“Don’t be stubborn, Ethan. You’re obviously in over your head. There’s nothing wrong with asking for help.”

“Like how I asked for help with the Tournel case, and you booted me off?”

“You weren’t a good fit.”

“I wasn’t a good fit or you just couldn’t stand the fact that your son was doing better?”

“Watch your tone!” He pauses to push himself off the wall. “I won’t be spoken to in that way.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “Or what, Dad? You’ll hijack another one of my meetings? Take away one of my big clients? Oh, wait. You already did that.”

Tom bristles, and a vein bulges in his neck. “This is exactly why no one is ever going to take you seriously as a lawyer.”

“I’m not the one who has issues letting go,” I reply coolly. “You’re the one who shows up here even though you’re supposed to be retired.”

“You—”

Jackson pushes his chair back with a screech. “I think everyone should just calm down. Why don’t we bring this meeting to an end, and you and your dad can talk about things privately, Ethan?”

“Finally someone who has some sense around here,” Dad mutters. He crosses his arms over his chest and gives me a meaningful look. Abruptly, I step away from the table, hold the door open, and wait. One by one, the other board members exchange quick looks and hurry out of the room. A few of the senior partners look concerned, but no one says a thing.

Jackson stays behind and pretends to do something on the laptop.

When everyone else is gone, I let the door click shut and advance on my father. “Do you have any idea what you’ve

done? I'm trying to get them to respect me as the majority shareholder *and* as a fellow lawyer."

"How? By parading yourself all around for the media to see? I taught you better than that."

"You taught me *nothing*," I reply with a shake of my head. "I got to where I am because *I* worked hard and because *I* earned the opportunities I was given."

"Opportunities you wouldn't have been given if it wasn't for me! Or have *you* forgotten the doors my last name opened for you?"

"I haven't forgotten, but I would've gotten there anyway."

Dad scoffs. "By investing in your friend's start-up?"

Even being one of the youngest billionaires in the country didn't impress my dad.

Then again, so few things did.

And as far as Thomas Black is concerned, I got to where I am because of him. Because of the hard work he put in to make a name for himself, enabling me to stand on his shoulders. While a part of me knows and is grateful for everything he and my mom have done for me, another part of me is tired of having it held over my head.

He's never going to give you the approval or credit you want. You've known that for years, Ethan. Why is this still such a surprise for you?

Because, in spite of my best attempts otherwise, I still care what he thinks.

I've spent years trying to step out of his shadow and prove that I'm my own man, only to end up right back where I started each time he's in the room. With his broad shoulders, lean physique, and a pair of ice-blue eyes, my father is still every inch the lawyer he used to be, right down to his custom-made suit.

He still commands respect when he walks into a room even though he's been retired for years.

But I've worked too hard for too long to let him undermine my success.

"I invested in my friend's start-up because it was a good idea. Look at how much money it made. Not such a bad idea now, was it?"

Tom inches closer to me, leaving the entire table between us. "You think making all of that money because you invested in the right thing at the right time makes you a man? Money doesn't make a man."

"And power does? Or was it position?"

"When you earn the respect of your colleagues, you'll know what I'm talking about." Tom glances over at Jackson. "Like your friend here. I've read his file, and I know how hard he works. He didn't have to rely on his father's connections."

Jackson looks up from the laptop and glances between the two of us. "With all due respect, Mr. Black, Ethan does work. He's one of the hardest workers in the company. Because of him, our profit margins are way up."

Tom shakes his head. "I see he's got into your head too. Pity. I really thought I could get through to you, Ethan."

"If you're so disappointed in me, then why don't you just leave? Nobody is stopping you."

A long moment passes where nothing happens.

Finally, my father unfolds his arms and lets them fall to his sides. On his way past, he holds my gaze and doesn't look away until he steps through the door. I watch him through the glass, taking long even strides with his head held high. I don't relax or glance away until he gets on the elevator and the door pings shut behind him. Once it does, I sink into the nearest chair and press two fingers to my temples.

"Man, you weren't kidding when you said your dad is intense. I thought it was just in court."

I rub in slow circular motions. "Believe it or not, you're seeing him on a good day."

I, of all people, know what it's like when Thomas Black is in a bad mood.

And I know that was nowhere near what he could've done.

Even though he's the one who walked away, I'm the one left feeling like an idiot and I know why.

Whatever progress I'm making with the board has been stalled again.

All because of Thomas fucking Black.

Fucking perfect. Why couldn't he just leave it alone?

AVA



“*Y*ou goddamn son of a bitch!” I toss the phone onto the counter and run a hand over my face. “Can you believe the nerve of this guy?”

Rebecca pauses, the ice cream spoon halfway to her lips. “Are we talking about Ethan again? Babe, I say this because I care, but you need to get laid.”

I place my hands on my hips. “What does that have to do with Ethan fucking Black?”

“You’ll feel much better when you get all of that pent-up sexual frustration out of your system.” Rebecca licks the spoon and runs her fingers over Brandy’s fur. “Isn’t that right, sweetie?”

Brandy lifts her beady yellow eyes up to Rebecca and blinks. She meows loudly, and her tail flicks.

“See? Even your cat agrees.”

“She’s just happy you’re giving her love.” I let my hands fall to my sides. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re here otherwise I might do something stupid.”

Rebecca raises an eyebrow. “You’re happy my apartment is being fumigated? You’ve got a weird way of showing it.”

I sigh. “I know. I’m sorry. My client, Melanie, is just sick of this divorce thing dragging on. She wants to move on with her life, and she says that Blake is keeping her from doing that. I can’t even imagine how frustrating it must be for her.”

Rebecca rummages through the drawer for another spoon. “Ethan still won’t budge?”

“He keeps coming up with circumstantial evidence to prove that Blake deserves half of Melanie’s royalties. He’s a real piece of work, honestly.”

I shouldn’t be surprised but it’s been weeks, and I can sense Melanie’s growing frustration.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I’m trying to set up a meeting with him, but he insists on meeting in his apartment. Says it helps him to think better or some other bullshit.”

Rebecca chokes on her treat. “Um, excuse me, what? One of New York City’s most eligible bachelors wants *you* to go to his apartment, and you’re refusing?”

“I’m trying to keep it professional! I’m afraid that if we’re alone together, I’m going to do something stupid.”

Rebecca sets the spoon down and grins. “Like kiss him? Oh, I knew it. Come on, follow me.”

In my bedroom, she throws the closet door open and rummages around. She pulls out a knee-length floral dress with matching flats and shoves me into my bathroom. When she starts peeling my clothes off, I swat her away and slam the door shut.

Do it for Melanie. It’s like ripping a bandaid off, Prescott. Just get in, get the agreement signed, and get out.

A thin mist follows me as I step out of the bathroom and into my room. Rebecca is perched on the edge of the bed scrolling through her phone while I change into my clothes. Wordlessly, I step back out into the living room, snatch my purse off the counter, and scratch behind Brandy’s ears. She makes a low purring sound and rubs her head against my palm.

“I’d much rather be staying home with you tonight,” I tell her, pausing to press a kiss to the center of my cat’s head. “If

I'm not back in a few hours, you might want to send an ambulance and find me a good lawyer."

Rebecca emerges in her sweats and t-shirt and waves my comment away. "You're going to be fine. Just remember to have a mint before."

"Not helping."

"Not true!" Rebecca calls out to my retreating back.

Downstairs, I am fidgeting with the strap of my purse and shifting from one foot to the other when the car pulls up. I get into the backseat, give him the address, and spend the entire ride convincing myself I'm doing the right thing. Once the driver pulls up outside of the apartment complex on the other side of the city, all of the confidence leaves me.

A text from Ethan has me squaring my shoulders and hurrying out of the car.

I offer the uniformed doorman a polite smile and my name. In the elevator, I resist the urge to smooth out my shirt and pat my hair down. Instead, I study the numbers above the door and grip the strap of my purse like my life depends on it. The doors ping open, and I step out into a cream-colored carpeted hallway.

Ethan is standing in his doorway at the end of the hall. He's barefoot, shirtless, and in a pair of shorts.

His skin is glistening with sweat as he steps back and offers me a smile. I dig my nails into my palms and duck in after him. Once the door clicks shut, I wander into the apartment, taking in the open-floor kitchen with modern appliances and a leather living room set overlooking a terrace with a view of the skyline.

His place is exactly how I pictured it.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

I clear my throat. "Some water, and you should put a shirt on so we can get down to business."

Ethan chuckles. "Does me being half-naked make you uncomfortable, Prescott? I was working out, and I didn't have

time to shower.”

I turn my back on him and fix my gaze on the terrace. “I don’t care what you do with your time, Black. We’ve got a deal to discuss.”

Ethan comes to stand next to me and hands me a glass of water. “Yes, so you keep saying.”

I spin around to face him and take an involuntary step back. “I think your client is going to like our offer.”

Without waiting for a repose, I stride over to the counter and set my purse down. After pulling out the papers, I smooth them out and set them down. Ethan is still nursing his beer and watching me with a strange look on his face.

Even when he’s drenched in sweat, he is the most attractive man I’ve ever seen.

It’s making my stomach do odd little somersaults and making it damn near impossible for me to remember why I agreed to have the meeting here in the first place.

A long moment passes where nothing happens.

Finally, ever so slowly, Ethan lowers the beer bottle and crosses over to me. His hand brushes against mine as he leans forward and pulls the papers toward him. A furrow appears between his brows as he skims over it, flips it over, and mutters to himself. With a great deal of difficulty, I take a few steps back and shove both of my hands into my pockets.

Do not do anything stupid. Rebecca is wrong. You do not see Ethan that way. It’s just a business meeting.

And the sooner I can get out of here, the better it’ll be for all of us.

“Is this really the best offer you can give my client?” Ethan pushes himself away from the counter and twists to face me. “I wasn’t aware it was amateur hour, Prescott. Come on, you can do better than that.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I think my client is being *extremely* generous considering she doesn’t owe Blake anything.”

“How is leaving him the house better than getting royalties?”

“Because they did buy the house together, and they both invested time and money into it.”

Ethan scoffs. “Aren’t you going to argue that since your client paid the deposit, she has more of a right to the house?”

I shrug. “I already spoke to her about that, and she feels comfortable giving up the house.”

Especially if it means getting to keep her royalty checks.

As far as deals go, Blake is getting the short end of the stick, but at least he’ll have something valuable of his own. Melanie, on the other hand, is playing the long game, and I respect her all the more for it.

Although, I hate giving Blake an inch...

“Yeah, I’m not buying it. You’re making this offer because you feel like you’re going to lose.”

“Public perception of your client sucks. We have nothing to worry about.”

A muscle ticks in Ethan’s jaw. “My client is not being tried in the court of public opinion.”

“Yeah, because as far as they’re concerned, he’s fucked.”

Ethan takes a step toward me. “It’s up to the court, as you well know, counselor. So whatever bullshit you’re trying to pull, I’m not falling for it.”

I throw my hands up in the air and scowl. “I’m not trying to pull anything! You and I could come to an agreement right now and get this over with. As Blake’s lawyer, you’re obligated to take this deal to him.”

“And I will, but I’ll also advise him *not* to take it,” Ethan replies, pausing to give me a cool look. “Was there anything else?”

“You’re just being a jackass right now. I came all the way out here during my weekend—”

“It’s my weekend too—”

“To make your client, who has no claim to anything by the way, a very generous offer, and you’re just throwing it in my face to be petty.”

Ethan covers the distance between us and scoffs. “You’re the one who can’t let go of your grudge, counselor. You want to talk about petty? You should take a look in the mirror.”

“You are the most unprofessional, self-centered person on the planet.”

“You haven’t even met everyone on the planet.”

I point a finger at him and bristle. “I don’t need to in order to know that you’re it.”

“And yet here you are...”

I make a low strangled noise and tilt my head back to stare at him. “Why are you wasting time? You and I both know you’re not going to get a better deal.”

Especially not if this drags on in court...

I am going to pull out all the stops to make sure that I bury Blake and Ethan along with him.

It is, after all, what Melanie hired me to do.

“You and I both know you can do better, counselor,” Ethan tells me, his blue eyes moving steadily over my face. “I’ve gone over your cases, and I’ve seen what you’re like. You can’t tell me that you actually think this is a good move.”

I clench my hands into fists. “It’s what my client wants and that’s all that matters. Now, are you going to take the offer to your client, or are you going to drag this on?”

Ethan and I are chest to chest when I realize he’s not saying anything and neither am I.

All at once, I realize how close we’re standing, and how, up close, his eyes are the deepest shade of blue I’ve ever seen. The hairs on the back of my neck rise when he shifts, and my entire body is buzzing. He reaches between us to tuck a lock of hair behind my ears, and I freeze.

It takes everything I have to remember how to breathe.

I suck in a harsh breath, and I hate that his eyes darken at the gesture. My eyes dart down to his lips, and my throat turns dry. I swallow and try to force myself to move, but I'm glued to the ground.

Do not do it. Do not do it. Do not—

Ethan's mouth is inches from mine when his phone rings, the sound slicing through the air. He casts a glance over his shoulders, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Abruptly, I take a few steps back and turn my back on him. There is a slight tremor in my hands as I wait for my breathing to even out.

As soon as Ethan answers the phone and presses it to his ear, I run.

I don't stop as I twist the knob and fly down the stairs, taking them two at a time. Once I reach the landing, I pause to exhale and shove my phone into my purse. Glancing down both sides of the street, I ignore the thrumming in my chest and grumble. I spot a taxi inching forward at a snail's pace.

When I'm safely inside, I message Rebecca and lean back against the seats.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

ETHAN



“Are you sure you want to wear that?”

I adjust the tie and meet my mother’s gaze in the full-length mirror. “You do know that I’ve been dressing myself for years, right? I can handle one little charity event.”

Even if I am going to be under scrutiny the whole night.

Already, it’s making my skin crawl and filling me with the urge to walk right out the door and keep walking until I reach my apartment.

I know I can’t avoid events like this forever, not if I want to keep up appearances.

My mother sighs and steps into the room, her floor-length silver gown rustling with each movement. “I know you’re capable of dressing yourself, but I’m still your mother, and I’ll always try to help.”

I twist to face her and smile. “You look beautiful.”

She reaches me and stops. She spins in a half-circle, muttering to herself and brushing lint off of my suit. “Please try not to get into it with your father tonight. It’s an important charity, and I don’t want people to be focused on what’s happening with us.”

I frown. “I’ll be on my best behavior.”

Or at least I am going to try to be.

Knowing my father, he isn’t going to make it easy.

When she comes back to stand in front of me, my mother is beaming and her entire face is lit up with joy. “I’m so proud of you, Ethan. And your father is too. I know he has a hard time showing it, but it’s true.”

I snort. “You don’t have to keep making excuses for him.”

With a smile, I tuck her hand into the crook of my elbow and lead her out of the guest room. Together, we climb down the stairs and I stiffen when I see my father waiting at the foot of the stairs. He is in his usual dark-pRESSED suit and slicked-back hair. His eyes flick over to me, and he says nothing as he takes my mom’s outstretched hand.

“You are stunning,” he tells her with a small smile. “You’re going to outshine everyone tonight.”

My mother blushes and tucks herself into his side. “I’m just so happy we’re doing this as a family.”

With one more glance in my direction, my father leads her away. I trail behind them. On the curb, my mother pauses to pick up the folds of her dress. My father gets in after her, and I am the last to get in. We spend the ride in silence. I alternate between glancing out the window at the trees and cars rushing past in either direction and scrolling through my phone.

“Don’t spend the entire night doing that,” my father says.

The car comes to a halt outside the hotel. There’s already a row of photographers lined up on either side of the railings and a uniformed security team is in place. I ignore my father’s comment and get out of the car.

I shove a hand into my pocket and offer the press my signature half-smile.

Cameras click and voices clamor to be heard over each other.

I walk ahead of my parents. I pause in the doorway of the hotel to spot them gliding down the champagne-colored carpet wearing identical radiant smiles. The two of them stop to answer a few questions, and I duck inside. My eyes take a moment to adjust. Once they do, I follow the group of well-dressed people and find myself in another lavish ballroom with

the same high-arched ceilings, glittering chandeliers, and live band set up on a makeshift podium. High round tables are scattered throughout with a few wooden chairs and name cards.

I grab a glass of champagne from one of the passing waiters and take a long sip. On the far side of the ballroom, I spot Jackson in a navy suit with a few older men and women surrounding him.

I make a beeline for him, pausing to grab two more drinks on the way.

His entire expression shifts and changes when he sees me.

He meets me halfway and downs the entire drink before I come to a complete stop. “How bad is it?”

“They’ve already started talking about politics and the stock market.”

I grimace. “The event hasn’t even started.”

Jackson winces and looks around for another drink. He gestures to a nearby waiter, distinguishable in his black and white uniform. After we both order our drinks, we lean against the nearest wall near a seafood buffet.

“How long do you think it’s going to be before they start looking for us?”

Jackson scans the room. “I have no idea, but I overheard the woman who was standing next to me talk about you. I’m pretty sure your mom’s friends are not going to go easy on you tonight.”

“Maybe it’s not too late to leave,” I mutter in between sips of my drink. “We need some kind of distraction, so we can duck out and—”

“Darling.”

My mother materializes in front of me, her smile stretching from ear to ear. She has a glass of half-finished champagne in her hand. “There you are. I’ve got a few friends who want to meet you.”

I tilt my head back and finish my drink. “I’m sure they’d love to meet Jackson too.”

My mother turns to him, and her smile grows wider. “Jackson, sweetheart, I didn’t recognize you. Don’t you look handsome?”

“Not as beautiful as you do, Mrs. Black.” Jackson gives her a warm smile. “You get better looking with age.”

A blush steals across my mother’s neck and cheeks. “You’re too kind. Come on. You can both come and meet my friends.”

Jackson shoots daggers at me during the walk to the other side of the ballroom.

Over the next hour, the two of us are examined, prodded, and fussed over until my father materializes. I use the distraction to make my escape, and Jackson follows shortly after. We find ourselves back near the buffet again, and I grab two plates.

“It’s rude to walk away from your guests.”

“They’re not my guests,” I reply without looking at my dad. “I’m only here to support Mom.”

“Part of supporting her is mingling with her friends.” He cuts in front of me and folds his arms over his chest. “Do you have any idea how much effort your mom has put into this event?”

Slowly, I set my plate down and draw myself up to my full height. “As a matter of fact, I do. She’s been telling me all about it during our weekly breakfasts.”

A muscle ticks in his jaw. “So this is what you’re wasting time on. Instead of using your time to better prepare for your case, you’d rather be sneaking around with your mom?”

“We wouldn’t have to sneak around if it weren’t for you,” I point out with a lift of my chin. “And I’m not wasting my time. My client is in good hands.”

My father gives a sharp shake of his head. “I don’t even know why they gave you the case. It’s clear you’re not

committed or focused.”

“For fuck’s sake—”

“Sorry to interrupt.” Ava materializes in front of us, a breathtaking vision in her knee-length dark green dress. Her hair is pinned up, leaving a few wisps to frame her face. She gives me a quick look before turning her attention back to my father and holding her hand out.

“I wanted to introduce myself in person, Mr. Black. I hope it’s okay that I’m coming up to you like this. I’m a big fan of your work.”

My dad’s expression changes, and he is wearing an easy smile when he takes her hand in his. “The pleasure is all mine, Ms. Prescott. I’ve been following your career as well.”

Ava blushes. “That means a great deal to me, Mr. Black. You’re one of the main reasons why I wanted to become a lawyer.”

My father gives her hand another firm shake before releasing. “Maybe you can teach my son a thing or two. He can definitely learn from you.”

Ava looks over at me, and a quick flicker of surprise moves across her face before she stamps it out. “Oh, I don’t know about that. He’s giving me a run for my money, that’s for sure. You should see him in court.”

“You’re being too kind.” He looks at a spot over her shoulders and clears his throat. “Would you please excuse me? I see someone I know. It was a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Prescott.”

As soon as he’s gone, Ava picks up my plate and nibbles on a shrimp. “Your dad seems like a nice guy, really charming too. It’s too bad the apple fell far from the tree.”

I roll my eyes. “He’s got nothing on me.”

Ava hands me back my plate and peruses the buffet table. “Is that what you tell yourself to feel better? I’d be pretty intimidated if my father was Thomas Black.”

I grip the plate tighter. “It wears off pretty quickly.”

Ava shoots me a quick look and straightens her back. “Maybe I should’ve let the argument continue. I’d love to see the two Black men in action.”

“The night’s not over yet,” I mutter. “We’ll probably end up in another argument before we leave.”

“Do I get to see this argument firsthand?”

“If you’re lucky.” I shoot a half-smile in her direction. “I don’t think you’re ready for that kind of privilege, Prescott. That’s some premium quality content.”

Ava fills up her plate and laughs. “I’m sure I’ll figure out a way to handle it.”

“You sound awfully sure of yourself, counselor.”

Once we reach the end of the buffet table, she spins around to face me. Her eyes are full of warmth, humor, and some other emotion I can’t identify. “When you’re the best, it’s better not to waste time pretending otherwise.”

My lips twitch. “Sounds like I’m rubbing off on you.”

Ava rolls her eyes. “Sounds like wishful thinking, Black. I was just pointing out the obvious.”

I follow her to an empty table with no name cards, and I pull out a chair. “In that case, I should probably point out that you shouldn’t have come tonight. You’re too distracting.”

As relieved as I am that she’s saved me from my father, I can’t deny that having her here feels strange.

Disconcerting.

It’s like the lines between my two worlds are coming closer and closer together.

Ava pulls her chair out and sits. “Afraid of a little competition, Black? I know you like being in the spotlight, but you’re just going to have to learn to share.”

I eye her over the rim of my whiskey glass. “I’m not the sharing kind.”

“Neither am I.” She holds her glass up and touches it to mine. “Here’s to not sharing, the spotlight or otherwise.”

“You got a better offer for me, Prescott? Or are you going to waste my time again?”

Ava picks up her fork and brings the cheese ball up to her mouth. “You’re too late, Black. That’s the most generous offer you’re going to get. I’m going to make you wish you’d taken the offer.”

I lean forward and flash her a smile that has her blinking. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Prescott.”

Ava clears her throat and sits up straighter. “Oh, I don’t go back on my word.”

I take another long sip of my drink. “Good. I look forward to it then.”

Ava turns to her food and lapses into silence.

I spend the next hour watching her and resisting the urge to lean across the table and devour her lips with mine.

Fucking hell.

What’s the matter with me?

AVA



“Oh, for fuck’s sake. You stalking me, Prescott?”

I glance up to see Ethan sitting across the bar with his sleeves rolled up and a beer in his hands.

I frown. “In your dreams, Black.”

Ethan takes a long swig of his beer and pushes his chair back. He comes to sit next to me and perches on his stool. “Are you sure it’s in my dreams, or are you projecting?”

I fix my gaze on the martini in front of me and down it all. “Give it a rest, Black. I don’t want to sleep with you.”

“You should stop begging then.”

I toss my hair back and look up at him. “You’re the one who came to sit next to me.”

Ethan leans over the bar and signals to the waiter. “It’s called manners. You should try it sometime.”

“I will if you do.”

Ethan chuckles and asks for two more drinks. “Looks like we’re at an impasse. What are we going to do, Prescott?”

“I suggest we divide the bar, and the winner gets the spoils.”

Ethan twists to face me, his expression unfathomable underneath the pulsing fluorescent lights. “Are you challenging me to a game of darts?”

I finish my drink, push my chair back, and stand. “Is that a hint of fear I detect in your voice? Don’t worry, Black. I’ll go easy on you.”

Once I lure him into a false sense of security, I’ll rip the rug out from under him. I don’t know what it is about Ethan that gets me all hot and bothered, but it’s been a while since I’ve felt this way about someone. And the more time the two of us spend together, the more I begin to realize what everyone else is seeing.

Damn it.

I hate it when Rebecca is right.

Ethan picks up his drink and follows me past rows and rows of tables. The dart board is hanging up on an empty wall next to the bathroom stalls. A few of the patrons sitting there get up and leave. I am studying the cracks in the ceiling and peering at the overhead speakers when Ethan comes back with the darts, and a tray full of nachos, fries, and drinks.

“You’re going to need all the help you can get.” Ethan tosses back a shot and cracks his knuckles. “I happen to be a master at darts.”

I pause to drape my sweater over the back of an empty chair. “Do you keep track of all your lies or do you just hope that people don’t remember?”

Ethan rolls his shoulders and examines one of the darts. Without responding, he throws it and it lands near the center. “You were saying?”

I snort. “Oh, please. I can do better than that while blindfolded.”

My dart shoots through the air and lands closer to the center. I offer Ethan a smug smile and take a sip of beer. “Cat got your tongue?”

“Where did a city girl learn to play like that?”

I shrug and select a nacho. “I wasn’t always a city girl. I grew up in a small town, so there wasn’t much else to do on a Saturday night.”

“I didn’t peg you for a small-town girl.” Ethan’s expression turns thoughtful as he reaches for another drink. “No wonder my dad liked you so much. He’s got a lot of respect for self-made people.”

I nibble on the chip and eye him carefully. “Aren’t you self-made too? Didn’t you make your fortune off of investing in your friend’s company?”

Ethan smiles. “So, you have looked me up. I’m flattered, Prescott.”

I turn my back on him and lift up my drink. “I didn’t. I overheard someone talking about you the other day. I can’t control when other people talk about you.”

Ethan stands in front of the dartboard, and his expression turns serious. “I just got lucky. Anyone can invest in a start-up. I’ve just followed my instincts since then.”

“And what made you decide to become a lawyer? That’s a far cry from a billionaire businessman.”

“My sister got screwed over by the system when she tried to leave her husband, and I hated seeing what it did to her. So, I decided that no one should ever have to face that.”

I pause with the glass halfway to my lips. “I didn’t know you had a sister.”

“She’s the black sheep of the family, no pun intended.”

I take a few sips of my drink and look directly at Ethan who is still looking at the dart board. In the background, conversation rises and falls, punctuated by the occasional sound of shoes squeaking against the hardwood floors.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t get soft on me now, Prescott.” Ethan spins around to face me and gives me a lazy, half-smile. “What about you?”

“My mom got screwed over by the system too. When she tried to leave my dad, he got pretty much everything because he was a better liar.”

“It’s a fucked up system,” Ethan agrees with a solemn nod. He touches his glass to mine and tilts his head back. “Here’s to making it a little less fucked up.”

“I’ll toast to that.”

Ethan and I have a lot more in common than I thought, and it’s unnerving.

Suddenly realizing that he’s just a guy who got lucky and was in the right place at the right time is making me see him in a whole new light and I don’t like it.

Nor do I like the warm tingling sensations in my belly or the butterflies that erupt into a frenzy whenever he gets too close.

It feels like I’m a teenager all over again.

“So you know what it’s like to have a controlling dad,” Ethan continues after a brief pause. “How do you deal with him?”

“I don’t. I cut him off years ago.”

Ethan exhales. “If it wasn’t for my mom, I’d have done the same thing. I don’t want to break her heart though.”

I glance at him over my shoulder and frown. “Yeah, I get that.”

In spite of everything he’s done to her, my mom is the same. In the beginning, we spent too much time arguing about my dad’s role in my life or lack thereof.

“I know it sounds ridiculous, but I like to think that every client I help proves my dad wrong,” Ethan tells me with a strange glint in his eyes. “I’ve never told anyone that before.”

My heart misses a beat. “Um, thanks.”

We lapse into silence and focus on the darts.

With each shot that I miss, I drift closer to Ethan. At some point, he drapes an arm around my waist, and I am leaning into his side. I have no idea if it’s the drinks or the fact that I’m getting to see Ethan for the first time.

All I know is that I don't want this night to end.

When we stumble out of the bar sometime after midnight, and he pulls me to him, I kiss him with everything in me. Ethan hesitates and kisses me back, sending jolts of electricity straight through me. Suddenly, I am pawing at his back, and I can't get enough of him. My head is spinning, and red-hot desire is pumping through me as we get into the back of Ethan's car.

I straddle him.

His touch is like fire, and I am burning up from the inside out.

I want his hands all over me.

He presses hot, open-mouthed kisses down the side of my neck and across my jaw. I throw my head back and grind against him, ignoring the panicked voice in the back of my head. He tastes like mint and whiskey, a heady combination that continues to make my head spin until he presses a hand over my chest and the roaring in my ears drowns out everything else.

I don't think I've ever wanted anyone as much as I do now.

We kiss until the need for air becomes too great and his driver pulls up outside the apartment building. Together, we stumble out onto the street and pass the uniformed doorman. I am flushed, and my skin is tingling as we wait for the elevator. Once the doors ping open, we get in and Ethan tucks me into his side.

He barely waits for the doors to close before pushing me up against the wall and attaching his mouth to my neck. I hoist myself up so my legs are wrapped around his waist. Ethan growls into my mouth and rubs himself against my center. His hand is on me, and I am about to combust.

I don't care if I explode into a million little pieces so long as it's his hands that do the destruction.

When the doors ping open, I am dimly aware of being carried down the carpeted hallway and in the direction of Ethan's door. With a grunt, he sets me down and takes his keys

out. I push him up against the door, and it clicks shut. Ethan pulls my dress up over my head, leaving me in my lacy black bra and panties.

His eyes move over me, leaving a trail of heat in his wake.

I fumble with the zipper of his pants. It takes me a few tries, but once I'm successful, my fingers move over the buttons, one after the other in quick succession, so he's in nothing but his boxers.

I take a step back and let my eyes roam over his taut body.

My mouth is half open as I drink him in and realize I've been starving.

He pulls me to him, and his mouth is hot and demanding.

Ethan carries me into the bedroom and sets me on the mattress. He pauses to kick off his boxers and unhook my bra. As soon as my breasts spill forward, he takes one nipple between his teeth, and I arch my back. Desire pools in the center of my stomach as I moan his name. Two fingers dart in between my wet folds, and my entire body goes still.

Every stroke, every touch, and every growl brings me closer and closer to the edge.

Nothing else matters.

Not the case, not the fact that I dislike him, and definitely not the fact that he is my opposing counsel. All that matters is Ethan's mouth on my neck and his fingers in between my wet folds. He rubs his hands up and down my arms, leaving goosebumps in his wake. Wave after wave of desire builds within me. I cry out as the force of my orgasm rips through me.

Once my vision clears, I pull him on top of me and spread my legs open.

He positions himself at my entrance and pins my arms over my head. In one quick move, he is inside of me, filling me to the hilt. I wriggle against him, and he drops his head into the crook of my neck. I squirm, and he releases my arms,

allowing me to rake my fingers over his back. Ethan eases out and slams back into me, eliciting a cry of pleasure.

I link my fingers over his back and lift my hips off the mattress.

The bed dips and creaks as we move, slowly at first then faster and faster. It isn't long before we are moving with a wild and animal-like abandon that both surprises and thrills me. Ethan presses my breasts together, buries his head between them, and licks my skin.

I dig my nails into his waist and squeeze my eyes shut.

Ethan's entire body jerks as his release washes over him, drenching him in sweat. When he's done, he rolls off of me and collapses onto the mattress. I am left staring at the ceiling as my heart pounds against my ears.

Holy shit.

What did I just do?

ETHAN



I lean against the wall next to the bedroom and fold my arms over my chest. “Did you know that you talk in your sleep?”

Ava glances at me. “I don’t.”

“You do,” I reply cheerfully. “Don’t worry. It wasn’t anything embarrassing. Just your standard stuff about how obsessed you are with me and how you can’t wait to jump my bones again.”

Ava’s mouth falls open in horror, and she turns so she’s facing me completely. “Shit. Please tell me you’re kidding.”

I chuckle and cross over to her. “You’ll never know if you run out the door.”

“I wasn’t going to run out. I was going to *exit* gracefully.”

“You mean like the day you came over to discuss your client’s proposition?”

Ava’s face turns a bright red as she mutters something under her breath. She lowers herself onto the floor and begins rummaging underneath the bed.

“Cat got your tongue, counselor?”

Ava looks up at me and blows away an errant lock of hair. “Look, we obviously had a lot to drink yesterday, and emotions were running high, but I think we both know it was a bad idea.”

I perch on the bed and raise an eyebrow. “Was it? Why is that?”

Ava shoves her hair out of her face. “You’re not really going to make me say it, are you?”

“Say what?”

Ava pushes herself up to her feet. She was wearing her dress from last night. Even though it’s wrinkled, she still looked amazing. When she lifts her hair up off her neck and leaves it in a bun on top of her head, I’m rendered speechless.

She pierces like an arrow to my heart.

Ava places her hands on her hips. “*Whatever* this is between us, it can’t continue. You and I don’t even like each other, and we’re on opposite sides of a big divorce case.”

I stand and ignore the fluttering in my chest. “Okay, first of all, it’s obvious you and I do like each other, Prescott. I rocked your world last night, and you know it. Second of all, we wouldn’t be the first lawyers to have something going on outside of court.”

Ava’s blush deepens until it stains her cheeks. “How would that even work? We rip each other apart in court and rip each other’s clothes outside of court?”

I give her a half-smile, and my fingers move to touch her hips. She doesn’t object when I start zipping down her dress. “I haven’t thought that far ahead yet, but I do know one thing.”

Ava swallows. “Hmmm? What’s that?”

“You’re incredibly sexy when you’re confused,” I murmur. I press my lips to her neck. I kiss a path up to her earlobe and tug. “How about we start with a shower and breakfast? In that order.”

Ava links her fingers over my neck. “Are you talking about an actual shower or...?”

I stop kissing her and give her a smirk. “You’ll have to follow me to find out.”

Without waiting for a response, I push my boxers down and give her my back. I step into the bathroom, switch the showerhead on, and wait for the water to heat up. When I pull the shower curtain back, Ava is in the bathroom with me, pressing her naked body against mine. I spin around to kiss her, and we stumble into the shower stall. She lifts one leg and wraps it around me.

I growl into her skin and bury my face in her neck.

A while later, the bathroom is filled with steam, and we are both panting and breathless. In a daze, she follows me back into the room and collapses against the mattress. I toss her a clean towel and pull a shirt up over my head. The elastic of my boxers snaps as I pull it on.

Ava is staring at the ceiling, a satiated expression on her face when I leave the room. When I come back with a tray of coffee and toast, Ava is sitting up in my bed in my shirt. She offers me a half smile when I set the tray down and sit next to her. In silence, she nibbles on her toast and sips on her coffee.

Ava clears her throat. “If we do this, and I’m not saying we will, no one at work can find out.”

I eye her over the rim of my mug. “Understood. Any other marching orders for me, Prescott?”

Ava sets her mug down and fixes her gaze on me. “I’m serious. Do you have any idea what it would do to my career if people found out I was sleeping with you? I’d never hear the end of it.”

I take a long sip of my drink, and it burns a path down my throat. “Ava, I’m not going to push you to do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

Nor did I have any intention of scaring her off after last night.

My entire body still tingles where she touched me, and I’ve got a warm sensation in the center of my stomach. While a part of me is worried about the repercussions of pursuing something with Ava of all people, the other part of me doesn’t care.

This pull between us isn't going anyway, at least not anytime soon.

I don't see the point of fighting it.

Ava throws her head back and coughs. "Okay, so we're in agreement. In court, we're still opposing counsel, and our clients are none the wiser. Outside of court, we don't discuss the case, and we don't use our personal relationship against each other."

I set my mug down and hold my hand out. "You've got yourself a deal, counselor."

Ava holds my gaze as she gives my hand a firm shake, and I realize two things at once.

The first is that I want her again.

And the second is that I am totally and completely screwed.

* * *

"YOU DO REALIZE you're not as stealthy as you think, right?" Jackson pours himself a generous amount of coffee and moves away from my window. "So, when are you planning on telling the board about you and Ava?"

I don't look up from my screen. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Jackson sits down opposite me and brings one pant-clad leg over the other. "You do realize that shit *only* works with other people, right? I've known you since we were kids, so I know when you're full of it."

I stop typing and look over at Jackson. "Prescott and I don't have anything going on between us."

I can tell by the look on his face that Jackson doesn't believe me.

It's been weeks of sneaking around, of finding excuses to pull Ava into the empty bathroom on the fifth floor in court.

Weeks of showing up to court in separate cars just to avoid being seen together. And weeks of spending our weekends in my apartment where we explore every inch of each other.

I can't get enough of Ava.

And the more time I spend with her, the more ridiculous I feel for agreeing to this arrangement in the first place.

As hard as I try to convince myself otherwise, I know my feelings for Ava aren't going away. She's my first thought in the morning and the last person I think of before I go to sleep. I keep finding excuses to talk to her and spend time with her, and I can't seem to help myself.

Nor do I want to.

She's got me wrapped around her finger, and she doesn't even know it.

Jesus, Ethan. What the hell have you gotten yourself into? You should know better than to mix business and pleasure. There's a reason those two things should remain separate.

And there's a reason why she's been able to kick my ass in court.

I spend half my time trying to pull my focus off of her and the other half trying to convince myself that it's just attraction.

Jackson takes a few more sips of his coffee and leans over the desk. "Look, I honestly don't give a shit what you do with your personal time, but I hope you know that these things rarely work out."

"Nothing is happening," I maintain without looking at him. "I think what you're picking up on is how dedicated we both are to our clients."

Jackson snorts. "Yeah, uh-huh. I just hope you have a plan for when things get too complicated and start going south."

An hour later, I have my hands down Ava's skirt, and she is moaning into my ear when we hear someone outside the conference room door. Ava freezes and lowers her legs. Slowly, I remove my head and pull her skirt back down. Her fingers are trembling as she fastens the buttons on her blouse.

With a frown, I cross over to the door, pause to run a hand through my hair, and twist the knob.

When I glance outside, the hallway is empty.

I shut the door, turn the lock, and spin around to face her. “Where were we?”

“Too close to getting caught,” Ava replies without looking at me. “Anyway, I’m here to discuss the case.”

I advance on her. “We can do both.”

Ava sits down in the nearest chair and flips the folder open. “We can’t do both.”

I stop in front of her, spin the chair around, and smile when I hear her sharp intake of breath. “What if I promise to be fast?”

Ava chokes back a laugh. “You and I both know you’re not going to keep that promise.”

I rub my hands up and down her arms. “You’re right. You could just come over tonight so we can continue talking about this.”

Ava shudders and leans into my touch. “We really should talk about the case.”

I press a kiss to her cheek and hold my hands up on either side of me. “Okay, I’ll behave for now. But tonight, your ass is mine.”

After we’re done with the meeting, Ava gets up to leave, and I sneak glances at her through the glass window. She has a spring in her step, a flush in her cheeks, and a smile hovering on the edge of her lips. While she’s waiting for the elevator, she taps her foot and checks her phone.

I lean forward in my seat and watch her.

Goddamn it.

I know I should end things between us before we’re in too deep, but I already know it’s too late. Not only am I completely head over heels for her, but I also know I can’t walk away from her.

I won't.

She's the only woman in the world who's ever made me feel this way.

When did you turn so sentimental, Black? Look at her, making you act like some lovesick puppy. Snap out of it.

Before she gets on the elevator, Ava glances over her shoulders and looks directly at me. I smile at her, and she doesn't break our gaze as she steps onto the elevator. I watch the doors ping shut.

A few curious looks are thrown my way, and my smile fades.

"Great job, Black," I mutter, pausing to stand and push my chair back. "What the fuck are you going to do now, huh? We only had one rule."

It feels like only a matter of time before everyone finds out, and my feelings for Ava are the least of my problems...

AVA



I toss back my drink and cough. “I do not have feelings for Ethan. We’re just sleeping together, that’s all.”

Rebecca leans over the bar and waves at the waiter who is occupied with a group of women wearing matching t-shirts and feathers. “You know you can’t keep denying it, right? It’s all going to bubble up and explode sooner or later.”

I stare down at my empty shot bottle and frown. “Thanks for the mental image.”

Rebecca pats me on the back and stands up. “I’m going to go see if I can get his attention from over there. Be right back.”

As soon as she’s gone, I twist in my seat and study the bar, the bright fluorescent lights causing spots to dance in my field of vision. Music is playing through the overhead speakers, but it’s drowned out by the steady stream of conversation. Now and again, it’s punctuated by the sound of the door opening and shoes squeaking against the hardwood floors. On the other side of the bar, a group of college boys are hollering and holding darts in their hands, their faces bright red.

I squint at the back of one’s head and think I see Ethan.

When he turns around, I give a slight shake of my head and spin back around. I pull the bowl of peanuts closer to where I sit and rifle through it. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Rebecca place both hands on her hips and give the bartender her most menacing look. To his credit, he doesn’t seem fazed, and he doesn’t back down.

I frown and hunch lower in my seat.

What the hell am I doing anyway?

I should be celebrating how well the case is going, not sulking at the bar and wanting to kick myself repeatedly. Over the past few weeks, I've gone from hating Ethan with a burning passion to wanting to jump his bones all the time to yearning for him.

And I have no idea how it happened.

One minute I'm picturing him naked underneath a judge's robes, and the next, my fingers are itching for my phone, just to hear his voice. A part of me knows I have no one to blame but myself for walking right into this mess, but the other part of me wants to hold Ethan accountable.

Fucking Ethan Black with his piercing blue eyes, his lean physique, and his devastating smile.

What did you think was going to happen, huh? Come on, Prescott. You're supposed to be smarter than this.

And I am, but when it comes to Ethan, all common sense flies right out the window.

I've gone from picturing myself towering over him in court to sneaking around empty floors in the courthouse just to feel his hands all over me.

I'm an addict itching for her next fix.

Jesus, when did I turn into such a cliché?

Rebecca waves her hand in front of my face. "Hello? Are you even listening to me?"

I blink and find Rebecca sitting next to me with a knowing look on her face. "Sorry, what?"

"Daydreaming about Ethan again? Babe, you've got it bad."

"I was not daydreaming about him." I sit up straighter and take a long sip of my drink, wincing when it burns a path down my throat. "I was thinking about the case."

“So then you won’t mind if I tell you that Ethan just walked in with that smoking hot friend of his?”

I spin around so fast I nearly fall off the chair. “Where?”

Rebecca bursts into laughter. “Shit, you really do have it bad. He’s right over there.”

I follow her finger and find Ethan sitting at a booth and holding a menu up to his face. Across from him, a man with dirty blond hair and dark brown eyes is talking into his phone. I try to wrench my gaze away from Ethan, but I can’t.

He looks good in his dark jeans and form-fitting shirt.

He’d look even better without the shirt on.

With a scowl, I look over at Rebecca who is giving me an innocent smile.

“See? Nothing is happening. You’re wrong.”

Rebecca snorts and sets her drink down. “Yeah, sure. I guess that’s why they’re both headed our way right now.”

I glance up, and my heart sputters when I realize that Rebecca is right. Ethan and his friend are making a beeline for us, and I have nowhere to hide.

This is ridiculous. You’re a grown-ass woman. You have no reason to hide.

Ethan reaches us first, and he is smiling. He smells like Old Spice and sandalwood. When he leans forward, the smell washes over me and the butterflies in my stomach erupt into a frenzy. My breath hitches in my throat when he tucks my hair behind my ears.

“Hi.”

I lick my suddenly dry lips. “Hi.”

“I didn’t know you were going to be here.” Ethan gestures to the waiter and turns the full force of his gaze on me, making me feel like I’m going to melt. “Come to our table, and we can all have a few drinks together.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea...” I trail off and look over at Rebecca who is openly staring at Ethan’s friend and undressing him with her eyes. “Okay, I guess we can join you for a few minutes.”

Ethan places his hand on the small of my back and his touch burns through my clothes. I ignore the shiver that races up my spine and stride toward the booth as if I’m on fire. Ethan sinks into one of the booths, and I slide in after him. Rebecca sits opposite me, her eyes never once leaving the man’s face.

“I’m Jackson by the way.” The blonde nods in my direction and flashes me a smile. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too,” I murmur, lowering my gaze to the menu. “I’m a little hungry. Anyone else want anything to eat?”

Underneath the table, Ethan puts his hand on my knee. “I can think of a few things I’d like to try.”

My throat turns dry, and my heart misses a beat. “Yeah, me too.”

Ethan picks up his phone and types something into it. I pretend to scan the menu when my phone vibrates in my purse. I wait for a few more minutes before taking it out, and my mouth falls open at Ethan’s suggestive text. Thankfully, neither Rebecca nor Jackson seem interested in what’s going on right in front of them.

When I receive another text message, I jump to my feet. “I’m going to go to the bathroom. Bec, can you come with me?”

Rebecca reluctantly lifts her gaze to mine. “Can we go later?”

I give her a pleading look.

Jackson stands up, allowing her to pass. A sultry look passes between them as she loops her arm through mine and we push our way through the crowd. In the bathroom, we’re the only two people there so I grip the counter and wait until

my heart isn't pounding anymore. Rebecca is checking her reflection in the mirror and reapplying her lipstick.

"I'm pretty sure Jackson knows too if that's what you're worried about," Rebecca says without looking at me. "I won't get offended if you decide to leave with Ethan."

I release the counter and stare at my reflection in the mirror. "I don't want to leave with him."

Rebecca twists to face me. "Yes, you do. It's written all over your face. So, what are you waiting for?"

"There's a reason we're not advertising it, Bec. You know what'll happen if people start finding out. No one will ever take me seriously as a lawyer again."

And everywhere I go, the whispers will follow.

Announcing that Ethan and I are involved is as good as signing my own resignation letter, and I've worked too hard for too long to let anything get in the way of my career, *especially* a man.

"I think you're overthinking things. You're still a great lawyer and that's not going to change. It might take some time for people to get used to the idea of the two of you, but once they do, it'll be fine."

I sigh and wrench my gaze away from the mirror. "Are you just saying that to make me feel better?"

"Does this look like the face of someone who would lie to you?" Rebecca drapes an arm over my shoulders and steers me out of the bathroom. "It'll be okay, V. You've got this."

Together, we step out of the bathroom and run straight into a group of men and women standing nearby. We're halfway through our apologies when one of the guys, a tall broad-shouldered man with muscles and a bald head, steps forward and gives me a creepy smile.

"I noticed you earlier. You're really hot."

"Um, thanks. Sorry again about running into you."

I take a step to the left, but he moves to block my path.

“I need to pass.”

“What’s your hurry? We’re just starting to get to know each other.”

I throw my head back and give him a blank look. “I’m not interested. Now, get out of my way.”

He advances on me and pulls his mouth back to reveal a few yellowing teeth. “There’s no need to take that tone with me, darling. I saw how you were looking at me earlier.”

“Looking at *you*? I didn’t even see you until a few seconds ago.”

“You’re lying.”

“Back the fuck off!” I snap, drawing myself up to my full height. “Or you’re not going to like what ends up happening.”

Next to me, Rebecca tenses and I feel her reach into my purse for the pepper spray. Suddenly, Ethan and Jackson materialize out of nowhere and fold their arms over their chest. Ethan’s expression is one of cold fury as he taps the guy on the shoulders.

“You heard my friend. Leave them alone.”

“You her boyfriend or something?”

A muscle ticks in Ethan’s jaw. “Don’t need to be to do the right thing. Now, are you going to back off, or we are going to take this outside?”

The man spins around, sizes Ethan up, and snorts. “Why don’t you get lost, shortstack? The lady and I are having a conversation.”

A long moment passes, and Ethan says nothing.

Out of nowhere, his hand darts out, and he lands a punch to the man’s jaw. With a wheeze, the guy staggers back. Ethan throws another punch to the man’s stomach before the guy can react. Jackson steps forward and gives his friends a menacing look. All of them disperse, leaving the bald creep on his knees on the floor.

I step past him with Rebecca following close on my heels. “I had it under control.”

“I know you did.” Ethan matches his stride to mine. “An extra set of hands doesn’t hurt. Especially in situations like this.”

I wheel around and tilt my head back to look up at him. “I am not some damsel in distress, and you are definitely *not* my knight in shining armor.”

Ethan searches my face. “So you expect me to just stand there and do nothing?”

I lower my voice. “We both know what this is, Ethan. You’re not my boyfriend. You don’t owe me anything, and I don’t owe you anything either. I think it’s important, now more than ever, for us to *maintain* our boundaries.”

Ethan’s expression turns blank. “Fine.”

I snatch my purse off the table and avoid his gaze. “Becca and I need to go. Long day tomorrow.”

Without waiting for a response, Rebecca and I hurry out of the bar and into the empty lit street. During the ride back to my apartment building, I replay the entire scene in my head, each time feeling worse than the last.

Oh, Ava. What have you gotten yourself into?

ETHAN



“*M*s. Lancaster, isn’t it true that you and Ms. Carmichael have been friends for years?”

Leighton Lancaster leans forward, a lock of blonde hair falling out of her bun, and clears her throat. “Yes, we’ve been friends since middle school.”

I stop at the desk and pretend to flip through the folder. “And isn’t it also true that you never approved of her marriage to Mr. Ryder?”

“I’m not a fan of Blake’s, no. I don’t make a secret of it though. Blake’s never been good enough for Mel.”

I unfasten a button on my jacket and stride over to where the petite blonde is sitting, looking incredibly pleased with herself.

“Let’s stick to answering the questions I give you, Ms. Lancaster, shall we?”

Leighton nods and sits up straighter. “Of course.”

“Isn’t it true that, on more than one occasion, you’ve encouraged Ms. Carmichael to leave her husband?”

Leighton glances over at Melanie and then back at me. “Yes, I was concerned that she wasn’t happy, and he was using her.”

I stop in front of the witness stand. “And isn’t it also true that you tried to get Mr. Ryder’s attention first, but he was more interested in your friend?”

Like clockwork, Ava jumps to her feet. “Objection, your honor. Relevance?”

“Speaks to the character’s motive, your honor.”

“Overruled. Answer the question, Ms. Lancaster.”

Leighton shifts from one side to the other. “Yes, I met Blake first, and I thought we had a spark, but I was wrong. That was years ago though and I’m over it. I’m in a committed relationship now.”

“Yet, you’ve always been against my client and have never once made it a secret that they should leave each other.”

“Objection, your honor. That was a statement, not a question.”

I take a step back. “Withdrawn. I have no further questions, your honor.”

“She’s your witness, Ms. Prescott.” Judge Bloom adjusts her spectacles and glances over at Ava. On my way past, I see Ava pick up a folder and push her chair back. Her heels click steadily against the hardwood floors, and she holds her head high.

Ava doesn’t look over at me once, and she hasn’t since the disastrous evening at the bar the other day.

Since then, we’ve been speaking less, and I haven’t been alone in the same room with her. Although a part of me isn’t sorry that I stood up for her, especially considering how dangerous the guy looked, the other part of me wonders if I’ve overstepped. I am all too aware of the dynamic between Ava and me, and the last thing I want is for it to crash and burn before we’ve even had a chance to make it off the ground.

With a frown, I sit back down behind the desk and glance over at Blake who is scribbling furiously in the notebook I gave him.

“Ms. Lancaster, isn’t it true that you’re the one who threw Ms. Carmichael a bridal shower?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And you threw the rehearsal dinner and you convinced all of your friends to pitch in so you could send Ms. Carmichael and Mr. Ryder on a nice trip for their honeymoon?”

Leighton smiles. “I did, yes. It wasn’t much, but they had fun.”

“And isn’t it also true that on several occasions, while a group of you were hanging out, you heard Mr. Ryder disparage my client and diminish her hard work?”

Leighton’s expression turns grave. “Yes, I’ve heard him mention that she’s a hack on several occasions and one time he said it so loud everyone else heard him.”

“So, in your opinion, as one of Melanie’s closest friends, my client thrived in spite of her husband’s negativity?”

“Yes, she’s overcome a lot of odds to get here today.”

Ava nods. “Thank you, Ms. Lancaster. No further questions, your honor.”

I glance over at the jury and a shiver of unease races up my spine. “I have no further questions either, your honor.”

“Court is adjourned. We’ll meet back here tomorrow at eight in the morning.”

As soon as everyone trickles out of court, leaving Blake and me alone, he pushes his chair back and folds his arms over his chest. “What the hell was that? You let her walk all over you.”

“It’s normal to have good days and bad days.” I push my chair back and give Blake a reassuring smile. “You don’t have anything to worry about.”

Blake’s eyes tighten. “I better not, or I’ll be finding myself a new layer.”

Without waiting for a response, he strides out of the courtroom. I wait for a few more moments before I duck out, taking a series of stairs that lead out into a back alley. There, I pause to take out my phone and text my driver. He pulls over by the side of the street, and I wordlessly get into the back. When he pulls up outside of my parents’ house, a two-story

remodeled Victorian an hour outside of the city, my mood hasn't improved.

If anything, it's gotten worse.

As soon as I step in through the front door, my mother hurries over to me, and I can tell something is wrong. She leads me into the dining room, but the smile doesn't reach her eyes. During dinner, she fidgets and hovers until the topic of Ava comes up, and she lapses into silence.

"I am not doing this today," I interrupt, bringing my father's lecture to an abrupt stop. "Mom, thank you for the food, but I'm going to get going. I'll call you later."

With that, I finish the rest of my wine and push my chair back with a screech. I give my mother a quick hug and linger, eyeing my father over her head as I do. He continues to cut into his food as if I haven't said a thing.

I walk out of their house without a backward glance.

Before I know what's happening, the driver is pulling up outside Ava's apartment building. I offer him a small smile and pause to peel off my jacket before draping it over my arm. On my way up the stairs, I take my phone out of my pocket to message her. Once I reach her floor, I lift my hand to knock. The door flies open, revealing Ava in a pair of shorts and a tank top. Her hair is matted to her forehead.

"I'm sorry to drop by unannounced. I can come back some other time."

Ava shakes her head and pushes the door open the rest of the way. "I was in the shower. Come on in."

I offer her a smile as I duck inside. "Thanks. I've never seen your place during the day before."

Ava picks up two bowls off the coffee table. "Yeah, sorry it's a mess. My friend is staying with me while her apartment is being fumigated."

A blonde woman pokes her head out of a room and offers me a wave. "That would be me! I'm Rebecca. Heard so much about you. Big fan."

“Bec.” Ava dumps the bowls into the sink and gives her a pointed look. “Didn’t you say you had work to catch up on?”

“Right, don’t mind me. I’ll be in the room with the headphones on. Do you want me to bring Brandy in here with me?”

A second later, I feel something rub against my legs. I look down to find an orange and white tabby with yellow eyes purring at me. “Ah, so this is the famous Brandy. I was beginning to think you were a ghost or something.”

“She doesn’t normally like people,” Ava says over her shoulders. “Do you want something to drink?”

“I’ll have some tea,” Rebecca calls out. “Oh, wait. Sorry, you were talking to Ethan. I’m going to go back inside now. Bye.”

Once the door slams shut, Ava turns around and offers a sheepish smile. “Whenever you’re coming over, she makes herself scarce.”

“It’s okay.” I bend down to scoop Brandy up in my arms and scratch behind her ears. “You’re a beauty, aren’t you?”

“She’s a rescue.”

I wander over to the kitchen and stop on the other side of the counter. “I’ll have some tea if you’re making some. Also, I wanted to apologize for the other day. You were right. I shouldn’t have interfered.”

Ava fills up the kettle. “You were right too. I overreacted. I guess I’m just used to being in relationships where the guy swoops in expecting a favor later.”

I set Brandy down on the counter and continue to stroke her fur. “Just so you know, I’m not that kind of guy.”

Ava puts the kettle down on the stove and rummages through the cupboards. “I know you’re not. I shouldn’t have jumped to that conclusion.”

“It’s okay. I know we don’t know each other that well, but I’d like us to.”

Ava takes out two teabags and puts one in each mug. She spins around to face me, a half-smile on her face. “I’d like that. Weren’t you wearing that at the courthouse earlier?”

“I had dinner at my parents’. It didn’t go well.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“There isn’t much to say. My dad has always been hard on me, always pushing and lecturing. Nothing I’ve ever done has been good enough, especially since my sister’s been out of the picture.”

“I didn’t know your sister was out of the picture.”

“Not by choice,” I reply, wrenching my gaze away from hers. “Personally, I think our dad drove her away, and I know my mom agrees, but it’s not like she’s going to do anything about it.”

“I’m sure it’s difficult for her too,” Ava offers after a brief pause. “I saw her at the charity event the other week. She seems nice.”

“She’s amazing, and if I’m being honest, the only reason my father is worth anything.” I place both elbows on the counter so I’m looking directly at Ava. “How about you? You mentioned that your parents are divorced.”

“Yeah, they got divorced a really long time ago, and he basically took everything she had. My mom built herself back from the ground up. That’s not the worst part though. You know what the worst part is?”

I shake my head.

“A few years ago, she was diagnosed with cancer, and when he found out, he came sniffing, just to find out what kind of money she had.”

“Fuck. No offense, but he’s a piece of shit. Neither you nor your mom deserve that.”

Ava shrugs. “When she got better, he disappeared again, and I haven’t heard from him since. It’s been two years.”

“It’s his loss.” I push myself off the counter and bridge the distance between us. Ava looks up at me, a strange glint in her eyes. “You’re a hell of a woman, Prescott. And I’m not just saying that because you let me show up unannounced or because you’re amazing in bed, which you are.”

Ava throws her head back and laughs. “I’m getting the full Black effect now, huh?”

“The Black effect?”

Ava is still laughing. “Yeah, it’s what you do when you’re talking to women. You stand real close, you smile, and you nod like they’re the only person in the world that matters.”

“I don’t do that with every woman.”

Ava touches my arm. “You don’t. I’m just kidding, mostly.”

“I know what my reputation is, but this is different for me, Ava. It’s never been like this with anyone.”

Ava searches my face. “I believe you.”

“Good.”

Ava sighs. “I guess we’re in trouble then, huh? Because it’s never been like this for me either.”

My heart gives an odd little dip at her words. “At least we’re in this together.”

Ava gives me another smile and pauses to pour the tea. “Yeah, at least there’s that.”

AVA



“You look a little pale.” Rebecca peers at me and frowns. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I just need to finish this paperwork, and we can go.” I lean against the wall and flip through the folder. “I can’t believe how much paperwork I have to finish. It feels never-ending.”

“Have you had something to eat?”

“Stop hovering.” I swat her hand away, push myself off the wall, and take a step forward. “I’m fine, okay? I had something to eat this morning. I’m probably just a little dehydrated.”

“All your extracurriculars making you work up a sweat, huh?” Rebecca gives me a knowing smile. “It’s okay. I won’t tell.”

I roll my eyes. “Not everything is about Ethan.”

Nor did I want it to be.

Things have been different between us since he showed up at my apartment a few days ago. Since then, we’ve been texting throughout the day and spending a lot of our time talking about anything and everything we can think of.

I have no idea when our dynamic shifted, but I do know that I like it.

A lot.

I like going home at the end of the day knowing that Ethan is going to stop by for dinner or take me out. On other days, I like seeing his driver outside, waiting to pick me up and take me to his apartment. Most of all, I like watching his face light up as he talks about his job, his mom, and how close the two of them are.

There is so much more to Ethan Black than meets the eye, and I'm almost ashamed at how badly I've misjudged them.

You've got it bad, Prescott. What are you going to do?

"So, are you seeing him again tonight?"

"I don't know yet," I lie, pausing to switch my purse from one side to the other. Together, we walk down the empty hallway and come to a stop in front of the elevators. "Why are you so nosy all of a sudden?"

"I'm living vicariously through you. There's a big difference." Rebecca steps in first, and I follow her. "Especially since nothing is happening with Jackson."

"Is he still playing hot and cold? You know you can do better, right?"

Rebecca taps her foot and exhales. "Yeah, but there's just something there, you know? And I really think I can get him to open up."

I squeeze her hand. "I hope you're right."

In silence, we step off the elevator and make a beeline for the double doors. A blast of hot air hits me in the face, making the hairs on the back of my neck rise. I sway a little on my feet, and my hands dart out, curling around Rebecca's elbow. She stops walking, twists to face me, and says something.

Then the world is spinning out of focus, and I lose my balance.

I blink, and Rebecca and a few other people are crouching on top of me, wearing identical concerned expressions. Rebecca lowers herself onto the floor and helps me sit up. I run a hand over my face and shake my head.

"Okay, I have no idea what happened. It must be the heat."

“Here, you should have something to drink.” Rebecca untwists the cap off a bottle of flavored water and hands it to me. “This should help.”

One by one, the crowd leaves until it’s only Rebecca and me. The spots in my field of vision disappear, and I manage to push myself up to my feet. I am still a little unsteady, so Rebecca keeps a hand on my arm and leads me carefully down the stairs. When I finish the bottle of water, she takes it from me and throws it into the nearest bin.

“We’re going to a doctor. I’ve got a friend of my sister’s who works nearby. I’m sure she can squeeze in.”

“I don’t need a doctor,” I protest with a shake of my head. “You’re overreacting, Bec.”

“There’s this nasty flu going around, so better safe than sorry.” Rebecca keeps her hand on my arm, glances down both sides of the street, and waves to a taxi that’s in the distance. It crawls forward, and she shoves me in, ignoring my protests the entire way.

A few blocks later, the taxi driver pulls up next to the curb outside of a medical complex with metal buildings and glass exteriors.

Rebecca pays our driver and pushes me out the door. “Come on. I messaged her already, so she’s waiting for us.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re pushy?”

Rebecca waves my comment away and quickens her pace. “You’ll thank me later.”

With a sigh, I follow after her, the double doors sliding open as soon as we’re close enough. As soon as we’re inside, the smell of disinfectant and air freshener hits me first then a blast of cold air hits me in the face. A group of doctors and nurses in scrubs rush past, shoes squeaking against the linoleum floors. Rebecca gestures to the metal chairs on either side of the blue walls and walks over to the main desk.

A small woman with wisps of silver in her hair leans forward to listen to Rebecca. When she comes back over, she sits next to me and reaches for the magazine. I glance down

both sides of the empty hallways, my knee bouncing up and down the entire time. A tall, dark-haired doctor comes over to us and greets Rebecca with a hug.

“Hi, Ava. Follow me, please.”

She leads us into a pristine white exam room with a single bed, a rectangular-shaped desk, and two chairs. There’s a window overlooking the park across the street where a group of kids are playing. I hoist myself onto the bed, roll up the sleeves of my blouse, and wait.

Doctor Sheridan looks over at Rebecca and back at me. “Do you come to hospitals a lot?”

“My mom used to be a doctor,” I explain. “She’s kind of drilled a few things into me.”

Doctor Sheridan smiles and uses an antiseptic to clean a spot near my elbow, then she rummages through a drawer and rips open a syringe. “Good, so you know what to do. Take a deep breath, count backward, and clench your hands then release.”

When she’s done, she snaps off her latex gloves. “Do you have symptoms other than lightheadedness?”

“Nausea, backache. Oh, and I’ve had to go to the bathroom a lot.”

Doctor Sheridan jots a few things down on her clipboard. “Are you sexually active?”

I clear my throat. “Yes.”

Doctor Sheridan nods to herself. “Are you using protection?”

I pull down the sleeves of my blouse and sit up straighter. “I’ve been on the pill for years, and he uses condoms.”

“Regularly?”

I shake my head. “I’d say about half the time, but what’s that got to do with my symptoms?”

Doctor Sheridan glances up at me, but her dark brown eyes give nothing away. “I’m just making sure I have the complete

picture. It's all standard procedure, Ava. It's nothing to worry about."

Rebecca leans sideways in the chair. "You did write down that she fainted earlier, right?"

Doctor Sheridan shoots her a look. "I did, yes. Is there anything else worth mentioning?"

I clear my throat. "Nothing that I can think of."

Doctor Sheridan writes something else down and tucks the clipboard underneath her arm. She then opens up another drawer and rummages through it. When she takes out a tongue depressor, I open my mouth and make a low noise in the back of my throat. Wordlessly, she unwraps the stethoscope from around her neck and presses it to the center of my chest where thin beads of sweat are rolling underneath my shirt.

The stethoscope feels cool even through the thin fabric of my shirt.

I take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, and wait. Doctor Sheridan listens carefully then presses it to my back and instructs me to do the same. Once she's finished, she presses two fingers against my pulse and a furrow appears between her brows. By the time she's done, I am resisting the urge to fidget. I keep sneaking glances at the clock hung up on the wall over her head.

Hospitals make me uneasy since my mom's cancer.

Everything from the smell of disinfectant to the sound of monitors beeping brings me back to those endless days pacing hallways and sitting by her side while we waited for good news. With a slight shake of my head, I push the thoughts away and realize that Doctor Sheridan has drifted away and is writing something else down.

She walks out of the room without a backward glance, my vial of blood held carefully in her hands. The door clicks shut behind her, and I jump off the bed. I run a hand over my face, pushing my hair back. Rebecca straightens her back and gestures to the chair opposite her. I lower myself onto the chair and link my fingers together.

“I feel bad for wasting your friend’s time.”

Rebecca stops scrolling and looks up. “It’s not a waste of time. You should be getting checked up often anyway. When was the last time you had a mammogram?”

I break our gaze and look at the window. “I don’t remember.”

“I can come with you. I do a check-up a few times a year just to be safe.”

I swing my gaze back to my friend’s and frown. “Yeah, I don’t know if I can commit to that.”

Rebecca’s hand darts out, and she pats my arm. “It’s okay. We can start off one time and work our way from there.”

A short while later, Doctor Sheridan leads us back out into the waiting room, her face still giving nothing away. Rebecca and I take a taxi back to the apartment where Brandy is sleeping soundly by the door. I pause to pat her before disappearing into my room and peeling off my sweaty work clothes. When I come back into the living room, Rebecca has changed into something more comfortable and is studying the takeout menus I have hung up on the fridge.

“What do you feel like?”

“Chinese,” I reply, pausing to run my fingers along Brandy’s smooth fur. “But don’t order too much like you did last time. We had to throw most of it out.”

Rebecca doesn’t look up at me. “That’s because you’ve got a sensitive stomach. I eat day-old takeout all the time.”

I lean against the counter. “I don’t know what kind of stomach you have, but I don’t think that’s healthy.”

Rebecca waves my comment away. “Your phone was ringing earlier. Prince Charming called.”

I glance at my purse. “You picked it up?”

Rebecca lifts her gaze and shakes her head. “No, I did what any normal person would do. I waited until it stopped ringing and messaged him back.”

I groan. “Bec, why did you do that? Didn’t I tell you that I think we’re moving too fast, and I need some space?”

Rebecca shrugs and takes her phone out of her pocket. “It’s a little too late for that. I know the two of you have been talking every day since he stopped by a week ago. There’s nothing wrong with that, you know. I’m just moving things along. You’re welcome by the way.”

“I never thanked you.”

Rebecca snorts and presses the phone to her ear. “You can’t tiptoe around this forever, V. The two of you need to talk, and you need to figure out what you’re doing.”

I scoop Brandy into my arms and press my face against her chest. “Doing about what? We’re just spending time together.”

Rebecca gives me a knowing look. “Uh-huh, so how come you get that look on your face whenever he comes up?”

With a huff, I set Brandy back down on her feet. “I don’t make any faces. You’re imagining things.”

Rebecca says nothing on her way past.

I sink into the couch, and Brandy curls up on my lap. “She has no idea what she’s talking about, does she, cutie pie?”

Brandy blinks up at me and purrs.

Ethan and I are in a good place, and the last thing either of us needs is for me to ruin it by reading into things.

Spending time together doesn’t mean anything, not if we pretend like nothing has changed.

Who are you kidding, Prescott? You know that Rebecca is right.

ETHAN



I push myself off the wall and match my pace to hers. “How’s your day going?”

Ava doesn’t look up from her phone as her heels click steadily against the sidewalk. “Oh, you know, the usual. How about you?”

“The same.”

Ava glances up and shoves her phone into her pocket. “Things have been pretty hectic lately.”

I offer her a small smile. “You got something you want to get off your chest, Prescott?”

Ava blinks. “Like what?”

I shrug and shove both hands into my pockets. “I don’t know. You’re the one who’s been hard to reach.”

And it’s frustrating me to no end.

I’m not used to chasing after women.

It leaves me feeling a little untethered and uneasy like the world has been turned upside down. And no matter how hard I try to figure it out, I can’t make sense of it. One minute Ava and I are connecting, peeling back the layers and being vulnerable with each other, and the next I’m only getting short texts in response. For the past ten days, whenever I see Ava in court, her head is buried in a folder, she’s on her phone, or she walks right past me without any kind of acknowledgment.

You agreed that you'd keep it professional at court, remember?

I don't want to admit that I hate feeling like an afterthought, like Ava will get to me when and *if* she has the time.

Ava shifts from one foot to the other. "Yeah, I'm sorry about that. There's a lot of paperwork to catch up on, and my mom is in town."

"Do I get to meet the famous Margaret Prescott?"

Ava's lips lift into the ghost of a smile. "Maybe, I don't know yet."

Damn, Black. Why are you acting so clingy? Get a grip. It's obvious you're coming on too strong.

Only I can't seem to help myself.

I've gotten used to having Ava around, and without her to start my day and end it, everything feels wrong.

"How about I take you out to lunch? There's this great place around the corner."

Ava stares at a spot over my shoulders and squints. "I can't. I've got lunch plans with Bec."

Rebecca materializes next to her and loops her arm through Ava's. "It's nice to see you again, Ethan."

I nod and give her my best smile. "You too, Rebecca."

"You ready to go?" Rebecca adjusts the strap of her purse and gives me another once-over. "You're welcome to join us, Ethan."

Ava clears her throat. "I'm sure he's got better things to do. I'll text you later, okay?"

I nod and press my lips together.

I watch them both take the stairs quickly and disappear into a taxi. When they're gone, I stare at the spot Ava occupied, feeling worse and worse with each passing second.

Finally, I give a slight shake of my head and hurry down the stairs and in the direction of my car. As soon as I get into the back, I pour myself a generous amount of whiskey and down it all.

I blink, and we pull up outside the apartment building.

In the elevator, I check my phone several times. As soon as I step into the apartment, a fresh lemon scent hits me along with the underlying smell of lavender. Mrs. Monroe, my elderly housekeeper, rounds the corner with a bucket in her hand and a mop in the other. Her silver hair is tied back with a bandana. She does a double-take and lowers the bucket when she sees me.

“Mr. Black, you’re home early. I haven’t started on dinner yet.”

I kick off my shoes and leave them by the door. “That’s okay. I can order something tonight, Mrs. Monroe. No need to trouble yourself.”

She waves my comment away and strides past me. “I already took out the chicken and the pasta. It’ll cook while I fold the laundry.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

With a quick smile in her direction, I duck into my room and hurry out of my clothes. In the shower, I keep picturing Ava, and it makes me scrub every inch of my skin twice. A thin mist follows me out of the tile bathroom and into the room where Mrs. Monroe has already emptied my laundry hamper and set a fresh set of clothes out on the edge of the bed.

I let the towel fall to the floor with a flutter and pull on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. I pick up my phone again and frown. With a little more force than necessary, I shove it into my pocket and make my way into the kitchen where Mrs. Monroe is fluttering around with an apron tied around her black and blue uniform. She is humming a tune I don’t recognize.

Bringing the bottle of water up to my lips, I clear my throat. “What’s cooking?”

“Pasta with tomato sauce. I seasoned a chicken for you too,” Mrs. Monroe replies without looking at me. She sprinkles some salt and pepper into the pot and wipes her hands on the apron. “Are you okay, Mr. Black?”

I take a long sip of my water. “Yeah, why do you ask?”

Mrs. Monroe glances over her shoulders at me. “You seem a little distracted lately. Have you and your lady friend broken up?”

“You’re very observant, Mrs. Monroe.” I push myself off the counter, and my eyes dance around the room, looking for nothing in particular. “But we were never together.”

Mrs. Monroe raises an eyebrow. “Are you sure? I’ve seen the two of you together. There’s definitely something there.”

“I’m positive. I’ll be in the gym if you need me.”

Without waiting for a response, I make a beeline for the gym and pause in the doorway to flick the lights on. I set my phone down on the treadmill and pull the TV out. I switch over to a news channel, turn down the volume, and peel off my shirt. When I drape it over the back of the chair, my phone vibrates.

My stomach is in knots when I pick it up.

I ignore the hard knot of disappointment when I see Jackson’s name flash across the screen before it darkens. Pressing my lips together, I hop onto the treadmill, turn up the speed, and place my arms on either side of me. My heart is hammering steadily, and I’ve worked up a sweat when Mrs. Monroe pokes her head in. There’s a smile hovering on the edge of her lips.

“The food is in the oven, Mr. Black. When you’re done eating, just put the dishes in the dishwasher and I’ll unload it in the morning.”

“Thank you! Have a good night, Mrs. Monroe.”

She lingers in the door and glances between the TV and the treadmill. “Are you sure you don’t need anything else? I can make you that pudding you like.”

I chuckle and pat my stomach. “I’m trying to cut back on sugar.”

Mrs. Monroe gives me a disapproving look. “You look fine to me, Mr. Black. You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

I press down on the speed so I’m at a brusque trot. “I’ll keep that in mind. How about some banana bread?”

Mrs. Monroe nods. “Tomorrow. I’ll make some extra for your friend.”

With one last knowing look, Mrs. Monroe leaves the gym and pulls the door shut behind her. I listen for the sound of the front door and blow out a breath when I hear it. Alone with my thoughts, I pick up the remote and point it at the TV.

The cacophony of noises does little to drown out the headache in the back of my skull, and it doesn’t chase away the unease in the center of my stomach. When I’m drenched in sweat, and my heart is about to jump out of my chest, I stop and jump off of the treadmill. Using a towel, I wipe away the sweat and drag my focus back to the case.

I am trying to develop a new strategy to ensure that Blake is the one who comes out on top.

With everything else going on at the firm, I know they’re counting on me to turn our luck around.

And you’ll get to wipe that smug smirk off of Thomas Black’s face. It’s a win-win.

In the shower, I go over strategies until steam fills the bathroom. I use the back of my hand to wipe the mirror and secure a towel around my waist. I’m watching videos on my phone and shoveling pasta into my mouth when Ava’s name flashes across my screen. My stomach does odd little somersaults as I stand up straighter and use a napkin to dab my mouth.

“Hey,” she says.

“Am I catching you at a bad time? You sound like you’ve been running.”

Ava snorts. “No, I know I should take up running because it’s good for you, but I prefer other types of exercise.”

“Mrs. Monroe made some extra food. I can help you work up a sweat.”

Ava hesitates. “Thanks, but I should probably go back to my yoga. Rebecca and I are trying out this new YouTube series, and she ordered food from this new Thai place.”

“Come over after.”

A long moment passes when Ava says nothing.

I hate that I’ve been reduced to this when it’s clear that Ava wants some space.

What is the matter with you? Take a hint, Black, and back off.

“I got us tickets to that Cirque du Soleil show you wanted to see and that new Japanese place,” I add a little too quickly. “It’s later in the week though, so don’t worry about giving me an answer right now.”

Jesus, what the fuck, Black?

“Yeah, that sounds really nice. Um, listen, I’ve got to go. The food is here. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

I grip the phone harder. “Sure.”

When the line goes dead, I toss the phone onto the counter and try to avoid looking at it. I eat the rest of my food over the sink, trying to push away all thoughts of Ava. When I’m done, I rinse off the plate and the cup and place them in the dishwasher. I then make my way back to the gym.

I have a dumbbell in my hand when Jackson calls. “I’m not getting dragged into whatever shady ass bullshit you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“The case is almost over, and I’ve got people here who want to meet you.”

I switch the phone to my other ear and work on my left arm. “Yeah, I don’t think so. You enjoy yourself though.”

“Ava fucking Prescott has done a number on you!” Jackson yells, his words slurring near the end. “You’ve got it bad.”

“I’ll see you in the morning.” I hang up before he can say anything else and roll my shoulders.

His words echo in my head when I crawl into bed, switch on the TV, and set my phone down on the nightstand.

What the hell are you going to do, Black?

AVA



“Hello? Are you even listening to me?”

I spin around to face Rebecca and the phone slides out of my hand and onto the floor beneath my feet. The clattering sound made me wince.

“What?”

Rebecca places both hands on her hips. “Daydreaming about Ethan again? Babe, when are you going to admit that you’ve got it bad? The two of you need to get together and just get it over with.”

There is a ringing in my ears when I stare right at Rebecca. “We have a bigger problem than that right now.”

Rebecca’s brows furrow together. “What are you talking about?”

My mouth moves, but the words refuse to come.

Instead, the doctor’s words keep repeating themselves over and over in my head. When Rebecca steps into the bathroom, she takes both of my hands in hers and leads me out into my bedroom. There, she pushes me down so I’m perched on the edge of the bed. She kneels in front of me with a glass of water in her hands.

I down it all in one gulp. “Thank you.”

“Did the doctor call? What’s wrong?” Rebecca’s bright eyes search my face, a myriad of emotions dancing across her features. “Whatever it is, we can face this together. I’m not going anywhere, V.”

I shake my head, and my shoulders sag. “I think this is the one thing you can’t help me with.”

Rebecca squeezes my hand. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m pregnant,” I tell her. “My test results came back today.”

Rebecca blinks. “You can’t be pregnant.”

“According to the tests, I am.”

“Pregnant,” Rebecca repeats, mostly to herself. “Like with a baby?”

“No, with a burrito. What other kind of pregnancy is there, Bec?”

Rebecca stands and runs a hand over her face. “I don’t get it.”

I stand, and the world around me is spinning and turning. I drape an arm over my stomach and press two fingers to my temples. “You’re not going to make me have the talk with you, are you?”

“I know how women get pregnant. I just don’t understand how *you* got pregnant. Didn’t you say you were on the pill and that Ethan used condoms?”

I clear my throat. “Even with all of those precautions, getting pregnant is still a possibility. The only way to ensure you don’t get pregnant at all is not to have sex.”

I feel like an idiot for not being more careful.

How could I have missed the signs?

Because I was too busy jumping Ethan’s bones to realize I was late.

Fuck.

What are you going to do now, huh? Getting involved with Ethan was bad enough but now you’re carrying his baby? Your career is never going to recover. You know what people are going to say about you.

Including Ethan...

Is he going to think I did this on purpose?

When my vision swims in and out of focus, I lower myself onto the bed and bury my face in my hands. “Shit. What am I going to do, Bec? Ethan is going to lose his fucking mind when he finds out.”

I don’t even know if he’s going to want anything to do with me.

We were supposed to keep it casual and lowkey.

Having a baby is the complete opposite of all of that.

The bed dips as Rebecca sits next to me and drapes an arm over my shoulders. “Maybe you don’t have to tell him.”

“He’s the father. He has the right to know.” My voice is muffled and hoarse when I talk, and it’s taking everything in me not to burst into tears. “I have to tell him, but how am I supposed to do that when I’ve been keeping myself busy so he and I could slow things down?”

Rebecca blows out a breath. “I don’t know, babe. I guess you just sit him down and tell him. I can be there for moral support if you want.”

I lift my head and stare at her through teary eyes. “I appreciate that, but I don’t think it’ll help. This is something I need to do on my own.”

The sooner I get it over with, the better it’ll be for all of us.

Every time I think of sitting Ethan down to have the discussion with him, my stomach churns, and I feel like locking myself in a closet. A part of me is terrified of facing his reaction when I tell him but the other part of me is still in disbelief.

I can’t be pregnant.

Fate has a twisted sense of humor, and I’m being punished for something.

Rebecca squeezes my shoulders. “Look, I know this isn’t the news you were hoping for, but this could be a good thing.

You love kids, and you told me before that you wanted to be a mom.”

I expel a harsh breath. “Yeah, but not like this. I wanted to be further along in my career and in a serious relationship.”

Rebecca draws back to look at me, a smile hovering on the edge of her lips. “I don’t know if this helps, but I know that Ethan cares about you. I’ve seen it in the way he looks at you.”

“Yeah, but we’ve gone from trying to keep it casual to... *this*. I doubt he’ll care about me for much longer when he finds out. What if he thinks I got pregnant on purpose?”

Rebecca makes a face. “Then he’s not the man you think he is and you’re better off without him.”

I glance down at my stomach and frown. “Yeah, but I can’t make that kind of decision without having all the facts.”

Rebecca pulls me to my feet and steers me out the door. “Okay, fine, so you tell Ethan. What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

I grimace. “He wants nothing to do with me or the baby? Eventually, people at work find out, rumors spread like wildfire, and I lose my job?”

“You’re not going to lose your job because you’re pregnant!”

I skid to a halt in the middle of the living room. “What if they *force* me to quit? Like an early retirement or something?”

Rebecca stops pushing and comes around to face me. “You’re a fucking lawyer, V. You know as well as I do that they can’t do that or you’ll sue them. And I doubt the company wants to have their name anywhere near this.”

I open my mouth to protest then slam it shut again.

Rebecca is right, but it doesn’t mean they won’t find ways around the law.

Considering it’s a company full of lawyers, the second the news of my pregnancy becomes public, I’m going to be cannon fodder.

And they're all going to eat me alive.

I'll be lucky if I have anything at all left to my name, much less my job.

Rebecca steps into the kitchen and rummages through the fridge. "Stop making that face. You're the one who always says you shouldn't jump to conclusions."

"That's when you don't know what the worst-case scenario is." I sink into the nearest highchair and bring my head to a rest in my hands. "But I already know what it is. Fuck, I'm such an idiot. I always tell my clients to be careful and take their precautions."

I should've taken my own advice, but it's too late for that now.

Especially because the part of me that wants to keep the baby is growing more and more protective by the second.

There's nothing wrong with putting the baby up for adoption.

I can't reconcile myself to the thought, especially not when I glance down at my stomach and a swell of emotion rises in my chest.

What are we going to do, little bean?

Rebecca kicks the refrigerator door shut with the back of her leg and pulls her shirt down over her stomach. "You can't abstain from sex, V. It's ridiculous, so you need to stop being hard on yourself, okay? These things happen."

"My mom is going to have a field day with this."

As if on cue, the front door clicks open and my mom steps through in her usual high-waisted jeans, flowery blouse, and a pair of bright sneakers. She is carrying a few grocery bags in her hand, and I jump up to help her. She takes one look at my face, and her brows knit together.

"What happened? Did the doctor call?"

I balance the grocery bags against my hips. "Am I that easy to read?"

“I’m your mother,” she replies. “So, are you going to tell me, or keep me guessing?”

As carefully as possible, I set the bags down on the kitchen counter and glance over at Rebecca. She holds my gaze, steps forward, and begins to take the things out of the bags. I wait for my heart to stop hammering while my mind races with possibilities. When my mother tugs on the grocery bag I’m holding, I look up at her, take one look at her face, and burst into tears.

She has her arms around me before I know what’s happening.

My shoulders are shaking, and my chest is tight with worry as she leads me into the living room. There, she forces me to sit and drapes a blanket over my lap. The tears continue to stream steadily down my face while panic and fear claw their way through my chest.

What the hell am I going to do?

“Here, drink this.” My mother hands me the drink and waits until I curl my fingers around the mug. She then sits down next to me and tucks me into her side. “What happened? Is it that guy you’re seeing?”

“Yes and no.” I take a small sip of my drink, the hot liquid burning a path down my throat. “I got my test results back today, and I’m pregnant.”

My mom’s grip tightens. “I take it this pregnancy wasn’t planned.”

I stir and lean back to look at her. “No, it wasn’t, and I don’t know what I’m going to do. Ethan is going to want nothing to do with me, and I don’t want to raise this baby on my own.”

Margaret Prescott tucks my hair behind my ear and sits up straighter. “Sweetheart, you’re not going to be raising the baby on your own. Even if Ethan decides to walk away, I’m still here and so is Rebecca. And we’re not going anywhere.”

“Damn straight!” Rebecca adds, pausing to lean over the kitchen counter. “I’d make a kick-ass aunt, just so you know.”

My mother takes both of my hands in hers. “No matter what you decide to do, I’m going to support you. You are not alone in any of this.”

I sink back against the couch and sigh. “I guess I have to tell Ethan, so I know what his decision is going to be.”

My mother gives my hands a firm squeeze. “Better to do it quickly, like ripping off a band-aid. Don’t hesitate, and don’t get distracted.”

I tilt my head to the side and study her. “Is that how you told dad?”

My mother clears her throat and looks away. “Your dad wasn’t exactly thrilled when I told him, but I don’t think Ethan is going to be like that. From what you’ve told me, I think he’ll rise to the challenge.”

Or he’ll prove everyone right and walk away without a backward glance...

Either way, the dinner we have looms on the horizon, and I’m suddenly dreading it more than I’ve dreaded anything in my entire life.

ETHAN



“*A*re you sure you don’t want to get something else to eat? You barely touched your food.”

Ava blinks and looks over at me. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just an upset stomach, but it’ll pass.”

Slowly, she matches her stride to mine, and we fall into a comfortable silence. The park is mostly empty except for a few couples here and there. They’re all admiring the kaleidoscope of colors lighting up the sky as the sun sets below the horizon. The path snakes in between thick foliage on either side, and there are a few benches scattered throughout.

It spills out near the water and a few street vendors.

Soft guitar music rises through the air and settles around us.

Ava adjusts the jacket around her shoulders and clears her throat. “Do you want to sit?”

“Sure.” I lead her to a bench and wait until she’s comfortable. I then lower myself onto the bench and stretch my legs out before me. “I should come here more often. I tell myself that a lot but something always gets in the way.”

Ava leans back against the bench, her curly hair framing her face. “I know what you mean. I had all these plans, but *nothing* works out the way we expect it to, does it?”

I twist to face her and drink in every inch of her, starting with the top of her head, down to her dress-clad body, and

ending with the soles of her feet. When I'm done, I lift my gaze back to hers and ignore the shiver of unease racing up my spine.

Is this why she's been acting weird the past few weeks?

Does Ava think our relationship has run its course?

And that we're not working out the way she wants us to?

I search her face. "No, I guess not."

Ava turns so she's facing me completely. She exhales and folds her hands in her lap. "I know you had plans for tonight, and I'm sorry I asked you to change them, but I wanted a chance for us to talk."

My heart misses a beat. "Is everything okay?"

Ava glances away again, and she fixes her gaze on the man in the flannel shirt and dusty jeans strumming on his guitar. "Yeah, no. I don't know to be honest. It depends on what you think about all of this."

"What are we talking about here?"

Ava blows out another breath and forces her gaze back to mine. "The reason I've been acting weird is because I haven't been feeling well. I went to the doctor and got some tests done."

I shift closer to her and take both of her hands in mine. "What did the doctor say?"

Ava studies my face and her expression turns serious. "She told me some serious, life-changing news."

A long moment passes, and I tense.

"I'm pregnant," Ava whispers, her eyes never leaving my face. "I know neither of us planned for this, and it's not good timing, but I thought you'd want to know."

I drop her hands and lean back. "I—what? You're pregnant?"

Ava nods and a shadow settles over her face. "I'm sorry."

"Is it mine?"

Ava gives me a peculiar look. “I haven’t been with anyone else in the past few months, Ethan. It’s definitely yours. *You* are the father.”

Blood is roaring in my ears, and bile rises in the back of my throat.

Abruptly, I stand and shove both hands into my pockets. “When did you find out?”

“A few days ago,” Ava replies, pausing to tilt her head back to look up at me. “I’ve been trying to figure out how to tell you all week, but it just didn’t seem like the right time.”

“So you decide that the best time to tell me is during our date?”

Ava raises an eyebrow. “No, you’re right. I should’ve told you while we were at the circus. Would that have been more convenient for you?”

I twist to face her and frown. “Fuck, I’m sorry. That didn’t come out right. I’m just a little shocked that’s all.”

It’s the understatement of the century, but I don’t want Ava to know how badly this is affecting me.

My entire world feels like it’s been turned inside out and flipped upside down.

A fucking baby.

On the bright side, at least you know that she’s not trying to break up with you. That’s something, right?

I came prepared to fight for Ava and a chance to be with her.

A baby, on the other hand, is another form of commitment altogether.

Ava throws her arms up on either side of her. “Believe me, it was shocking to me too. It’s not like I wanted any of this to happen. At least not like this.”

I force myself to sit and stare straight ahead. “What do you mean not like this?”

Ava's eyes are on me, but I can't look at her. "I want kids and a family, but this isn't how I pictured doing it. You're ten years older than me, Ethan, and we work for rival law firms."

"And we're meant to be at each other's throats," I add in a quieter voice. "I know all of this already, Ava. I don't need you stating facts."

Ava makes a low noise in the back of her throat. "Look, I know you didn't plan any of this but neither did I. I understand if this is it for you."

My head snaps in her direction. "Do you really think so little of me?"

"No, but you're not exactly inspiring any confidence right now." Ava makes a vague hand gesture and lets her arms fall to her sides. "I want to keep the baby, Ethan. Whether or not you want to be involved is completely up to you."

I press my lips together and say nothing.

Ava not wanting anything doesn't surprise me.

From the get-go, she's been clear about the kind of woman she is and what she expects from me. However, considering her entire life has been turned upside down too, she's handling it really well.

Surprisingly well if I'm being honest...

I feel like a completely under-prepared jackass next to her.

You're not actually considering saying yes, are you? Think about this, Black. You don't exactly have the best role model when it comes to being a dad. What makes you think you'll do any better?

My gaze falls to her stomach, and I tilt my head to the side, allowing the silence to continue to stretch between us.

Fuck.

Am I actually considering this?

"I don't know if I'd make a good father," I admit, my eyes never leaving her face. "But I do know that I want to do better. Given the chance, I'd like to do much better."

Ava sucks in a harsh breath. “Are you being serious?”

“I want to be in our baby’s life, Ava,” I say. “I can’t promise I’ll be the best dad, or that I’ll always get things right, but I can promise you that I’ll do my best.”

Ava’s eyes fill with tears. “It’s the only thing you can do.”

I brush away some of her tears using the pad of my thumb. “Those are happy tears, right?”

Ava laughs through her tears. “Yeah, don’t worry. You’re taking this a lot better than I thought you would and my hormones are insane. There’s been a lot of crying since I found out.”

“Who else knows?”

“My mom and Rebecca,” Ava replies without preamble. “You can tell your family if you want.”

I pause. “I’ll tell my mom later. I’m not sure what I’ll do about my dad.”

Or if he’ll even welcome the news of a grandchild.

All I know is that the thought of telling him fills my stomach with knots.

Ava opens her mouth and clears her throat. “Ethan, I know that things just got complicated between us and neither of us know what the future holds, but I want you to know that you don’t have to do any of this.”

“Huh?”

“You can be in the baby’s life, but you don’t have to be in mine,” Ava continued, the words pouring out of her in a rush. “I don’t expect to have it all and that’s fine. We can still co-parent. This doesn’t have to get ugly.”

“You are, by far, the most stubborn woman I’ve ever met.” I give her an exasperated look. “Why is it so hard for you to believe that you can have it all?”

“Because that’s not the way the world works.”

“It is now,” I reply, pausing to take both of her hands in mine. I look into her eyes, and my mind goes blank. “Shit, Ava. I’m not good with words. I don’t know exactly what to say to sweep you off your feet and big romantic gestures aren’t really my thing, but I can tell you one thing. I’ve never felt this way about anyone.”

Ava’s mouth falls open, but she says nothing.

“I’m not saying that because you’re carrying my baby. I’m telling you this because it’s true. I’ve felt this way for the past few weeks, ever since that day I showed up at your doorstep after my family dinner. I’ve been trying to figure out the best way to tell you.”

“Not so easy trying to find the right time, is it?”

I give her a half smile. “No, it isn’t. I guess we both had other ideas for how this was going to go.”

Ava choked back a laugh. “That’s an understatement.”

“Do you want me to be there?”

“Honestly? I wasn’t sure in the beginning. I kind of came here thinking that you were going to walk away and leave me to do this on my own. I didn’t think we were going to get this far.”

I smile at her. “Is that a yes then?”

“It’s a hell yes!” Ava gives me a serious look. “I know we still have a lot to figure out, but I’ve never felt this way about anyone either, Ethan. You drive me fucking crazy sometimes, and you get on my last nerves, but I can’t imagine doing this with anyone else.”

“Jesus, Prescott. You need to reign it in a little. People are going to think you’re in love with me or something.”

Ava rolls her eyes. “Okay, first of all, you’re the one who’s in love with me. Look at you, you can’t stay away from me.”

“Pot calling the kettle black, Prescott.” I tuck her hand into my elbow, and she leans into my side, the floral smell of her wafting up my nostrils. My stomach does an odd little dip, and

I can't stop smiling. "If you wanted to date me, all you had to do was ask."

Ava snorts. "Oh, please. You want this more than I do. I wear the pants in this relationship, Black."

And I don't mind.

I don't mind one fucking bit.

As far as I'm concerned, I am completely and totally hers, and I have been since the moment we faced each other in court.

I bring her hand up to my lips and kiss each knuckle. "We'll see about that because I remember things very differently, especially when we were in the conference room the other day."

"You had your hand down my skirt. I would've said anything at that point."

"Bullshit." I draw back to look at her and give her a wicked smile. "You need me as much as I need you, and you're going to admit it."

Ava grins. "You sound awfully sure of yourself, counselor. Want to bet on it?"

I lean forward and kiss her. "No need because I already won."

AVA



Rebecca's hand darts out and closes around my wrist. "Are you sure you're okay? You look a little green."

I nod and squeeze my eyes shut. "Yeah, it's just morning sickness. The doctor said it's going to last for a while."

Rebecca releases my wrist, and her smile turns sympathetic. "It's a good thing I haven't moved out yet, huh? I heard you last night."

I wince and pry one eye open. "I'm sorry about that."

But I'm not sorry that Rebecca is still around.

With Ethan and I still trying to navigate uncharted terrain, and my mom back home, Rebecca is the only person who knows how hard this has all been. Between the weird cravings, the upset stomach, and being plagued with guilt and uncertainty, Rebecca is the only reason I haven't had a nervous breakdown.

I don't trust myself not to, not with how hard I'm working to hide my pregnancy and give my client a hundred percent of my effort. Already, I'm dreading what it's going to be like when the baby is big enough to give me a bulging stomach and frequent trips to the bathroom. The voice of reason in the back of my head rises above the nausea and tries to whisper in my ear.

Okay, little bean. Just let me get through today, and we'll get some pizza tonight. Work with me here.

Another wave of nausea washes over me, and I push it back. I stand straighter, force both eyes open, and give Rebecca a tight smile. "I've got this, don't worry."

Rebecca leans back in her seat and gives me two thumbs up. "Damn straight you do. If anyone can handle this, it's you."

I press my lips together and move away. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ethan sitting at his desk, head bent together in concentration with his client. Slowly, I twist to face him, our eyes meet, and the look of concern on his face gives me pause. With a shake of my head, I turn my back on him and focus on Melanie who hasn't looked up from her phone.

"Court is back in session."

Judge Bloom walks in, robes swishing behind her, as she eyes the courtroom. A moment later, she is seated and gesturing to us. Clearing my throat, I push myself away from the table and walk over to the witness stand where a petite brunette is sitting with spectacles perched on her nose and her hands folded in her lap.

"Ms. Roberts, I understand that you've been in the publishing business for some time."

Gina Roberts glances over at Melanie and back at me. "Yes, that's right."

"And is it true that you've come across many husbands like my client's?"

"Objection, relevance."

"Speaks to the witness's credibility, your honor," I reply without missing a beat. "Is it true that you've had a lot of authors with husbands who were unsupportive at first but then changed their tune once careers started taking off?"

Gina's mouth twists in disgust. "Yes, you wouldn't believe how many times I've seen it happen. It's disgusting. Because I know how much hard work my clients put into their books, and Melanie is no exception. She's very dedicated to her craft."

“And is it true that your client and friend, Melanie Carmichael, has confided in you on several occasions regarding the volatile nature of her relationship with her husband?”

“Objection, asked and answered.”

“Watch yourself, Ms. Prescott.” Judge Bloom leans back in her chair and gives me a disapproving look. “Rephrase the question, please.”

I lean against the witness box and give Gina a reassuring smile. “Is it true that you have reason to believe that my client has an unhealthy relationship with her husband?”

Gina nods, wisps of dark hair coming out of her bun. “Yes, I firmly believe that.”

“And is it also true that you’ve discussed a clause in Ms. Carmichael’s contract that prevents anyone, especially her husband, from being able to profit off of her hard work in case of Ms. Carmichael’s incapacitation?”

“Your honor, I wasn’t aware we were coming up with conspiracy theories here.” Ethan’s voice echoes back to me, and I stiffen. “Ms. Roberts is here in her capacity as a publisher, and Ms. Carmichael’s friend. She isn’t a lawyer or a shrink.”

“Sustained.”

I push myself off the witness stand and link my fingers together. “Ms. Roberts, let me rephrase. Under the terms of her current contract, does Mr. Black have any royalties to make off of my client’s books?”

Gina leans forward, shoots her friend a quick smile, and shakes her head. “No, he doesn’t. Our lawyer made sure the contract is ironclad.”

“So, in other words, the only way for Mr. Black to benefit off of my client’s hard work is if he sued for royalties during divorce proceedings?”

Gina sits up straighter. “Yes, that’s right.”

I give her another quick smile and walk back to the table. When I reach for the folder, I sway a little on my feet. Heat rises up my back and neck, and I have to grip the table for support. Rebecca rises to her feet and moves in my direction. I grip the table tighter and give her a slight shake of my head. I count backward from five and push back against the bile in my throat.

“Counselor?”

I snatch the folder off my desk and wheel around to face the judge. “My apologies, your honor. Where was I? Oh, yes. Ms. Roberts, would you be so kind as to read the paragraph I’ve highlighted in Ms. Carmichael’s contract?”

While Gina recites the paragraph, I lean against the witness stand and try not to hurl all over the courtroom floor. It takes every ounce of self-control I have not to bolt out of the room and in the direction of the nearest bathroom. By the time I’m done questioning Gina, sweat has formed on my forehead and back and my earlier lightheadedness has returned. As quickly as possible, I sit behind my desk and press the bottle of water to my lips.

Ethan wastes no time in pushing his chair back and advancing on Ms. Roberts as if she were his prey. To her credit, Ms. Robert doesn’t flinch and answers all of Ethan’s questions as directly and succinctly as possible.

Above the hammering of my heart, I focus on Gina, the half-smile never leaving my face. Not only have I prepared her well, but I can sense Ethan’s growing frustration even from where I’m sitting.

A few feet away, Blake is fidgeting in his seat and scribbling furiously onto a blank piece of paper. Melanie, who had sunk against her seat when the trial first started, is now sitting up straighter with her head held high.

We exchange a quick look, and I give her a reassuring nod.

“I have one last question, Ms. Roberts.” Ethan comes to a stop in front of her and shoves a hand into his pocket. “Isn’t it true that you were married?”

Gina raises an eyebrow. “I don’t see how that has anything to do with Melanie’s case.”

“Yes or no answers, please, Ms. Roberts.”

“Yes, I was married, and just like Mr. Black, my husband tried to sue for half of my royalties.”

Ethan nods, his face giving nothing away. “And isn’t it true that the court found in favor of your ex-husband because, in spite of your insistence otherwise, he was supportive and he provided a wealth of inspiration for you to draw on?”

I’m on my feet before he’s done phrasing the question. “Objection, your honor. Relevance. My witness’s marriage has nothing to do with why we’re here.”

“On the contrary your honor, I’m trying to establish a pattern. Ms. Roberts didn’t include the clause in her contract until after her husband won the court proceedings.”

“Objection, where is the question?”

“Sustained. Rephrase the question, Mr. Black.”

Ethan uses his free hand to gesture. “Isn’t it safe to assume, Ms. Roberts, that because of the outcome with your former husband, you decided to take it upon yourself to protect clients who do have partners? Because you don’t want them to end up having to share the credit?”

A muscle ticks in Gina’s jaw. “It’s not sharing the credit if the credit was never theirs. My ex-husband’s situation opened up my eyes to the horrors of the situation. I’m just trying to make sure no other client has to go through what I went through.”

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” Ethan tells her, pausing to give her a sympathetic half-smile. “Isn’t it true that this clause is only included when it comes to your female clients?”

“Objection, your honor.”

“Withdrawn.”

Ethan takes a few steps back, and we exchange a quick look on his way past.

I sit back down, cross my ankles together, and flip through the folder. My mind is racing, and my heart is pounding in my ears, but I can't think of anything. When the court is adjourned for the day, I jump out of my seat and race out of the courtroom with Rebecca following on my heels.

In the bathroom stall, she holds my hair back and pats my back. "My sister-in-law tried these anti-nausea pills. I'll get you the name, and you can see if your doctor would be willing to prescribe them."

Throat burning and eyes watering, I stagger to my feet and flush.

Rebecca hands me a wadded-up roll of toilet paper, and I wipe my mouth.

"Yeah, I definitely need to look into that. I don't know how I'm supposed to go to that event tonight."

Rebecca stands next to me while I bend over the sink and cup my hands underneath the faucet. "I'm going to be right there, and if it gets to be too much at any point, we leave."

I swallow and pat my face dry. "You're the best, Bec."

Rebecca pats my back. "I know. Let's go before people start getting suspicious."

Ethan is waiting outside the bathroom when we come out. He pushes himself off the wall, does a once-over, and stops when he reaches my eyes.

I draw myself up to my full height, and my lips lift into the ghost of a smile. It vanishes when a red-haired woman walks up to Ethan and places a hand on his arm.

He leans in and listens to her intently.

I walk right past him, counting out the steps as I do. During the taxi ride back home, Rebecca does most of the talking while I tilt my head back and squeeze both eyes shut. When we reach my apartment, I'm feeling better than I have

all day, and I do my best to push away the image of Ethan and the redhead.

It comes back full force when I meet Rebecca in the doorway to the apartment, the two of us decked out in floor-length dresses with clutches tucked underneath our arms. She loops her arm through mine, leads me down the stairs, and into the black car waiting for us by the curb.

Once we arrive at the hotel, I lift my head up and square my shoulders. “Let’s get this over with.”

Rebecca gets out first and offers the crowd a big wave. She then holds her hand out to me and helps me out of the car. I tuck my arm into her elbow and keep my gaze fixed ahead. Bright lights snap and dance in my field of vision.

A loud cacophony of voices rises when another car pulls up. Ethan steps out with his mother on his arm. In the doorway, I pause to look back at him and butterflies erupt in the center of my stomach.

The good feelings last until we step into the glittering ballroom, and I feel people’s eyes on me. I spend half the night scowling into my glass of sparkling wine and the other half in disbelief over the rumors running rampant about me. Every time Ethan looks at me, I see people stare at us, their heads bent together in vicious conversation. By the end of the night, when Rebecca and I finally settle in the backseat of the car, I am in tears and shaking with fury.

“They’re just jealous,” Rebecca murmurs, her face pressed to the glass. “As long as you and Ethan know the real reason the two of you are together, that’s all that matters.”

Rebecca and I both know that isn’t true.

By tomorrow morning, everyone is going to wonder if the real reason behind my success is that I’m sleeping with one of the most powerful and influential lawyers in the city.

I hate that I have no one to blame but myself.

ETHAN



Ava is sitting across from me, her legs propped up on the coffee table, and her eyes squinting into the laptop screen. “What do you feel like eating tonight?”

“I could make us something to eat,” I offer without looking up from my screen. “I did take out some chicken to defrost.”

“Or we could have Chinese.” Ava rolls her shoulders and chews on the tip of the pen. “Or there’s that new Indian place we could try.”

“Won’t that upset your stomach further?” I set my laptop down on the coffee table and stand. When I stretch my arms over my head, Ava is looking over at me, her gaze lingering on the taut muscles of my stomach. “Like what you see?”

A flush steals across Ava’s neck and cheeks. She wrenches her gaze away and flips her notebook open. “Stop thinking so highly of yourself. I was just wondering how you have time to work out and put in any kind of work.”

“I’m good at multitasking,” I tell her with a smile.

After letting my arms fall back to my sides, I wander over to her and perch on the edge of the coffee table. Wordlessly, I reach for her leg and press my fingers into the soles of her feet.

Ava makes a low moaning sound and sinks lower against the couch. “Oh, that’s good.”

I press down against her flesh and shift, so her other foot in my lap. “You know what would be better? You and me in the

jacuzzi.”

Ava throws her head back and sighs. “I really want to, but I’ve got a lot of work to finish.”

I switch my attention to her other food, and her entire body shudders. “You sure about that?”

“Maybe in a bit?” Ava’s eyes roll to the back of her head, and she sinks lower, leaving her body completely at my mercy. “Don’t stop what you’re doing though.”

“I love it when you boss me around,” I murmur, my eyes never leaving her face. “How about a massage?”

Ava’s eyes flutter open, and she looks directly at me, sending a jolt of electricity racing through me. “We both know how that’s going to go. Work and food then we have some fun.”

I set both her feet back on the coffee table and stand. When I bridge the distance between us, Ava is already looking at me through hooded eyes. Her breath hitches in her throat when I bend down and touch my lips to hers. She makes a low mewling sound, pushes the laptop away, and links her fingers over my neck. As soon as I place both arms on either side of her, she wraps her legs around my waist and growls.

My phone rings, slicing through the thick tension.

With a growl, I wrench my lips away and pepper her neck with kisses. “Ignore that.”

Ava makes a low noise in the back of her throat as her dress rides up, pooling around her waist. “That’s the plan.”

I am lowering the straps of her dress when my phone rings again, louder this time.

Reluctantly, I draw back and snatch it off the coffee table. When I glance at the screen, some of the earlier fog of desire dissipates, and I take a few steps back. “Actually, I’m sorry. I need to take this. I’ll be right back.”

Without waiting for a response, I dart away and onto the terrace. The door slides shut behind me, and I press the phone

to my ear. “Mr. Swanson, thank you for getting back to me so quickly. I assume you’ve heard my voicemail.”

“I have. Since Ms. Carmichael is no longer my client, I can answer whatever questions you have, Mr. Black.”

I glance over my shoulders and see Ava stand and pull down her dress. She steps into the kitchen and fills the kettle with water.

“For starters, why aren’t you her attorney anymore?”

“Because I advised her to include half of her royalties in the prenup,” Mr. Swanson replied over the sound of scratching. “I felt like it was a fair compromise considering she wanted the house to herself.”

“Did she? That’s interesting considering she’s willing to give up the house now.”

“It’s not worth that much right now but her royalties weren’t worth much in the beginning,” Mr. Swanson continued, his voice drifting in and out of focus. “If you’d like to meet to discuss this further, I can have my assistant call you and set up a meeting.”

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Swanson.”

As soon as the line goes dead, I hurry back into the house and reach for the notebook tossed onto the couch. I jot down everything the lawyer said before throwing the notebook back onto the couch. I wander over to where Ava is standing, with one hand on her hip, and the other scratching her chin. I hug her to me and press a kiss to the back of her neck.

“Why don’t you order whatever you want? I’m going to go take a shower.”

Ava spins around in my arms and presses a kiss to the bridge of my nose. “You sure?”

I give her a quick peck on the forehead. “Absolutely.”

Ava gives me a confused look but says nothing. After another quick hug, I pull back and hurry into the bedroom. In the shower, I turn the information over and over in my head, wondering why I don’t feel more relieved at the smoking gun

I've uncovered. While a part of me is thrilled to have this kind of ammo in my corner, the other part of me wonders if I should use it at all.

It's been years since Jake Swanson worked for Melanie Carmichael.

I'm not even sure his testimony will help, but I do know that using that information against Melanie, and Ava by extension, doesn't sit well with me. With a frown, I step out of the shower, towel off, and change into a pair of shorts and a T-shirt.

When I come out of the room, Ava is holding the notebook up to her face, an incredulous look on her face. "What the fuck is this?"

"I thought we agreed we wouldn't talk about the case outside of court." I cross over to her, and my eyes dart between the notebook and her face. "Or does that only go one way?"

"The notebook was on the floor." Ava snaps it shut and lifts her gaze to mine. "I bent down to pick it up, and I saw what you wrote. Have you called Blake yet?"

I fold my arms over my chest. "Not yet, no."

Ava tosses the notebook onto the couch and places both hands on her hips. "Why not?"

"We're not supposed to talk about the case," I repeat, ignoring the knots forming in the center of my stomach. "These were your rules, remember? And I agreed. Nothing's changed."

Ava's brows furrow together. "Something obviously has otherwise you would've raced to give Blake this information."

"I need to verify the information first. I can't tell him everything I uncover, not if it's not useful."

Ava's frown deepens. "What the hell are you talking about? This could be exactly what you need to regain your edge."

"Drop it, Ava."

Ava blinks. “What the hell is the matter with you? The only reason you wouldn’t use this information is because...”

Silence stretches between us.

Ava’s eyes tighten, and she clenches her hands into fists. “Fuck no, Black. We had an agreement. We are not going to put each other above our careers.”

“I am not putting you over my career.”

“Like hell, you aren’t.” Ava is bristling now and her eyes are blazing with emotion. “What the hell do you call this then, huh? Because if it were me, I wouldn’t hesitate. You have a moral responsibility to your client.”

I take a step toward her. “And I have no responsibility toward you? Toward our unborn child?”

Ava points a finger at me and shakes. “No, don’t you dare pull that card. When it comes to the case, the only person you owe anything to is Blake. I shouldn’t even be in the equation.”

“I’m sorry I can’t turn my emotions on and off like you do.”

Ava jerks back as if she’s been slapped. “Is that what you think I do? Do you think it’s easy for me to see you around court and at events and not be with you?”

I shrug. “Isn’t it? You’re the one who came up with these rules.”

“And you agreed!” Ava points out, her voice rising toward the end. “These rules are to protect both of us. You know that.”

“It sounds more like you’re trying to protect yourself and make sure you have an out in case you need it.”

Ava’s mouth falls open. “Fuck you, Black. I’m not the one who’s going back on our agreement and screwing over a client.”

My arms fall to my sides, and I stiffen. “I am *not* screwing over my client. Not that it’s any of your business, but I was

considering interviewing the lawyer first to see if he's legit before I went to Blake."

Ava shakes her head. "I don't believe you."

I bridge the distance between us so our chests are pressed against each other. "Are you more upset because I'm not handling this the way you would've or because I'm calling you out on your rules?"

Ava takes an involuntary step back and looks up at me. "Don't do that. Don't make it seem like this is my fault."

"I'm not saying it's your fault. I'm saying that us being together and you having our baby changes things."

"It shouldn't." Ava takes a few more steps back and crosses her arms over her chest. "Nothing is supposed to change, not yet."

"Life doesn't work like that, Ava."

"Don't talk down to me!" Ava snaps, her face contorting into cold fury. "You have no idea what it's been like for me or the kind of things I'll have to face if this gets out. We agreed on the rules because we care about our careers. You might be willing to throw yours away, but I can't. *I won't.*"

"Nobody asked you to throw your career away, but sooner or later, people are going to find out what's happening. By then, you won't be able to use your career or this case as an excuse to hide anymore."

"Fuck you."

I stare at her for a few more seconds before I shift away. When the doorbell rings, I march over to it, yank the door open, and reach into my back pocket for my wallet. I carry the containers into the kitchen and leave them there. Without glancing backward, I walk into the gym and slam the door shut behind me.

Over the next few hours, I work up a sweat and try to push Ava's words out of my head. It almost works until I emerge from the gym, covered in sweat, with Ava nowhere to be found. I stumble across her in my room, curled up on her side

of the bed. Frowning, I shower, change into clean clothes, and crawl into bed next to her.

All through the night, I toss and turn and wonder if Ava is right.

Am I allowing my feelings for her to get in the way of my job?

AVA



“*H*ow’s this?”

I wiggle my toes and exhale. “It feels great, Bec. Maybe you should move back in. Aren’t you lonely in your apartment?”

Rebecca dips the nail polish brush into the bottle and hums under her breath. “I miss you, and Brandy, of course, but it was time for me to move out. You’ve got Ethan now.”

I make a low derisive noise in the back of my throat. “Things are weird between us now.”

Finding that notebook wasn’t easy but realizing that Ethan intended to sit on the information was worse, and I had known immediately that I couldn’t let him do that.

Not if we have any chance of surviving as a couple.

I need to know that, when push comes to shove, Ethan is going to do the right thing, even if it hurts me.

Otherwise, he isn’t the honest and scrupulous man I know him to be.

Come on, you can’t deny that a tiny part of you is relieved that he didn’t jump at the chance to take you and your client down. He really cares about you, V. Doesn’t that count for something?

Not when it came to our careers...

Ethan doesn’t know or doesn’t care about what’s at stake for me.

As the man in the relationship, and a billionaire lawyer to boot, he's going to skate by with his reputation intact. At most, the tabloids will develop an even deeper interest in him and decide to paint him as some kind of hero. I, on the other hand, am all too aware of how easy it is to paint me as the manipulative gold-digging villain who sank her hooks into Ethan to provide herself with a better life.

Hell, I can even see the headlines about me now.

And none of them are sympathetic or flattering.

"I'm sure he did the right thing," Rebecca replies, pausing to squint at my toes. "He's just waiting for the right time to use the information. You'll see."

I huff and sink lower against the couch. "Maybe. I don't know."

"Are you actually going to break up with him if he doesn't? Come on, V. The man is in love. Cut him some slack."

I swallow past the lump in my throat.

A part of me knows my real issue isn't that Ethan is sitting on the information to avoid humiliating me in court. I know that what really terrifies me is how far Ethan is willing to go to prove his feelings when I'm still having a hard time making peace with mine.

I hate that I'm crazy about Ethan, and I hate that I have one foot out the door.

You can't ever give a man the power to completely destroy you, remember? You've seen firsthand what that's like. Your dad didn't even think twice about going after your mom and leaving her with nothing.

I know Ethan is nothing like my dad. Still, there are times when I look at him and see how I act around him, and it terrifies me. The last thing I want is to put myself and the baby in a compromising position by allowing Ethan to have too much control over me. Considering the kind of backgrounds we both come from, I know Ethan understands.

However, I also know that it's only a matter of time before he confronts me about it. Whether I like it or not, I hold the winning cards in my hand, and I know that one word from me will silence Ethan forever.

And I can't tell if I love or hate the fact that he's so vulnerable with me.

Rebecca bends forward and blows on my toes. "How's your stomach? Is the tea helping?"

I shake my head. "Not much, and the nausea pills are awful, but what else am I supposed to do? Bec, I don't know how women do this, but I'm already sick of being pregnant."

Rebecca sits up straighter and gives me an incredulous look. "It's only been a few weeks."

I push my hair out of my eyes. "Longest few weeks of my life. Get a surrogate when you want to have kids."

Rebecca opens her mouth to respond and the doorbell rings.

Moments later, Ethan is in front of me holding two bouquets and a box of chocolates. "These are for you, Rebecca."

Rebecca holds the daisies up to her nose and sniffs. "I like him, V. You should definitely keep him."

I push myself up on my elbows and clear my throat. "What are you doing here?"

Ethan sets the flowers down on the couch on top of the chocolate box. He perches on the coffee table, takes my feet in his lap, and presses hard with his fingers. "I wanted to apologize for the other day. I'm not sorry that I didn't tell Blake about the lawyer, and I'm not sorry that I put you and the baby first, but you are right about me having an ethical obligation to my client."

"So, does that mean we should be expecting the good lawyer as a witness?"

Ethan smiles. "It means I booked us a hotel for the weekend. You deserve to be pampered and spoiled."

“I’ll stay here with Brandy. You’ve got better streaming channels anyways,” Rebecca added from the kitchen. “And I’ll send you pictures and videos, so don’t worry.”

“It’s settled then.” Ethan moves to the other foot, and his smile grows brighter. “The driver is waiting for us downstairs.”

“I’ll pack her bag,” Rebecca offers, her voice floating down the hallway.

I shake my head, stand, and give Ethan a pointed look. In the bedroom, Rebecca is rummaging through my closet and half of my clothes are dangling off the edge of the bed. When she emerges, she has a Cheshire cat grin on her face and a sparkle in her eyes.

“Don’t even think about backing down. Yes, I think it’s a good idea. No, I don’t mind staying with Brandy. Go and have fun.”

I carry some more clothes over to the bag. “Fine, but don’t call me to complain about the neighbors who have loud sex all the time.”

Rebecca waves my comment away and holds a lacy red lingerie set up. “This’ll do just fine. Somebody’s going to have a wild weekend.”

* * *

“YOU HAVE TO STOP FEEDING ME,” I complain as I drape an arm over my stomach. I sink lower into the couch and cross one ankle over the other. “I’m going to gain so much weight.”

“I made an appointment with a nutritionist and a dietician,” Ethan says in between bites of food. “They’re the best in the city, and they’re discreet.”

With a smile, I wriggle and adjust my bathrobe. “I can’t believe you actually booked us a couple’s massage.”

“Helga is the best.” Ethan sits back in his chair. He’s a handsome vision in his dark bathrobe. “You’re going to love

her, and I booked you for a spa right after you're done."

"You know you don't have to do any of this, right?" I sit straighter and gather my hair up into a bun on top of my head. "I'd like you even if you weren't rich."

Ethan yawns as he stands. "I know, but you've been working so hard lately, and I wanted you to have a break."

I pick up the remote and frown. "I'm sorry about the other day. I was too hard on you."

Ethan returns with a bottle of sparkling water and two glasses. He sinks across from me in the leather armchair and leans forward. "It's okay."

I set the TV to mute and twist to face him. "I don't know how to open up to people easily, and I know it must be frustrating to feel like I'm keeping you at arm's length, but I'm trying not to."

Ethan pours me a generous amount and hands over the glass. "I know that your parents' divorce did a number on you, especially because of the way your dad behaved. It doesn't bother me."

"It doesn't?"

"I'm going to get frustrated now and again," Ethan admits in between sips of his drink. "But it doesn't mean I'm going anywhere. I meant what I said, Ava. I'm here for as long as you'll have me."

I take a long sip of my drink and marvel at the butterflies in the center of my stomach. "Good."

Ethan downs the rest of his drink and comes to sit next to me. I tuck myself into his side, and he drapes an arm over my shoulders. He smells like soap and spicy aftershave. When he squeezes my shoulders, the butterflies in my stomach intensify, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

I want to stay here with Ethan forever.

I want to forget about the outside world and all of the reasons we shouldn't work on paper. Over the past day, Ethan has done everything within his power to pamper me, from

massages and extravagant meals to lavishing me with love and attention. While a part of me is overwhelmed by everything that I feel, the other part of me couldn't be happier.

I almost can't believe how lucky I got with Ethan.

I dread returning to our real lives and everything that comes with it.

"We should just stay here forever," I murmur into his neck. "This hotel has everything we need."

Ethan chuckles and drops a kiss on top of my head. "It does, but what about our careers?"

"We can still be lawyers," I reply after a lengthy pause. "We just have to be sure we never go up against each other in court."

Ethan stirs, and I feel his eyes on me. "You do realize that, even if we do, it doesn't matter."

I pry one eye open and fix it on him. "You can't say stuff like that."

Ethan frames my face in his hands and rubs his thumb across my jaw, sending goosebumps all over my skin. "I can because I mean it. We can have this kind of life, Ava. All you have to do is accept it."

I look into his eyes. "It can't be that simple."

We're living in a bubble, on borrowed time, and I know Ethan isn't naïve enough to believe otherwise. Between the two of us, I hate having to be the realist, but I see no other choice, even if the romantic in me is clinging to this dream with everything in her.

I want to sink my nails into this life and never let go.

And never let Ethan go.

But what good would it do either of us?

Ethan's smile lights up his whole face. "Yeah, you're right. It isn't, but it doesn't mean we can't enjoy moments like this."

I bury my face in the crook of his neck. “Thank you for this weekend. It’s exactly what I need.”

Ethan flips me over so he’s hovering over me and my back is pressed against the couch. “The weekend isn’t over yet. There’s still a lot for us to do.”

I giggle and link my fingers over his neck. “Like what?”

Ethan pins my arms over my head and rubs himself against me. “I can think of a few things, starting with that lacy red number you have in your bag.”

“Hasn’t anyone ever told you it’s bad manners to go through people’s things?”

Ethan lowers his head and chuckles, his hot breath dancing across my skin. “Hasn’t anyone ever told you it’s bad manners to hold out? It’s practically a crime, Prescott. We need to make things right.”

I keep one hand on the back of his neck while the other traces a path down his back. “I need to make amends.”

Ethan touches his mouth to mine. “It’s a good thing you have me to guide you.”

ETHAN



“*W*hy do you look like you swallowed a bug?”

Jackson glances up from his phone and pushes his chair back. “You haven’t seen the news, have you?”

“No, Ava and I were on a social media cleanse all weekend. You should try it sometime.”

Jackson steps into the elevator with me and shoves a hand into his pocket. “When you were on your social media cleanse, you didn’t happen to be staying at the *Clairmont*, did you?”

“Yeah, actually we were. I thought Ava could use a weekend off. She’s been working really hard.”

Jackson shifts from one foot to the other. “I’m glad for you, man, but I hope it was worth it.”

I twist so I’m facing him directly. “What are you talking about?”

Jackson takes his phone out of his pocket and mine buzzes a few seconds later. “Check your phone. The tabloids were having a field day with the news.”

I fish my phone out of my pocket, the unease in my stomach growing stronger and stronger with each passing second. “Fuck, how the hell did they find out? I was careful, and the *Clairmont* staff is usually discreet.”

Jackson shrugs. “I have no idea, but I’m pretty sure the emergency meeting has something to do with the article.”

I stand straighter and shove my phone back into my pocket. “I doubt they heard the news already.”

As soon as the elevator doors ping open, several pairs of eyes turn to us.

I realize two things at once.

The first is that everyone in the company has seen the article about Ava and me.

And the second is that my father is in the conference room... He is in his usual pressed suit with one hand shoved into his pocket and the other gesturing animatedly. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a flash of movement and a few more board members trickle into the board room. They all greet my father with bright smiles and enthusiastic handshakes.

“You were saying?”

I ignore Jackson as the two of us stride across the room past rows and rows of half-empty desks. In the doorway to the conference room, I pause to take my phone out. After sending Ava a quick message, I straighten my back, hold my head up high, and step in.

Everyone in the room goes quiet at the same time.

The only sound I can hear, past the pounding of my heart, is the AC whirring in the background. Slowly, I pull my chair back to sit and glance around the room. No one meets my gaze as they all take their seats at the rectangular-shaped table with Jackson sitting closest to me and my father lingering in the background.

Even from across the room, I can sense his frustration and disappointment.

I’ve disappointed the great Thomas Black once again...

“I’m sure everyone is eager to get started, so why don’t we get right to it?”

Robert Montgomery sits up straighter and arches a silver brow in my direction. “I’m sure you know by now why we’re here. The news is everywhere, Ethan, and I believe you owe us

an explanation as to why you think that fraternizing with the enemy is the smart course of action.”

I unfasten a button on my jacket and stand. “Ava Prescott is not the enemy. She’s opposing counsel, and we are two mature, consenting adults. There’s nothing wrong with the two of us seeing each other.”

Well, except for the fact that the media likes to sensationalize everything.

Already, Ava is being painted as the scheming gold digger trying to entrap me.

I can’t imagine how it’s going to feel when she sees the news, but I have every intention of walking out of the meeting and into my lawyer’s office.

“The optics aren’t good, Ethan,” Roberts tells me with a frown. He glances around the table and receives several nods of confirmation. “I’m sure you can understand our concern.”

“There is nothing to worry about. We’ve made sure it’s all above board,” I reply, pausing to shove a hand into my pocket. “I’ll reach out to my lawyer and make sure we do a sit down with the press to clear all of this up. It’ll die down soon enough.”

“The press is not going to let it go if you throw them a bone,” my father says, stopping to give me a long look. “You should know better by now.”

“I know how to handle the press,” I respond without looking at him. “If I need your help, I’ll let you know.”

But my father and I both know that he’s the last person I want to talk to about this. Regardless of how deep the hole is, I’d rather sink to the bottom than ask Thomas Black for any kind of assistance, temporary or otherwise.

It’s my mess, and I’m going to clean it up on my own.

This is exactly what Ava was worried about. You should check on her. The press is going to make this a lot harder for her.

My father mutters something under his breath and folds his arms over his chest.

“I’ve asked your father to be here today because he has experience doing damage control,” Robert reveals before pushing his chair back and standing up. “We need to get ahead of this before this overshadows all of our hard work.”

“I assure you, Mr. Montgomery, there’s nothing to worry about. I will be handling this myself.” I cast a glance around the room and meet several of their gazes. All of the board members have their eyebrows drawn together and eyes pinched with worry, but at least they’re looking at me this time which is more than I can say for my father who is still fuming in the background.

I’m furious that Robert Montgomery asked him to come in.

And for the life of me, I can’t understand why he did.

You’re the partner now, not him. They can’t keep going back to Thomas Black. You need to shut this down once and for all.

With another quick look around the table, I sit back down and push my chair closer. Robert Montgomery is engaged in a conversation with another board member when Jackson looks up and gives me a pointed look. For the rest of the meeting, I do my best to pretend my father doesn’t exist.

At last, everyone else trickles out with Jackson lingering in the doorway. I push my chair back, give him a look over my shoulders, and nod.

I see my mother gliding towards us in her usual blouse and skirt with her hair falling in loose waves around her shoulders. She is holding her clutch as if her life depends on it but her face gives nothing away. I cross over to the door to greet her, her sickly sweet perfume washing over me.

“Mom, what are you doing here?”

My mother steps inside the conference room and lets the door click shut behind her. “Your father asked me to come.”

“I wanted you to see for yourself what a disappointment your son is. Not only is he dating the opposing counsel, but he also just lied to other board members about his ability to clean up his mess.”

I wheel around to face my father, little bursts of anger pumping through my veins. “Are you fucking kidding me right now? You asked her to come here so you could publicly humiliate me? Is there really no line you won’t cross?”

It’s despicable, and it’s exactly the kind of thing my father would do.

I shouldn’t be as surprised as I am.

“Thomas,” my mother chides, pausing to straighten her back. “Ethan is a senior partner here now, not you. You can’t keep doing this. I’m sure Ethan will figure out a way to clean up his mess, and you need to stay out of it.”

“Don’t coddle him, Elanor.”

“Don’t talk about me like I’m not here!” I snap. “What bothers you more, Dad? That the board seems to trust me or that I’m not falling all over myself in order to ask you for help?”

My dad gives me a withering look, the kind meant to reduce me to a pile of ash. I ignore him and kiss my mother on her cheek. “I can drive you back home if you want.”

My mother shakes her head. “No, I’ve got it. You go do what you’ve got to do.”

With that, I spin on my heels and leave the conference room. I am aware of my father’s eyes following me into the elevator. When I step outside into the mid-morning sun, I’m met with a blast of hot air and the smell of spices from the hot dog vendor a few feet away. I shove both hands into my pockets, inhale, and hold it in. As soon as I exhale, I set off at a brusque pace with no particular direction in mind.

I walk until I find myself standing outside Ava’s apartment building.

She throws the door open, wearing a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, and does a double take when she sees me. “Hey, you’re not my breakfast order.”

I give her a quick peck on the cheeks on my way past. “I can go back down and get you something to eat.”

Ava touches two fingers to her skin. “No, it’s okay. I’m sure he’ll be here soon. Are you okay? Didn’t you have a big meeting today?”

“Have you checked your phone?”

Ava slams the door shut and wheels around to face me. “Yeah, I’ve seen the article. Please tell me you have some kind of plan because it’s taking everything I have not to go down the rabbit hole.”

“I’ve got a plan.” I peel off my jacket and drape it over the back of the couch. “And it’s already in motion, provided my father doesn’t shove his nose into it as usual.”

Ava’s eyebrows draw together. “Your father? What does he have to do with anything?”

I lower myself onto the couch and lift my feet. “The usual. The great Thomas Black can’t stand being left behind or being made irrelevant. You know, I’m this close to pulling a Valerie and stop attending family dinners or taking his calls.”

Ava crosses over to me and perches on the edge of the armchair opposite me. “I’m sure your sister had her reasons.”

“Yeah, because he’s a fucking narcissist and a control freak. Everything has to be done exactly his way or it’s not good enough. The senior partners are never going to take me seriously so long as he keeps lurking.” I tug on my tie and leave it hanging askew around my neck. “I need to figure out a way to keep him from getting involved all the time, but I’m not sure if it’s worth the fallout.”

Or the inevitable headache that’ll follow.

“How did your sister do it?”

I pause. “I’m not sure. I should ask her because right now, being the black sheep of the family doesn’t seem like such a

bad thing after all. I'll take that over this."

"Let me get you something to drink." Ava stands and gives me a small smile. "Beer?"

"Got anything stronger?"

"Maybe, let me check."

I sink back against the couch and fold my arms over my chest. "I don't know how to escape him, Ava, and I don't want to end up like him."

Even if it costs me my career.

You'll just have to find a way to beat him at his own game.

AVA



“Why is this dragging on?” Melanie pushes her hair out of her face and shoots me an exasperated look. “I thought you said it wouldn’t take this long.”

“I said it shouldn’t.” I lift the bottle of water to my lips and push myself off the wall. “There’s really no way of knowing with these things, Melanie. But the good news is that we have Blake right where we want him.”

And even with Ethan bringing Melanie’s former lawyer to the stand, our case still stands. Not only did the lawyer fumble and admit that Melanie never drafted up the contract, but once I cross-examined him, he admitted that he didn’t think Blake deserved the royalties anyway.

We have Black fucking Ryder right where we want him.

I can’t wait to take this home and hand my client her win on a silver platter.

“It’s the last week anyway,” I add in between sips of my drink. “And Ethan Black has played all of his cards. He’s got no more tricks up his sleeve.”

Melanie rummages through her bag and pulls out a club sandwich. “He better not. He’s like a fucking cat with nine lives or something.”

“He is resourceful,” I admit, pausing to tilt my head back to enjoy the warmth of the sun on my face. “We’ll head back inside once you’re done with your sandwich.”

With that, I step away from her and wander over to Rebecca who is sitting atop the stairs leading into court with her phone pressed to her ear. She ends the call when she sees me coming and tosses her hair over her shoulders. I sit down next to her and set my briefcase down between us.

“What do you think?”

“The jury seems sympathetic. Hell, I kind of hate Blake a little bit,” Rebecca says, without looking at me. “There’s no way he comes out of this a winner. The longer this drags on, the more he looks like the greedy, self-serving, son of a bitch that he is.”

My lips lift into a grim smile. “Good, that’s exactly the point. How’s your case going by the way? With the tax evader?”

“It could be better,” Rebecca replies with a grimace. “But I’ll figure something out.”

I give her shoulders a quick squeeze. “I should head back inside.”

Rebecca nods and stares straight ahead. Melanie scarfs down the rest of her sandwich and follows me inside. My eyes take a few seconds to adjust as our heels click against the hardwood floors. Once we come to a stop outside the bathroom, Melanie ducks inside.

I spot Ethan gesturing furiously to Blake.

He studiously avoids my gaze when I stare at him.

In silence, Melanie and I duck back into the courtroom. A short while later, everyone else trickles back in.

I am tapping my pen steadily against the table and ignoring my bouncing knee when Ethan and his client come in wearing identical blank expressions. Rebecca darts in a while later and shoots me an apologetic smile. Soon, the judge steps back in, her usual black robes rustling behind her.

As soon as she sits, Ethan unfastens a button on his jacket and clears his throat. “Your honor, I’ve got one more witness to call to the stand.”

I jump to my feet. “Counsel wasn’t made aware of another witness.”

“We were just able to confirm that the witness can be here,” Ethan responds without looking at me. “Your honor, this witness has important information regarding Ms. Carmichael.”

I glance over at Melanie who offers me a shrug. “I’d like a moment to confer with my client.”

The judge nods and leans back in her chair.

“Is there anything I should be worried about?”

Melanie shakes her head and smooths out the front of her shirt. “I don’t think so.”

I stand up straighter and look back at the judge. “Counsel has no problem with a new witness being brought to the stand, your honor.”

“I’d like to call Roy Williams to the stand, your honor.”

A tall, broad-shouldered man with wisps of silver in his hair and serious brown eyes stands and walks over to us. On his way past, he and Melanie lock eyes, and she pales. She shrinks lower into her seat and begins to scribble furiously.

Shit.

What did you do, Ethan?

After Roy is sworn in and gives his name, profession, and address, Ethan advances with one hand shoved into his pocket. “Mr. Williams, thank you for coming out here on such short notice.”

Thin beads of sweat are rolling down Roy’s face. “I was under the impression that this was important.”

“It is.” Ethan leans against the witness stand and makes a vague hand gesture. “Can you tell the court about the nature of your relationship with Ms. Carmichael?”

Roy glances over at Melanie who sinks further into her seat. “Ms. Carmichael and I have known each other for a long time. I’m a friend of her brother’s.”

“And?”

Roy pulls on his collar. “Ms. Carmichael and I were having an affair.”

A gasp rises through the room.

“While she was married?”

“While she was married,” Roy confirms with his hand still tugging on his collar. “Ms. Carmichael, Melanie, had a miscarriage and Blake was on tour, so I was trying to be there to support her.”

“You did a lot more than support her, Mr. Williams.”

“Objection. Relevance?”

Ethan takes a step back. “Withdrawn. Mr. Williams, isn’t it true that you, during the course of your affair which took place while Ms. Carmichael was in between books, told her that you thought she needed to work on her marriage?”

Roy clears his throat. “I did.”

“And isn’t it also true that she told you that she felt guilty about using Blake and his band as a source of inspiration for her books?”

Roy looks over at the jury, and his expression turns even more grave. “It’s true. She also told me that she wasn’t sure that signing the contract was a good idea because half of the royalties should’ve been Blake’s.”

“Objection, your honor. Speculation. The witness has no real proof other than Ms. Carmichael’s testimony.”

Ethan spins around to face me, and his expression is tight. “Ms. Prescott, I’m trying to establish a pattern here. Your client has a history of changing her mind and being unreliable when it comes to her husband.”

“I’ll allow it. Please continue, Mr. Williams.”

I place my hands on either side of me and exhale.

“I knew the affair wasn’t a good idea,” Roy continues in a strange voice. “But I couldn’t help myself. Melanie can be

very persuasive when she wants to be.”

Ethan nods sympathetically. “Isn’t it also true that you warned Ms. Carmichael that her publisher was asking too much of her? Didn’t Ms. Carmichael herself admit that her publisher was putting pressure on her to cut my client out of the picture completely?”

“Your honor, is counsel going to allow the client to answer or is he going to spoon-feed him the answers too?”

“Sustained. Re-direct, Mr. Black.”

Ethan looks away from me. “Mr. Williams, in your opinion, was Ms. Carmichael pressured to sign the contract against her own will in order to keep her friend and publisher happy?”

“In my opinion, yes, she was.”

“And do you feel like her grief over the loss of her unborn child was used against Ms. Carmichael to manipulate her into cutting Blake out once and for all?”

“You son of a bitch.” Melanie is on her feet with tears running down her face. She slams her hands against the table and shakes. “I told you all of that confidence. How could you use that against me?”

“I’m sorry, Melanie,” Roy offers, his expression softening when he looks at her. “I have to do this. You weren’t thinking straight, and you know it.”

Melanie lunges, and I catch her at the last second.

A loud cacophony of voices erupts, each clamoring to be heard over each other. The judge sits straighter and bangs her gavel. “The court will adjourn for ten minutes giving Ms. Carmichael a chance to compose herself.”

“Thank you, your honor.” I keep my arms wrapped around Melanie’s waist as I steer her out of the courtroom and into the early afternoon sun. Once we’re outside, I release her, and she staggers away from me.

“You told me there was nothing to worry about.”

Melanie rakes a hand through her hair. “Because I didn’t think they were going to find out about Roy or bring him in.”

I blow out a breath. “I need you to breathe, okay? I did warn you that his lawyer was going to dig and bring out the skeletons in the closet. We’re just going to have to pivot and adapt accordingly.”

Even though a part of me wants to hunt Ethan down and give him a piece of my mind.

You’re the one who pushed, remember? You made a big deal about him being professional and keeping his feelings out of the courtroom.

As much as I hate to admit it, I know my indignation and anger have more to do with wanting to protect my client and less to do with Ethan himself.

He is, after all, doing his job, just like I told him to.

Melanie shudders and makes a low whimpering sound. “I don’t want to relieve this, Ava. I regret having the affair with Roy, but Blake wasn’t around, and I needed someone.”

I exhale and place a hand on her shoulders. “We all do stupid shit, Melanie. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Melanie spins around to face me. Her face is withdrawn and her eyes are bloodshot and red. “But you heard what they said in there. They’re trying to prove that I wasn’t in the right frame of mind when I made my decision.”

I rub her back. “I know, but at this point, it’s all conjecture. The only two people who have the real picture are you and Blake. Everyone else can form their own conclusions.”

Melanie sniffs. “What if the jury decides that this information is enough to award Blake half of my royalties?”

“Then we file an appeal.” I remove my hand and rummage through my bag. When I pull out a packet of tissues, Melanie takes the whole thing and blows her nose. “We’re not done yet, Melanie. You still have a fighting chance. Blake wouldn’t have asked Roy to come as a witness if he wasn’t desperate.”

“He doesn’t even like Roy,” Melanie mumbles. “How did he get him to agree?”

“That’s courtesy of his lawyer,” I reply with a grimace. “They probably promised him something.”

Ethan is doing what he has to do for his client.

But it doesn’t stop me from wanting to wrap my arms around him and give him a good firm shake for Melanie’s sake.

Goddamn it.

Am I the one who’s in danger of not being professional?

“Why don’t you go back inside and wash your face?” I take a few steps back and give Melanie a pointed look. “I’m going to talk to my friend and meet you inside.”

Wordlessly, Melanie hands me back the pack of tissues and ducks inside.

I wait until she’s inside before walking over to Rebecca who is leaning against the wall, a cigarette dangling from her lips. “I know you’re pissed he blindsided you, but you have to admit, that was a hell of a smoking gun.”

I dig my nails into my palms. “It is. Damn it.”

Rebecca blows out a ring of smoke. “You did tell him that he owed his client better.”

I sigh. “I did.”

“So, what are you going to do now?”

“I have no fucking clue.”

ETHAN



“*A*re you sure it’s okay?”

Ava nods and slams the refrigerator door shut with the back of her leg. “I’m positive. You’ve asked me a few times already. My answer hasn’t changed from five minutes ago.”

I lean against the counter and frown. “Maybe I should’ve checked with you first. I know that we’re on opposing teams now, and our careers aren’t on the same trajectory, but I’m not going to do anything to compromise that.”

Or us.

But I know that Ava doesn’t need to know the last part just yet.

She’s warming up to me, little by little, and the last thing I want is to scare her off by admitting how much this relationship means to me.

Because I still have no intention of letting anything, least of all Blake Ryder, get in the way of my relationship with Ava.

“Ethan, seriously. It’s fine. You did what you had to do for your client. I would’ve done the same thing.”

Ava is a hell of a woman, Ethan. You better not fuck this one up, okay?

For once in my life, I don’t mind having a serious discussion with a woman who isn’t my mother or sister. I know that has more to do with the level of maturity and grace

Ava is exhibiting regarding the whole matter and less to do with any real change in my mind.

As far as luck goes, I've hit the jackpot when it comes to Ava, and everyone knows it.

I raise an eyebrow. "Why don't I believe you?"

Ava sets the container down on the counter and blows away an errant lock of hair. "Okay, fine. Maybe I would've hesitated a little. But eventually, I would've done it. It's your moral obligation."

"Would it help if I said that I think you still have a good case?"

Ava pries the container open and spreads the food onto two separate plates. "It helps a little, but you're not supposed to tell me that."

I snort. "Maybe we need to revisit our rule book."

"What book? It's barely a page."

"Exactly."

Ava snaps the container shut and lifts her gaze to mine. "So you want to make a rule book?"

"No, I just think it would be helpful to have guidelines. Things we can and can't do. That sort of thing."

Ava's lips twitch. "You want to make a dating contract?"

I push myself off the counter and grin. "When you put it like that, it sounds horrible."

Ava tilts her head to the side. "How would you phrase it then?"

I step away from the counter and bridge the distance between us. As soon as she's standing directly in front of me, my arms circle her waist and I pull her to me. "I don't know how I would phrase it, and it doesn't matter. That was just the lawyer in me talking."

Ava throws her head back to look up at me, and I find myself looking into her eyes. "I'm curious about this

hypothetical contract though.”

I chuckle. “Okay, how about naked Sundays?”

“Come on, counselor. You’re going to have to do better than that.”

“You wanted to be naked all the time? Alright, that’s your call to make.”

Ava slaps my arm. “There’s more to life than being naked all the time.”

I nod. “You’re right. There are also sexy times and massage times. That sort of thing.”

“Sexy times? Is that really what we’re going to call it?”

“Do you have any other suggestions?”

Ava laughs. “No, not really, but it feels weird to call it that.”

“I don’t care what you call it as long as you know that your ass is mine.” I press a kiss to her neck. Then I begin to pepper it with hot, open-mouthed kisses leading up to her jaw. “That and the rest of you.”

Ava links her fingers over my neck. “Oh, is that so? I don’t remember agreeing to the terms of the contract.”

I kiss a path up to her mouth, and my fingers dig into her waist. “Oh, but you gave me a verbal agreement.”

“That’s a non-binding agreement, counselor,” Ava murmurs in between kisses. “You know that as well as I do.”

I wrench my lips away, bend down, and hoist Ava up. When she’s cradled against my chest, I step out of the kitchen and into the direction of the bedroom while she shrieks and scowls.

“I’m trying to make a solid case for myself.”

I set her down on the mattress. I then lift my shirt over my head and let it fall to the floor with a flutter. “How am I doing so far?”

“You can’t use sex to make your case.” Ava points a finger at me and wags it. “I’m pretty sure that’s against the rules.”

I push my shorts down and step out of them. “You mean our *made-up* rules?”

Ava nods as her fingers move to the hem of her dress. She pulls it up over her head, leaving her in a white cotton bra and underwear.

“Exactly, just because they’re fake doesn’t mean we don’t stick to the spirit of the law.”

I kick my shoes off and advance on her. “I like the way you think, Prescott.”

“You’re going to like me a whole lot more when this is over,” Ava teases before twisting her arms over her head and unhooking her bra. Her breasts spill forward, and my eyes immediately fall to them.

The blood is roaring in my ears when I climb onto the bed.

Ava’s breath quickens and her mouth parts.

I’m inches away when my phone rings, bringing me back to the present with a jolt. I ignore it, pull Ava to me, and kiss her like my life depends on it. However, my phone rings again, and I scowl in its general direction.

“Maybe you should see who that is,” Ava suggests into my skin. “Otherwise, they’re not going to leave us alone.”

I blow out a breath, climb off the bed, and pat my pockets for my phone. When I fish it out and see my lawyer’s name flash across the screen, a knot forms in the center of my stomach. I read his message, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

“He just wants to remind us to be prepared for the interview tonight.”

“I was trying to forget about that. Do we have to do an interview?”

“Now that the news is out there, we’re trying to control the narrative,” I reply without looking at her. My fingers move quickly over the keyboard, formulating a response faster than I

can think. “It’s going to be fine. They sent over the list of questions, remember?”

Ava exhales and pulls her shirt back on. “Yeah, but doesn’t it all feel a little contrived?”

“Not any more contrived than preparing a witness in a deposition,” I respond, pausing to toss my phone onto the mattress. “If you ever feel uncertain, just look over at me. I’m really good with the press.”

Ava gathers her hair up into a high ponytail. “You think very highly of yourself, don’t you? I bet you’ve done this enough times to know how it goes.”

“Prescott, you’re the only woman I’ve ever officially gone public with.” I crawl over to her and pull her down onto the mattress so we’re facing each other. “To be clear, you’re the *only* woman I’ve ever wanted to go public with. With everyone else, it just didn’t seem to matter.”

But with Ava, I want the whole world to know that I’ve found a rare woman and I have every intention of declaring it.

Now that the press knows, it feels like this weight has been lifted off my shoulders, and it doesn’t scare me as much as I thought it would.

You’ve turned into a romantic idiot. That’s why. Ava’s made you all soft and mushy inside.

I don’t care one bit.

I’ll shout it from the rooftops if that’s what it takes to prove how I feel about her.

Ava reaches between us. Her fingers move over my face, tracing my features slowly. “No one’s ever said anything like that to me before. I guess I’m just nervous.”

“You have no reason to be.” I kiss the tips of her fingers and smile. “This right here is all that matters.”

With a smile, Ava presses her lips to mine.

Before I can deepen the kiss, the doorbell rings, bringing us back to the present with a jolt. With a groan, I jump off the

bed, pull my shorts back on, and pad over to the door. After a quick look through the peephole, I punch in the security numbers and undo the latch. I take the containers from a short teenager in glasses and leave him a generous tip.

Ava comes out wearing only her shirt, and I kick the door shut.

“There’s food in the fridge.”

“I know, but I thought I’d treat you to something nice since we were meant to go out on a date tonight.”

Ava’s lips lift into a half smile. “I’m glad you’re not counting the interview as a date.”

“More of a necessary evil.” I step into the kitchen and take the containers out. “I got us sushi and Chinese because I wasn’t sure what you were in the mood for.”

Ava’s stomach grumbles. “Apparently, I’m just hungry.”

I laugh and pull some plates out of the cupboard underneath me. “So am I. We’re going to need our energy for tonight.”

“What’s tonight?”

I give her a quick wink and pause to take out some cutlery. “Is there anything in particular you want to avoid talking about tonight?”

Ava releases a deep breath. “There is something, but it’s going to come up anyway, so I don’t see how that’s going to be avoided. They’re going to ask how we feel about being on opposite sides of a case.”

I pick up one of the containers and sniff. “Yeah, what do you want to tell them?”

“I want to win, you know that already, but I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I don’t want to hurt you either.”

Especially when I know there’s no turning back.

Ava and I can't go back to the way things were before, and I don't want us to. As far as I'm concerned, we've stepped out of the shadows and into the light, and we're all the better for it.

I'll make sure of it.

"I'm not going to let anything get in our way, Ava," I tell her, pausing to give her a serious look. "I know you don't know this about me, but I do have a lot of influence."

Ava snorts and reaches for a pair of chopsticks. "Nobody has that much influence, Black. Even you can't control everything."

I look over at her. "True, but when it comes to the people I love, there's nothing I won't do to protect them or make them happy."

A blush rises from Ava's neck and stains her cheeks. "Maybe don't say that during the interview."

"I won't if you don't want me to."

"I know you're like a public figure," Ava replies, her eyes darting down to study the container of sushi. "But it doesn't mean we have to air out everything about our lives, right?"

"It doesn't, no."

Ava lifts a piece of sushi and eyes me over it. "Good, because I like my privacy. I wouldn't even consider doing this if it was someone else."

I reach for my own chopsticks and flash Ava a smile. "I know I'd wear you down eventually, Prescott. All it took was some time."

"And a whole lot of luck," Ava says in between bites of food. "We can't both win the case though, so I hope you're prepared to have your ass handed to you."

"Keep dreaming, Prescott."

AVA



“*I* don’t feel like it’s going well,” Melanie mumbles without looking at me. “Maybe I should’ve just given him half the royalties like he asked.”

I finish my sandwich and throw the wrapper away. “Melanie, listen to me. Blake doesn’t deserve any of that money. After I cross-examine Blake, the jury is going to rule in your favor, and you’re going to feel much better.”

Melanie has no idea what I have in store for Blake.

Having spent the past week turning over every stone and chasing down every lead, I finally have what I need for the final nail in the coffin.

Blake is going to wish he’d taken the deal we gave him.

A large part of me is going to enjoy handing Blake’s ass back to him on a silver platter. The other, smaller, part of me feels bad for Ethan for getting caught in the crosshairs. Considering how close we’ve gotten after our interview with the press, I’m almost reluctant to use the information I have.

He used his smoking gun. It’s time to use yours, Ava. You’re doing your job. It’s what Melanie hired you to do, remember?

With a slight shake of my head, I unscrew the cap off of the bottle and take a long sip of my water. When I’m done, I take one last sip and look over at Melanie who is hunched over and squinting at her phone. Sighing, I take it out of her hand and shove it deep into her purse.

“Looking up articles about yourself isn’t going to help,” I tell her with a pat on the back. “It doesn’t matter what people say. What matters is the truth.”

“Spoken like someone who’s never gone down the internet rabbit hole.”

I snort and steer Melanie back into the court where it’s brusque and cool. It smells like incense and lemon air freshener. “You learn to get better at ignoring all of the white noise and that’s exactly what the internet is.”

After Melanie is seated at our table, I lean over the railing and gesture to Rebecca. “She’s coming, right?”

“She doesn’t want Blake to know she’s here,” Rebecca murmurs after a quick look around. “Is it too early to congratulate you?”

I press a finger to my mouth. “Not yet.”

As soon as the judge comes back in and is settled, I flip my folder open. “Your honor, we have one last witness to call to the stand. The defense calls Amanda Lohan, your honor.”

“No, she can’t,” Blake hisses a little too loudly. “Stop her.”

“Since the defense graciously allowed Mr. Roy Williams to be called to the stand, I’ll allow a last-minute witness,” Judge Bloom decides with a quick look in my direction. “Let there be no more surprises please, counselor.”

“Of course, your honor.” I hold the railing door open for Amanda. She is a tall and leggy brunette in a pencil skirt and a button-down blouse that accentuates her figure. She gives her hips a little sway on her way to the witness stand, and I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Blake sink lower into his seat.

Once she’s sworn in, I stroll over to where she’s sitting and watch her ruby-red lips press together. “Ms. Lohan, thank you for making time for us today. I know you’re a busy woman, so I’m going to get right into things. How do you know my client?”

Amanda clears her throat. “I don’t know Melanie all that well, but I know her husband or her soon-to-be ex-husband.”

“How do you two know each other?”

“I’m a model. In my downtime, I run a studio that’s a few blocks away from his house. He attended a few of my classes.”

I stop in front of the witness stand and flip the folder open. “Ms. Lohan, isn’t it true that you and Mr. Ryder were having an affair?”

“Objection, there’s no proof of that.”

I take a few pictures out of my folder and hand them over to Ethan who takes them with a stony expression on his face. “I apologize for the gratuitous nature of the photos, your honor. However, as you can see, there’s no doubt that there was a relationship between Mr. Ryder and the witness, Ms. Amanda Lohan.”

“I took those pictures myself,” Amanda adds with a smile in the direction of the jury. “I’ve got an Instagram page, and a TikTok page dedicated to my art.”

I snap the folder shut and stand straighter. “Ms. Lohan, can you share with the court what you told my associate on the phone?”

Amanda nods and adopts a serious expression. “Blakey… sorry, I mean *Blake*, told me that he has an offshore account in his wife’s name. He’s been taking a little of her money every month and using it for himself.”

“And how do you know this, Ms. Lohan?”

“He showed me the account, and he even gave me a supplementary card,” Amanda replies, pausing to flash a row of pearly white teeth. “He’s a very generous lover, you know.”

Bingo. Thank you, Ms. Lohan. You’ve given me just what I need to bury Blake and make sure he stays buried.

“Objection, your honor. Counsel has no proof of any of this.”

I smile. “Ms. Carmichael, is this your signature?”

Startled, Melanie sits straighter and peers at the document I hold in front of her. She skims over it and frowns at the negligible handwriting at the bottom of the paper. A furrow appears between her brows.

“No, it’s not my handwriting.”

I walk over to Amanda and hold the paper out for her. “Are these the papers you saw him sign?”

“Yes.”

“Ms. Lohan, are you sure that this money was being transferred from my client’s account?”

Amanda nods. “Yes, I’m sure. I’ve seen all of this before.”

I stop in front of the witness stand and hand her another sheet of paper. “Is this Mr. Ryder’s handwriting?”

“Objection, your honor. The witness is not here to serve as a graphologist.”

I smile. “Withdrawn, your honor. I do have here a written testimony from a graphologist who was unable to be here today. She confirms everything Ms. Lohan just said.”

Adopting a more serious expression, I step over to the judge and hand her a copy. I then walk over to Ethan with my head held high and a stomach full of knots. I can’t make out anything from his expression as I hand him a copy of the testimony and take a few steps back. Next to him, Blake looks like a vein is going to pop in his forehead.

But I know I can’t do my victory dance just yet.

When Ethan is done questioning Amanda, she leaves the witness stand with her heels clicking steadily against the hardwood floors. All too soon, Ethan is giving his closing statement, flashing the jury his signature half-smile and holding each of their gazes. Once it’s my turn, I focus on sounding sincere and gesture to Melanie who is the picture of innocence and grace.

A short while later, the jury is led out of the room, and I’m left alone with Rebecca and Melanie. Ethan ducks back into the room and gives me a meaningful look. Rebecca glances

between us and steers Melanie out of the room. In silence, Ethan and I sit down on the pews and face the front of the courtroom which is lit up by the soft glow of the late afternoon sun.

“That was well played.”

“Thank you.”

“What do you want to do to celebrate?”

I twist to face him. “That’s a little premature. I never celebrate my wins before they’re official.”

Ethan turns so he’s facing me directly, and there’s a twinkle in his eyes. “Come on, Prescott. You and I both know that you’ve got this in the bag. Especially with today’s witness. Take the win.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Why do I feel like you don’t mean it?”

Ethan’s lips lift into a half smile. “I’m not looking forward to having to deal with an angry Blake, but I’m a grown-ass man, and so is he. I’ll handle it.”

“I heard the law firm put a lot of thought and effort into the case.”

Ethan gives me a confused look and drapes an arm over the back of the pew. “Where did you hear that?”

“I know people.”

Ethan’s smile grows slightly. “It’s nothing to worry about, counselor. Like I said, I’m a grown-ass man.”

I make a low noise in the back of my throat and stand. “We should head outside before our clients start to wonder where we are. It’s a miracle they haven’t heard the news that we’re dating by now.”

And I intend to keep it that way.

All I need is a few more hours until we’re home free.

Well, unless the jury can’t reach a unanimous verdict right away...

“I’m pretty sure Blake knows.” Ethan stands and fastens the buttons on his jacket. “He’s been dropping not-so-subtle hints all week.”

I grimace and step past him. “Sorry.”

Ethan brushes his hand against mine. “I’m not.”

Outside, Melanie is waiting for me with her back pressed against the wall and one eye squeezed shut. Opposite her, Rebecca is standing and saying something while gesturing. I walk over to them, set my bag down on the floor, and roll my shoulders. I offer Melanie my best and brightest smile.

“You ready to move on with your life?”

Melanie’s other eye flies open. “It feels like it’s been forever.”

I reach between us and squeeze her shoulders. “Why don’t you splash some water on your face, and we can get something to eat?”

Rebecca looks at something over my shoulders. “Seems like the jury is coming back.”

Melanie’s face loses some of its color. “Already? Shit.”

I place my hand on the small of Melanie’s back and push her inside. Rebecca is hot on my heels. The two of us exchange a quick look before I disappear behind the railing. Lips pressed together, I usher Melanie into her seat and sit next to her. I link my fingers together, bow my head, and wait.

Thunderous applause erupts throughout the room as the court rules in Melanie’s favor. I feel her sag, and I hear her sharp intake of breath, but I don’t lift my head. I don’t say a word until the judge bangs her gavel and everyone in the room settles. There’s a thick cloud of anticipation and excitement hanging in the air.

Slowly, I rise to my feet and push my chair back with a screech. “Congratulations, Melanie.”

Melanie stands and pulls me in for a hug. “Thank you so much!”

All too quickly, she stiffens and draws back. I spin around, follow her gaze, and see Blake standing in front of Ethan. His face is a bright and angry red and his hands are balled into fists at his side. In spite of my better judgment, I cross over to them and linger in the background.

“That was pathetic!” Blake complains as spit flies out of his mouth. “You’re supposed to be one of the best lawyers in the country, and you let her walk all over you.”

“Mr. Ryder, I understand your concern—”

“You don’t understand shit!” Blake interrupts, his eyes blazing with fury. “I’m going to appeal, and I’m going to make you regret allowing that bitch of a lawyer to distract you.”

Ethan steps forward so the two of them are chest to chest. “I’d choose my next words very, *very* carefully if I were you.”

Blake’s eyes tighten. “I’m going to make you pay for this. All of you.”

With that, he spins on his heels and storms off, pushing past several groups of people on his way out. As soon as he disappears, some of the tension leaves my body and bile rises in the back of my throat. I try to meet Ethan’s gaze, but I can’t.

Blake’s threat rings in my ears on the drive back home and all through dinner.

ETHAN



“*I* know the outcome isn’t what we hoped for, but we’ve already got several high-profile clients lined up.”

Robert Montgomery flips through the folder in front of him, the crease between his brows deepening. “You are correct. This is *not* the outcome we were hoping for, Ethan.”

A murmur of agreement rises through the room.

In the background, the AC continues to whir steadily. Several of the board members shift in their seats and continue to flip through the folder I’ve prepared. It is filled with numbers, projections, and statistics to try and cushion the blow. Although I know that it’s not going to change the facts, I’m hoping it’ll help them come to terms with what happened.

Blake Ryder was a long shot, but I knew that when I took the case.

The publicity, on the other hand, has been pouring in.

I clear my throat and drag my gaze away from the tiny particles of light dancing on the hardwood floors. “Take a look at the projections, Robert. I was up all night with the marketing and finance departments.”

It took some sweet-talking and a slew of promised favors to get here, and I’m not going to let Robert push me out the door without giving me a chance. While I’ve heard the rumors that some of the senior partners are re-considering their support of me, I know I have nothing to worry about.

Not so long as I carry the Black family name and reputation.

It's the only good thing your father's given you.

Robert glances up, and his green eyes are filled with apprehension. “The numbers could be better.”

I smile and stand. “I’ve already got a few new clients lined up, including the oil heiress who was recommended by one of the witnesses from the Carmichael—Ryder case.”

A flick of surprise moves across Robert’s face. “Good. Let’s set up meetings.”

I glance over at Jackson and then back at Robert. “There is one more thing I’d like to discuss before we proceed.”

Several pairs of eyes are fixed on me, and the room goes unnaturally quiet.

“Effective immediately, I will be stepping down from my role as an active senior partner. I want to retain my position as a board member though and my shares remain intact as will my name alongside yours on the door.”

Robert blinks. “I don’t understand.”

“I’d like to focus on my cases for the time being,” I continue, my eyes darting steadily around the room. “My lawyer has already drafted up a revised version of the contract and will have it on your desks by this afternoon.”

Murmurs of confusion rise through the room.

Jackson pushes his chair back and taps his pen against the table. “Those are going to be big shoes to fill.”

I offer Jackson a grateful look. “Thank you.”

With that, I sit back down and turn my attention to the folder. The rest of the meeting is subdued and tense, with a few more curious looks being thrown in my direction. I ignore all of them and resist the urge to check my phone.

When the meeting is done, I take the elevator down to my office and smile when I spot my lawyer there. He is helping himself to a croissant, the napkin held away from his mouth.

“Want something stronger?”

Ian shakes his head and bites into the pastry. “I’m going to need to stay sharp if I’m going to get you out of your previous contract.”

I sit behind my desk and pull my chair closer. “You know I like to keep things interesting.”

Ian finishes his pastry and brushes the crumbs off of his mouth. “Speaking of interesting, I’ve set up the accounts you asked for. One for Ms. Prescott and the other for Prescott-Black, no first name.”

“Not yet.” I toss my phone onto the desk and roll my shoulders. “I’ll let you know once we’ve settled on a name.”

Ian shakes his head. “Well, I’ll be damned. So the rumors are true then. Congratulations.”

“No one in the firm knows yet, but I’m sure a few people have their suspicions.”

“It won’t be long before they realize why you’re stepping back,” Ian agrees, pausing to shove his hands into his pockets. “Are you sure you want to do this? You’re at the top of your game. If you step back now, it’s going to have some serious consequences.”

“I know.”

Ian exhales. “It’s going to be hard to claw your way back to the top if you take a few years off.”

“There’s more to life than being on top, Ian.”

Ian raises an eyebrow. “I look forward to meeting Ms. Prescott in person to offer my condolences on being stuck with you.”

“Always a pleasure doing business with you, Ian.” I flash him a quick smile and gesture to the door. His laughter follows him out into the hallway. It is only cut off when the door to my office clicks shut behind him. Through the glass window, I see my assistant lean forward against her desk and follow him with her eyes.

By now, I'm sure the whole company is abuzz with the news.

I know my assistant, Greta, is dying to find out firsthand.

Now and again, I feel her looking at me through the glass, but I ignore her. Instead, I spend the rest of the day answering emails and returning phone calls. When the pile of paperwork on my desk shrinks, I push my chair back and stretch my arms over my head.

Jackson comes into my office when I'm putting the laptop away. "That was a hell of a meeting."

"They'll get over it."

"They're going to be talking about it for weeks. The indomitable Ethan Black conquered by love."

I roll my eyes. "That's not how I would put it."

Jackson lowers himself into one of the leather chairs and pulls on his tie. "How would you put it then? The way I see it, it's pretty straightforward."

I zip up the laptop bag and set it down on the table. "How are things going with Rebecca?"

Jackson shrugs. "Hate to burst your bubble, but we're not going to be going on double dates or any shit like that."

I walk toward the tray I have and pick up the decanter of whiskey. After pouring myself a generous amount, I add the same into a glass and hand it over to Jackson. He tilts it in my direction, eyes me over the rim, and takes a long sip.

"Don't fuck it up," I tell him in between sips. "She's Ava's closest friend."

Jackson pulls a face. "You're not going to turn into one of those men, are you? Does she have you pussy whipped already?"

I set down my glass. "Stop changing the subject."

Jackson takes another sip of his drink and peers into the amber glass. "I wasn't aware you had a point to make."

“I made my point already.” I down the rest of my drink and step out from behind the desk. “I should get going or I’ll be late for dinner.”

“Don’t forget to buy a carton of eggs and milk on your way back!” Jackson calls out to my retreating back. In the doorway to my office, I stop and give him a meaningful look. Reluctantly, he stands and strolls over to where I’m standing.

“Fuck you very much,” I tell him with a pat on the back. “Don’t forget to lock up on your way out.”

With that, I make a beeline for the elevator. Before the doors ping shut, I catch the scowl and the annoyed glint in Jackson’s eyes. Downstairs, I stride past the evening security team who all stand when I walk past. I offer them a quick nod and a small smile, never once breaking my brusque trot.

My car is parked next to the curb and the driver is already holding the door open for me. I get into the backseat, set the laptop down next to me, and fish my phone out of my pocket. The phone rings a few times before it goes straight to voicemail. Ava’s voice fills my ears.

With a frown, I hang up and send her a message.

On the way back, I stop outside our favorite Chinese restaurant. I sit and wait at one of their tables covered in a white and red tablecloth, the smell of cinnamon and ginger lingering in the air. When the containers of food come out, I’ve emptied my inbox for the day and am feeling very pleased with myself.

Until I realize I haven’t heard from Ava yet.

John drops me off in front of the apartment building, and I race up the stairs with the phone pressed to my ear. When her phone doesn’t ring, I walk right past the doorman and the bald security guard seated behind a large desk without glancing up. In the elevator, I tap my feet impatiently and stare at the numbers blinking down at me.

It finally opens onto my floor, and I am walking so fast that everything around me is blurring together. Once I reach the apartment, I fish out my keys and shove them into the lock.

It turns with a familiar clicking sound and the smell of sugar hits me first, followed by Ava's distinct floral smell. Hastily, I drop the laptop bag by the door and peel off my jacket.

“Ava? Hello?”

A half-finished cake is on the kitchen counter along with a bowl of raw chicken. I walk past them calling out as I do. In the distance, I hear the sound of water running and breathe a sigh of relief. Pausing to kick off my shoes, I head straight to the bedroom where a thin mist is pouring out into the hallway. In the bedroom, my eyes take a minute to adjust, but as soon as they do, I drop to my hands and knees and crawl toward her.

Her unconscious form is sprawled out over the carpet. Her breathing is labored, and I notice a thin gash down the side of her head. I fumble for my phone, take her wrist in my hand, and press two fingers there. I then hoist her up, place her head in my lap, and cradle the phone between my head and shoulders.

“Come on, baby, wake up,” I murmur. “Help is on the way, okay?”

I push her hair out of her eyes and press my ear to her chest.

“911, what's your emergency?”

“Yes, hello? I need an ambulance sent out to West and thirty-fourth street. Fourth floor. I came home and found my girlfriend unconscious on the floor.”

The operator stays on the phone with me while I shift Ava away and place a pillow underneath her head. I do a quick cursory check, relief pounding through me when I realize her vitals are stable. When I'm done checking her over, I jump into the bathroom, switch off the water, and yank the curtains shut.

When the ambulance finally arrives, I help them hoist Ava up and follow them into the night. In silence, I climb into the back of the ambulance, take Ava's cold and heavy hand in mine, and bow my head as a single tear slides down my cheek.

Please be okay.

Please.

AVA



The first thing I notice is the smell of disinfectant, followed quickly by the sound of a beeping monitor. There is a low pounding in the back of my skull, and my arm feels heavy when I lift it. Slowly, I rub a hand over my face and frown when I feel something digging into my skin.

Something cold and sharp...

Reluctantly, I pry one eye open then the other and spots dance in my field of vision. I blink, stare up at the ceiling, and wait for my vision to adjust. Little by little, it does. I recognize the sound of Ethan's voice, pitched low and filled with worry. I then recognize Rebecca's voice.

I force my head to the side and wince, the headache in the back of my skull increasing. With a great deal of difficulty, I bring my other arm up to my face and blink, my vision sharpening into focus and revealing Ethan and Rebecca standing on either side of a hospital bed. They are in wrinkled clothing and wearing identical worried expressions. When I glance between the two of them, Rebecca bursts into tears and Ethan's shoulders sag.

"What happened?" My voice sounds strange and hoarse to my ears. I frown when Ethan hands me a glass of water. I press it to my cracked lips and swallow, my tongue feeling like sandpaper. "Why am I in the hospital?"

"You were passed out when I came home," Ethan replies in a low voice. He fills up the glass again and holds it up to my lips. "Easy does it. You've had a rough day."

“I’ve been here for a whole day?”

Ethan nods and sets the glass down on the table next to me. “You were extremely dehydrated when you came in and anemic too. They had to do a few blood transfusions.”

My gaze drops to my arm and moves to his where I see a band-aid pressed to his elbow. “Shouldn’t you be sitting down too?”

Ethan releases a deep breath and leans forward. His lips are warm and feather-light against my flushed skin. He lingers for a while, the smell of his sweat and peppermint gum washing over me. He then draws back and presses his forehead to mine. A long moment passes where neither of us move or say anything until Rebecca stops sniffing and falls quiet.

Slowly, Ethan draws back and gives me a reassuring smile. “I’m going to go find the doctor. I’m sure he’ll want to know you’re awake.”

He and Rebecca exchange a quick look on his way out.

Once he’s gone, Rebecca closes the door, draws back the covers, and climbs into bed with me.

I nestle against her side and exhale. “You guys were really worried, huh?”

“You scared the shit out of me, V,” Rebecca murmurs into my hair. “I don’t think I’ve ever been more scared in my entire life.”

My arm drops to my stomach, and I tense. “The baby’s okay, right?”

“Yeah, he’s fine. He just needs you to take care of yourself better.”

“He?”

Rebecca tilts her head to look at me and guilt stretches out across her face. “Shit, I’m sorry. I forgot that you didn’t already know.”

I shake my head. “It’s okay. I don’t mind. Does Ethan know?”

“He was the first person to find out.” Rebecca squeezes my shoulders. “He called me when you were admitted, and he’s been with you ever since. I’ve been trying to get him to go home to shower and change, but he refuses to leave your side.”

I sigh. “I’ll talk to him.”

“I called your mom too,” Rebecca adds. “She’s been checking in every two hours or so.”

I curl up against Rebecca and squeeze my eyes shut as a wave of dizziness washes over me. “I have no idea what happened. I remember being at Ethan’s place. I was making cake and dinner, I think, and I went to take a shower because I felt gross. Honestly, that’s the last thing I remember.”

“You weren’t out for long,” Rebecca assures me in a quiet voice. “Ethan found you thirty minutes later. Don’t worry, Brandy is with my sister. I dropped her off there on my way here.”

“You’re the best, Bec.”

When Ethan comes back in with the doctor in tow, Rebecca has pulled up a chair and is holding both of my hands in hers. I offer Ethan a small smile when he comes in, and he comes to a stop at the foot of the bed. The doctor, a short and stout man with a protruding belly and wisps of thin hair, holds a light up to my eyes and his pointer finger. I follow the light with my eyes and resist the urge to let my head fall back, so I can sleep.

Wordlessly, he presses the stethoscope to my chest and back, listening intently the entire time. When he’s done, Doctor Hoss writes something down on his clipboard and tucks it underneath his arm.

“You gave us quite the scare, Ms. Prescott,” Doctor Hoss begins, a furrow appearing between his brows. “I don’t like the results of those blood tests, so I’d like to keep you here overnight for observation.”

I swallow. “Is the baby going to be okay?”

“Right now, my primary concern is you,” Doctor Hoss replies. “You need to take better care of yourself, Ms. Prescott.”

Get plenty of rest, eat well, and stay hydrated, *especially* in this heat.”

Ethan takes one of my hands in his and squeezes. “Is there anything else we should be doing, doctor?”

“I’m going to prescribe some prenatal vitamins,” Doctor Hoss adds after a brief pause. “And some vitamins for mom as well. Iron, zinc, that sort of thing.”

Ethan nods. “Are they available at the pharmacy downstairs?”

Doctor Hoss clears his throat. “Yes, I believe so.”

Ethan releases my hand and takes a step back. “I’ll walk with you, doctor.”

Without looking at me, Ethan steps out of the room and into the hallway. When the door clicks shut behind me, Rebecca releases my free hand and rises to her feet. She runs a hand over her face and stifles a yawn.

“I’m going to go get us something to eat from the cafeteria. Got any preferences?”

I sit up straighter and fold my hands in my lap. “Nothing with eggs in it. Oh, and can you get me a coffee please?”

“You got it,” Rebecca responds with a smile. Once she leaves the room, and I’m left alone with my thoughts, I glance around the spacious room with a bathroom off to one side.

As soon as my stomach gives an odd little dip, I drape an arm over it and frown. “Hey there, little bean. I’m sorry if I scared you today.”

With a smile, I pause to fluff up my pillow and sink lower against the mattress. “Next time you need a little more to eat, just let me know, okay? I’d really appreciate that.”

“So would I.”

Ethan appears in the doorway with a plastic bag full of medication in one hand and a bouquet of colorful roses in the other. “Do you need me to get you anything?”

I shake my head. “Rebecca went to get us some food.”

Ethan sets my bouquet down on the table and pulls a chair closer to me. He takes both of my hands in his, lowers his head, and kisses each knuckle. “You have no idea how glad I am to see you awake and responsive, Prescott. When I found you, it was the longest fifteen minutes of my fucking life.”

I swallow. “I’m sorry.”

Ethan lifts his gaze to mine and a furrow appears between his brows. “Don’t apologize. Just take better care of yourself, okay? Because you and I, we’re not done yet. We’re only just getting started.”

My lips lift into a smile. “We’re having a boy.”

Ethan’s face transforms when he grins, giving him a softer and more vulnerable look. “We are.”

I squeeze his hand. “How did it go with the board? Did they give you a really hard time?”

“They weren’t happy about the outcome of the trial, but I showed them how much publicity we got and the numbers so that shut them up for a bit.”

“Why do I sense that there’s a but in there somewhere?”

I know Ethan well enough by now to know when he’s hiding something.

I can’t tell if he’s worried about my current condition or if he doesn’t want to add anything extra to my plate, but I do know that I don’t want him to face it alone.

Ethan is right. We *are* in this together, and the last thing I want is for Ethan to feel like he’s facing any of this alone.

“Dealing with the board is nothing compared to what happens when my father finds out,” Ethan replies, pausing to blow out a breath. He still holds his hands in mine as he leans back against the chair and flicks his hair out of his eyes. “He’s going to lose his shit.”

I frown. “Can’t your mom help?”

Ethan grimaces. “Yeah, I don’t think so. There’s only so much she can do when it comes to my dad.”

I pry my hands away and lean back against the bed. “There’s got to be something we can do.”

“We don’t have to do anything,” Ethan replies, his expression turning serious. “You have to focus on getting better. It’s a good thing I just got done with a big case because they won’t need me in the office for a while.”

“What about partner meetings?”

Ethan clears his throat. “I was going to talk to you about that over dinner. I already told them today that I’m renegotiating my contract as an active senior partner.”

“What do you mean?”

“It means, as of a few hours ago, I am no longer an active senior partner. I still have my seat on the board, and I still own the majority of the shares in the company, but other than that, my duties are going to be scaled back to give me more time to deal with clients.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I want to have more time to spend with you and the baby,” Ethan tells me, his eyes moving steadily over my face. “No more half-assing things, Ava. I’m all the way in.”

I open my mouth to respond, but I’m interrupted when the door flies open. Rebecca steps in carrying bags of food. She grins, steps to the side, and makes a sweeping hand gesture to indicate my mother who is wearing wrinkled clothing. I notice her hair wisps around her delicate yet weathered face and her eyes are pinched around the edges.

“Look who I ran into.”

“Sweetheart.” My mother crosses over to me and throws her arms around me. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t get here sooner. I took the first available flight out and came here as soon as I could.”

Tears fill my eyes. “You didn’t have to come all the way out here, Mom. I’m okay.”

My mother sniffs and pulls back to look at me. “Of course, I had to come. Thank you for sending a car to pick me up,

Ethan.”

Ethan stands and offers his hand. “It’s my pleasure, Ms. Prescott. Please let me know if there’s anything else you need.”

My mom takes his hand and gives it a firm shake. “I’m glad Ava has you, Ethan. And I’m happy to finally put a name to the face.”

Ethan offers her his signature smile. “Why don’t I get you something to eat and drink while you and Ava catch up?”

My mother sinks into his chair and scrubs a hand over her face. “Thank you.”

In the doorway, he pauses to look at me over his shoulders, and I offer him a smile.

ETHAN



I slam the door shut and hurry over to Ava's side. She waves my hand away and pushes herself out of the car. She then straightens her back and tugs on the edges of her shirt, an attempt to pull it down over her bulging stomach. With a smile, I tuck her hand into the crook of my elbow and lead her up the driveway and up the stairs of the front porch.

"You know, it's not too late to change your mind. We can come up with an excuse and get out of here."

Ava pats my hand. "No, it's time we all sat down and had family dinner together."

At the top of the stairs, I press the doorbell and twist to face her. "You sure you ready for this, Prescott? Black family dinners can be intense."

Ava rolls her eyes at me. "Stop trying to scare me away. I can handle your parents."

"You don't have anything to worry about when it comes to my mom," I remind her with a quick smile. "My dad, on the other hand..."

I'm still tempted to scoop her into my arms, deposit her in the car, and drive away, but I know that's not going to do either of us any good. Not only will Ava give me a piece of her mind if I do, but I also know that it's going to upset my mother. It's been months since Ava's been released from the hospital, and in the time since, news of her pregnancy has been all over the tabloids.

People can't get enough of the two of us, and since our interview, the stories being printed are a little more favorable.

Still, I know that they make Ava uneasy, and I know a large part of that is due to the fact that, other than the occasional chat with my mother, we haven't had any kind of relationship with my family. After her hospital visit, Ava's mother insisted on staying with us, giving me ample opportunity to get to know her better and finding myself in awe of the woman I got to know.

Ava is her mother, through and through.

I don't want to ruin the bubble we've been in over the past few months, but I know we have to come back down to reality sooner or later. Thankfully, it's Ava who steers me into the house when my mother opens the door and greets us in a pair of jeans, a button-down blouse, and an apron. She and Ava pause to embrace, then my mother leads us through the hallway and into the dining room where my dad is already nursing a drink by the window overlooking the backyard.

He grunts but doesn't say anything when we come in.

"Look who I found." My mother makes a sweeping hand gesture to indicate the two of us. "Doesn't Ava look beautiful? She's glowing, Thomas."

His dark eyes regard Ava, but she doesn't flinch or look away.

"I see."

"Dinner's almost ready!" my mother adds with a quick look around the room. "Why don't you make yourselves comfortable?"

"I'll come and give you a hand." Ava presses a quick kiss to my cheeks and withdraws. She offers my dad a small smile. "It's nice to officially meet you, Mr. Black."

My father doesn't respond as he takes another sip of his drink.

When the door clicks shut behind them, I fold my arms over my chest and level my father with a pointed look. "You

could at least make the effort to be nicer.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” He lowers his glass and uses his free hand to rake his fingers through his hair. “I could’ve been anywhere else.”

“I’m going to marry her someday,” I tell him, my eyes never leaving his face. “And she is the mother of my child. She’s not going anywhere, Dad, so I suggest you start making your peace with it.”

My father stiffens. “It’s bad enough that you walked away from being an active senior partner, Ethan. Hasn’t your career suffered enough?”

“My career hasn’t suffered at all. Now that I have more time on my hands, I have more clients than ever,” I reply tightly. “You’d know that if you joined us for family breakfasts.”

He sets his glass down and turns away from me. “I’ve had other things to do.”

What did you expect? He’s not going to roll out the red carpet and hire a welcoming parade just because you’re trying to be civil. You’ve known your father long enough to know how things work.

Still, I know that his being here means something.

In his own way, Thomas Black is trying, and in spite of his gruff and indifferent demeanor, I know that it’s better than nothing. Before I can say anything else, the doorbell rings, and we both turn toward the dining room door.

A short while later, my sister steps into the house in a knee-length dress paired with a jean jacket and a pair of dark sneakers. She sets her glasses down on top of her head and pulls me in for a hug. When she pulls away, she straightens her back and looks over at my father.

A long moment passes before he nods in her direction.

“You look good, Dad,” Valerie says with a smile. “Retirement suits you.”

He grunts in response and pours himself another drink. Red-faced and grinning, my mom appears in the doorway with Ava on her heels. “Dinner’s ready.”

In silence, the three of us cross over to the dining room table where a tablecloth has been laid out with several dishes ranging from chicken in rich sauce to a few seafood dishes and a large bowl of salad with a vinaigrette sauce. I pause to pull Ava’s chair out and her stomach grumbles as she sits down.

Nervous laughter rises through the air.

Valerie sits across from us and smiles. “I never thought I’d see the day when my brother found a woman who knows how to put up with him, much less start a family. It’s good to finally meet you in person, Ava.”

“You too, Valerie.” Ava gives her a warm smile. “I’m so glad we’re all finally doing this.”

My mother glances around the table, her eyes full of emotion. “Let’s eat before the food gets cold. Ava, how did your last doctor’s appointment go?”

Ava scoops up some salad and hands me the plate. “It was fine. Everything looks good.”

“I can’t wait to meet my grandson.” My mother takes the bowl from me, adds a little to her plate, and hands it off to Valerie. “Have you thought of any names yet?”

Ava and I exchange a quick look.

I glance back at my mother and clear my throat. “We were thinking of James.”

My mother beams. “It’s a nice strong name. What about a middle name?”

I look over at my father who has all of his attention fixed on his plate as if his life depends on it. “We’re not sure yet. We’re open to suggestions.”

“As long as he doesn’t end up like you, I think my nephew should be just fine,” Valerie teases with a quick look around the table. “Don’t worry, I plan on being around to make sure of that.”

“And who’s going to make sure he doesn’t end up like you?”

Valerie flips me off and my mother shoots her an exasperated look. Ava hides her laughter behind her napkin and picks up her cutlery. “Elanor, this looks absolutely delicious. You shouldn’t have gone through all of this trouble.”

My mother waves her comment away. “Nonsense. It’s been too long since I’ve had an excuse to break out the good China and plan an elaborate meal. I hope I get to do it more often.”

Ava nods in between bites of food. “I know my mom can’t wait to meet you all in person.”

We all fall into an easy pattern as conversations flow between us while we talk about anything and nothing in particular. Halfway through the conversation, my mother manages to coax my father into participating, and even though he does it reluctantly, I can see how pleased everyone is. Near the end of the meal, Ava brings her head to a rest in the crook of my neck and laces her fingers through mine underneath the table.

“This is going much better than I thought it would,” I whisper into her ear. “Maybe we caught them on a good day.”

Ava draws back to look at me and snorts. “Oh, please. I’m your good luck charm. It’s okay to admit it.”

“You’ve been hanging around me too much, Prescott,” I tease, pausing to bring her hand up to my lips. I press a kiss to the inside of her wrist and linger, watching her shiver from delight. “I’m finally rubbing off on you.”

Ava’s lips lift into a half smile. “You wish.”

I lower her hand and hold her gaze. “Thank you for insisting we do this and for convincing my sister to come. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

It’s been five years in the making, but I’m glad the Black family is all under the same roof. I know we still have a long way to go before we can find a rhythm and dynamic that

works for everyone, but for the first time in a long time, we're not avoiding the important conversations.

Because of Ava's intervention, we're all getting the chance to air out our grievances and put the past behind us once and for all.

For the first time in a long time, sitting down to a meal with my parents doesn't feel like a chore, and I don't check the time. I'm not counting down the minutes to leave even when the meal is over.

We all trickle into the living room, taking up various stages of rest on the couches. After Valerie and I help my mother clear the table, I come back in the living room to find Ava with her feet propped on the coffee table, mid-laughter with my father, who has relaxed considerably since we first came in.

I lower myself onto the couch next to Ava and take her hand in mine. "What's so funny?"

"Your father's knock-knock joke." Ava twists to face me, and her expression turns serious. "I wanted to tell you something by the way."

"It's not a knock-knock joke, is it?"

Ava's answering smile makes my stomach dip. "No, it's not that. I've been wanting to tell you for a while, and this feels like as good a time as any."

I give her a confused look.

Ava turns so she's facing me completely. "I love you, Ethan Black. I know it's taken me a while to say it, and in case it wasn't obvious, I'm all in too."

My heart swells and grows to twice its size. "You sure about that, Prescott? Because if you are, you can't take it back."

Ava nods as a tear slips down her cheek. "I've been holding it back for a really long time. I'm just happy I can finally say it."

I grin and press my forehead to hers. "I love you too, Ava Prescott. And I can't wait to have this baby with you."

“The future doesn’t look so bad now, does it?”

I shake my head. “Not as long as I have you by my side.”

Together, I’m sure we can weather whatever storm comes our way, and I can’t fucking wait to see what fate has in store for us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Everleigh Green has a passion for steamy contemporary romance stories focusing on forced proximity, fake fiancés, secret babies, and Billionaires with a capital ‘B’. When not furiously typing away on her keyboard in NYC, she enjoys spending time with the cutest dog in the world, Cara, discovering new cooking recipes and watching old episodes of ‘Law & Order’... All spin-offs.



WAIT... THERE'S PLENTY MORE WHERE
THAT CAME FROM

Did you like this book? Head on over to Amazon and leave a review. Let me know your favorite moments so I can be sure to give you more of them. Reviews really help authors like me gain traction in the Amazon algorithm.

And don't forget to check out my FREE e-Book!

BAD BOY BILLIONAIRE DADDY

An Enemies to Lovers Surprise Pregnancy Romance

He's my ex-boss, twice my age, my fake fiancé and now... my baby daddy.

My infuriatingly sexy boss has hired me to be his fake fiancé at his family wedding to appease his dying grandmother.

I know deep down I'll regret it, but he's desperate and I need the cash.

The man I've locked horns with is now my partner in a charade that's as thrilling as it is dangerous.

His smoldering looks are unraveling my defenses faster than his ripped forearms are unraveling my skirt.

In the heat of the night, the lines get blurred between business and pleasure.

And as his gruff exterior softens, I can't deny I'm falling for him... fast.

I'm not just his pretend fiancé, I'm the woman who might just change him.

Just when I thought things couldn't get messier, now I have to tell him that this baby in my belly... belongs to him.

Start reading

***Bad Boy Billionaire Daddy* NOW!**



Bad Boy Billionaire Daddy

Read Bad Boy Billionaire Daddy



ARC Team

Join my [ARC Team](#)